



# SOS HOTEL: Sleep With Us

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Three weeks in, and the SOS Hotel is still standing. I know, crazy right? Despite the gremlins, lethal electrics, vampire threats, a shadowbeast in the attic, and a psycho sorcerer, our doors remain open to all Lost Ones. Also, nobody has died . . . in a few days.

All I have to do is, hold it all together, keep every guest safe, not mention the body in the flowerbeds—and maybe we'll last another week?

But Sebastien has demanded Zee return to the club, or he'll hurt more demons. Sebastien has become a big problem. And problems, like gremlins, have a habit of multiplying at the SOS Hotel.

I promised Zee I'd stay out of his other life. But I can't—won't—watch Sebastien mistreat him.

I might be a boring, average, harmless human, but even I have my limits.

Plus, I've got a vampire on my side. Lord Reynard has a knack for getting answers out of people, and together, we're going to find a way to break Sebastien's hold over Zee, even if part of our plan involves an evening of la mort d'amour at Razorsedge. Reynard says we're not going to do anything risky. But I kind of, maybe, just a little bit . . . want to?

Trust me. I'm Adam Vex. Totally normal human. It's all going to turn out just fine.

I'm absolutely certain I have everything under control.

Probably.

Welcome to the SOS Hotel.

**Total Pages (Source):** 15

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

Zee grunted. “Deeper.”

“I am.”

“Shove it in harder.”

“It’s too small.”

“Kitten, have you seen the size of the hole? Put some hip action into it.” He huffed, bent over the rickety cabinet, hugging all the panels in place. His wings were up, out of the way, while his tail helped him hold on. “Did you lube?”

I was trying to manhandle the cabinet’s side panel into its longer back panel, lining up the little wooden-dowel things with their holes. But it wasn’t going so well. Although, I could tell by the tittering coming from the customers in the bar, at least they appeared to be enjoying the show.

“I don’t have any lube,” I told Zee.

“Emergency lube is vital—I can’t hold it. Thrust, Adam.”

“I am thrusting!” I jerked my hips, trying to pump the panel into place.

“May I be of assistance?” Lord Reynard chose that precise moment to appear in the corner of my vision. I puffed my bangs from my sticky face, while awkwardly contorted around the end of the cabinet. Reynard stood back, eyebrow arched in silent judgment, holding the instruction pamphlet I hadn’t read. And neither had Zee.

“Does it look like we need your help?” Zee grumbled. “Hold it!”

Reynard’s beautiful, dark-lined, silvery eyes swiveled to Zee, then cut back to me, querying whether we wanted an answer.

Of course, he had to show up while I had my ass in the air and appeared to be humping a poorly put-together piece of furniture. “Uh, I think we’re—” My grip on the panel slipped, and the rickety cabinet buckled. Its doors popped off, the legs twanged, and drawer shot up toward my face. Reynard grabbed my shoulder, and spun me into his firm arms as though we were back on the dance floor, just in time for me to watch Zee sprawl onto the floor with the cabinet.

He sprang back to his feet, flared his wings, and hissed at the now flattened piece of furniture. “No. I am done. You need eight arms to put this shit together. It’s like fucking Jenga.”

“In Jenga, don’t you take pieces out?” I asked.

“Huh?” Zee grunted.

“Did you read the instructions?” Reynard asked, his warm arm still clasped around me.

“Did I read the—pfft.” Zee barked a laugh. “Did I read the instructions?” he mocked, in Reynard’s posh American accent. “Instructions are for losers, control freaks, and people with tiny dicks. Oh, and there I see you’re holding the instructions. And Adam. There’s a surprise. Also, those are in Swedish. You fucking read Swedish, Your Highness?”

Oh dear.

“I do,” Reynard replied calmly. “And please, I’m a mere baron. Your Highness is reserved for immediate royal family.”

Zee’s tail rattled, and his eyes narrowed to dagger-like slits. But the wards didn’t tingle, so that was good, right?

If I’d expected them to get along, since we’d plucked Reynard out of his family’s clutches and they’d begun to use each other’s first names, I’d clearly been a bit too optimistic.

Zee picked up a hammer, took a single step closer, and dropped it at Reynard’s feet with a heavy clang. “Have at it, Fancy Daddy.” He flicked his horns and strutted off, hips rocking, boots punctuating the floor.

“Why does he insist on calling me Daddy when we are clearly not related?”

“Oh, uh, I have no idea.” I extracted myself from the comfortable niche under Reynard’s arm, and brushed sawdust from my clothes. I couldn’t construct the cabinet on my own, and there were a hundred other jobs to be done in the hotel.

“Why don’t you take a break and I’ll see what I can do?” Reynard asked. He shrugged off his jacket and draped it over a nearby chair, then folded his shirt sleeves up his forearms.

I could have watched Reynard’s fingers tease those sleeve cuffs all day. He made each gesture precise. Each pinch had its place. Every little fold-over was performed with perfect accuracy, ensuring no gesture was wasted, and he had the kind of wrists and forearms made for advertising expensive, luxury watches. Why were forearms so sexy?

I cleared my throat. “Are you sure? Don’t you have better things to be doing?”

“I have some time. The company largely runs itself.” He picked up the instructions again and leafed through them. “This shouldn’t take long.”

If he made that cabinet as perfect as he had made the paper swan he’d once given me, Zee would despise it. “Erm... Maybe don’t make it too well?”

He looked up and grimaced, as though I’d suggested he roll in mud. “You’re asking me to fail?”

“Not fail, exactly, just... you know...” How was I supposed to ask him to half-ass it so Zee didn’t have a crisis of confidence?

“No, I don’t know. Explain, Adam. A job worth doing is worth doing properly.” A good kind of shiver ran through me. One of those all-over, breathless shivers that had nothing to do with being cold, and everything to do with Reynard’s firm tone of voice. “Why would I sabotage my own efforts?”

Ugh. Vampires. Were they all obsessed with tiny details? I sighed, and glanced across the bar, checking that Zee hadn’t returned and wasn’t within listening distance. “Just trust me. It’ll make our lives easier if you’re less than perfect.”

“Well, that is a tall order.” His mouth ticked at one corner. “But I will try to oblige.”

“Good, that’s good. I’ll uh... go get cleaned up.”

He bowed his head, and turned to begin assembling the cabinet. I’d have liked to watch, but unlike his business, the SOS Hotel did not run itself, and required constant attention so it didn’t collapse like a card castle. At least the work kept me busy, and my mind off other things.

I pushed through the bar door, into the lobby, and found Zee standing with his back to

me, beside a single-horned demon, at one of the waiting-area tables. I recognized Ramone—the demon with one horn from Razorsedge who had helped us dispatch Reynard's bloodthirsty wife.

He raised his hand and threw me a smile. He was shorter than Zee by several feet, but stockier, and packed with muscle under his plain clothing.

I made my way over, but Ramone's smile faded fast the nearer I got. This couldn't be good.

"Adam," Ramone said, "I hope you don't mind me coming here?"

"Not at all. You're welcome any time."

Zee perched his ass on the arm of a tired-looking chair. His wings drooped, and his tail lay limp on the floor. I didn't need to look at his face to know what I'd see there. Something bad had happened.

"There's some trouble at the club," he said, averting his purple eyes. When he did finally look up, all of their usual sparkle had faded.

"Trouble?"

"A friend of ours is missing," Ramone explained. "Cherise."

I blinked. "Missing?"

"I have to go back." Zee stood and headed for the door, his mind already made up.

He was leaving? But he couldn't. We had to talk about this. There were things I knew that he didn't. I caught his wrist, opening my mouth to explain, but as he jolted to a

stop and his gaze dropped to my hand, I let go.

He looked up, his expression still concerned, but now questioning too.

I hadn't meant to grab him so hard.

I thrust both hands into my pockets, to keep from grabbing him again.

He couldn't go back there. He wasn't safe. He was safe here, at the hotel, with me. If he went back, Sebastien would sink his claws into him. I knew Zee could fight. I knew he could look after himself. But he didn't fight Sebastien. I'd seen him battle vampire royalty. He'd put a frisky lupine shifter facedown on the Razorsedge bar. But for some inexplicable reason, he didn't touch Sebastien.

How could I say all that, without saying all that? "I don't think you should go."

"It's alright, Kitten," Zee said, probably sensing my spiking anxiety. "It won't be for long."

"But what can you do that the others haven't already done?" I asked, afraid I sounded whiny, when in fact, I was scared. "Why does it have to be you? You work here now, with me. You belong here."

He smiled softly, and planted his hands on my shoulders, pinning me under his gaze. "This isn't work, it's family. You understand, right? You won't even notice I'm gone."

He ruffled my hair, then headed for the door with Ramone at his side.

My heart lurched. If he went back, Sebastien wouldn't let him go. I knew, because he'd left me a message making it clear all games were over. He believed Zodiac was

his, and he'd kill to prove it.

"What if you don't find her?" I called.

Zee opened the door to let Ramone through, and shrugged. "I will. Until I do, you have Reynard."

"What?" I didn't have Reynard. And even if I did, he couldn't ever replace Zee. I had to tell him. He had to know this was all wrong. He was doing exactly what Sebastien wanted.

He stepped outside, onto the porch, and the door swung shut.

"Zee, wait." I hurried after them, but by the time I reached the deck they'd vanished, probably taking to the air.

I slumped against the porch pillar and huffed. This was... bad. He'd gone back to look for his friend. But Zee wouldn't ever find Cherise.

Because, while I'd never technically met her, I suspected I knew exactly where she was.

I looked down at the freshly dug-over flowerbeds, and the bright flowers, happy in their new homes.

Cherise wasn't going to be found.

Because she was flower food.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

I returned to the bar to find Reynard crouched by the flat-pack furniture, all organized into little piles on the floor. Everything had its neat and tidy place. He'd begun assembly in a much more orderly fashion than Zee's and my raccoons-in-a-trashcan approach.

A tight band gathered his long black hair at the nape of his neck, and with his sleeves rolled up, he was clearly serious about fixing the cabinet. I could have asked for his help with the missing demon, but this seemed like a Zee problem—it was probably best to leave Reynard out of it.

"I uh... I have to go do a thing in Demontown." I gestured absently at the door, not sure why I was telling him. He was technically just a guest, but too much had happened in the past few weeks for me to treat him like one.

So what were we, if anything? Friends with benefits? Whatever we were, my gut said I should tell him I was heading out, and my gut was usually right about most things.

Crouched, and with pieces of cabinet in his hands, he looked over his shoulder. Something must have shown in my face for him to ask, "Would you like me to accompany you?" He rose to his full height, carrying a bag of screws in one hand, and a screwdriver in the other.

"Oh, no, it's fine." I laughed him off. Vampires were banned from Razorsedge anyway. I planned to visit quietly, without making any waves. Taking Reynard with me would be the opposite of subtle. "Thank you, though, for offering."

"Anytime, Adam."

Ever since his wife—and whole family—had tried to kidnap and hand me over as a gift to their queen a week ago, he'd been on his best behavior, volunteering to help out around the hotel while avoiding Zee. He'd even helped fix the pipes, since our handyman gargoyle, Claymore, was still AWOL.

We probably needed to discuss everything that had happened, but to do that, I'd have to explain how I managed to disappear an ancient vampire duke when I was supposed to be just a harmless human. Then there was the kiss we'd shared during our not-date—which had been all kinds of wonderful—but as he hadn't shown any interest in me since then, it had probably been a spur of the moment thing that he had no intention of repeating. However, add to that how he'd agreed to help deal with my evil-sorcerer problem, and we really did need to talk. But not yet.

Zee's wellbeing was more important than everything else.

"If you need me, you merely have to ask," Reynard said, after several minutes had passed with me staring at him like an idiot.

"I will." I smiled, appreciating the offer. It felt pretty good knowing I wasn't alone. Reynard had a knack for making me feel safe. Zee did too, but Zee's company was more chaotic and fiery. Reynard's presence was altogether smoother, calmer, more measured. Reassuring. But I was getting ahead of myself. He'd asked to stay, and agreed to help with my sorcerer problem, to avoid his family's wrath, but he could just as easily up and leave tomorrow.

Relying on others was a mistake I'd never make again.

With my hood up and hands tucked into my pants pockets, I walked from the hotel, hopped on a bus into downtown San Francisco, and from there, had an Uber drop me inside Demontown's limits. It was still early, so the boisterous parts of town hadn't gotten lively yet. With any luck, I'd slip in mostly unnoticed, and nobody would have

to know. Not even Zee. He wouldn't want me here alone—probably wouldn't want me here at all, since he preferred to keep this part of his life far from the hotel. But there were things about me he didn't know. Things, such as being able to handle myself should Demontown bare its teeth.

I climbed Razorsedge's painted neon steps, and waved at the female demon wearing a transparent plastic coat over glossy lingerie.

She purred as she eyed my approach, then recognition must have kicked in. "Oh shit, it's you babycakes."

"Hey, Velvet."

A broad grin broke out across her face. We'd met briefly, the last time Zee had brought me to the club. "You here with Zee?"

"Uh, not really. I need to speak with Sebastien. How do I do that?"

Her eyes narrowed, probably trying to assess whether I was serious. "Ask at the bar. You may have to wait though. He gets pretty busy."

"Alright, thank you."

"Anytime. Any friend of Zee's is a friend of us all around 'ere." She blew me a kiss.

She probably wouldn't have been so kind if she knew I'd buried one of her friends in my flowerbeds.

I pushed through the main door, and had a demon grunt and point to the sign telling visitors to leave any weapons with him. I shrugged and showed him my hands, earning another grunting snarl, indicating I could proceed. I ventured deeper into the

club, where the music and lights throbbed. An occasional bark of laughter sailed under doorways. A huge demon muscled by me, barely sparing me a second glance under my hood. I tried to project calm, nothing-to-see-here vibes, but couldn't stop my heart from racing, especially when I entered the main club, where a large crowd had gathered around two demons performing an erotic dance on stage. The crowd was mostly made up of demons. Some tall, slim fae added a dash of poised glamor, speckled among several humans being paraded around on leashes. Demon bait.

I spotted a sequin-clad Ben behind the bar, relieved to find a face I knew, and tucked myself into the shadows at the end of the bar.

"Hey there again, peaches," Ben greeted with a smile. His sequined jacket sparkled like stars. "What can I get you? You here for Zee?"

"Oh, uh no. I'm here on my own. I need to speak with Seb. Is there a way to get a message to him?"

"Baby, he knows you're here." He thumbed over his shoulder, under his wings, and between the glittering racks of bottles, to where a camera's beady lens watched the crowd.

Was he watching us now? Did he even care?

"Can I get you a drink while you wait?"

"No, thank you. It's okay." I needed to keep my head clear for what came next.

Ben eyed me long and hard, then huffed a short laugh, and leaned on the bar. "Can I give you some advice you maybe won't like but need to hear?" His wings spread behind him, blocking the camera's view.

“Sure, I guess.”

“Sweetie, you’re not the first person to think Zee needs saving. We’ve all had tricks fall for us, try and pry us out of Sebastien’s grip, thinking they can set us free like we’re fireflies in a jar. You humans have a soft spot for creatures you think are trapped. But take it from me, Zee don’t need your help.”

“It’s not like that,” I dismissed. I wasn’t like those other humans, for one.

Ben straightened, and shrugged his wings. “You sure?”

The phone on the back wall behind the bar rang. Ben went to answer it, leaving me trying to organize my thoughts around his words. I wasn’t trying to save Zee. I just wanted him to have a choice. Sebastien had some kind of hold over him. Whatever that hold was, it wasn’t right. Besides, Sebastien had sent me a personal message by leaving a dead demon on my doorstep. It was time I responded.

“You can go up,” Ben said, hanging up the phone.

I nodded my thanks and hopped off the stool.

“Hey.” He caught my eye. “Don’t accept any drinks from him, alright? If anything happens to you, and Zee finds out I sent you up there, he’ll skin me alive.”

Nodding again, I headed across the room to the back door, where I’d seen Seb take Zee before. The door opened into a narrow, double-height staircase—probably built that way to accommodate arched demon wings. Feeling small, I climbed the steps to a landing, where a demon guard nodded me through a second door, and into a sprawling apartment suite with a smoky-glass partition separating the bedroom area from a sumptuous lounge. Storage cupboards lined the back wall. To the right, a wall of windows looked down onto the club’s stage.

The background thrum of music sounded like a giant's heartbeat, as though I'd walked into the belly of an enormous beast.

I sucked in two great lungfuls of cologne-scented air, and sighed out.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the stupid little human." Sebastien emerged from behind the bedroom's privacy glass like a snake slithering from long grass. His wings shimmered with black metallic spray, like great canvasses of silk. His spiral horns shone too, painted in white gloss. He wore black and white pinstripe pants, patent leather shoes, and a black silk shirt. He was a lot to take in.

He approached a drinks trolley, and poured himself something smoky and pink from a crystal decanter. "Drink? Drugs? I'll get you anything your heart desires."

"No, thank you."

"Hm, so cute." He purred. "Do I frighten you, little human?"

"No." I lowered my hood for the first time since stepping out of the hotel.

He chuckled, making his wings sparkle, then turned and slow-blinked, running his gaze over me. I knew what he saw. A twenty-something, blond-haired man. Kinda average. Not much to set him apart from every other blond-haired male human.

"I assume you got my message," Seb said. "And you didn't cry to Zodiac about how terrible I am. Aren't you a package of short, blond and interesting?"

I wasn't that short. "How do you know I didn't tell him?"

"Because he's here, looking for his bitch, when you and I both know she's no longer with us." He sauntered toward a couch and reclined into it, vanishing his wings as he

sat. Sipping his drink, he drew his long white hair over his shoulder and twirled a long lock between his fingers, while his tail twitched.

“You killed her then. You admit it?”

“So?”

I swallowed and took a few steps forward, so I wasn’t loitering by the door like the scared little mouse he believed me to be. “If Zee finds out?”

“He won’t do a fucking thing.” Seb grinned, revealing small, sharp, triangular teeth. “You seem to be confused, Adam Vex. Cherise was mine, to fuck and fuck-up as I liked, and it just so fucking happened, I liked very much to kill her. Oh”—he frowned—“does that upset your little human feelings? Poor fucking you. What I do with my property is none of your fucking business, fuck face.” He pointed at me. “You better fucking learn real quick who the boss is around here.”

“You own the demons in Razorsedge—all of them?” A TV screen built into the cabinet on the back wall caught my eye. Split eight ways, the footage showed live images from multiple viewpoints around the club—the main stage area was there, and so were a few smaller rooms—clearly watching the demons inside performing their duties.

I blinked away. Seb had probably watched Zee in those rooms, and a spiky part of my insides definitely did not like that thought.

Zee had accused me of being jealous after he’d fed from unsuspecting guests in our lounge, and I’d denied it. But here, now, in Zee’s world, it wasn’t the sex I was jealous of, but how Sebastien knew Zee like I didn’t. I’d had six months of Zee’s life, Sebastien had years.

He breathed in, and eyed me as though wondering if I was worth the air his next words would expel. “Fuck off, Adam Vex.” He leaned forward, and his pale blue eyes narrowed. “Fuck all the way off to your happy little hotel, and don’t come back. You’ve had your fun. It’s fucking over. Zodiac is mine. He’s always been mine.” He stood, discarded his drink on a side table, and strutted toward me. “Will always be mine.” His wings shimmered back into the visible spectrum and opened wide, doubling his size.

He pointed at the cupboards along the back wall. “I got a contract says I own every inch of him. And you”—he poked me in the chest, jolting me back—“are nothing, fucknuts. You’re not even demon bait. You’re cum-slush I scrape off my shoe. Now get. The fuck. Out.”

I looked up, and up—since he was really tall. He was probably used to people cowering by now, but I’d endured far worse than someone like him.

Zee had told me, when we’d both been sloshed on the hotel roof, that he couldn’t leave Sebastien because of a contract. Tom Collins’s concoction had likely loosened his tongue. Deals were sacred to Lost Ones, which meant contracts were too.

That contract was why Zee didn’t stand up to Sebastien, and it would be the way out of this.

“I’ll buy his contract,” I blurted.

Sebastien’s laugh filled the apartment. He backed away a few steps, to get a better view. “The fuck? You can’t afford him.”

“Try me.” He didn’t need to know I had five bucks in my bank account. I’d get the money. Somehow.



“He’s priceless. Not even your billionaire vampire daddy can afford Zodiac.” Folding his arms, Seb smirked. “I’ll never sell.”

Ugh, this... demon. I was starting to understand how Gideon Cain must have felt at being denied the one thing he wanted most in the world. There had to be a way. Contracts could be broken, but to find its weakness I’d need to see it. Sebastien would never show me. He had no reason to. But Zee might.

“You have nothing to bargain with. You have no claim over him.” Seb pulled an overly dramatic sad face. “Poor baby human. That shit you’re feeling inside is your pathetic heart breaking. I can smell it on you. You reek of self-pity, loneliness, and humanity. Now, nice chat, but you’re boring and I’m busy. Ciao, bitch.”

He turned, and strutted off to collect his phone from a side counter.

There had to be something I could do to show Sebastien I wasn’t what he thought—what everyone thought. Enough to make him back off Zee and think twice about taking me on. But I’d already revealed too much to the vampires, and Gideon Cain. Perhaps it was better to back off and speak with Zee, if he’d even discuss his contract. He never liked to talk about Razorsedge. At least, not with me. But things had changed.

“Still here?” Sebastien purred, grin stretching. “Hm, what about a deal? Get on your knees, suck my enormous dick, and beg me to void Zodiac’s contract, and I might consider it?”

I chuckled in disbelief. Did he think I was really that foolish? “Considering it means nothing.”

“Oh, then you’re not opposed to the idea—just the terms?”

I wasn't going to suck his dick. But there had to be something I could say or do to make him think twice about crossing me... Some parting gift. How could I hurt someone like him? Someone who didn't care about anything?

There wasn't much to go on. His suite was luxurious, and five times the size of my room at the hotel. He had everything he could ever want or need at his fingertips.

Although... there was one thing he didn't have. "You know. If you were nicer, you wouldn't need contracts to make them work for you."

Seb blinked, and coughed a laugh. "What?"

"If you weren't such a toxic person, they'd choose to be here. That's what you're afraid of, isn't it? Without the contract, Zee would never come back to you. It's not the club they hate, it's you."

Sebastien's cheek ticked.

"You're alone. Nobody loves you. Nobody even likes you. I almost pity you?—"

He lunged, like a slingshot—wings back—and slammed me into, then through the door, and out into the hall. The guard yelped in surprise, and some demons climbing the stairs swore, then gawked.

Sebastien clamped his hand around my neck and squeezed. Gasping, I kicked out. He lifted me off the floor and pinned me to the wall at his eye level. He was everywhere—his eyes inches from mine, his wings spread, dark canvasses of black blotting out the world. Or maybe that was my vision blurring. My heart pounded, thumping in my ears. I gulped, trying to swallow air, but none came.

He wouldn't kill me, I knew that much. He wouldn't dare risk Zee's compliance. But

that thought wasn't much comfort as the darkness washed in, trying to drown me. I couldn't even fight back, not with multiple witnesses, all watching on.

His grip vanished. I dropped, landed on my hands and knees, and choked air back into my lungs.

Sebastien crouched, draped his hands over his knees, and reached out to pinch my chin between his finger and thumb. "You just made Zodiac's life a thousand times worse you dumb fuck. Stay the fuck out of Demontown and away from what's mine, or the next time we meet, you'll be as dead as the bitch I dumped like trash on your doorstep."

I tore my chin free, and tracked Sebastien's leaving as he stomped down the stairs. The demons who had witnessed it all, gave their wings a ruffle and continued on their way.

Sebastien's guard arched an eyebrow. "Want me to carry you out?" he grumbled.

"No," I wheezed, waving him off. "I got this." I stumbled to my feet and rubbed at my sore throat. "It's all good. I'm fine. Everything is fine."

Shrugging my clothes back into place, I flipped my hood up, hiding my face, and hurried from Razorsedge. My visit hadn't been a complete failure. I'd learned that I needed to get my hands on Zee's contract, and that Sebastien was sensitive when it came to friends—or his lack of them.

Now, all I had to do was ask Zee to hand over the contract that tied him to Sebastien, and fight its loophole before Sebastien made Zodiac's life a living hell.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

“I can’t perform with him there.” Zee thrust both hands out, gesturing across the room to where Reynard was frowning over the half-constructed cabinet.

Zee had been absent from the hotel since heading to Razorsedge with Ramone the previous evening, and I’d been preoccupied with a minor emergency in the kitchen that saw the wrong kind of mushrooms almost end up on the menu. The potentially fatal error was only caught because one of Chef étrange’s assistants found a stoned gremlin trying to climb into a pie.

I’d only now found time to check the bar, where I’d found Zee, wrapped in a black and purple, silk and leather outfit, tail lashing, arms crossed, glaring at Reynard. There were others in the bar too, enjoying their drinks and socializing.

Reynard had his back to us, and was focused on the cabinet. He probably didn’t even know we were here. “He’s not even watching.”

“But I fucking know he’s there.” Zee thrust his hands out again, as though the more he gestured, the more I’d get the point.

What was happening here? If he wanted to dance, he could. Reynard was too busy with the cabinet to notice or care.

Tom Collins placed a multicolored cocktail in front of Zee, distracting him, then caught my eye, trying to convey something. Tom was attuned to reading his customers, including dramatic demons. I glanced between him and Zee—who was now guzzling the cocktail like it was water—and then over at Reynard. Nope, I still didn’t get it.

“It’s not like you to get stage fright?”

“It’s not... that’s not...” Zee huffed, slumped on a stool, and groaned. “It’s fucking worse than that.”

Wait... I was lost. Worse than stage fright... and it had something to do with Reynard? Tom Collins caught my eye, and motioned cutting a line across his throat—i.e., stop talking, Adam. What could be worse than Zee being afraid to go up on stage? Was he afraid of Reynard? No, that didn’t make any sense. He’d never been afraid of him. So why couldn’t Zee dance?

Tom whipped Zee’s empty cocktail glass away and replaced it with a fresh one. “Thanks,” Zee mumbled, then caught me loitering. “I want him to watch,” he whispered, then chased the confession with a gulp of cocktail.

Wait. ”What?” Zee was all huffy because Reynard wasn’t paying him any attention? Oh. Oooohhh. “Oh.”

“Fuck off. I am not into him. Like that. At all. I don’t do suckers. Especially humorless, heartless, sticks of ice like Fuck-Hard.”

He was definitely into him. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You said oh.” He waved at my face. “Like you do.”

I snorted, parked myself on the stool beside Zee, and motioned for Tom to serve my usual whiskey. “Why don’t you just ask him if he wants to watch you dance?”

Zee recoiled so hard he almost fell off his stool. “Wait, let me think? Fuck. No.”

Tom Collins rolled his eyes. “Man baby.”

“The fuck you just call me?” Zee snapped. His wings flared, then gave a little warning shimmer. “Do I look like human spawn to you? Is this exquisite package of demon prowess a pink potato? I think fucking not. Take that back.”

“Easy.” Tom Collins raised his hands. “What do I know? I’m just an AI, with no emotional depth or ability to experience feelings.” He picked up a random glass and wiped it down. “See? Sticking to my script, and doing my fucking job.”

Zee glared. His tail whipped back and forth. His wings sizzled.

“Zee?”

“Yes, Adam.” He snapped his teeth together.

“Are you okay? You seem a little... tense.”

His top lip rippled. “I am not tense. I am abso-fucking-lutely fine. I may have read some Reyzee fanfic and learned a few fucking things about myself, such as, I’m not not into him. And totally unrelated to Fuck-Hard, is that I want to dance. But he’s right fucking there.” He was gesturing again. “I can’t chill, knowing he’s there and I maybe want him to watch—that fanfic was fucking hot—and it’s the fucking internet’s fault.” A low growl rumbled out of him. “It should be fucking hashtag Zeenard.”

“Okay.” Zee was clearly having a fanfic crisis. “Can I help in any way?”

“No. Maybe. Alright. Distract me.” He propped his elbows on the bartop, buried his face in his hands, and groaned. “If he takes any longer making that cabinet we’ll all be dead of old fucking age,” he mumbled, then breathed in and looked up at me. His eyes sparkled, a little more softly than before. The little smile was real too. “He used a ruler, Kitten. A fuckin’ ruler, to check the corners were perfect. Who the fuck uses a

ruler to make furniture?”

“A set square,” Reynard interrupted, appearing behind him.

Zee jolted. His wings popped out, to balance himself, and would have knocked Reynard over if he hadn’t neatly sidestepped them. “Sweet baby Gareth. Vampire, you were this close to getting my knuckles through your fangs. A square what now?”

“Gareth?” I asked.

“Baby Gareth?” Zee explained. “Son of human God?”

I glanced at Reynard, who arched an eyebrow. “I think it’s maybe, baby Jesus?” I offered.

“Gareth? Jesus?” Zee shrugged. “What does it matter? Reynard almost got my fist in his face.”

Reynard added, “It likely matters to several billion humans.”

Zee flung a hand at me. “Adam is human, and he doesn’t know Gareth’s name. Maybe these humans should get their names straight?”

“I am definitely human,” I agreed.

A moment of tense silence fell over the three of us, until Reynard cleared his throat. “It’s called a set square.” He raised the little triangular measuring tool Zee had seen him use in making the cabinet. “For measuring exact angles.”

Zee squinted. “That’s clearly a fucking triangle.”

“You are correct. It’s triangular in shape. But it’s called a set square.” Reynard placed it into his shirt pocket. Did he just happen to have a set square hanging around, or did he carry one with him at all times for angular emergencies? “Regardless, Adam, I’ll continue the cabinet’s construction tomorrow. I’m needed elsewhere this evening. I will return.”

“Okay, sure?—”

“Or, you know? Here’s a thought. Don’t come back at all?” Zee suggested. “Just an option. It’s good to have options. Think about it.”

Reynard ignored Zee’s advice, and bowed his head. “Good evening, Adam... Zodiac.”

We watched Reynard scoop up his jacket, hook it over his shoulder, and leave the bar. “He’s trying,” I told Zee.

“Yeah, he fucking is.”

I picked up my whiskey, Zee picked up his replenished fancy cocktail, and we sat a while in silence, sipping our drinks. I needed to approach the idea of seeing his contract, but now was definitely not the time to bring up Sebastien or Razorsedge.

Zee sighed. “Ever since we found him in Vampire Mansion, all fucked-up, I’ve been... feeling things.” A shudder ran from his horns to his toes, then back up his wings.

He’d seen Reynard vulnerable, and he’d stood up for him. He’d cared. I understood. Because I cared too. “It’s not wrong to care about someone.”

He sat upright. “For you, maybe...” His eyes widened. “Wait ... It’s your fault! Your need to fuck him has rubbed off on me.”



I spluttered my whiskey. “That’s not—it’s not like that. I don’t, I mean, it’s just?—”

“That’s it! You’re gagging for his cock, and since I’m tuned into you, so am I. It’s not me at all. Fuck, that was close.” A strained, slightly panicked laugh fell out of him. “Imagine wanting to fuck a vampire. Ugh, yuck.” He grimaced.

Uh. I did sort of want to do that.

“No offense.” His smile flopped and faded from his face as a new thought ruined his mood again.

Maybe he was right. I definitely had a thing for Victor Reynard, but most of that was mixed up in the fangs-in-neck scenario. Was Zee angry about his secondhand lust for Reynard? We hadn’t really talked about feelings or relationships, mostly because he’d made it clear that whatever relationship we had wasn’t supposed to be more than business with benefits.

“I just wanted to come back here after going to Razorsedge,” he said, sulking again. “But he’s here. And I was going to fucking dance, but then I got to thinking about what would happen if he watched and liked it, and it messed with my head, and then you arrived, and here we are. Fuck. I’m not usually this messed up. It’s Daddy Fuck-Hard’s fault.”

He had feelings for a vampire, which I suspected was a demon no-no. He’d also had to go back to Sebastien to find a friend who had gone missing. Then there was the opening of the hotel, and the shadowbeast who had tried to kill him—it was a lot to handle. And because Zee was so... Zee... I sometimes forgot, not everything rolled off him like water off a demon’s wings. “How can I help?”

“You’re sweet, Kitten. I’m okay.” He breathed in through his nose, nostrils flaring. “But back at the club, I—” He swallowed his words, and tried again. “You ever cut

yourself off from a part of you, and hidden it so deep that you don't recognize it anymore? I mean, if you try to be that person, you can't?"

More than he could ever know. "A little," I admitted.

Zee winced, and sighed hard. "Forget it. I'm just hungry. I haven't eaten in like, forever. Wanna get wasted and fuck?"

"An admirable solution to almost all problems, I find," Tom Collins piped up before I could attempt an answer. "Besides the fucking part. Unfortunately, your cheap asses made it so I am not equipped with that bonus package."

Zee's eyes lit up. "There's an upgrade for that?"

Oh dear. "Tom, can we maybe get some space here?"

"I'm a few lines of code away from a sexbot," Tom unhelpfully explained, with a little gleam in his brown eyes.

No, this wasn't happening. I did not need an incubus demon and a sexbot in the hotel bar.

"You don't say." Zee sat straighter, his interest piqued. "How does that work, then?" He circled his hand, gesturing below the bar. "You got much going on down there?"

"Buy the upgrade, then fuck around and find out." Tom grinned. "Refill your cocktail, sir?"

"Fuck." Zee chuckled, holding out his glass for a top up. "We should definitely get that upgrade," he said, watching Tom Collins saunter off to serve another customer.

“We aren’t getting that upgrade, and you can’t have sex with the AI bartender. It would be inappropriate. Like having sex with the jukebox.” I gestured at the neon jukebox sitting in the corner, playing a jazzy record.

Zee glanced over, then back. “You say that like I haven’t.”

“What?”

“What?”

I narrowed my eyes. He hadn’t. Had he? How was that even possible? Did it... have holes?

Zee’s eyebrows jumped.

He was joking. Wasn’t he? I laughed. “No sexbot.”

He pulled a sad face and made his wings droop. “Buzzkill.”

“Even if I wanted to upgrade Tom, which I don’t, we don’t have the money for upgrades.”

“Ugh, everything is so much easier when the answer is always to fuck it.” Zee slumped hard against the bar. “Tell me something good. Anything. Good news only. Lay it on me.”

“Uh... nobody died in the hotel today?” Did that count?

He rolled his head to face me and arched an eyebrow. “Was someone going to?”

“There was an incident with a gremlin, some mushrooms, and a pie.”

He blinked, but his smile grew. “I fucking love this place. It must stay shitty and broken forever.”

We chinked our glasses and toasted to the hotel, our fabulous sanctuary for the fiendish. “We could maybe fix the elevator though?”

“Yeah, for sure,” he agreed. “It’s a fucking death trap.”

“One of the back windows fell out yesterday.”

He snorted a laugh.

It felt good, the two of us. Felt like it had while we’d fixed up the hotel, just him and me, working toward something new and good. And now that Zee’s tension had fizzled away, it might be a good time to mention his contract with Sebastien.

“So—”

“I have to go back again,” he said, not needing to explain where. Razorsedge.

“When?”

“Tonight.”

An acidic burn tainted my tongue. The toxic taste of Sebastien. “You don’t have to go anywhere though, you know. He can’t force you.”

He raised his eyes, and there was that defeat. The same defeat I’d seen when Sebastien barked orders at him. He didn’t even want to fight. “If only that were true.”

“Maybe if I could take a look at your contract, I might be able to?”

He laughed. “No fucking way.”

“If you could leave Sebastien tomorrow, would you?”

Zee smiled, but the rest of him remained very still as he held himself in check. Only his tail twitched. “You gotta ask?”

“Show me the contract, Zee, and I’ll find a way. I promise.”

He shook his head, ruffling his hair. “There’s no fucking point. It’s unbreakable. You think I’m the first one who’s tried to get out of it? It doesn’t happen. And I don’t want you anywhere near him or any of that shit.”

It was a bit late for that. “But I can help.”

“No, Adam,” he said sternly. “Give me your word. Don’t go near Sebastien. Stay out of it.”

I couldn’t promise that when I was already in the middle of it. I frowned into my whiskey glass, feeling guilty, and kinda defeated too. I wanted to help. I could help. Why wouldn’t he let me?

“Adam?” he growled. “Promise me.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Look at me.”

I turned my head and faced him. His serious expression left no room for smirks and glittering eyes. He braced an arm on the bar, and leaned in so close I had to look up to meet his gaze. Close enough to kiss. Close enough, it was just him and me in the

whole world. I could taste my heart and feel how, whenever we came together, it felt as though continents shifted and the stars aligned.

“If you get hurt because of me, I’ll lose my fucking mind,” Zee whispered. His hands—always fluttering and gesturing—settled on my face. His tail looped around my ankle, holding tight. “Razorsedge and Sebastien are my shit, Kitten. They can’t touch you. You’re too... you. You’re this place. You’re the good I come back to, the good shit I need to always be here. Can you just be that?”

I kept my lips pinned shut, but nodded. I’d always be here for him. I wasn’t going to promise him I’d back off when I knew I could pry him out from under Sebastien’s heel. But if he wasn’t going to show me his contract, then I’d have to get it another way. Sebastien had already killed to prove a point. He might kill Zee, just because he could. And he’d made it clear Zee was just meat to him. But Zee was so much more. It hurt, looking at him looking at me, thinking he had to protect me, when I should be the one protecting him.

It hurt, that he didn’t think he was worth fighting for.

“Zee, I...” I placed my hand over his on the bar—always so warm—and I tucked my fingers around his. “Don’t let him tell you you’re worthless.”

He huffed, shrugged, and backed off, taking his hand from mine. “Babycakes, I’m fucking priceless, and I know it.”

Did he, though?

He wasn’t going to listen to me, but there was another way to make him understand. Plus, he was hungry, so it would kill two birds with one stone. I slid off the stool, and leaned into his shoulder. “Your room or mine?”

His eyes widened, then narrowed. “Are you offering a pity fuck?”

I smiled, and batted my lashes. “I’m offering whatever you want.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

We scarcely made it inside my suite door before slamming into each other.

Zee kicked the door closed and had me pinned against the wall, his hands riding up under my shirt, while I shoved mine down his back to cup his ass and grind close.

Neither of us was drunk, or close to death. He could have danced and fed off the crowd's lust. But I wanted this. Wanted to be the one to feed him. Which was kinda weird, but I was too lost in the heat of the moment to care what any of it meant.

For now, I planned to kiss him breathless and make his wings burn with desire. Maybe I was a little angry too. Angry at Sebastien, angry at myself, angry at Zee for thinking me weak, even though I made it so everyone saw me that way. Angry at the world for what it had done to both of us.

"Fuck, you're bright tonight." Zee breathed up my neck, into my hair, where he scrunched his fist, holding me trapped between him and the wall.

His whole body was a firm pillar of demon masculinity, pressed all over me, setting me ablaze where we touched, even through our clothes.

I grabbed him by his neck chain, yanked, and slammed my mouth over his, driving my tongue in. He growled, and battled me back, kissing as though he could scoop out my lust and swallow all of me. Raging hard and burning up with need, my thoughts rewired into a desperate knot, fending off any doubts and uncertainties. This was right, and it was happening. Now. Screw the consequences.

Zee tore from the kiss with a gasp, arched his back, and flared his wings behind him,



absorbing my lust. His eyes rolled, lashes fluttering, and when he looked down again, his dark pupils were blown and scattered with glitter. He'd said before that my lust was enough, that we didn't have to actually have sex, but if he didn't get his hands on my skin soon, I was going to combust from need.

His eyebrows pinched. He wrapped a hand loosely around my neck and held me in his grasp. "You're angry?"

He could taste it.

"No. Not with you," I panted, and grasped his face in both hands. "I need this. Need you. Need to feel you inside."

His gaze skipped over my face, trying to read too much, trying to read between the lines I'd drawn that kept everyone on the other side.

I broke our embrace, pushing him back to arm's length, then whipped my shirt off over my head. Zee surged, scooped me off my feet, and wrapped me in a whole-body kiss that had me hooking my legs around his waist. His wings flapped, upsetting something fragile on a nearby shelf that clattered to the floor.

He broke our kiss, and glanced toward it. "Fuck, big wings, sorry."

I cupped his face, pulling his gaze back to my face. "I need you in me, now."

A broad, sudden grin lit up his face. He dropped me to my feet, spun me in his arms, expertly unzipped my fly, yanked my pants down, and as I stepped out, he kicked them away. It happened fast, and rough, and hard. And I liked it. With my hands splayed on the wall as though I was waiting to be strip searched, Zee's warm fingers scrunched my ass, squeezing and widening.

Then the stroke of something firm, warm, and wet lapped at my hole.

I choked on a yelp. “Eep!”

“You good?” Zee purred.

“Yeah, I just... wasn’t expecting, uh, your tongue there.”

“Kitten, imma lick you out like an ice-cream cone.” His tongue looped and flicked while his hands kept me spread, and his tail wrapped around my bare thigh, then snaked up, nudged over my balls, and grasped my hard dick.

Oh mercy. There was something to be said for looking down to see a demon tail wrapped around your cock, jerking you off. But as I’d lost all ability to think, or talk, all I could do was watch his tail pump fast, then slow, in the most excruciatingly pleasurable way. Harder, then softer. Squeezing, then easing. I bit my lip and dropped my head back, taking my eyes off the show to try and slow the approaching tingling.

Zee’s tail vanished. Its absence peeled a little needful moan from between my lips.

“Mew like that and I’m done for.” Zee growled, then his hands pulled my ass wide, his fingers delivered a lick of lube, and his warm, probing dick gradually eased in, slowly widening me. I dug blunt nails into the wall, taking him inside. His tail was back, stroking my dick, helping to ease the pressure. Then he was in, seated balls deep. But he didn’t pump. He just stayed there, stretching me wide and filling me to the brim.

“Not many can take all my magnificence,” he purred in my ear.

“You’re so humble,” I panted.

“I fucking know, right. Modest, handsome, smart. A fucking catch. You’re so lucky to have me.”

His hot chest skimmed my back and shoulder blades, pressing in close, while his dick remained seated inside me. And then his hand came around, and took over from his tail in jerking me off. I needed him to move, needed to feel his dick pumping, and whined for it.

“Fuck, I need it as much as you. But this... My cock inside... Feels good, doesn’t it? Knowing what’s coming?”

It did. Too good. “Please, Zee?”

“You’ll get it.”

I nudged my greedy ass back, then rocked my hips in a seesaw motion, trying to make him ride my ass, but Zee chuckled and used his left hand to clamp himself tight to me. “Your lust is the finest, sweetest I’ve ever gorged on. Imma savor it.”

His hand pumped. My balls tightened. I was going to come too soon. “Zee, please.”

He dropped my dick, clutched my hips in his hands, pulled out, then thrust in so deep he jerked me off my feet. Then he pumped his cock into me, hard and deep. His thighs relentlessly slapped mine. I bounced, heels coming off the ground, pleasure zipping up my spine.

I’d been walking the edge, trying to keep from falling over and coming too soon. Now, I was back there, teeth clenched, dick bouncing as he pounded. It was exquisite, and rough, and brutal, and everything I’d needed. Zee’s pace quickened. His panting became short, sharp grunts.

I knew, if I looked behind, I'd see him in all his incubus glory, and as soon as I witnessed that, I'd come undone. But he was always worth admiring, especially now, when we were fixed together as though one.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw how his left wing was ablaze with purple dancing light. His muscular shoulder and bare arm glistened, muscles tensed. A fierceness showed on his face. But a smile too—a crooked, smug, naughty smile that made everything alright.

It was too much.

I dropped my head between my braced arms, squeezed my eyes closed, and bit into my bottom lip to keep from yelling as wave after wave of exquisite pressure released.

Zee's angle shifted inside, his pace raced, then stuttered, and his little groans became desperate growls as his orgasm crashed over him, chasing mine.

We spluttered and trembled, spilling together.

It was a good thing he had hold of me or I'd have been a wreck on the floor. He drew me upright and hugged me back against his chest. Hot arms wrapped around me, and his kisses scattered up the back of my neck, tickling into my hair.

“You have no idea how much I needed that—need you, Adam Vex,” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

Was this bond we had just about sex? Or was there more to his words, to all of this? To us? I swallowed, still flying high and coming down at the same time. If I thought too hard about it all, everything became a muddle. So I didn't think, and just absorbed the moment—soaked him into my heart and soul.

“I have to go...” he said, still clinging on, still inside me.

My heart stuttered and shrank, wincing from the blow. “I know.”

“I don’t want to.” He kissed my neck, my shoulder. “But it’s not just about me.”

I knew that too. “It’s alright.” I caught his hands, unwrapped myself from his embrace, and kissed the back of his right hand, then sprinkled kisses all the way up his forearm, into that soft inner-elbow part.

He snickered, and tried to pluck his arm free, pulling all of himself free. I slumped against the wall, body heavy and head lust-drunk—deliciously used. “Did you just giggle?” I snorted.

“Moi? Giggle? Fuck. Off.” He growled, dropping his voice an octave. “Zodiac does not fucking giggle.” He turned and sauntered toward my bathroom, probably to deal with the condom. I watched how his hips swayed and his tail sashayed, how little purple sparks fell like glitter from his wings, and how all his glorious body moved in liquid motion. Mercy, he was breathtaking.

“Tell anyone I giggle, I will murder you to death,” he called.

Chuckling, I flopped onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. My heart still thudded hard from exertion. I laid a loose fist over it, listening to it race. What if I told Zee everything? Could I risk it? If I did, it would change things. Change how he looked at me. Change us.

No, I couldn’t.

This happened every time I got close to anyone. And every time, I had to walk away, leaving my past in rubble and my heart shattered.

Hey Zee, by the way, you know the prophesied one...

Hey Zee, you know why the D's are missing in every Wilson's Guide in the hotel...

Hey, Zee, in order to save the world, I have to die.

Yeah. No.

We weren't in a fairytale, or one of those Reyzee fanfics. I already knew this story didn't have a happy ending. The only control I had was not featuring in it at all.

"I'll be back in the morning," Zee said, emerging from the bathroom while buttoning up his pants. He braced over me, making the bed dip, and planted the cutest kiss on my forehead. Then he ruffled my hair, and smiled as though I was the most adorable human he'd ever met. "You're gorgeous. Don't ever change, Adam Vex."

Somehow, I mustered a smile at his words, even as my insides twisted into an emotional knot.

He poofed away in a blast of sparks.

I sighed, and listened to my heart slow.

Don't ever change.

What if I already had?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

Reynard stood in front of the cabinet, looking grumpy. Which is to say, his expression was stoic, but the fact he was staring at the cabinet as though he wanted it to burst into flames spoke for him.

He had on a pair of steel-gray suit pants, with suspenders that criss-crossed at his back over a red shirt. Old men wore suspenders, right? So he should have looked silly. But Reynard did not, in fact, look silly in suspenders. He looked refined, distinguished, and if Zee had witnessed the way those straps accentuated Reynard's frame, he'd have definitely had something erotic to say, and then blamed his desire on me.

"It looks great," I said, approaching him after the midday lunch rush in the bar. Zee hadn't returned from Razorsedge last night, but that was fine. I wasn't going to worry. Not yet.

Reynard folded his arms. "It is a monstrosity."

Beside him, I wondered if we were looking at the same cabinet. "It looks fine."

"Fine?" He scoffed. "I should dismantle it and begin again."

There was nothing wrong with it. The doors all lined up, the drawers were in. "No, nope. It's brilliant as it is. And you can't make it too perfect, remember? Fine is perfect."

His eyes narrowed and his gaze slid to me. "Are you humoring me?"

“No.” I laughed a little, hoping to ease the tension. “It really is fine. If Zee and I had made it, then it would be a monstrosity. But that looks great.”

“I remain unconvinced.” Reynard sighed, collected his jacket off the back of a nearby chair and shrugged it on. “Where is Zodiac?”

“Oh, he’s... He had a thing.” I shrugged, and tucked my hands into my pockets, looking around the bar at nothing in particular. Tom was there, pouring drinks. The jukebox played. “At Razorsedge. Last night. He’s fine.”

Reynard did that thing he does, where he stares until you blurt out what’s really on your mind. But I wasn’t falling for that. Nope. He didn’t need to get involved. I was just here to see how the cabinet was coming along, and definitely did not need his help with anything else.

“You’re concerned for him?” Reynard prompted.

I winced. “Am I that obvious?”

“You would not be you, if you weren’t concerned for a friend.”

Oh well, that was nice of him to say. “It’s just... I can’t really talk about Zee’s private life. But he’s worked at Razorsedge for years. He has friends there, and uh... there’s been some trouble... So, he’s gone back to fix the trouble.”

“Some trouble?” Reynard echoed, in a way that suggested he didn’t believe my flippant explanation.

“Yeah, I guess, I don’t know. He’s fine.” Just like we were all fine, and not clinging to this hotel like it was a life raft in the tumultuous oceans of our lives. “So, uh, how’s work? Your business. All good? Making millions?”



Reynard tilted his head, keeping his eyes narrowed. “Have a drink with me, Adam.”

I wasn’t sure if he’d suggested or ordered, but followed him to the bar where Tom Collins greeted us. “Good day, gentlemen. What poison may I serve you today?”

“Your exquisite Irish tea, please Tom,” Reynard said. I probably shouldn’t have ordered whiskey, but there it was in front of me so down it went, warming my insides after Zee’s absence last night left them cold.

“Tom.” I called him back over. “Where did you get the bow tie?” He wore a burgundy suit, which wasn’t new to his programming, but the blue bow tie was.

“Do you like it?” He preened, plucking at the tie’s edges.

Could AI update its own programming? Because I didn’t recall a bow tie in his appearance library. “It’s... blue.”

“It’s charming,” Reynard said, raising his teacup to his lips, clearly humoring him.

“Was it in your programming?” I asked.

Tom Collins smiled. “Must be, else it wouldn’t be around my fucking neck, would it?”

“You aren’t downloading anything off the internet, are you?”

“Did you enable automatic updates after you plugged me in?”

I huffed. When I’d set him up, I hadn’t paid too much attention to the settings. Which was how we’d ended up with the profanity-riddled AI. “Maybe.”

“I’m just an AI. I do exactly what you tell me to do. If you don’t like the bow tie, I’ll remove it.”

“No, it’s fine. It looks good.” I waved him off and away he went, humming to himself. Was the humming also new?

“I suspect he is gaslighting you,” Reynard said.

“What?” Could AI do that?

“I’ve been watching your Tom Collins while building the cabinet, and there are a great many issues affecting his programming.”

That didn’t sound good. “He has some glitches, but he seems to be a hit with the customers. Should I be concerned?”

He thought for a while, before answering. “You already have enough to worry about. I’m sure it’s nothing. I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“I thought you didn’t know about tech?”

“I’ve rather had to learn enough to get by.”

I eyed Tom Collins as he wiped down the bartop, making it gleam. The bar was, without a doubt, one of the most well-maintained places in the entire hotel. He had some issues, but he’d been working fine, so as long as the guests didn’t mind his eccentricities...

“Now, tell me what has you troubled, Adam.”

“Me? What? Nothing. I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

“Like the cabinet is fine?”

“The cabinet is fine.”

Reynard sipped his tea, and I could have excused myself and left, but I also, maybe, sort of, wanted to sit with him, because whenever I did, he made all my worries seem smaller.

“We could do this dance around the truth, but we both know you are deeply troubled. Is it anything I can assist with?”

I clasped my hands around my whiskey glass and peered into its depths. “It’s... personal.”

“Ah.”

“I want to do the right thing, but the right thing might hurt someone I care about... but also, save him. He thinks I can’t, because I’m me, which is to say... Never mind. It’s complicated, and you don’t want to know my problems.”

“If I didn’t, I would not have asked.” He set his teacup down in the saucer with a stern clack. “Allow me to be clear. I am in your debt. Until we deal with a certain sorcerer, I am yours.”

He was mine? I had sort of, technically, claimed him in front of the vampire royal family. We were definitely more than hotelier and guest. And sometimes, when I looked at him, I got the impression he really did want to help.

I pinched my lips together, trapping everything inside. Maybe... just a little... mention? “Sebastien killed one of Zee’s friends and demanded I let Zee go, but Zee doesn’t know, so he’s gone back to find her, but he won’t ever find her, because I

buried her in the flowerbeds, and Sebastien threatened to kill me if I ever went back, but I know I can free Zee, and maybe the others too, if I can just get a look at his contract.” I breathed in. Okay. Wow. That had all just fallen right out of me.

“Sebastien threatened you?” Reynard repeated in monotone. “How exactly?”

“Oh, it was nothing. Just a little choking against a wall until I almost blacked out. But I’m fine now.”

Reynard’s eyes widened. His top lip thinned, pulled tight over fangs. “That is far from nothing.”

“What he did to me doesn’t matter. It’s what he’s doing to Zee that’s wrong.”

“And what is he doing to Zodiac, Adam?” I should have stopped, should have heard the warning in his voice. Or perhaps I did hear it, and knew exactly what it would mean if I told him. Because I needed his help.

“Sebastien uses him, treats him as though he’s nothing. Like Zee’s his property. He treats them all like that. Like they’re nothing. They’re not nothing, Victor. They’re special, each one of them. They think I want to save them, but it’s not that. It’s not that at all. I want them to be free to choose. That is what I want. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. For everyone to be free to choose.”

Oh dear. I’d said too much. It had rushed out of me again, and now it was out there.

Reynard sat very still, absorbing my words. “He abuses Zodiac?” he repeated.

Oh dear. “I shouldn’t have said anything. If Zee finds out I’ve told you, he’ll be mad.”

Reynard called Tom over. “A Bloody Bitch, please Tom.”

“Coming right up.” Tom Collins mixed the drink, tossing stainless-steel mixers like a maestro directing his orchestra.

“Does Zodiac wish to be free of Sebastien?” Reynard asked, stuck in the same, monotone voice.

“He does.”

“He raised a sword in my time of need. The least I can do is help him spread his wings.”

My heart missed a beat. Reynard was going to help me help Zee? Oh, Zee would hate this, but also my chances of success had just doubled. Why did helping people always have to be so complicated? “It’s probably best we don’t tell him you’re involved, and... also he doesn’t know his friend is dead. So we should probably keep that from him too. If he knew about Sebastien’s threats, he’d go back to him forever, to stop him from hurting anyone else. And I’ll lose him.”

Reynard considered everything I’d said so far, cleared his throat, and turned to face me. Those darkly lined eyes with their silvery accents looked through me, touching my soul. “There are many lessons I’ve learned and relearned throughout my many years, but a few things remained consistent during the centuries.”

By the stars, he was old. I peered at him, sensing more was coming. I was ready for some ancient vampire wisdom. Ready to learn.

“Choosing truth is always the better path.”

“Hm... Yes. But also, sometimes, lies are good too.”

“Experience has taught me, truth eventually leads to the better outcome.”

I disagreed, and sat back. “Not always.”

“Which one of us has survived the ages?”

“Yeah, but...” I shrugged. He was wrong. Truth could be twisted. Truth could be wielded like a weapon. “I’m not telling him.”

“Is it not Zodiac’s choice to make, Adam?”

Probably, but I wasn’t going to tell him. “I appreciate your wisdom, I really do. But he’s got enough going on. I will tell him, just not yet.”

Reynard conceded with a slight bow. “Rest assured, your secrets are safe with me.”

“One Bloody Bitch for the bloody vampire,” Tom Collins announced, placing the red, glossy drink in front of Reynard. “And might I add, neither of you losers have seen Zodiac sitting at my bar alone at night, and witnessed the bruises beneath his glamor. If I could leave this bar, shove that shotgun down Sebastien’s throat and blow his balls off, I would have.” He smiled. “Enjoy your drinks.”

Tom left to serve another customer, whistling a jolly tune as he worked. I blinked after him as his words settled in my mind, their meaning becoming clearer as the seconds ticked on. I was fairly certain I’d bought a murderbot. Maybe there had been a mix-up up at the AI bartender factory?

“I think we have our answer,” Reynard remarked, taking a sip of his potent drink.

“As to whether Tom Collins is glitchy?”

“About what to do regarding Sebastien.” He downed the drink in one gulp and licked his lips, eyes shining with renewed vigor. “Where do we begin?”

“We need to get a copy of his contract. I think it’s in Sebastien’s suite. But he has eyes all over the club. Vampires are banned, and he’ll know as soon as I step inside. So we need to find a way to get past the doorman, past all the demons, avoid the guards, and break into his apartment without being seen. Oh, and we should avoid Zee, since he’ll probably be there too.”

“Ah.” Reynard’s smile slowly crept across his face. He raised his gaze, and the predator living behind his polished exterior pinned me to my stool under its gaze. “Well, it appears the answer is simple.”

“It is?”

“We merely have to give Sebastien exactly what he wants.” He ran the tip of his tongue over his thin lips.

“I don’t understand.”

“La mort d’amour,” he purred. His voice sounded like audible chocolate, and did tingly things to parts of my anatomy. Hello, Vampire Daddy.

Death sex? Wait. With him? What?

“Prepare yourself, Adam.” His fangs gleamed, on display now, when they hadn’t been moments ago. “You shall accompany me to Razorsedge this evening.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

Reynard's black sedan made its typically sleek arrival outside Razorsedge, but this time, it was gone eleven, and all of Demontown's nightlife witnessed us cruise to a stop. Some demons even gathered around the car, expectantly awaiting the opening of the doors.

This definitely was not subtle.

"Adam?"

I wiped my sweaty hands on my thighs. I wore a nice, casual, pale blue sweater and black pants, and had tried to style my bouncy hair. Nothing too fancy. I looked like Reynard's valet, since he wore a suit that was probably worth a million dollars. "Yes?"

Reynard offered up his softest, most charming smile. "Relax. No harm will come to you while you're at my side."

His voice, so deep and smooth, had me swallowing hard.

"Oh, yes, I know. Thank you." Why was I spanking—thanking him? We hadn't done anything yet. It wasn't as though we were about to walk into a demon sex-club and pretend to Sebastien we were about to engage in la mort d'amour. Death sex. With Lord Reynard. Mercy.

Reynard had said on the ride over, that we weren't actually going to do anything—the death sex was just a ruse to get in the door—but when in Rome, do as the Romans do, right? Wasn't that how the saying went? Oh deary.



All I had to do was get inside, get Zee's contract, and get away.

Reynard's driver opened the door and Reynard exited the vehicle. Razorsedge's thumping music spilled in, along with the general chatter and remarks of demons side-eyeing our emergence.

"Adam?"

"Yup?" I blinked up at Reynard as he leaned back inside.

"It's time to go."

"Oh, right, yes." I sprang from the seat, thanked the driver, and smiled at Velvet, who was watching all this from the neon steps. Her eyes widened, then narrowed, as Reynard elegantly trailed along behind me in all his suit-clad perfection. The glow from the neon lights made rainbows in his black hair, and by the stars, how was I going to do this without revealing how I actually did want to jump his bones and ride him hard?

I couldn't think about that. This was strictly about saving Zee. Not getting frisky with a vampire lord. Focus, Adam.

Flickering neon light shone in Reynard's eyes and licked along his lips. He stopped beside me, like an elegant statue of poise and grace.

Don't focus on Reynard. Focus on getting inside the club. There's the door. Open it.

"Hey, Velvet." I waved and climbed the few steps, hoping to slip right past Velvet, leaning against the wall beside the big black door.

"Hey there, babycakes. Who's this slick piece of ass, then?"

“This is a friend of mine.”

“Good evening,” Reynard purred, turning his charm level up to eleven.

Velvet tilted her head, studied Reynard from his polished shoes to his smooth black hair, and frowned. Anyone could wear a suit, but it was the eyes that marked him as vampire. “You should go on your way now. We don’t allow suckers in ’ere.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” I laughed. “Sebastien invited us.” Which was sort of true.

She shrugged—arched an eyebrow. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Adam.”

“Is Zee here?” We hoped he wasn’t, but it seemed likely. If we encountered him we’d have to keep our story straight. We were here to engage in—ahem—la mort d’amour. He’d be confused, and probably suspicious, but he also knew how much I wanted to climb Reynard like a ladder, so he wouldn’t stop us.

“He is, sugar. Want me to text him?”

“No, no, it’s fine. We’ll find him inside.” I hurried through the door with Reynard in tow. The pink-eyed albino demon at the front desk, grunted for us to leave our weapons, then saw Reynard. “No suckers.” He pointed down, to where a hand-painted sign on the front desk read: No Fang Fuckers.

“It’s alright, we have an invite,” I said.

“Can’t let you in.”

This demon was going to need more than my word that Reynard was allowed inside. This was it. Once we did this, there was no going back. It wasn’t too late. We could still turn around. Could think up another plan that didn’t involve me spending some

quality time in a sex room with Lord Reynard.

Reynard rested his arm on the desk. “Call your boss down here, friend.”

The demon snorted. “Ain’t no friend of suckers.”

Reynard’s little mind trick hadn’t worked, not on this strong-willed demon.

“Please,” I added. “Sebastien knows us.”

Grumbling, the demon picked up his phone and dialed, then held one end of the phone near his mouth, leaving it on speaker.

“See,” I told Reynard. “Saying please sometimes gets the same results your talent does.”

“What is it?” Sebastien’s sharp voice crackled.

“I got a sucker at the door, wants to enter, says he has an invite.”

“The fuck you bothering me with this shit for, dickface? No suckers.”

“Sebastien?” I piped up. “Hello. Uh. Adam here.”

“Adam Vex!” Sebastien’s voice switched from irritated snaps into a smooth, seductive purr. “Back for more? You got a death wish, stupid little human?”

“Uh, no, it’s just, uh . . . you said . . . when I came here before, that uh . . . me and uh, a friend could . . . come back and erm . . . maybe?—”

“Spit it out, for fuck’s sake. Ugh, fucking wait there.”

The call ended, and the guard grunted at us to wait by the sticky chairs and plastic plant.

Reynard folded his arms and leaned a shoulder against the wall, apparently relaxed, although his eyes scanned the faces of everyone who passed us. Then his gaze landed on me, and the smallest of smiles lifted his lips. That smile landed like a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

It was good to have backup.

Sebastien surged into the lobby in a blast of baby pink—accented with snow-white details on his jacket and pants—with his long white hair currently pinned up in an artfully messy bun.

“The fuck are you doing here with that? Was one warning not enough? You thought you’d bring your suit back, to what? Make you look big? You just look like a simp. Don’t embarrass yourself. Fuck off. Bye.”

He was a lot. Every time. I took a breath, reeling from his tirade.

“Then do you rescind your offer?” Reynard asked, adding some much needed composure to the conversation.

“What fucking offer?”

“La mort d’amour? You offered us a room, no?”

“La mortdafaq?” Sebastien straightened, then stepped back. A few nearby demons, including the one at the desk, fell quiet too. It probably wasn’t often that they saw their boss lost for words.

Sebastien's wings gave a little flutter, and from watching Zee... that showed he was interested, perhaps even intrigued. "I did say that..." Sebastien purred and tilted his head. His black pupils widened, swallowing the pale blue of his eyes. "Well then, right this way." After turning on his heel and vanishing his wings, he led us deeper into the club, tail swishing behind him.

My heart pounded, hard and fast, like the music trying to break through the walls. This was happening. It was working.

"Death sex. You're a kinky fuck, human. You taking this to its limits, vampire? Or just for fun?" Sebastien asked, leading us down several steps into a neon-lit hallway. Several of the doors hung open, revealing lavish rooms inside, like private booths with a bed area. A few doors were closed too. Probably occupied.

"For fun," Reynard replied, since my brain had forgotten how to word.

"If you change your mind, I'll pay good money to film you fuck the human to death. Snuff videos sell for a fortune." Sebastien glanced over his shoulder, pupils blown wide now. His wings sparked some too, dusting the air with pale blue glitter.

"Money is not something I'm short of."

We'd been concerned that Sebastien might ask why we'd come to Razorsedge to erm... do the thing, when we could just engage in death sex at the hotel, but Reynard had suggested Sebastien would be too titillated to ask. He was right.

Sebastien opened a door for us, into a large suite with a red leather-cushioned booth area to the right and a bed draped in red curtains on our left.

"You have the room for an hour. If you need longer, hit the button over there on the control panel. Oh, and don't forget, I'll be watching. As was the deal."

“Of course, as was the deal,” Reynard said, heading into the room without a moment’s hesitation.

Sebastien eyed me from his towering height, like a bug he’d like to squish. “Erm, thank you.” I stepped inside too, and Sebastien swept the door closed.

Reynard and I stood alone in the large, sumptuous, and comfortable room. I couldn’t hear the music as much now, so there was adequate soundproofing should things get noisy.

“So.” I clapped my hands together. “This is nice. It’s very...” Hot? Erotic? Sexy?

“Red,” Reynard said for me. “Look for the camera.” Straight to business. Always the professional.

“Yes. Right. The camera.” I hurried toward the gleaming, stainless-steel control panel on the back wall and its array of candy-colored buttons. Poking at one opened a side panel in the booth, revealing a small drinks cabinet stocked with wine. A mini bar. I jabbed the next button, and a drawer popped open in the oval table in front of the booth. That one appeared to be filled with essential oils of all different colors. Massage oils? No wait, flavored lubricant. I jabbed that button again, closing it before Reynard saw.

When I pressed the third button, a whirring sounded, the ceiling panels opened, and an array of chains and leather dropped from above. There were, very clearly, four straps ending in buckles, creating a large sling of some kind. It looked like a medieval torture device.

I blinked, frozen in place.

Reynard also blinked. Twice. And paused, midway through adjusting his shirt cuffs.

A drawer beside the bed popped out with a loud clang, revealing a selection of coiled whips.

“I doubt we’ll be needing those,” Reynard said smoothly.

“Oh. Right. Yes. I mean no. No! Definitely not?” I jabbed at the panel, missed the button, and hit the one next to it. A drawer under the bed rolled out, displaying a rack of dildos and buttplugs that put Zee’s drawer of dicks to shame. Big ones, small ones, studded ones, colorful ones, double dicks, small dicks, spikey ones, fat ones. So many... The display went on and on.

“Or those,” Reynard added, eyebrow arched.

I turned my back on him, and the dicks, and punched the buttons, desperately trying to hide everything. Heat flushed my face. “Oh dick—dear!”

Help.

“Adam.” He appeared at my side, took my hand, and proceeded to switch off all the buttons, hiding the toys away. “Breathe.”

I was breathing, a lot. Too much. Mercy, why was there so much air in this room?

Placing my hand over his chest, I felt his heart’s thump-thump—he definitely did have a pulse. I looked up, and found his smile again. He leaned in. Blood rushed in my veins. Yes, kiss me, Daddy. He bowed his head. His silver eyes captured all my thoughts and set them on fire. I parted my lips, ready—closer—so ready.

He veered right, his cheek skimming mine, and he whispered, “We must find the camera or this will not work.”

Mercy, he smelled so good. Just a hint of cinnamon and something exotic. Whether it was his cologne or just him, he always smelled delicious. By the stars, give me strength to resist.

“Slow dance with me.”

“What? Okay.” I didn’t need much persuasion, since his hands had already settled on my back and eased me closer. What was I supposed to do, if not hold him close and gently rock with him in a seesaw motion, even if there wasn’t any music to dance to? But then he reached out and found a button on the panel for that. A soft, romantic melody began to play in the background.

Well, this was so nice. I sighed, finally beginning to thaw.

“I see it,” he said, then stepped from my arms and backed toward the bed.

He’d seen what?

He shrugged off his jacket, and even that movement was graceful. His gaze skewered me, kicking my heart back into a thousand beats per minute. We were being filmed, so this was all an act, but that didn’t stop my blood from simmering and my body from singing.

“Tell me you want me.”

I swallowed, or tried to, but my throat had inexplicably shrunk around my answer.

“Tell me, Adam,” he ordered.

“I . . .”



“Yes?” He shoved his sleeves up their final inches, behind his elbows, exposing strong forearms. And I was done for.

He’d barely touched me, just glared and ordered, and my knees were already weak. I bit my lip. He hadn’t looked down, but if he did, he’d know how aroused I was. Was this wrong? It didn’t feel wrong.

He strode forward, boxed me in, and backed me against the wall.

I gasped, trapped by the elegant hardness of Victor Reynard, bracketed between his braced arms. “Tell me, Adam, how much you want me.” His eyes blazed. This was Victor unhinged, Victor at the pinnacle of authority.

“I want you,” I whispered, afraid it was true. “A lot.” Words were hard.

“Good.” He bowed his head. His mouth hovered over mine, so close the kiss already burned me up. “Because I want you too.”

A tiny, strained moan gurgled up my throat, and all Zee’s words came flying back to me about how Reynard had hangups, but once he got over them, he’d take me. I wanted that. Wanted him. Wanted to lick him all over, then have him tell me what to do and how to do it.

Reynard slammed a fist into the wall. I yelped, and looked down, to find the new hole he’d made fill with dancing electric sparks. The camera.

He pushed off, gave himself a realigning shoulder-roll and cracked his knuckles. “Come then, Adam. We do not have long.” He grabbed his jacket and dashed out the door.

I clung to the wall—panting, hard, stunned—as though I’d been railed all over, my

skin on fire and dick heavy. He'd barely touched me.

"Adam?"

"Yes. I'm coming." I might come. I wasn't far off. I shuddered, peeled myself from the wall and stumbled into the corridor, finding Reynard checking both ways.

"We need to find a weak-willed guard, someone easily manipulated who has access to the rest of the club," Reynard said, going over the plan we'd agreed on.

"Right. Yes." If my brain hadn't turned to Jell-O, I'd have known where to find such a guard. "Erm. The stage?" I pointed one way, then the other. "There's security there."

"Alright, let's go there." He grasped my shoulder and peered into my eyes. "We must move fast, Sebastien may already know we've left the room."

"Uh-huh. Fast. Yup."

"Adam?" Black lashes swept closed, then opened again, presenting mesmerizing eyes. "Are you alright?"

"No. Yes. No. Uh-huh. Fine." Except for the overpowering urge to drag him back into that room and make him order me around some more. Maybe try out some of those restraints? Have him say my name to chastise me.

A giggling pair of demons stumbled out of a nearby room and headed toward us. Reynard scooped me to one side and propped me against the wall. He waited until they'd passed, and then his firm hand cradled my chin, tilting it up. He examined my face. His smile faded. "I was under the impression you were immune to my talent, but it seems I was mistaken. My apologies, Adam. It will wear off."

“No, no it’s good, it’s fine, I just...” I just really needed to drop to my knees and suck Vampire Daddy. Right here. Right now. If he told me to, I’d do it in a heartbeat. This was... new, and kinda weird. But good weird. Like feeding Zee was good weird.

“We’re here for Zodiac, remember?”

Zodiac. Yes. I needed to snap out of it and focus. “Alright—I’m all right. Let’s go.”

We hurried from the warren and back up the stairs, following the sound of thumping music, through corridors and up more steps, then emerged into the main stage room and dance floor. Colored lights flickered and swept across the crowd, but the chance of anyone paying us any attention was slim. Most people watched the male demon dancing naked on stage.

“There.” Reynard had spotted a security guard. Like a shark scenting blood, he carved through the crowd. “Good evening.” The guard—a gargoyle—turned his head and fixed his gaze on Reynard’s. “We are the most important people in this club tonight. You will escort us to Sebastien’s suite. Anyone who attempts to stop us, you will deal with.”

“Yes,” the gargoyle said, his face slack.

“Good. Lead on.”

The big gargoyle trudged forward, cutting through the middle of the room in a not-so-subtle stomp toward the side door. Reynard followed in his wake, and I tagged along behind, glancing around to make sure nobody was paying us any attention. Thankfully, the dancing, naked demon had everyone under his thrall. So far, so good. Now we just needed to get inside Sebastien’s room and find the contracts. If we’d timed it right, Sebastien would already have left, looking for us. He’d never suspect we’d be inside his suite.

The gargoyle plodded through the door, into the narrow stairwell, then up to the landing outside Sebastien's room, where the keen-eyed demon guard waited.

"Let us through," Reynard said.

The guard straightened. "Not happening, sucker."

"Deal with him," Reynard told the gargoyle. It happened so fast, the guard didn't have much time to react before he found himself picked up by the neck and slammed into the wall behind him. "Open the door." The gargoyle leaned into Sebastien's suite door and popped it from its lock.

Seeing Reynard's power in action was impressive, but also unsettling. He could walk into any locked room, anywhere, if he chose the right weak-willed person to manipulate. And I doubted he'd used his powers for good his whole life.

I followed him inside Sebastien's suite. What did I know about Reynard, really?

Sebastien's sickly sweet cologne choked the air. The smoky glass partitioned off the bedroom area, but Sebastien wasn't here or we'd have heard him already.

"Where does he keep the contracts?" Reynard asked, after telling the gargoyle to guard the door.

Sebastien had gestured at the back wall with all the cupboards when we'd been discussing contracts, so they had to be there, somewhere. "Check there."

We tore open the drawers and cupboards, looking for anything substantial that might hold important documents.

"Here." Reynard flicked open the lid on a black box file, and removed multiple

documents. Lost Ones preferred printed documents. They were easier to authenticate that way. Digital files were too easy to hack, delete or alter.

He turned, and spread the contracts out on the glass coffee table. There had to be fifty documents, at least. But I could clearly see that each contract proclaimed its contents to be the property of Sebastien.

We just needed Zee's.

"What the flying fuck is this?" Zee growled from behind us. Oh no.

I straightened, stomach dropping, and turned toward the bedroom area to see Zee, wrapped in a silky blue gown with blue feather trim.

"Adam, what?" The surprised look on his face quickly tightened to betrayal. "How did you get in here?"

I swallowed, and glanced at Reynard, at a loss for where to even begin to explain how or why we'd broken into Sebastien's room.

Reynard straightened too, and glanced at me, silently asking how much he should say.

"Zee, we just?—"

"You can't be here." Zee's eyes widened. "Neither of you can be here. You have to go now, before he?—"

"Before he what?" Sebastien purred, slinking through the door. "Do continue. I'll wait, while you all try and think up some explanation for why the fuck you're in my room, rifling through my shit."

A heavy, expectant silence fell over us.

Sebastien chuckled a heartless laugh, and his cruel, cold eyes cut to Zee. “Did you think you could trick me, Zodiac?”

“Zee doesn’t know anything about this,” I explained. “It was all my idea.”

But Sebastien wasn’t listening. He sashayed toward Zee, tail sweeping, wings back. “You know what I do to bitches who misbehave.”

Zee’s tail twitched, but instead of standing taller, he folded his arms over his fluffy gown. “Leave.” He gritted his teeth, making the muscle in his cheek twitch. That one word was meant for us.

“Oh no,” Sebastien laughed. “They fucking stay and watch. Since I’m owed a show, and these two cockteasers pulled out early.”

“Zee didn’t know about this,” I protested, starting forward, but Reynard’s arm shot out, blocking me. Sebastien would punish him, more than he already had. He’d hurt him.

The defiance on Zee’s face fizzled out. His shoulders drooped, lowering his wings. “It was my idea,” he lied.

“Zee, no—” Why would he say that?

“It was me,” he told Sebastien, dead in the eyes. “Let them leave.”

“The fuck did you think was going to happen?” Sebastien demanded of him. He reached up his sleeve, and withdrew a slim length of chain. Zee saw it, and from how his eyes widened he knew what it meant. “You think you’re the first to try and tear up

your contract? You know what I do to little bitches like you?"

I couldn't stand by and watch this. "Stop!"

Sebastien spun, and launched the chain at me. Its short length shouldn't have reached, but as he whipped it out, the links extended into a long, jagged length that shot across the room toward my neck. Reynard lunged, and flung up his arm. The chain looped around his wrist, tied off, and Reynard let out a low warning growl, the chain now fixed on him.

"I caught a sucker. You wanna play, vampire?" Sebastien crooned "You think you can take me Baron? Like old times?" He yanked on the chain, jolting Reynard forward a few steps.

"I don't need to," Reynard warned. "Gargoyle, attack Sebastien."

The gargoyle thundered into the room and barreled toward Sebastien.

Sebastien dropped the chain, pulled a pistol from under his jacket, pointed it at the gargoyle's chest and pulled the trigger. The weapon barked, the gargoyle jerked, but kept on marching for Sebastien. Sebastien fired again, then again, making the gargoyle jerk each time.

Sebastien would kill his own guard. "Stop." I glanced at Reynard. "Stop this." He could order the gargoyle to stop, but wouldn't.

Sebastien fired a fourth time, and the gargoyle dropped to his knees, then pitched face first into the floor. Dead.

"Ugh, what a mess." Sebastien grumbled. He suddenly swung the gun up, aimed on me.

“No!” Zee yelled.

Reynard moved, turning into liquid shadow, and must have slammed into Sebastien, because he was there one moment, then gone the next. The smoky-glass partition exploded as a vampire and a demon flew through it.

Sebastien shrieked, landing on his back on the bed. Reynard had him pinned, jaw wide, fangs extended, going for his neck, but Sebastien levered him back, wrestling. “Zodiac!” Sebastien screamed. “Call him off, or every last fucking demon in this club dies because of you! Just like Cherise. They’ll all die!”

Zee’s tail lashed now. He glowered at Reynard, still trying to sink his fangs into Sebastien’s neck, then at me. Fury poured off him. His tail beat the air, whip-like.

“She’s dead because of you!” Sebastien screeched. “Come back to me, stay with me, and nobody else gets hurt.” Sebastien struggled to brace Reynard off him. “The fucking whore deserved it. They all deserve it. And they will all die, one by one, until you kneel to me.” Reynard growled. “Get this fucking leech off me!”

Zee glanced to me again, and there was that resignation, that moment when he surrendered. For his friends. For me.

“No, Zee.”

His eyes said sorry for him. “Reynard, let him up. Take Adam, and go,” Zee said.

“No.” I marched toward him. “I am not leaving you here. Not again. I can’t leave you here with him.”

“This isn’t about you, Kitten.” He sounded calm, but the way his wings flared and his tail whipped back and forth said he was far from it. “It’s about keeping people safe. If



I'm here, they are safe, and so are you. Victor," Zee growled, turning away from me. "Don't make me fight you in a fluffy gown."

"Zee, please..." I sidestepped, putting myself between him and the battle on the bed. "What about the hotel, about us? Isn't that worth something?"

"It was fun," he said sadly. "But it's not for me."

"No!" I slammed my hands into his chest, rocking him back a step. "You'll fight for Reynard, you'll fight for everyone out there, but you won't fight for you?"

"I think we both know I'm nothing special, Adam. But you are." He grabbed my face in his hands. "Go, be fucking amazing. I'm right where I'm supposed to be."

My heart cracked and my voice came out broken. "You're supposed to be with me."

"I'd have liked that, but this ain't no fucking fanfic, Kitten." He slammed a bruise of a kiss on my mouth, then shoved me back so hard I almost fell over a coffee table. "Victor, get the fuck off Sebastien," Zee ordered. "Don't make me wrestle you buck naked. Neither of us is ready for that shit."

Reynard eased off a ruffled Sebastien and stepped back. He clicked his fangs away and adjusted his clothes, then smoothed his hair. They eyed each other, glaring daggers.

No. This wasn't right. The contract was just a piece of paper. "You could fight for us, for you, here and now, but you won't. And that's on you, Zee!"

His face fell, and a horrible stab of guilt twisted my guts. Oh no, I'd hurt him.

I hated him, even if I knew why he did it—to save everyone else. But I admired him

too. He was doing the right thing, instead of hiding or running. It might have been the bravest thing I'd ever seen, and I was ashamed of how weak I was. Because I couldn't stand to leave him here, but I couldn't do a damn thing about it.

I fled the room, and only stopped to breathe when I stumbled outside the club. Velvet didn't dare ask if I was alright. And the other demons cleared a path, moving out of my way.

Reynard reappeared a few minutes later, and used his phone to summon his car.

He didn't say a word.

Slumped against the wall, I closed my eyes, and breathed.

Once upon a time, in a land, far, far away, I would have leveled the club and everyone in it. I'd have burned all of Demontown to the ground. I could take Sebastien and crush him like the bug he thought me to be, but then they'd come for me—the humans, the hunters, vampires, demons, sorcerers, witches, all the Lost Ones. They'd come for me, and they'd tear out my heart. Just like Zee had done.

“Adam?”

I bent double and grasped my thighs, trying to hold myself together. It hurt, inside, all over. It hurt like I was breaking open and spilling out.

I wanted to explode.

See how they treated me then.

“Adam? The car,” Reynard said gently.

The car was here. I opened the rear door, and scooted along the back seat to slump against the other door. Reynard climbed in, and we were away, leaving the neon lights and chaos of Demontown behind.

I propped my chin on my knuckles and stared out the window. “He left me, Victor.”

“I’m sorry.”

Zee had chosen Sebastien. The hotel wouldn’t be the same without him. I missed him already, missed him like he’d made a hole in my heart.

“But we did get this,” Reynard said.

I turned my head, and saw that Reynard had removed a neatly folded sheet of thick paper from inside his jacket. He opened it, and there, at the top, I read:

Contract of Sale. Battalion warrior Lycian (Zodiac).

It wasn’t over yet.

Zee might have surrendered, but I never would. Not when it came to the people I cared for.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

We sat in the bar in the very early hours, poring over Zee's contract, while Tom Collins watched on, glowering and muttering about how useless Reynard and I were. He had a point.

"It says he was sold by a demon named Copernicus." I'd never heard the name, and Zee hadn't ever mentioned it. But he didn't talk about his past. I'd only recently learned his real name was Lycian, and only then because the vampires had let it slip.

"Copernicus was a warrior general during the war," Reynard said casually, as though it was common knowledge. He sat in the chair, looking a little frazzled since his run-in with Sebastien. His hair was a bit mussed, and his nice shirt had glitter on it from Seb's clothes. He also kept looking away, as though his mind was wandering. Like he was doing now.

"War?" I asked.

Reynard looked back. "I forget you're not one of us. My apologies. You may have noticed, there's some animosity between vampires and demons."

"Uh well, yes, a bit."

"Demons and vampires have been at war for several centuries."

"What for?"

"What do most societies fight for? Land, resources, and more recently, out of principle. We don't like demons."

I was aware of that last part, but hadn't paid much attention to their war, probably because I'd been fighting my own battle.

Reynard leaned back in his chair. "I suspect Zodiac's was one of the first battalions to venture through the tear in the veil, and when it sealed, it trapped him and his fellow warriors here. With no war to fight, they were adrift. This contract confirms that General Copernicus sold his warriors into service, as was his right as their general."

That made sense. Lost Ones had had a hard time of it when the veil sealed itself back up. With no way home they'd had to adapt. "Are all demons warriors?"

"Most, to some degree. Their society is warlike by nature. If I have my timings right, Zodiac's battalion was the first wave, sent here to scout out for the second wave—the invasion force."

"Invasion?" I squeaked. "The demons were planning to invade?"

"In truth, if it hadn't been them, it would have been us," he said. "This world is ripe and verdant. Ours is—was—stripped to the bone. No invasion happened. The veil slammed shut. Nobody has been able to go home or come through since, which is probably for the best for everyone."

It sort of made sense. I knew Zee had a whole other side to him. I'd witnessed it when we'd saved Reynard from his family. "Was Sebastien a warrior too?"

Reynard's lip curled in disgust. "I do not know. It's possible—likely even. But he does not fight like one."

"No." He'd preferred to pull a gun and shoot his own guard than fight.

"I'll take this contract to an expert," Reynard said. "While demons don't much care

for human law, they do take contracts seriously, and from what I can ascertain, it appears to be watertight. But I'll ask Pierce to go over it. He'll find any weaknesses, if they're there to find."

"Pierce?" I'd heard that name recently, but sleep deprived and emotionally fragile after Zee had dumped me, I couldn't recall where.

"Yes, he's the royal scribe. An expert in contracts and deals. He's on the council. You likely saw him seated behind the princess during your visit to the mansion."

Oh yes, there had been a vampire who Princess Daisy had turned to, querying my claim that our guestbook was a type of contract. "Do you have to go back to Vampire Mansion to talk to him?"

"No, I'll ask him to meet me here or at my office. Both locations are warded. He'll come. He'll be too curious not to."

"Good, that's good. I can't lose you too," I muttered, scanning the contract again. Then I caught Reynard's querying glance, and realized I'd spoken that last part aloud. "I mean, I uh..." What had I meant?

Exactly what I'd said.

I had nothing to add, and instead rustled the contract in my hands. "It does seem thorough."

"Adam, Zodiac was quite clear. He doesn't want you involved in his life there."

"I'm aware." His words still cut deep, and if I thought about them, a knot tightened my throat. "But I don't give up, not when it's important."

Reynard nodded, and sat back in thought a while. “I’d like to apologize for my behavior at Razorsedge.”

“It’s nothing.” I waved him off and stared hard at the contract, so I didn’t have to see his eyes or his handsome face, or the way the top button of his shirt was missing, making his collar gape, or how his precise fingers played with a hotel coaster. “You weren’t to know Sebastien had a gun, and I suppose the gargoyle knew the risks when he signed up to protect Sebastien.”

“Not that. I meant in the room. Between us. You’ve been resistant to my suggestions before, and honestly, I forgot you’re human. I have become careless around you. Please, accept my sincerest apologies.”

Yeah, no, that wasn’t what happened. “Like I said, it’s nothing.” I stared harder at the contract.

“Well, it’s not nothing. Consent is a large part of what makes this hotel work, and what I did to you was nonconsensual. I wouldn’t want it to get in the way of our friendship?—”

“You don’t need to explain.” Please stop explaining.

“I’d never knowingly hurt you, I owe you a great?—”

“Yes, okay, it’s fine.”

“Adam.”

He lifted my gaze to his stern face. He seemed pained to think he’d persuaded me to do something I didn’t want to do. Oh dear, I was going to have to tell him the truth. Or some of it. “You didn’t coerce me. You can’t. I wanted it. It was all me. You

didn't do anything wrong. Don't apologize."

"But I . . . You were clearly smitten."

I placed the contract down and sighed. "I may be the tiniest bit not human—just a smidge, like one percent not human. Zero-point-one percent. I'm mostly human. All the important bits, but not those bits. I mean, some other parts of me..." He was staring oddly, and those perfect eyes had begun to narrow with suspicion. "It could be, probably isn't, might be, that I am immune to your persuasion, so erm... yeah. You didn't do anything to me, because you can't."

Tom Collins dropped and smashed a glass. "Shit!"

Reynard cast him a sideways glance, then flicked his gaze back to me. "Indeed."

I fixed Reynard's gaze under mine. It was time to make one thing very clear to the vampire lord. "You can't break me, Victor."

He swallowed, then briefly looked away, before facing me again. "Then what happened in that room was consensual?"

The part in Razorsedge where he'd gotten all bossy, and I'd gotten all hot, as though I'd been shoved into a power outlet, and my brain turned to goo while other parts of me got real hard? That part? "That was, uh, all me. I guess." Mercy, someone kill me now. There was little point in denying my desires now. It was probably best to lay it all on the table. "Look, I have a little thing for you." I poked at a coaster, keeping my head down. "Kind of always did. And then we went dancing, before your family kidnapped me, and the thing got worse—or better, I'm not sure. And we uh... You remember? On the deck outside the dance club. I don't know if that was genuine, or just to lure your wife out of hiding, but I liked it, and I'm really not in a good place right now to deal with all this, so can we maybe not talk about it and just pretend the



red room didn't happen?"

The jukebox had stopped playing. I peeked up, and found him motionless, and staring.

He swallowed, and sat back. "I see. Right. Yes. Of course. It did not happen. As you say."

We all fell quiet, and now it was really awkward—crawl into a hole kind of awkward. I was going to need a Tom Collins drink.

"In that case, you should know, it was genuine," he said. "Or, more correctly, I was being genuine when we kissed on the deck outside the dance club, prior to my spouse's ultimately fatal arrival. I've rarely had such a fine evening. Killing my wife was the perfect digestif. Unfortunately, you were taken, and what happened after is best forgotten. But prior to that? Yes, a fine evening, indeed. And fine company."

My heart thumped. "Oh." Wait, he liked me? Not just as food? Or was that what he meant? "So uhm, in Razorsedge last night, that was real then?" The whole growly, "Tell me you want me, Adam." That had been real?

"Invigoratingly so." He reached across the table and tentatively brushed his fingertips over the back of my hand, as though fearing I might reject him. Which was ridiculous.

Mercy, our hands were touching, fingers stroking, and it was nice.

Tom Collins slammed a bottle onto the bar, startling both of us. We jerked our hands back and glared.

Tom tutted. "You can fuck later, after you've saved my best performer so I can sell

more fucking overpriced drinks and make this rundown excuse for an establishment profitable. You think patrons come to this bar for the atmosphere? No, they visit to lust after Zodiac and get drunk, courtesy of yours truly.” He tugged on his bow tie. “The profit on my liquid creations is fivefold. So, pack your little Bella-and-Edward drama away, and go save the one unique selling point this rundown hotel has. You may fucking thank me later.”

Reynard faced me and cleared his throat. “Who are Bella and Edward?”

“Friends of his?” I had no idea, but it was probably best not to ask.

“Adam. For the sake of clarity, what happened between us at Razorsedge didn’t happen until we mutually acknowledge it did. Correct?”

There was an us? I swallowed. “Yeah.” My heart skippety-skipped. Lord Victor Reynard liked me. Now, I just needed my bestie demon back and everything would be fine again. As fine as any day at the SOS Hotel could be. “Let’s free Zee.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

The vampire scribe, Pierce, arrived around lunchtime the next day and met with Reynard privately in the conference room, since Pierce refused to discuss anything with the “duke killer” present. I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of the name the vampires had given me, and instead avoided them, preferring to check in with Madame Matase.

She sat at the reception desk, knitting needles set aside as she spoke on the phone and scanned the guest book, booking some potential guests a room for next week. She wore black lace, and had her tumble of dark hair pinned back, adding a touch of glamor to our tired foyer. Madame Matase had been one of my lucky finds, like Zodiac.

I got a glimpse of the book, noting lots of names. That was good. We might actually make a profit soon, if occupancy stayed up once the novelty of a Lost Ones hotel wore off.

She ended the call and smiled up at me. “Hello, darling. How are you?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Has there been any more unusual activity with the wards?”

“There was, Adam, yes. Two nights ago, in fact. How did you know?”

“I see.” When Zee and I had been getting up close and personal in my room. I suspected we’d found our culprit. Me. “Did the wards swell again?”

“They did, yes. Just a little. Do you know what’s causing it?”

“I think so, yes. It’s nothing to worry about.” Not for her, anyway. But I was going to need to examine my own cursework and the glamor trapped beneath it, and patch any leaks. I wasn’t a natural curse maker. Curses were sorcery. Which was probably why the desperate, last-ditch one I’d performed on myself was beginning to fail. Hiring a licensed sorcerer was out of the question. They had to report to the authorities any unregistered cursework, and mine was definitely unregistered.

“Mr. Adam Vex?” a soft, delicate male voice, sweetly slithered into my preoccupied thoughts, demanding I pay attention.

I turned to find a tall, androgenous fae peering down their fine nose at me. They wore a one-third length, dark duster coat over a dark gray suit. A badge flashed at their hip, which they made sure to show me with a flick of their lean fingers. Their pale green hair had been trimmed at jaw length, into a perfect bob.

Mercy, they were pretty.

“Good day to you Mr. Vex. My name is Agent Elion Leomaris with the Special Supernatural Division.” They pronounced every word slowly, stretching each syllable to beyond an inch of its life.

Wait. The SSD? The supernatural police.

“Oh dear.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.” I casually propped an elbow on the front desk. “All our business licenses are up to date, and our Lost Ones licenses too. We’re all above board. Absolutely legitimate. Nothing untoward happening here. It’s really quite boring, actually.” Definitely no dead demons in the flowerbeds, no human protestor’s corpse

somewhere hidden, or an interdimensional, incorporeal shadowbeast in the attic. And definitely not anything so powerful living under the SOS Hotel roof, that it would see my home, my life, immediately shut down and quarantined.

I smiled, my one hundred percent human, innocent Adam Vex smile.

“I’m here at the request of one Detective Somers,” he said, his voice as soft as silk. “I believe you’ve met?”

“Detective Somers? Yes, we met. I’ll be honest though. His baseless accusations regarding my business partner are bordering on racism against demons.”

The tall, lean fae propped their hands on their hips, shifting their coattails back, and sighed. “Yes, that is not unusual, unfortunately. But some of his accusations are quite serious in nature, and do warrant a follow up from my department, hence my arrival. Perhaps we might discuss this in private?”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, well, there’s an ongoing meeting in the conference room, and the bar and restaurant are busy with lunchtime. Uhm, so there really isn’t anywhere.”

“Your room, perhaps?”

“My room?” I did have a seating area in my room, but I’d never used it for formal meetings. “I suppose that will do. Madame Matase, if Lord Reynard should finish his meeting early, please tell him I’m meeting with Agent Leomaris in my room.” I tried to convey that she should send Reynard up immediately, since he was much better at these things than I was.

She nodded. “I will do, Adam.”

My thoughts raced as I climbed into the elevator with the SSD agent. The fae were notorious liars and con artists, which made them excellent at detecting liars and con artists. Hopefully, Agent Leomaris was here to tick a few boxes and that would be the end of the matter.

At my room, I invited them in, and quickly scanned the floor for any dirty or bloody laundry. I hadn’t slept much after leaving Zee at Razorsedge, and had tidied my room instead. That burst of cleanliness happened to be perfect timing.

“Please, take a seat, Agent.” I gestured at the little table and chairs by the window.

They glided around my room, taking the long route to the chairs, and paused at my shelf of cat figurines. “You like cats, Mr. Vex?”

“I like collecting things.”

“I see.”

“So, how can I help?” I sat, hoping they’d do the same. They did finally make their way over, swept their coat out, and took a seat in the chair opposite.

“You’re aware of Detective Somers’s concerns, and I’m sure you’re aware a protestor went missing the day this hotel opened.”

“I heard about that. How terrible. We, of course, had nothing to do with it.”

“I’m sure.” They smiled and leaned back in the chair, getting comfortable. Their coat flopped open, showing the gleaming SSD badge. “It’s quite admirable, what you’re doing here. But also rather foolish. You see, I have spent the last three years

attempting to craft order from chaos. Lost Ones, such as myself, were never meant to exist this side of the veil. Some blend in successfully, others have a harder time of it. But one thing remains consistent—trouble follows some wherever they go.”

“Humans are the same, I guess. We have good and bad ones, you know?”

They smiled, and a few seconds passed. “Were you aware, the human female you bought this hotel from hasn’t been seen since the sale?”

“Oh dear. She was sweet. She liked cats.”

“Answer the question, please Mr. Vex.” They continued to smile, but their smooth, soft tone now had a barb behind it.

Hm, was Agent Elion Leomaris going to be a problem? “I was made aware, yes. But we had nothing to do with that. The sale was all above board.”

Agent Leomaris nodded. “Tell me about your feud with Gideon Cain of Cain Developments.”

“Feud?” I laughed. “Oh, we don’t have a feud?—”

“Do not lie to me, Mr. Vex.” Their pale green eyes narrowed. “Prior to my career as an agent with the Special Supernatural Division, I was a successful bounty hunter for many years. There wasn’t a bounty I could not track and capture. Rabid shifters, demon troublemakers, dark sorcerers... No single target escaped my crosshairs, so to speak.”

My heart stopped. I coughed, and it kicked back into gear. “Oh? We uh, we don’t allow bounty hunters in this hotel, for the safety of our guests.”

“Of course not, and I’m no longer a bounty hunter. But do not look at me and assume you can talk me around in circles. One liar to another.”

A tiny voice told me to run now. To run and keep on running. Agent Leomaris was going on my Bad People list. “I uh... I’m not lying.”

Their mouth teased a laugh that never made it past their thin lips.

This fae scared me more than Detective Somers ever could. I knew their kind—bounty hunters. Hired by the highest bidder to take down anyone and anything. No morals, no code. Just ruthless pursuit of their target. They carried crossbows, and could hit a target a mile away. They hunted their prey to the ends of the known Earth. Was this one here to hunt me, and lying about it in that clever way the fae lied? No. Leomaris couldn’t know who or what I was. But I did need to be careful. They were clearly good at their job.

“Between you and me, Gideon Cain is not what he seems. He attempted to kill my business partner.” Better to put the fae’s focus onto Cain, and off me.

“Is that so?” Their pale eyebrows lifted.

“He’s sore because he wasn’t able to buy the hotel. Gideon sent a shadowbeast to kidnap Zodiac, and demanded I sell or Zodiac would die. We’re lucky we were able to find him in time. We have done nothing wrong, but Gideon Cain won’t let it go. Honestly, I’m afraid of what he’ll do next.” I leaned forward and whispered, “I think he might be an unregistered sorcerer.”

The agent’s pale eyebrows lifted in alarm. “You didn’t report the incident?”

“No, I... I didn’t want it known that I couldn’t protect Zee. If I can’t protect my own business partner, how can I protect anyone? It would damage our reputation—a



reputation I'm trying to build.”

The ex-bounty hunter cast their gaze out my window. “I understand. Disagreements between Lost Ones that have the potential to escalate are exactly why I'm here. But here is my problem. A missing protestor, a missing vintage human, an unreported disturbance at Cain Towers, multiple massacred demons in Runo potentially linked to your business partner?—”

“There's no proof of that. Zee hasn't done anything wrong.” I was getting pretty tired of people accusing Zee without any evidence.

“You misunderstand, Mr. Vex.” They reached inside their coat, withdrew a card, and handed it over. “Humans have a saying: there's no smoke without fire. It is my job to discover what is burning. I merely seek the truth. If you help me do that, then you have nothing to worry about.”

The truth? That was rich, coming from a bounty-hunter fae who had never cared about the truth in their whole life—at least, prior to becoming trapped here.

Leomaris stood and buttoned up their coat. “Also, during my arrival, I noticed your wards have extended far beyond their legal boundaries. This is a breach of city code, and while not my department, I suggest you have someone take a look at it before it gets you into trouble. Trouble is not something you need more of.”

“I will do that, thank you. I'll see you out.”

We walked back down to the reception desk, and Agent Leomaris said their farewells in their slow, melodic drawl, which seemed to take forever. Their visit had made it very clear, we were on the SSD radar. But now, so was Gideon Cain.

They turned toward the door, and almost walked straight into a sparking zip in the air.

Zee burst through, spilling all of his larger-than-life self into Agent Leomaris's path.

"Thank fuck that's over," Zee breathed, grinning. He gave himself a shake, like a wet dog, flinging out his tail, wings, and nails.

"Zee!" He was okay! His little waistcoat had been slung on in haste, his pants were creased too, but otherwise, he looked great.

"D'yah miss me?" He spotted the SSD agent peering at him. "Oh, hellooo Legolas. What tall side order of cool lemonade are you?" Zee purred, stepping close, charm level ramping up to eleven.

It was probably best not to flirt with the SSD agent who had the power to shut us down with a click of their fingers. "Zee, this is Special Agent Leomaris from the Supernatural Division."

"Oh, fuck." Zee sprang back. "You good, Mr. Agent? You look fucking great, very official and... important. I fucking love your coat. Wow, so vintage. And your hair? Gorgeous!" Zee winced, caught my gaze, and his eyes widened in alarm. Swaggering my way, he mouthed silently, "What the fuck?!"

I didn't care. He was here. He was alright. He'd come back! I wanted to run at him, fling myself around him, and smother him in kisses.

"Good day, Adam," Agent Leomaris finally said. "I'm sorry I missed the opportunity to speak with you Zodiac. Perhaps another time?"

Zee draped himself against Madame Matase's desk and saluted. "For sure, Agent Fae."

We all watched the agent leave, and gave it a few beats before breathing out. "Zee!"

You're?—”

Zee thrust out a hand. “Nope. Don’t get close. Meet me in my room in fifteen minutes.” He poofed away, leaving me speechless, deflated, and adrift. He was alright, wasn’t he? What if he wasn’t? What did I do? “Madame Matase.” I dashed to her desk. “If you were a demon and you needed a little comfort, what gift would you like?”

“Hm, I don’t know. Some sage, perhaps? It’s very soothing and clears bad thoughts.”

Maybe she was the wrong person to ask. “I don’t think Zee is into herbs, at least not those ones.”

“Oh, a Squishmallow!” she suggested.

“A what now?”

“A squishy plushie, you know?” She squished her hands together in front of her. “They’re adorable. Big eyes. Soft.”

“I was thinking more of something I can find now, in the hotel?”

“Oh, well then, I’m not sure.”

The conference-room door opened and Pierce emerged, followed by Reynard. Pierce glared daggers at me all the way to the door, and once he was gone, I approached Reynard. “Zee’s back. He looks okay, I guess. But I’m not sure. What shall I give him to make him feel appreciated?”

“Well, this is good news, Adam, but we should discuss this contract?—”

“And we will. But I want to give him something, so he knows we missed him.”

Reynard thought for a moment. “I find a good cup of tea soothes almost any ailment.”

“Uh... he’s not really a cup of tea person.”

“No, that’s true. A cocktail, then?”

“Great idea.” I showed him both thumbs, in a thumbs-up, and backed toward the bar.

“And we’ll talk. Soon. Just... I just need to do this. It’s important. You know?”

He smiled. “Of course, Adam. Summon me when you are ready.”

“I will do that.”

I tried Tom Collins, but his suggestions included a concoction of drugs and alcohol, which I was definitely not giving Zee. I eventually settled on something that soothed me when I was down, and hurried with it to Zee’s room. I knocked, and heard his call to enter.

He’d left a trail of clothing, leading toward the bathroom. Steam rolled out around the half-closed door.

I loitered outside. “Hey.” I needed to see him. Was he alright? I ached to see him, to hold him, so I knew we were okay. “May I come in?”

“Anytime,” he said, sounding a lot less bubbly than he had in the lobby.

I nudged the door open and saw his wings first, rising up from where he reclined on the sloped end of the bath. He’d draped his arms over the rolled edges of the tub. A mountain of bubbles spilled onto the floor and hid the rest of him from view. His wet

hair clung to his face, making him seem leaner and harder, but then he smiled, and the heavy burden of guilt lifted off my shoulders.

“Why are you holding a bowl of cheesy pasta?”

“It’s mac and cheese. It’s for you, but I... maybe later? I guess.” I hunted around for somewhere to put the bowl, but there were bottles, brushes, aftershave, shower gels, and a whole array of body products all over.

“The mac and cheese is for me?” Zee asked, head tilted.

“It’s silly, I know. I thought, well, it cheers me up, so I thought you might like it too?”

He beckoned me forward, took the bowl, and tucked in. “This is good,” he mumbled around a mouthful. “Chef étrange make this?”

“Especially for you.”

“This is the best fucking thing I’ve ever eaten.”

I sat myself on the floor by the bath, and leaned against the side panel. “Do you mind if I stay?”

“I need you here,” he said casually, then devoured the mac and cheese, and handed me the bowl to set aside. “That was so good. Mac and cheese is the fucking best.”

“I’m glad. Madame Matase suggested a Squishmallow, but I don’t know what that is.”

He rolled his eyes up in thought. “Is it edible?”

“I don’t think so.”

He sighed, and draped himself against the back of the tub again. “This is good. You brought me mac and cheese. I have bubbles. I’m good.”

He was back, but it seemed a bit too good to be true. “Are you good?”

“I will be.” He stared at the ceiling.

I propped my chin on my arm, resting on the side of the bath, and studied his face, with its strong lines and angles. His little horn ring glinted, and his hair had dried some, springing out. He truly was beautiful, in a chaotic way. “I didn’t think I’d see you again.”

“Kitten, you’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

A sob wedged in my throat. “You said... it was over.”

“For Sebastien. So he’d let you go.” He turned his head, looking over. “Sorry. But you shouldn’t have been there. Also, what the fuck, Adam? I told you to stay away.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“Sebastien is my battle. You can’t fight him for me.”

“I’m so sorry.” He didn’t fight that battle either, but I wasn’t getting into that with him now. He was here, he was okay, and that was all that mattered.

“I know you are, Kitten. I can’t stay fucking mad at you. What did I miss? What the fuck was that agent here for? No wait, tell me something fun. Nothing heavy.”

“Oh erm...” Nothing heavy. “I sort of told Reynard I’m into him.”

Zee’s eyes widened. He twisted in the tub, getting closer. Water and bubbles sloshed. “Oh my fuck, give me the tea. Did you fuck? Please, tell me you fucked. No, wait, don’t tell me. I wasn’t here and I fucking missed it! Ugh, was it filthy? Was there hair pulling? Did he spank you?”

I laughed. “Stop! That didn’t happen.”

“You told him you want to climb him like a pole, and what did he say?”

“He kind of—sort of accepted it.”

Zee rolled his eyes, then his head. “Did it go something like this?” He cleared his throat and donned a Reynard voice. “That’s inappropriate of you, Adam. I only get it up for right angles and proper grammar.”

“It’s uncanny how good you are at impersonating him, almost as though you watch him?”

“I watch him because I don’t trust him ... and also, he has the finest fucking ass this side of the veil. Those fucking pants... Have you seen how they sculpt his peachy cheeks?”

“I can’t say I’ve noticed.” I had definitely noticed.

“No, of course you haven’t, Adam.”

“Oh, please stop.” I chuckled. “Zee, he makes me crazy. He got all bossy in Razorsedge, and I sort of liked it. A lot.”

Zee's eyes glowed brighter. "Oh, babycakes, you got it bad. Seb put you in the red room, right? He said as much. Did you use the cuffs?"

I recalled the horror of the slings falling from the ceiling. "We didn't really get that far."

"I'm telling you, Daddy Fuck-Hard is a control freak. Total dom. You remember when he went rabid and we had to hold him down? You remember what happened?" Zee grinned.

I couldn't forget how aroused Reynard had been when we'd held him down and force-fed him my blood. He hadn't been all that surprised by the dangling leather and chain contraption either. "He saw your video, on your socials. You were holding a chain?—"

Zee jolted. "Vampire Daddy saw that?"

"He was speechless after."

"I told you! Control is his kink. I called it. He liked it, my video?"

"I think so. He did that thing where he can't say what's in his head, so he goes still and quiet."

"Fuck..." He sloshed back in the tub. "Maybe Reyzee ain't such a crazy fucking idea? Not that I care, right? Fucking Reynard is your thing, not mine."

I smiled at him, glad to have him back. "I missed you."

"Pfft, I was gone for like a day."



“Yeah, but it felt like forever.”

“Zodiac, gone for less than a day,” he said, all dramatic-like. “And in a day, you made moves on Vampire Daddy. C’mon, like you care what happens to me.”

“I do care. A lot. Like... a lot, Zee.” I propped my chin on my folded arm again and huffed. “Please don’t leave again.”

“Kitten, this shithole hotel? You? I know a good thing when I see it. I ain’t going anywhere.”

“What about Sebastien?”

“He’s fine. Just so long as I go back once an’ a while so he can get his rocks off, then he’ll let me go again. It’s a small price to pay to return to you and this place. Trust me. I can handle him.”

“Did he hurt you, though?”

Zee closed his eyes and laid back, keeping his eyes closed. “You want me to answer that?”

“It’s wrong, Zee.”

“It doesn’t fucking matter.”

“It does.”

“I’m telling you it doesn’t.”

“And I’m telling you that I—” I cut myself off before saying too much.

He cracked an eye open. “You what?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s nothing.”

“The fuck? It’s not nothing if you can’t say it.”

I shrugged, and scooted across the short space to lean against the opposite wall, needing a bit more room to gather up all my leaking feelings.

“Kitten.” Zee huffed. “Talk to me.”

“He hurts you, and I can’t let it go like you can. I just can’t. Because when you’re gone, when you’re there, with him, it hurts inside. It hurts my heart. I want to hurt him for what he does to you, Zee.” The list of people I wanted to brutally deal with only had a few names on it, but Sebastien’s was right up there.

“Kitten, look at me.” He clutched the side of the bath, wings spread behind him, horns and hair gleaming wet. “You can’t let him get inside you, that’s where his power is. If you make it so it doesn’t hurt, he can’t control you.”

“Is that where you are? It doesn’t hurt you anymore so it doesn’t matter?”

“Mostly. I stopped caring about me years ago.”

“When you were sold?”

“When I was sold.” Zee slunk back into the water. “I can help the others by having

Seb focus on me. Then I come back here, and I know what it's like to have this life, even if it's not meant for me. I still have it for a short while. It's enough. Can you have me, like this, like I am, Adam? With half of me here and half there? Because if you can't, then maybe I shouldn't come back? If all it's going to do is hurt you?"

No, no, no, no. I'd make it work. "I can have you, even if it's just half of you. If that's all you can give."

"Okay." He nodded.

"Okay."

"No chasing after Sebastien?" he asked.

"No chasing after Sebastien," I grumbled. Breaking his contract wasn't technically chasing after Sebastien. "I care about you," I mumbled, because if I said it any louder, he'd hear the wobble in my voice.

He smiled in sympathy. "You think you do because you're sad, grumpy, feeling guilty, and you haven't eaten mac and cheese yet."

He was wrong. I knew my heart—the truest part of me—and it cared for Zodiac in ways that went far beyond friendship. But maybe it was a good thing he didn't believe me. "You want ice cream?"

"Is that what follows mac and cheese?"

"Every time."

"Then fuck yes, I'm all in." He flopped back in the tub.

I climbed to my feet, and collected his mac and cheese bowl to take back to the kitchen.

“After, can we spoon?” he asked, when I was almost out the door.

His big eyes explained his meaning. This wasn’t about sex, but comfort. “I’d like that.”

When I returned to his room with bowls of ice cream, I found him sitting cross-legged on his bed, wrapped from the waist down in a towel, with his tail idly flip-flopping beside him. After climbing on beside him, we ate ice cream, chatted about the hotel, and about plans for its future, avoiding any topics too personal or heavy—and Reynard.

When tiredness claimed us both, Zee crawled under the sheets, and I undressed and climbed in beside him. His soft breaths in the quiet of his dark room were almost comfort enough. Did I roll into his arms? What if I got hard? How did this work? I hadn’t ever been close enough to someone to snuggle before.

“Come here, Kitten.” Zee scooped me into his arms and spooned close, wrapping me in seven feet of demon, plus wings and tail. I sighed, cocooned in firm, muscular warmth. We’d hurt each other with our words, and we were a long way from perfect, but this was good.

There really was no better place to be, than with the people you cared about the most.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

I left Zee sleeping, and padded in my PJs down to the bar in the early hours of the next morning. I had a few hours before the guests began to wake and go about their day, and I liked the quiet, early hours in the bar, watching Tom bustle and mutter grumpy complaints.

Reynard was seated at a table, and staring at the cabinet while sipping his tea, as though the piece of furniture was his arch nemesis. I never would have asked him to make it if I'd known he was going to obsess over it.

“Ah, good morning Adam.” He brightened. “How is Zodiac?”

I yawned and settled in the chair beside him. “I think he’s alright. But he’s going back. He believes Sebastien is going to be fine with sharing him, but he doesn’t know about the note, or that Sebastien dumped his friend on the hotel steps.”

“Hm, that is concerning. Forgive my candor, but Sebastien will tighten Zodiac’s leash until it chokes him.”

That was my fear too. I held Reynard’s gaze. He knew how to keep his feelings off his face, which made him difficult to read, but I suspected we were on the same page when it came to Sebastien. “We can’t let that happen.”

“No, we cannot, but I’m afraid the contract is binding. There is one possibility to void it though. And that’s if we find General Copernicus, the demon who sold Zodiac and the others, and determine whether he did in fact have the right to trade the battalion to begin with.”

That sounded promising. “How do we find him?”

“I have people working on it. Like most demons trying to craft new lives, the general probably goes by another name now. It may take some time.”

That didn’t sound so promising. “Time in which Sebastien tightens the leash.”

“Hm...” Reynard sighed. “His treatment of Zodiac displeases me.”

It displeased everyone, including Zee. But we had a target to work toward, which was a good thing. It was better to focus on the positive. “Admit it, you like Zodiac.”

He clacked his teacup onto its saucer. “Like is an overstatement.”

“But you do feel something for him?”

“Feeling anything but hatred for a demon is highly inappropriate. We are enemies.” He’d said all that as though reading off a script, and without meeting my gaze. Those weren’t his words, they were the words of his vampire family. He didn’t believe them. But maybe he was still working through all that vampire drama, as Zee called it.

Reynard’s gaze lifted, checking whether I was paying attention. I was. He pinched his lips together and leaned back in the chair. Was that a little hint of resignation in his eyes?

The internet had been right. Hashtag Reyzee, and hashtag enemies-to-lovers was a thing. Had Reynard read the same fanfic as Zee? There was probably explicit fanart out there too. I couldn’t quite imagine the two of them ever being close enough to get naked, but there was a spark of something between them, and it definitely wasn’t all hatred.

“However,” he began tightly. “This hotel and its proprietors are of considerable personal value to me in a way my business empire is not.” He cleared his throat, as though the confession had almost choked him.

“Oh.” Reynard didn’t do elaborate gestures or talk about his feelings. Considerable personal value was another version of Zee’s saying he needed the SOS Hotel to come home to. I grinned. Lord Victor Reynard, billionaire vampire nobility, was totally into us.

“Your smug smile is unnecessary.”

“Smile?” I coughed into my hand and wiped my smile away. “What smile?”

Tom caught my eye and winked.

“This is a business arrangement,” Reynard clarified, but he was speaking more for his benefit than mine. He’d already confessed to all of it being real. Whatever we had, all three of us, it had gone far beyond a business arrangement, right about the time Zee had helped save Reynard’s head from the axe, and Reynard had posted on all his socials to help keep Zee alive. They could dance around it all they liked, but from my place in the middle, I saw it all.

Zee sauntered into the bar, yawning and stretching. He wore his classic lace-up corset and black pants riding low on his hips. Normally, I’d have been lost in gazing at him, but I stole a moment to side-eye Reynard, and witnessed how his gaze lingered on Zee’s approach for that extra few seconds.

“Adam...?” My name rumbled from Reynard’s lips in a soft warning.

“Nope. Nothing. Not saying a word.” I zipped my lips, folded my arms, and leaned back in my chair, maybe just a little bit smug.

“Okay.” Zee grabbed the chair next to mine, spun it around so it faced the wrong way, then straddled it and draped his arms over its back. “What in the actual fuck are you two plotting that’s making my wings itch?”

“Plotting?” The smug smile fell from my lips. “We’re not?—”

Zee dropped his gaze and glared through his lashes. “Do I look like a dumb fuck?”

“Would you like me to answer that?” Reynard asked, straight-faced.

“You, vampire, can fuck all the way off, back to Vampire murder Mansion.” Zee showed him his middle finger. “Oh look, I have all ten fingers and this is one of them.”

Reynard’s eyes narrowed.

I cleared my throat. “We were just discussing the cabinet. Doesn’t it look great?”

“Sure.” Zee shrugged, and lounged back in his chair. “It’s kinda wonky, though.”

“Wonky?” Reynard repeated.

“Slightly off-kilter, pissed, you know?” Zee tilted his head. “Maybe your ruler’s bent.”

“My set square is not bent.” Reynard glanced at the cabinet. Then with a huff, he stood, and approached the cabinet. He mumbled something, crouched, and opened the cupboards, testing the door’s swing angle.

Zee’s grin grew. He’d deliberately baited him. He wagged his eyebrows. “Check out the view.”



“Zee, you can’t...” I looked over, and sure enough, Reynard’s pants hugged a perfectly sculpted backside that was very nice. And looked firm. So firm.

“He could crack nuts between those cheeks.”

Mercy. I tore my gaze away and cast it across the room instead, at the peeling wallpaper in the far corner—we really needed to invest in some fresh paint.

“It’s the left side,” Zee called, and gestured for Reynard to move to the other end of the cabinet. Reynard followed his directions and knelt to examine the other door. “Yeah, that’s it. Right there.” Zee tilted his head again, and his pupils got a whole lot fuller. “Bet he fucks likes a jackhammer.”

I knew that laser-focused look. “Are you imagining Reynard naked?” I whispered.

“What? Pfft. Aren’t you?”

“I am now.”

Zee mock-gasped and fanned his face. “Adam Vex, your filthy mind is shocking.”

“It’s not wonky, is it? The cabinet?”

“No, it’s fuckin’ perfect, like that ass. And I hate that it’s perfect, like I hate him and his stupid cabinet,” he grumbled. Then sighed and pinned his full, big eyes on me. “What are you plotting?”

“What?” I squeaked, caught off guard by the sudden change in topic, from Reynard’s fine ass to my plotting with a vampire lord to bring down Zee’s ex-boss. “Nothing.”

Zee leaned in. “Now your partner in crime is over there, imma ask you again. What

are you plotting, Kitten?” His eyes sparkled with humor, but their pupils had sharpened to slits too. I couldn’t see his tail, but suspected it would be ticking on the floor.

Zee had always suspected when I was lying, and the more time we spent together, the more he saw right through me. I sighed and watched Reynard fiddle with the cabinet. He’d probably have to dismantle it again, and all because Zee wanted to check out his ass. I’d have to tell him the cabinet was perfect, or he’d spend hours on it. He needed to know the truth, and so did Zee. He’d earned it.

“Sebastien is never going to let you go,” I said.

Zee groaned. “We’ve talked about this. Seb is a me problem. Back off.”

“I can’t,” I replied softly. The truth hurt. “I can’t Zee.”

Zee sighed and pointed a sharp, glossy nail at me. “We made a deal over mac and cheese. Mac and cheese is sacred.”

“I know . . .”

“Then this won’t work.”

“This?” My heart thumped. “You mean us.” I couldn’t lose him. I’d do anything to keep him. If I lost him, then what was the point in all this? Why was I even trying to make this life work if I had nothing to live for?

“If you can’t back off, then I can’t be here. If my life touches this place, it’s all fucked. That I can control.”

I leaned in. “Zee, you don’t need to protect me.”

“And I don’t need you protecting me. Or His Lordship protecting me. Especially Fancy Daddy. Why aren’t you getting this?”

“Drop your glamor.”

He recoiled. “Excuse you?”

“Drop your glamor.” I checked the bar. It was still early, and nobody was here. Just me, Reynard, and Tom, who was prohibited from revealing secrets to anyone anyway. “If what he’s doing to you is fine, and you’re okay with it, drop your glamor.”

Zee clenched his jaw and stared back. “That’s not fair.”

I knew what I’d see. Friction marks, bruises, or worse. I could help him, could help them all. I’d made him see Adam Vex as the harmless human, but now I needed him to unsee just a tiny bit of that lie, and understand I was a whole lot more than the mask I wore.

“General Copernicus. Do you know where he is?” I asked.

All the humor and lightheartedness vanished from Zee’s face. “Copernicus?”

“How can we find him?”

“You’ve seen my contract?”

“Tell us where he is.”

Zee’s eyes sparked with fury. “I can’t tell if I’m pissed off or turned on by your bossy voice, Kitten. But I know you and that vampire are going behind my back, trying to

find my general, when I told you not to.”

My heart raced now. I was in the wrong in some things, I knew that. I’d kept things from him. I’d gone against his wishes, but it was for the right reasons. I needed him to hear me. I needed him to fight back, like I knew he could. “You don’t want to be under Sebastien, I know you don’t. Zee, please. Look at what we did for Shadow. We gave them a sanctuary. We stood against the vampires, you and me. We stopped Gideon, for now. I will find a way to end Sebastien. We will find a way, all three of us. Trust me in this. Trust that I will not break. And trust I will make it so you have a choice. Don’t you want that? A choice?”

His gaze skipped back and forth, reading the conviction on my face, and I stared back, unblinking. This wasn’t a game to me like it was for Sebastien. I wasn’t ever going to use Zee and toss him away. He meant more to me than anything else in this world. He’d saved me when I’d lost everything and everyone I’d ever known. Sebastien would kill him, eventually. I wasn’t going to let that happen.

Zee huffed, slumped back, and flicked his fingers in front of his face. His image shimmered, glamor peeling away. I didn’t want to look, but it was already too late. A patchwork of bruises spread across his jaw. A split cut into his lip. Purple thumb prints speckled his neck, and claw marks scored across his shoulder. And that was just the visible.

The rage came out of the dark, visceral and real, and its terrible swell almost tore through the curse holding me together. A small, sharp hiss filtered through my teeth, then a sob tried to follow. I swallowed hard, pushing everything back down.

Reynard’s simmering presence was suddenly beside me. Beside us.

“It won’t be bruises next time,” Reynard said to Zee.

Zee slowly raised his gaze. “When it’s me he’s fucking up, it’s not them.”

He was protecting his friends, his fellow warriors. I wanted to pin Sebastien down and tear his wings off. A tingling sparked the air, tensions building, the wards firing up around me. I very much meant to harm Sebastien, and the wards didn’t know he wasn’t in the room with us, just that I meant to hurt someone. Worse than hurt, I’d destroy him.

Zee’s gaze slid to me. “Kitten?”

Reynard took a step back. “Adam?”

I spread my hands on the table and watched tiny little sparks dance down my fingers.

It was fine. Everything was fine. We were fine.

Gradually, the rage subsided and the wards settled, and I was just me again. Adam Vex. A nobody human who definitely did not have any secrets. “Ah-hem, sorry about that. Indigestion, maybe?”

Zee’s eyebrows lifted.

“Perfectly reasonable explanation,” Reynard agreed. He pulled out his chair, sat, and rolled up his sleeves, in a sure sign we were about to discuss grown-up things. “Adam, while I concur with you on most things, the time has come to be truthful about certain issues. Don’t you think?”

I swallowed. “What?”

Reynard pinned down my innocent gaze, making me squirm. “Zodiac has been honest with you, showing you what you asked.”

He'd heard that? Then, had he heard everything we'd said about his ass? "I don't follow."

"The flowers?" Reynard prompted.

Oh my stars, the flowers? He wanted me to tell Zodiac his friend was in the flowerbeds, now?! "Oh, I don't think now is the time to talk about flowers."

"I disagree. It's the perfect time."

"No, nope, I don't think so." I picked up an SOS Hotel coaster and flicked it between my fingers.

"What's wrong with the flowers?" Zee asked.

"Nothing!" I smiled, and tried to make it look sweet and innocent, but neither of them appeared to be buying it, so I glared at Reynard. "The flowers are not relevant."

"They are certainly relevant to this conversation."

"Nooooo, nope."

Zee glanced between us. "Why are we talking about flowers?"

"We're not."

Reynard folded his arms and slowly sat back, his face so disappointed I wanted to shrink in my chair. "It will only get worse."

"What the fuck is wrong with the flowers? What flowers?" Zee scrunched up his face. "The flowers out front?"

I slammed the coaster down. “No!”

“Yes,” Reynard said over me.

I gave him the stink-eye. Where Zee’s friend’s body was laid to rest was not Reynard’s secret to tell. “Anyhoo, what are we going to do about Sebastien? Hm? Let’s focus on that, shall we, Victor?”

Zee stared at Reynard, waiting for the big reveal, and Reynard glared at me, waiting for me to reveal it. But I saw Zee’s bruises, knew how he’d tried to protect everyone he’d worked with at Razorsedge, and I couldn’t do it. Even though I should. It would hurt him, and he’d already been hurt so much.

“General Copernicus,” I said, steering us back on track.

“You stole my contract?” Zee asked.

“Yes,” Reynard answered, before I could deny it.

Why did he have to be so... right?

“That’s what you were both doing in Seb’s apartment,” Zee said. “It won’t do you any good. You think nobody has tried to find a loophole? There isn’t one. Also, you’re both epic dicks. I told you to back off, Adam. Instead, you did the exact opposite, and suckered His Lordship into your plan.”

“I volunteered,” Reynard corrected.

Zee rolled his eyes. “Right, because an influential billionaire vampire baron, volunteered to save a fabulous sex demon from his asshole pimp? Because that’s a thing that happens in the real world?” Zee grinned, but only to bare his little, sharp

teeth.

It did sound farfetched. “That’s actually, exactly what happened,” I confirmed.

Zee pointed a sharp fingernail at Reynard. “You, Fancy Daddy, are manipulating Adam’s good nature for reasons, and it’s not even fucking subtle. You’re using his feelings for me to make yourself look good. You’re so transparent.”

“You’re wrong, demon,” Reynard glowered. “I stole your contract because I care.”

That last word dropped like a hammer and silenced the room. Reynard’s eyes widened as he realized he’d revealed more than he’d wanted. At the bar, Tom Collins clattered some mixers together, trying to save us the awkwardness, but also proving he was listening to every single word.

Reynard cleared his throat and shuffled in his chair. “That is to say, the smooth running of this hotel benefits me greatly, since I intend to stay here, and has nothing to do with any personal attraction... feelings... desire... ahem... toward either of you. Because there obviously aren’t any. Feelings. Or desires.” He swallowed, loud enough we all heard it.

Zee stared, mouth slightly open. “Who are you and where is the real Victor Fuck-Hard?”

Reynard sighed. “Demon, your juvenile names are not amusing.”

“I’m fucking hilarious. Tom?” Zee called. “How hilarious am I?”

“Fucking hilarious,” Tom agreed.

Zee gestured and reclined in his chair, suddenly smug, where before he’d been



seconds away from ditching us. He'd just gotten Reynard to admit to having feelings, and now he was watching Reynard squirm like a worm on a hook. I'd done the same thing earlier, before Zee's arrival, and admittedly, it did feel good to pry open Reynard's hard outer shell to find his gooey, yummy center.

Reynard let out an exasperated growl and huffed through his nose. "It appears we all want the same outcome—which is for the hotel to run smoothly—and for that to happen, its proprietors must be free to perform their duties without outside threats impeding their efficiency."

Zee snorted. "That's a whole lot of words for let's go fuck up Sebastien."

Reynard considered it, and said, "It is."

Was that an option? I leaned forward. "Can we do that? Can we just go and... uh... unalive Sebastien? Like we dealt with Baroness Reynard?"

"No." Zee shut me down. "If I could fuck him up, I'd have done it the first week. Contracts are sacred. I can't attack him. He owns me. He can do what he likes. Those are the terms we all abide by."

Contracts and deals, they couldn't be broken. Humans had their laws—Lost Ones had deals. "But you didn't sign the contract, your general did. You had no choice in any of this."

"I told you, demons don't get choices. We're all sold into servitude. I was sold into the military, and it didn't fucking matter because I liked it. Fucking thrived on it. Killing suckers is my kink." Reynard let out a rumbling, warning growl, but Zee winked and continued. "Shit went tits up when the veil sealed, trapping me here. No war, no purpose. My battalion had to find one, and fast. Copernicus sold us so we'd survive, and who cares if I had to fuck for money? I like fucking. I'm the best at

fucking. Free food, right? Win-win.”

“Except Sebastien isn’t a win,” I said.

“He showed his colors pretty fuckin’ quickly, and we knew we were in for a whole world of hurt for a very long time. When he started fixating on me, and eased off his shit treatment of the others, we all just kinda let it happen.”

Just because he was used to it—because he’d surrendered to it—didn’t make it right.

“Where did Sebastien find the money to purchase all of you?” Reynard asked. “He couldn’t have had much wealth here.”

Zee shrugged, tilted his chair back, and kicked his boots up on the table. “Don’t know.”

“What did he do before coming here?”

“I don’t know that either.” His tail sought out my leg, and began to loop around my ankle. “I’d never met him before. Whatever he was, doesn’t matter. We all left our lives behind and made new ones.”

“We need to find your general,” Reynard said. “The contract is solid, but there’s a slim chance Copernicus knows more, and perhaps knows a way to void it.”

“I know where Copernicus is,” Zee said, unlooping his tail. “He runs an animal shelter in LA.”

“Oh, he saves pets? That’s nice.” Unexpected, but nice. An ex-warrior demon general who saved animals. Not everything had to be bad. “He sounds like a good person.”

Zee chuckled, and shook his head. “Adam, Kitten. You’re adorable. Copernicus doesn’t save strays.”

“Oh.” What else could an animal sanctuary do?

“He eats them?” Reynard suggested, grimacing.

I glanced at Zee, hoping Reynard was wrong, but caught his nod. Oh, then General Copernicus was not very nice at all.

“It’s worse than that,” Zee said.

“Worse?” I didn’t want to know. “No, don’t tell me.”

Zee chuckled again and waved his hand, sprinkling his glamor back over his bruises. “There’s no get-out clause in my contract, but if you two wanna get your rocks off trying to find one, be my fucking guest.”

It appeared we were taking a roadtrip to Los Angeles. “Will one of your drivers take us?” I asked Reynard.

“Drive to LA?” He scoffed. “We’ll take the jet.”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

Zee dozed through the flight, his knee-high boots up on the cream-leather seats, and wings draped over the entire couch. His skimpy, sunshine-yellow top proclaimed: Girls Just Want to Have Fun-damental Rights. Reynard sat opposite, alternating between scowling at Zee and tapping on his phone, then taking technical-sounding business calls. I spent the flight time thinking over the past few days, and everything we knew, or didn't know about Sebastien and Zee.

A lot of things made more sense, now Zee had explained why he'd never fought back. He'd resigned himself to submission, accepted it. But I hadn't, and couldn't. Not ever. It wasn't okay unless he'd chosen Sebastien. Everyone deserved a choice.

And then there was Reynard. On his best behavior, since his family probably wanted him and me dead. He wasn't free either. He couldn't walk down the street without looking over his shoulder, fearing he might lose his head. The vampires would surely try and get to him, and me.

And then we came to me. Adam Vex. Hiding. No longer running, since there was nowhere left to run to. At least Reynard and Zee didn't ask the question I knew they both wanted the answer to.

What is Adam Vex?

I was supposed to keep my head down, stay hidden in Zee's larger-than-life shadow, run a hotel and stay safe within its wards, where nothing and nobody could reach me. And here I was, heading to LA to speak with a demon general, looking for a way to save my demon from a pimp, before that pimp killed Zee.

After this, I had to go back to hiding. I couldn't get involved in any more lost causes.

Within a few hours, we'd landed under LA's brilliant blue sky, and walked off the private jet with umbrellas raised, shielding Reynard. I sauntered unmolested through the human security line, while Reynard and Zee were both searched. Zee obviously took the opportunity to flirt with the security guard who had him spreadeagled against the wall. Reynard was much less enthused by having a metal-detecting wand waved around him. He fixed his face into its stoic mask, which meant he was a few seconds from unleashing a verbal tirade of long, elaborate-sounding words, that would likely result in threats to sue.

We eventually made it outside to the pick-up area, where a black sedan waited.

"Does Reynard magic these cars out of thin fucking air?" Zee muttered, vanishing his wings and scooting into the rear seat beside me. It was a tight fit, with Reynard on my right and Zee on my left, mostly because Zee had foot-long horns and three-inch-heeled boots, meaning he had to scrunch himself into a gap not designed for fabulous demons.

His wriggling shoved me against Reynard's firm, warm leg, causing Reynard to arch an exasperated eyebrow. He didn't say it—because unlike Zee, Reynard didn't blurt out every thought in his head—but I suspected he'd begun to regret offering to help.

Zee gave the driver the animal shelter's address and slumped back in the seat, knocking me into Reynard's arm. "Sorry. Zee, can you maybe shift over a bit?"

"It's not my fault I'm magnificent."

We cruised through LA's wide, flat, palm tree-lined streets.

"Let me do the talking," Zee said, still fidgeting. "Reynard, stay in the car. The

general—Fido is his chosen name now—has spent several decades fucking up vampires. If you waltz in making demands, he’s more likely to cut your balls off than help us.”

“As delightful as meeting the general sounds, I have a luncheon elsewhere,” Reynard said, sounding relieved. “Take my driver’s number, and when your meeting concludes, summon him via text.”

We hit a bump. Zee’s horns snagged in the car’s roof lining. He shot out a hand to steady himself, shoving me sideways. I toppled, and grabbed Reynard’s thigh.

“Adam, if you could please refrain from wriggling?” Reynard suggested in his clipped voice.

I plucked my hand back. Mercy, he had thighs as firm as steel. “It’s just a bit tight between you both, that’s all.”

“Tight.” Zee snickered.

Reynard tugged on his shirt collar, and flung an irritated glare past me, at Zee. “Perhaps if Zodiac wasn’t so imposing?”

“Do my generous dimensions bother you, Your Highness?” Zee enquired. “It is a common complaint,” he continued, his voice beginning to mimic Reynard’s lofty American accent. “Of course, you don’t have that problem, since you’re smaller.” He pinched his fingers together, leaving a tiny gap, and whispered, “In every way.”

“Bigger is not better. Size is nothing without control.”

Zee’s lashes fluttered, his pupils widening. Reynard had touched a nerve, or... touched some part of him he’d liked. I waited for the comeback, but for the first time

in forever, Zee didn't have one.

Reynard had used his smooth, brain-candy voice. The one that could touch a person's soul—and other parts of them. Mercy, it was getting hot in the back seat. “Driver, can we maybe have some air back here?” A blast of cold washed over us.

“The general's new name is Fido?” I asked, hoping to clear the air a little, and distract them both before Zee demanded Reynard produce his set square to measure their dicks.

Zee shrugged. “We all picked new names. Except Sebastien, he kept his. Loved himself too much to change it.”

“Why did you choose Zodiac?” I asked.

“You can see the stars more clearly here than back home. The patterns are awesome.”

I grinned. “I like stars too. So does Reynard. We talked about the big spoon and little spoon. It's so great how we have that in common.” Somehow, it was the wrong thing to say. Zee glared out the window again, tail twitching in the footwell, and Reynard chose that moment to check his phone. At least I was between them. If they'd been able to get to each other I wasn't sure if they'd try and kiss or kill each other.

The car cruised into an industrial park. Trash fluttered in rusted fencing, and the nearby burned-out car had been perched on blocks. I spotted a hand-painted sign for Fido's Lost Animal Shelter, and a big arrow pointing toward a single-storey warehouse with wraparound chain-link fencing.

Zee hopped out of the car. His wings popped back into the visible realm, and he gave himself an all-over shake. “My generous dimensions are not designed for itty-bitty cars.”

“Remember. Summon the driver when you’re ready,” Reynard said, as I climbed out.

“Alrighty, Your Highness.” Zee saluted and sauntered toward the shelter.

I lingered beside the car, holding the door open, with Reynard right there, waiting to leave. “Adam?”

The warehouse didn’t look any more imposing than the typical industrial-park units around it. But it was midday, and there was no traffic, and no sign of any people. If it was an animal shelter, shouldn’t there be yapping dogs?

“Would you prefer I stay?” Reynard asked.

“No.” I laughed off the strange feeling of unease. I had Zodiac. Nothing was going to go wrong here. I just hadn’t been this far from the hotel and its wards in six months. I felt vulnerable. “It’s fine. We’ll meet up later.”

“Are you sure?” Reynard shifted across the seat, moving closer. “The sunlight is an issue, but not insurmountable. I’m happy to assist.”

He meant that, and knowing he cared did settle my rattling nerves. “No, it’s fine, really. It just feels strange, being away from the hotel, that’s all. It’s nothing.” Zee was already halfway between me and the shelter. He clearly wasn’t worried, so I didn’t need to be.

I tossed Reynard a soft smile. “Thank you for helping with this. And I’m sorry I put you in a difficult position, with the uh... flowers.”

“He should be told, but I respect your wishes.”

Reynard was right, and I would tell Zee about his friend. Soon. I nodded, and raised



my hand in a short wave. “I’ll see you later.”

“Indeed, Adam.”

I closed the door, thrust my hands into my pockets, and watched the car pull away, hiding Reynard behind its black privacy glass. Sunlight beat down, and heat rippled off the gritty asphalt that crunched under my shoes.

Zee waited outside the warehouse’s main door, under a sign that read: Fido’s Fillings Flavors. A Pet in Every Pie.

I read it again, sure I must have misread it the first time. “Oh.”

“Are you going to freak out?”

Pets. In. Pies. I winced. “Maybe? Why didn’t you tell me?”

A mechanical thumping, sounding from inside the building, and the slight odor of baked pastries hung in the air.

“I would have, but you’d have still come, and worried all the way here. I can call Reynard’s driver back?” He dug into his tight trouser pocket and plucked out his phone. “This is a huge waste of time anyway.”

“No, we’re here now.” Fido—Copernicus—was our only possible loophole to void the contracts. I was doing this. For Zee. For every demon on the end of Sebastien’s leash. I didn’t have to like the general, or his business. I swallowed hard and nodded. “I’m not freaking out.”

Zee shoved the phone away and hammered on the door, then backed up and eyed the camera watching us from high up on the wall.

“Yeah, yeah!” A deeply accented male voice grumbled beyond the door. Whatever accent it was, it definitely wasn’t American. Australian? Or demon, maybe. They must have had their own vernacular?

A bolt clanged, the hinges groaned, and the entrance door swung open, revealing the biggest demon I’d ever seen. He was taller than Zee, with four stumpy head-horns, and so enormous I doubted he’d be able to fit through the doorframe. The name Fido had been stitched into his big white apron, that strained to contain his bulk. Stunted wings jutted out from his back. He probably hadn’t used them in a while.

He peered down his broad, flat nose. “No humans.”

“General.” Zee dipped his chin, bowing his head. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Do I know you?”

“Wow, I’m hurt you don’t remember me. Your favorite battalion commander, the life of the party, the one, the only?—”

“Lycian,” the general grunted, then eyed Zee closer. “Did you get smaller? I didn’t recognize you. Why you here? You wanna pie?”

“Uh...” Zee glanced at me, then back up at his former general. “Sure.”

General Copernicus turned, and stomped down the narrow corridor, filling it from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. “But we’re not here for the pies,” Zee added, trailing behind. “Delicious, as I’m sure they are.”

I closed the door behind us, sealing us inside with an increasing, baked-pastry smell.

“Then why you here, Lycian? No war, no more. No veil. No home. Just pies.”

I was pretty sure there was more to life than pies, but maybe the general didn't have anything else? I still wasn't going to feel sorry for a demon who clearly advertised pets in pies.

"It's Zodiac now. This is my friend, Adam." Zee gestured at me, and the general gave me a quick glance, then continued on his way, down the corridor, toward the heavy clanging, thumping and hissing noises.

"Right, right," Copernicus grumbled, not at all interested in me. "What doin' now, Zodiac?"

"That's why we're here." Zee gave a little dismissive laugh. "You remember Sebastien?—"

"That worm. Can't forget. Want to put him in a pie. Bake him for forty minutes at one-eighty degrees. Hmm... no. Not enough meat on that shlak." He looked over his shoulder and snapped his sharp teeth together. I had no idea what a shlak was, but it didn't sound friendly.

"You like pies, human?" the general asked.

"Erm, yes?" I smiled, and hoped it looked genuine. I was beginning to suspect General Copernicus might be missing some mental ingredients, and tried to catch Zee's eye to ask, but he was too preoccupied with following in the general's shadow.

We emerged from the corridor onto a vast factory floor, filled with loops of conveyor belts snaking through different machines, almost like a scaled-down rollercoaster. Except pies rode this one. The thumping sound came from a machine that appeared to be an enormous grated metal hammer, pounding chunks of meat into mush.

It was probably normal meat, right? Just pie filling?

I glanced around, and found I'd fallen back from Zee and Fido. They'd climbed a rickety set of metal stairs, to a suspended office with a glass front on it. Like a watchtower, from where Fido could oversee his production line. There didn't appear to be any other workers. Just him, and his loud, clanging, hissing, rumbling machines.

A shiver tracked down my spine. I hurried up the stairs to the watchtower office.

“—sold you off,” Copernicus was saying. “All agreed.”

“I know, I know,” Zee agreed. “But is there anything you can think of that might void the contract? Any reason the deal might not be legit?”

The general planted his huge ass on his large desk and sniffed. “You looking to wriggle out of a deal, like a coward—like the shlak, Sebastien? Thought better of you, Lycian—Zodiac. I got a copy of the contract.” He reached behind his desk and yanked open a drawer. “Wanna see? No wriggle room for cowards.”

Zee rolled his eyes toward me, asking if I really wanted to go through with this when there was obviously nothing to find.

“Can I see it?” I stepped up to the general and took the familiar-looking contract from his hand—a hand the size of my face.

“It's as tight as your puny ass, human.”

“Oh. Erm. I'm sure it is.” I buried my face in the contract, not sure what to say to that. I didn't have a photographic memory like Reynard, but the contract did appear to be the same as the one we'd taken from Seb's apartment. We weren't going to find any answers in the general's version.

“Remind me why Seb is a coward?” Zee asked.

“Tried to get out of service. Fled, several times. Had heavies bring him back. Always trying to fly away.” Copernicus waved a hand. “Had to clip his wings. Then we came here, and nothing made sense no more. No battle to fight, no war to win. New lives. Lots of pies.”

“Where did Sebastien get the money from?” I asked. “If he worked for you when the veil closed, how did he have any money at all? Why wasn’t he sold?”

“Didn’t have money. Made a deal. The more he earns, more he pays, more pies I make.” The general swept his arm toward the windows, encompassing the factory floor. “Delicious pies for everyone.”

“But...” I licked my dry lips, sensing I was onto something. “Those payment terms aren’t in the contract.”

“Addendum.” Copernicus shrugged massive shoulders and those limp wings. “What flavor pie you want? Labrador is a solid choice.”

Labradorpies. I pinned a smile to my face and forced out, “Uh... maybe, erm, don’t put pets in pies?”

The general’s face scrunched up in disgust. “Why the fuck wouldn’t I?”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit cruel?”

“Humans throw pets away. Better in pies. It’s on the sign. Labrador?”

“Sounds great.”

“Be right back.” Copernicus stomped out the door and down the steps. I moved to the window and watched his barrel-like body plod down the production line, toward the

giant masher machine, and out the door behind it.

“I told you this was a fucking waste of time.” Zee dropped into the general’s tattered, exhausted chair behind the desk, and kicked his boots up. “Copernicus is losing his marbles, and the contract is solid. I don’t know what you were expecting, but the general’s not saving me, or any of them. This whole fucking trip is as pointless as a chocolate condom.”

I knew he’d thought the trip was a waste of time, but what I hadn’t known, and what I could see on his face now, was how he’d hoped we’d find him a way out. And now he was crushed.

“It’s not pointless, Zee.” I set the contract down on the desk. “We’ll find a way. Has the general always been like this? Maybe he wasn’t in his right mind when he signed the deal? We could argue he didn’t know what he was signing?”

“Kitten, you’re clutching at straws.”

Zee’s boot nudged the computer mouse, and the computer screen blinked awake, showing a black and white camera feed into a room lined with metal cages.

Inside those cages, were all the unwanted pets. Dogs mostly, but some cats too. “Oh no.” They hadn’t done anything to anyone, and they had no chance of escape. The only good thing, was that they didn’t know the fate that waited for them. Although, they must have been able to hear the meat pounder slamming through their last few hours alive.

Nope. I was done. I’d reached my limit. “I can’t be here. I have to go.”

Zee stood, and grumbled, “We should never have come.”

“Where’s Lycian, huh?” I snapped, lashing out. “Scourge of Demios? Would he sit back and let fate steamroll over him like it’s doing to those poor pets? Is that you, in a cage, like them?”

Zee snarled. “Lycian left the building when that dumb fuck sold me to Sebastien. Are you happy now, Adam? You saw what you wanted and it’s made no fucking difference.”

The stairs clanged as Copernicus returned with two pies, one in each hand. “Fresh off the line.” He beamed, so proud of his monstrous baked creations.

“Nice seein’ you again, general.” Zee shoved by him and hammered down the steps, leaving me to smile and thank Copernicus for the pet pies.

“Are those?—”

“Yes.” I cut Reynard off, not wanting to get into why I was holding two pies.

Reynard sat to my right in the back of the car, with Zee squished to my left. In the middle again, I rested both pies on my knees.

The sun was setting as we made our way back toward the airport. Our trip to LA had been awful. Zee hadn’t said a word since we’d left the factory, and now I had two pies that made me sad every time I glanced at them. I couldn’t bring myself to throw them out, but I definitely wasn’t eating them.

We rode in thick silence until the car pulled up at the airport. Zee was quick to hop out, then Reynard left, and I found myself bereft without them—alone, marooned in the back of the car.

“Adam?” Reynard peered back inside the car. He’d loosely braided his hair, and it

flopped forward, like a tail. Like the pets had tails. “You have to leave the car so we can board the jet.”

I couldn’t do it.

I couldn’t leave.

I stared into Reynard’s gentle gaze. “I have to save them.”

Reynard blinked, uncertain. “Save . . . what?”

Zee appeared at his side, braced an arm on the roof of the car, and leaned over Reynard’s shoulder. Like that, together, with Reynard’s face all pale and stoic, and Zee’s hair a chaotic mop of purple and black tousled between his horns, his gaze intense, they looked right.

Zee’s eyes narrowed, trying to read me, then a broad grin broke out across his face. “I thought you’d never fucking ask.” Zee turned his head, putting his face very close to Reynard’s cheek. “Wanna partake in some illegal shit, Your Highness?”

Reynard’s head stayed still, but his eyes cut to the side. “That rather depends on the likelihood of being caught.”

Zee snorted, straightened, and slapped Reynard on the back, jolting him forward. “Fucking live a little, Daddy. You might find you like being bad.” Zee stepped back, glancing around us. “Park the car down the block. I’ll get masks.” And he sauntered off, apparently having a plan.

I eyed the two pies. It was too late for the Labrador in them, but I’d be damned if any more pets were going into pies on my watch.



“Is General Copernicus going to appreciate your intervention in his business, Adam?” Reynard asked, climbing back into the car.

“I doubt it.”

“Masks will be wise, then.” He instructed the driver to park down the street.

“He’s also the biggest demon I have ever seen, who might be a little unhinged,” I said.

“Demon generals most often are.” Reynard rolled up his sleeves, and a predatory gleam made his silvery eyes shine. “A demon general undergoes thorough exams in battle prowess and strategic thinking.”

“Is that how they become generals?”

“No, they do that by killing their predecessor.”

“Oh.” It seemed likely General Copernicus would not let us free his pets without a fight, and his bulk alone would make him formidable. “Maybe we should find some weapons as well as masks?”

Reynard’s smile grew, revealing a hint of his sharp fangs. “I have all the weapons I need.”

Zee poofed outside the car, flung open the door, and dropped inside. He tossed Reynard and me each a black hood. Reynard lifted the full-face leather mask and poked his fingers through the two holes for eyes, then stretched the small cutout circle for the mouth.

“Where did you get these?” Reynard asked, incredulously.

Zee picked his up, with its sock-like additions for horns. “What’s wrong with them?”

“Zodiac?” Reynard’s chastising tone rumbled. “Did you buy them from a sex store?”

“Pfft, no,” Zee scoffed, gaze shifting.

Reynard blinked and sat back in the seat.

Zee grinned, and pulled a pair of fluffy pink cuffs from his back pocket, then tossed them into my lap beside the mask and pies. “For later.” Glancing up, he caught Reynard’s incredulous expression, and his grin grew. “Let’s go save some fuckin’ furbabies.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

The sun had set by the time we returned to Fido's Fillings Flavors. Reynard's driver dropped us a short walk from the factory, because a seven-foot-tall demon, an average human, and a suit-clad vampire were very conspicuous, even before we donned the masks. Luckily, there wasn't anyone around to witness our approach.

A few meters from the rear of the warehouse, Reynard dashed ahead and disabled the camera observing the back door, raining sparks on the sidewalk.

"Time to get our criminal on," Zee said with enthusiasm, then tugged the mask over his horns and head. He vanished his wings, making himself smaller. A few steps behind, I pulled my own mask on and swallowed my racing heart. This was the right thing, wasn't it? It did feel a bit naughty. But good too. Righteously good.

Reynard gave the back door a quick shoulder shove, popping it open, and in we ventured.

"I can break into shit too," Zee whispered, his voice muffled by the small mouth hole. "I just don't want to," he added, eyeing Reynard striding ahead.

"I know," I told him, soothing his wounded ego.

Another camera blinked at the far end of the corridor. Reynard spotted it, blurred ahead, and ripped it from the wall, leaving it dangling. He opened the next door, and poked his head out, checking the way was clear.

A curl of cold mist rolled through the door, over his polished shoes.

I was beginning to wonder what Zee and I were here for when this was clearly a walk in the park for Reynard.

“Which way?” Reynard asked, as we caught up.

We’d only seen the main entrance area and the factory floor. The refrigerated room we’d entered now was stacked with crates of boxed pies, ready to be shipped out, and we’d come to a crossroads among the crates. “I’m not sure.”

“Let’s split up, we’ll find the animals more quickly,” Reynard whispered.

Zee snorted a laugh and mocked. “Split up.”

“Do you have an opinion?” Reynard asked, turning to face him. Oddly, the mask made no difference to how I read his face.

Zee blinked behind his mask’s eyeholes. “Nope.”

“Clearly, you do.”

I sighed, stuck between them again.

“You’ve never seen a horror movie?” Zee asked.

“What does a movie have to do with this?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just, every time a group splits up, the big bad takes them out one by one.”

“Then you are suggesting my plan is flawed?” Here came Reynard’s haughty voice.

Zee shrugged. “We should stick together. The general might be a few buttplugs short of a sex party, but he’s no pushover.”

“There’s no use in the three of us sticking together when there’s no immediate threat. We’ll find the animals more quickly if we split up.” A snarl simmered under Reynard’s words.

“And I’m telling you, if we split up, bad shit will happen.” Zee cocked a hip. “It’s the rules.”

“This isn’t some fantasy of yours, demon.”

“Obviously, or we’d all be naked. Wanna get naked, daddy?”

Reynard stilled. “Adam, some assistance please, before discussions deteriorate further.”

They both blinked through their masks, asking me to pick the winner. Oh dear. “You both make great points. But as nobody seems to be around, maybe we should split up, then meet back here in a few minutes so we can proceed together. How does that sound?”

“Excellent.” Reynard strode left, heading off toward that closed door.

Zee’s narrowed eyes glared through his hood slits. “You’re such a simp for him. I’m secondhand cringey for you.”

I chuckled. “C’mon, Zee.”

Zee huffed behind me, tagging along as I wove between the crates, hoping for another exit. The thumping sound of the masher grew louder, suggesting we were heading

toward the main entrance and the factory floor where the pies were made. A side door beckoned, with a sturdy looking bolt holding it shut.

“I got this.” Zee grabbed the handle and gave the door a firm shove. It didn’t budge. “Wait, I’m warming up.” He gave the bolt another yank. The door still didn’t budge.

“Maybe—”

“No. I have it.” He heaved on the bolt, putting a foot on the door, and leaning back. It groaned, but still didn’t budge. “Fuck, what’s this door made of?” Huffing, he let go and shook out his hands.

This could take a while. I shoved my hands into my pockets. “Maybe?—”

Zee held up a finger. “My masculinity hinges on getting this door open. My whole life has been building to this moment. It’s the door or me.”

“I just?—”

He grabbed the bolt, and slammed his shoulder into the door, rattling it in its frame. Then did it again. Unsuccessful, he puffed, shook his head, and backed up. “This door is way thicker than the one Reynard broke open. Like, it must be a foot thick or something. There’s no way we’re getting in there. A bomb won’t open it. It’s impossible.”

“You’re probably right, except...” I stepped up to the door and used two fingers to lift the bolt up. The door jolted, and squealed open on its hinges.

Zee flicked his wings. “I fuckin’ knew that. It was obvious. I was just testing to see if you’d noticed.”

I rolled my eyes with a smirk and entered the room. Low lighting layered shadows over the cages. An air-conditioning unit hummed somewhere nearby. Some scratching sounded, then the click of claws. A whimper started up. Followed by another. I ventured deeper between the cages. A cat mewed. A cage rattled.

Zee flicked a switch on the wall, flooding the room in harsh, white light. All around, scruffy dogs and cats blinked sad eyes from behind their bars. My heart cinched to breaking point. Then the cats began to yowl. Just a couple, at first. Long, drawn out, reooowwwlllllll sounds. More joined in. The whimpering dogs grew louder.

“They’re looking at you, Adam,” Zee said, appearing beside me. He was right. Those in the closest cages had squished themselves to the back, as though to get away. And those further away had angled themselves to face me. The dogs hunkered down on their bellies, but the cats... The cats were afraid.

Because they saw through my glamor.

Every single one laid its eyes on me, and cried.

I bolted from the room, made it a few steps outside, and clung to a crate of chilled pies. Gradually, the whines and yowls subsided.

“The cages are on some kind of remote lock,” Zee said, joining me. “We need to get inside the general’s office. We’ll probably find a master switch in there.”

Yes, we’d do that, but before then, I needed a minute to collect myself and breathe.

“Adam?”

“I’m fine,” I croaked.

“It’s going to be okay.” He laid his hand on my shoulder and gently squeezed. “We’ll save them.”

I nodded, afraid my voice wouldn’t hold. I knew what it was like to be cast out, to be pushed to the fringes, shoved aside, and then hunted down. I also understood the helplessness of being trapped behind bars, knowing your time was running out. I’d accused Zee of letting fate trap him in a cage, when I’d put myself in one.

“Adam? Kitten?” Zee leaned in close, touching my side, so I knew I wasn’t alone. “Let me take the hurt away?”

“No, it’s fine.” I couldn’t—wouldn’t—ever let him absorb my pain like he’d been paid to do in the past. My past, as hurtful as it was, belonged to me. I nodded, and looked up into his purple eyes—all I could see of his face behind the mask. Never in a million years would I let him become trapped behind my bars too.

I gently eased his hand off, and stepped away. “Let’s get this done.”

Zee followed me, as I headed back through the crates toward the junction where we’d split from Reynard. But Reynard wasn’t there, and he didn’t show after several minutes, punctuated by the distant thumping of the mashing machine.

Zee paced, tail lashing. “I fucking told him. I said it, didn’t I? Don’t split up. I said it. Happens every time. Why does nobody listen to the fabulous fucking demon? Huh? Is it because I’m attractive? Does my charisma distract from my intelligence? Ugly people don’t have this problem. Beauty is a fucking curse!”

We’d waited long enough. “Let’s go find him.”

Heading down the left fork in the crates that Reynard had taken, brought us to another door with a broken camera. The mashing machine’s thumping had faded some, but



wasn't far. I peeked through the door, recognizing a section of the factory floor and the rumbling production line, then snuck inside. The watchtower office jutted up a short distance away. But still no sign of Reynard.

"We could leave Lord Fuck-Hard here?" Zee whispered, hurrying alongside me. "Nobody likes him anyway. Who's gonna even notice if he's gone?"

"I'll notice, Zee."

"Hm, right. We need his big-dick jet to fly home in."

We headed up the rickety metal staircase to the office and flicked the lights on. Everything appeared to be the same as earlier in the day. Zee dropped behind the desk again, and woke the computer. The screen showed the room of cages and some icons along the bottom bar.

"The lock override must be here," Zee muttered. "Where else would it be?"

"Hurry." The prickling sense of unease, that hadn't fully left, crawled over me again now. Was all of this a bit too easy? Or did it seem like that because Reynard had made it look easy? Where was Reynard? He did have a habit of disappearing at the worst times.

"Fuck fucking fuck. Look what I found."

I scooted behind Zee, and leaned over his shoulder to read the cascade of emails open on the screen. Emails from: [email protected]. A glance at the spelling made it clear who had written them.

Dont freten me cockscker u hav no fukin idear wot I kan do. i dont ow u fuk. They r min. all of em. I payd ten times theyr werth. fuk of.

I skimmed another message.

U got yer cut. dEALS DONE. Fuk u yer weredass pize.

The general's misspelled reply in all caps read:

U OWN NTOHING

"Looks as though the deal was breaking down," I mumbled. But just because they'd fallen out, didn't mean the contract was void.

The emails didn't really help. Although, they did seem to indicate that Sebastien had the confidence to declare the deal over. Why would he think that, unless there was some kind of get-out clause?

Addendum, the general had said. I'd missed its importance, alarmed by his offer of Labrador pie.

They'd modified the contract.

I yanked open the drawer, from where the general had removed the contract earlier in the day. The contract was there, on top. But I already knew what it said. I rummaged beneath it, looking for an addition, amendment, something... more.

A crumpled slip of paper lay at the bottom, like an afterthought.

Addendum. Dated: February 2025. Copernicus to Sebastien. The licensee shall hereby renumerate fifty percent of all earnings to the licensor for three years. Terms must be renewed by both parties within three years from the date of this agreement, or all contracts will be voided.

I read it again, slower, making sure I fully understood what the addendum referred to. “Oh my stars.” This was it. This was the jackpot. Sebastien and General Copernicus were due to renew their terms, but Sebastien had gotten greedy and told Copernicus where he could shove his share of the club’s profits.

This tiny slip of paper could free Zee from Sebastien, free all of them.

“Zee, this is?—”

An alarm screeched. Red light flooded into the watchtower windows.

“Uh oh.” Zee shot to his feet.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing?” He dashed to the windows.

“You steal my pies, Lycian!” the general boomed.

“I don’t want your pies, you crazy fuck.” Heading for the door, Zee gestured at the computer. “Find the lock override. Save the furbabies. I’ll keep him busy.”

“Zee, wait. Are you going to be alright?”

“Eh, he’s slow. Watch how I get shit done, babycakes.” He flung open the door and stepped into waves of red light. The great arches of his wings shivered into sight behind him, rising up. He sprang off the stairs and was gone.

Something crashed out of sight—probably Zee plowing into the general. It was fine. I just needed to find the lock switch on the computer. I stuffed the addendum into my pocket and dropped into the chair, then maneuvered the pointer on-screen to bring up

the camera feed. And there were the pets.

What was I supposed to do? I didn't use computers. Why wasn't there a big button that said lock override?!

The window exploded. Bits of glass peppered my mask. I lunged off the chair, behind the desk, avoiding most of the debris, and twisted to find Zee on his back, wings flapping out of sync as he tried to climb back to his feet.

"I'm fine," he croaked. He tore off his mask, revealing a split in his lip. "Fuck, I forgot how hard he hits. You alright?"

I ruffled glass from my hair. "Yeah, I think."

But the computer lay on the floor, in pieces.

"Did you get the lock?" Zee asked.

"No."

"Fuck."

The masher machine's hammering was louder now the windows had gone. Red light washed over us in waves. Alarms wailed. This could have gone better. I got to my feet and helped brush glass off Zee's clothes. "Have you seen Reynard?"

"Oh yeah, he's out cold on the conveyor belt. I probably should have told him the general hits like a semi."

"The conveyor? What?"

“Pfft, he’s fine.”

“Fine?” I hurried to the broken windows and saw the general sneering up at us.

“Put you in pies!” Copernicus boomed.

“We got bigger problems.” Zee clutched the window frame. “How to unlock those cages. Find a way, Adam. And do it fast.” He vaulted over the sill and plunged toward the general. At the last second, Copernicus raised an iron bar and swung it like a bat. Zee thrust out his wings, parachuting his descent, avoiding the swing at the last moment. He landed, and spin kicked, knocking the general back a mere single step.

Oh, this definitely was not going well.

I caught sight of a large, dark lump rumbling along the conveyor, in with the chunks of meat.

Reynard. He still had his mask on, and wasn’t moving. The general had knocked him out cold, just like Zee had said. But further along the belt, where Reynard was headed, the enormous masher plate slammed down every five seconds. At the speed the conveyor moved, he’d be crushed into tiny vampire mush within minutes.

“Victor!” I yelled. The alarms blared, swallowing my shout.

I had to get down there.

I hammered down the metal stairs and sprinted across the factory floor.

A fist flew at me. I didn’t see it until it was too late. Didn’t feel it either, until my body slammed into something unforgiving, and I crumpled to my knees, stunned, ears

ringing.

“Adam!” I heard Zee, but he sounded so far away.

Reynard was in trouble.

I had to get to him.

“Save him,” I muttered.

Wobbling back to my feet, I clung to the bent safety rail I’d been flung into, and staggered toward the conveyor belt. To my right, the giant masher thumped, mincing the pie filling. And a bit further on, lay Reynard.

“You hurt my Adam, you fuckin’ die!” Zee roared.

I glanced over my shoulder. Zee stood in all his glory, wings flared. His yellow Fundamental Rights top had gained a few new stains. His tail thrashed. He brandished an iron pole he must have torn from a machine.

The general had a bar too.

They roared and clashed—metal ringing, wings flapping, nails clawing. So much noise and motion. My head throbbed, vision swimming. The masher boomed, over and over, thumping so hard it made my heart jump too.

I wasn’t going to make it.

I had to.

What if I stopped the conveyor?

Unbaked pies trundled by me in an orderly line. Multiple wheels pushed along the rubber belt. If I interrupted the belt here, would the whole thing shut down?

There wasn't time to get it wrong.

I climbed over the barrier, stumbled against the conveyor, knocking several pies to the floor, and grabbed the rubber belt, digging my nails in to anchor up. I planted my feet, and heaved against the machines. Gears ground. Metal screeched. No human could do this. They'd get chewed up. But Zee was busy with the general and Reynard was out cold. Nobody would know...

Motors chugged—clanging, juddering. Smoke rose from the wheels. The smell of hot rubber filled the air. I couldn't let go, couldn't look. Had to stop the belt. It whined, and the rubber smoked, getting hotter.

The belt snapped.

I flew backward, accompanied by several pies, and sprawled on the floor. Pies splatted around me.

"My pies!" the general wailed.

The masher still pounded.

I'd only stopped one side of the belt. On the other side, it still fed Victor toward his death.

I'd failed.

"Zee! Help Victor!"

Zee saw me, then swung his gaze down the line, and spotted Reynard. His wings flung out, he sprang into the air, then shot like an arrow toward Reynard—inches from the hammering metal plate.

Now—It had to be now!

He dove.

Hands grabbed my face from behind, yanking me backwards into broad, meaty arms. The general smelled like hot pies, and crushed me in his arms. “Hm, you squish good, human.”

His fingers groped over my mask. Then one big fat finger slid over the mask’s mouth hole. I bit down, hard. The general bellowed, and shoved me away, through the rail, snapping it. But it did break some of my fall.

I spun, panting.

He clutched his hand. Blood dribbled from his finger, raining red blotches onto the dusty floor.

“You’re pie meat, human!” He stomped forward, stumpy wings spread as far as they’d go. That wasn’t a look of friendly discussion. He meant to kill me.

I raised my hands and backed away. “Maybe we can talk about this?”

“You bit my finger.”

“Well, you had hold of my face, so...”

“Adam, run!” Zee yelled.



The general came closer. I couldn't take my eyes off him to see if Zee had Reynard, but he had to, didn't he? I backed up some more, inching closer to the loud slamming sounds of the masher. Its noise thumped so loudly that my ribs jumped.

"Humans in pies." The general leered. "My next business venture."

"I don't think it will catch on."

"What?!" he grunted, struggling to hear over the masher's slamming.

"Bad idea!" I yelled.

"Eh?" He stopped, and frowned. "What you say?"

I grabbed his shoulders, and with a burst of inhuman strength, spun him around and kicked him in the chest, sending him flailing backward. The masher's enormous plate lifted. The general toppled backwards onto the belt. His eyes widened. The gigantic plate reached its highest point?—

Wham!

Warm splatter dashed my face.

I jerked, then stumbled, tasting metallic wetness on my lips, and wiped my eyes clear of startling pink goo. At least I had the mask on. Although, it hadn't saved my clothes, now glistening with sticky bits of General Copernicus.

Two thick, severed legs schlopped to the floor.

Nothing else was left. Just Copernicus filling everywhere.

“Oh dear.”

“Adam.” Zee grabbed my arms and peered into my eyes. “Are you hurt?”

“What?” I blinked through the gunk.

“Are you hurt, Kitten?”

Reynard staggered into sight, holding his head, and my racing heart swelled. On seeing me, he smiled. He was alright. They were both alright.

“Adam, talk to me.” Zee’s panicked face got closer. “Don’t die.”

“I’m okay. I’m not going to die. I’m just a bit messy.”

He pulled a face. “I’d hug you, but you’re kinda gross.”

My shoes squelched. “Yeah.” Blood dripped from my fingers. “Can we go save the furbabies now?”

We retraced our steps to the cage room—my shoes squishing the whole way—this time with Reynard close behind us. And after some thorough searching, Zee found the master override outside the room, near a fire exit. He hit the switch, opening all the cages. Reynard held the cage-room door open, while Zee held the fire-exit door open, and the pets streamed out. Some of them needed persuasion to leave their cages, but Zee was on hand, coaxing the scared ones out.

I hung back, since they were probably scared of me.

“I suggest now would be a good time to leave,” Reynard said, nodding toward the black smoke forcing its way through an inner door.

With all the animals free, I followed Zee and Reynard outside. We pulled off our masks, and watched hungry flames devour Fido's Fillings Flavors.

"We did a good thing," Zee said, bathed in shifting firelight.

"Yeah, we did."

The fire raged, gobbling up the building until its roof collapsed. Then the LAFD trucks arrived, and it was time to go home.

Reynard summoned his driver, and the three of us waited in a quiet part of the industrial yard, in a comfortable silence. Zee sat on a wall, legs crossed at the ankle, tail relaxed. I'd have sat with him, but didn't want the congealing squishiness to travel into places it had no business squishing into.

"Is there a shower on the plane?" I asked, peeling congealed bits of splattered demon off my clothes.

"There is," Reynard replied. He plucked a slimy bit of something from my hair, then tossed it aside. It splattered out of sight. "That was quite something, Adam."

He seemed impressed, which was nice, but I felt a bit... yuck. And not just because I was smothered in gore.

Zee faced away, watching the far end of the street for the car's arrival. His cheek twitched. He hadn't said anything, but I'd killed his general. That seemed like a big thing, that we should probably talk about when I wasn't covered in his general.

"I hadn't meant to end it like that," I whispered.

Reynard's left eyebrow arched. "Didn't you?"

I huffed. Okay, so maybe I had. A little bit. “How’s your head?”

Reynard touched his forehead, where a red smudge messed up all his pale perfection. “Sore, but healing.”

“That’s good.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t get any information that will help Zodiac.”

“Oh! But we did.” I shoved my hand into my pocket—straight into cold goo. The crumpled piece of paper had turned to mush from all the bits of Copernicus soaked into my clothes. I managed to pull some of it out, and cradle it in my hands. “Oh no. I had it, Reynard.”

Zee glanced over.

He’d been so hopeful, and I’d had the key to his freedom in my hands. But I’d ruined it.

“What is it?” Reynard asked.

“Nothing . . . it’s nothing.”

But he saw how my face had fallen.

I sighed. Had it really all been for nothing?

Reynard folded his arm around my shoulders, and tucked me close. He smelled so good, even now, all masculine and woody. And I smelled like a sewer. “I’m getting your suit all gooey.”

“I have other suits,” he mumbled into my hair. “If anyone can save him, it will be you,” he whispered, so only I heard.

Did he care for Zee? Or did he care because I cared? It didn’t matter, not in that moment. I’d done a bad thing and a good thing, and while I was coated in the blood and guts of a bad person, I kinda just needed not to be alone.

We were together, all three of us.

And that was enough. For now.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

I stood under the hot water, washing bits of Copernicus out of my hair, in Reynard's posh private jet. How many times did you have to wash bits of body off you before it indicated some poor life choices? Was twice in two weeks too much? I'd worn bits of vampire duke, and now a demon general. It was probably best not to think about it. Hopefully, Zee and Reynard weren't thinking about it at all, or they'd start asking questions, the answers to which would get them killed.

"Adam?" Zee rapped on the door.

"Yeah?"

"May I come in?"

"Erm..." I swept my soaked hair back. I was naked in the shower, obviously, but the glass screens were all steamed up, and he'd seen all of me multiple times, so it wasn't a big deal. "Sure?"

He entered the bathroom, wings hidden, propped his ass against the washbasin, and folded his arms. "I was going to wait until you'd finished, but didn't, because you're taking ages. What happened back there—you don't need to worry, okay? It wasn't your fault. The general had it coming."

"He was going to put humans in pies." I lathered up Reynard's lovely soap and swept it all over me, determined to get every trace of grossness off. I'd been telling myself the humans-in-pies thing had justified my turning the general into mincemeat, but a part of me remained unconvinced. Probably because, deep inside, I'd wanted to kill him.

“He would have, too. In his mind, humans were no different from pets. I just want you to know, it’s fine, okay? I don’t care that you pulverized him. I was so fucking close to turning him into sushi after he knocked you into that machinery anyway. Would have, if Fuck-Hard hadn’t needed saving. Again.” Zee rolled his eyes. “He’s such a damsel.”

I rinsed the suds off, rotating under the hot water. “I didn’t plan for it to happen that way though. It just sort fell into place.”

“Fell into place?” Zee snorted. “You got that right. And hey, listen, I know I’ve been a dick. It fucks me up when you get involved with my shit. You’re you, and that shit is that shit. It’s wrong when it mixes.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I should have left it all alone, but didn’t.”

We fell into a soft quiet, with the only sound being the hissing shower. I rinsed off some more, ruffling my hair, fairly certain I’d washed all the chunky bits out.

“Are we okay?” Zee asked in a small voice.

I turned around again and found him pressed against the steamed-up glass, his eyes all big and pining.

“Always, Zee.”

“It’s just that, Reynard hugged you, and I didn’t. You were dripping bits of intestines. He didn’t care, and I shouldn’t have cared either. But I really like these pants, and blood stains are a bitch to get out?—”

“It’s okay.” I pressed my hands against his, with just the glass between us. “I’m not sticky now?”

His gaze grew heavy with intent. “If I come in there, we’re both coming in there. Just so you know.”

I shrugged a shoulder, and stepped back. “That’s the plan.”

He whipped off his favorite pants, tore off his top, and was in the shower in three seconds flat. Water splashed over his horns and face, then he was crowding around me, suddenly everywhere, filling the cubicle with his Zeeness. Purple eyes blinked slowly. Water dripped from his lashes and wet his hair, darkening its two-tone shades of black and purple. He shifted a few inches closer, and his warm, firm body pressed against mine in all the right places. A purr rumbled up his throat. “Kitten, when you look up at me like this, I understand how fucked I am.”

Seb’s words, about everyone thinking they loved Zodiac, decided to slap me around the face. Ben, the Razorsedge barman, had tried to tell me the same. Zodiac had millions of fans. They all thought they loved him. Was I just like them? Did any of this really mean anything? Could it, when he had no idea who or what I was?

“Hey.” He tucked a nail under my chin and lifted my head. “There’s no room for sads in this shower.”

I dropped my head back against the hard tiles, and Zee shifted closer. Water dashed his face, painting his hair down his cheeks. His lips nudged mine, asking permission to venture further, to open me up and dive in. That was always a risk—that I’d open up too much, let him get too close.

“Take me like you mean it,” I told him, then bit my bottom lip.

His hot hands clasped my face. “I always mean it, Kitten. Every time.”

Did he though? Could he, truly?



He slammed a kiss on my lips, and I opened, taking him in, needing to swallow him into my soul. Sparks zinged. Tiny little static shocks, like needles dancing over our lips. He gasped, pulling back, and more sparks fell between us, raining to the shower floor. “The fuck?” he exclaimed, watching their glitter dance around our bare feet.

I flung my arms around his shoulders, and kissed him harder—kissed all the questions away. His hands dropped down my back, cupping my ass. Closer. I needed more. He lifted me off my feet. I wrapped my legs around his waist, clamping on, my hard dick crushed between us. His hung lower, and rode up behind my balls, finding a way in.

He pinned me to the wall, spread my ass, and angled the tip of his cock over my hole.

“You’re tight,” he muttered against my neck. “And I’m real big.”

I grabbed at a convenient bottle of conditioner. Zee performed a balancing act—with me perched on one hand, he spun the bottle in his right hand, tipped it upside down, facing his palm, dribbled a squirt out, tossed it aside, then swept the cool conditioner right where it was needed. This time, when his cock nudged my hole, it lodged in place—I gulped—and he steadily pushed in.

He lowered me down and filled me up.

A gasp hissed between Zee’s gritted teeth, and his expression grew even more intense. “I’ll never get enough of you.” His hips rocked, slow-pumping his cock, stroking in and out. I clutched at his hot back, getting off on my dick rubbing his rippled abs while his hit the spot.

Hot water poured over us, filling the air with steam and sex. Zee was under my skin, under more than that. Inside me. It was visceral, real, and exactly what I craved.

His panting sawed against my ear, our bodies rocked, and neither of us was far from coming.

“I don’t care what you are,” Zee growled, working a rhythm that had me climbing toward bliss. “I know you. Inside. And I—” He swallowed the rest of that sentence, cutting himself off.

I kissed him, thrusting my tongue in, tasting what I thought he’d been about to say. “Deeper,” I growled, after pulling from the kiss.

He set me down on my feet, spun me around, spread my ass, and speared his cock so deep I gasped, my toes curling.

“Deep enough, lover?”

I dug my blunt nails into the tiles. “Deeper.” I needed Zee to find the real me.

He thrust again, his thighs slapping my ass. Water pattered against my back, and ran down my chest. His nails dug into my ass cheeks, holding me open, and he pounded. My leaking dick bounced with every impact, and electric pleasure rode my spine, lighting me up. I stopped thinking, and became a creature of sensation, relishing every second.

Zee’s hand snaked around my chest, skimmed a hard nipple, then eased me against him, switching his dick’s angle downward as I arched. The new position drove me higher with every thrust of his cock. His tail tightened around my balls, giving them a firm squeeze, and his hand found my dick, capturing it in his grip. He pumped, attacking front and back without mercy. I was taken in every way, inside and out. And loved it. “Yes, Zee!”

He clamped a hand over my mouth, chuckling. “Vampires have good hearing.”

Vampires? Reynard?! He could hear?—

I came hard, sputtering, gasping, losing my mind, and with my head still abuzz, Zee dropped my dick, grabbed my thighs, and pumped harder. In a few savage thrusts, he came too, growling each breath as his rhythm stuttered.

He caught me in his arms again, and fluttered kisses down the back of my neck, going from brutal and hard, to sweet and soft in a few dizzying seconds. Or maybe I was about to pass out, because everything got really dreamy and dappled after every time we did this.

“I’ve got you. Stay with me,” he whispered, then nibbled on my ear, bringing me sharply back into the moment. “I can’t fuckin’ help it. I take too much of you, every time. You’re more than me, more than I can contain. You blow my mind, and my load.”

Yeah, I sort of already knew that from everything Madame Matase had said, about the wards swelling every time Zee and I were intimate. “It’s alright, it’s... fine. I mean. We’re a lot. It’s nothing.”

“We’re a lot and nothing? Okay, sure. Adam Vex logic.” Chuckling, he drew me to him and pecked a chaste kiss on the top of my head, then freed me and opened the shower door.

“We should find our clothes before Reynard comes looking.” That thought stopped Zee halfway out the door. “Do you think he’d like seeing us naked?”

I switched off the water and gave him a playful shove. “Maybe. Do you think he heard?”

“Maybe.”

He'd have definitely heard something. We hadn't been quiet. Maybe he'd heard and liked it? Tiny shivers ran through me—those breathless, stuttering ones that assaulted me every time I thought of getting personal with Reynard.

“I doubt Lord Fuck-Hard even knows what his dick is for,” Zee said, grabbing a huge fluffy towel from the rack.

I grabbed my own towel, but as I turned, Zee's towel lassoed over my head, dropped around my waist, and hooked me almost off my feet. He roughly rubbed the towel all over me, jiggling me on my feet from the friction. “W-what is h-happening?”

“I'm dryin' you.”

“O-oh. O-ok-ay.” It was kinda vigorous, and weirdly invigorating.

He stopped, blinked, and turned around. “Now, do me,” he said, spreading his arms.

“Erm...” I eyed my small towel, then his generous dimensions, and rolled my lips together. Where to even start?

“Don't humans dry each other after bathing?” he asked, head tilted, as though puzzled.

“Oh yeah, sure.” Probably. “All the time.” I dove in, and patted his firm thighs, with their taut muscles. His tail swished back and forth, mostly dry already, so I switched to jiggle-drying his ass, then quickly looped the towel around his front, trying not to enjoy it too much. “After every shower, humans dry each other. Sometimes we like to dry strangers in public restrooms. It's definitely a normal human thing to do.”

“I thought so. It's a bonding thing.”

I dried his back, wings still hidden, then circled around and dried up his gorgeous abs, slowly collecting glistening droplets of water, until reaching his nipple. Just a little tongue flick, maybe a suck?

“So, the sparks?” he asked, while I gazed at his nipple. “What was that?”

“What?”

“The kiss?” He tipped my chin up, peeling my gaze off his chest. “And it’s happened before, when we touch.”

Oh, those sparks. “It’s nothing. Just erm . . . static. From all the uh . . . friction.”

“Right.” He took the towel from me, since I’d forgotten how to use it, and wiped himself down. “So it’s not dangerous? It’s not like the wards firing up?”

“Erm, no?” I didn’t think it was dangerous, but four ward weavers had died trying to get a look at my curse, and although Zee wasn’t technically trying to undo the cursework, he was, in a way, getting inside me.

Perhaps the sparks were like the wards? “Does it hurt?” I asked.

“Kinda. Not much.”

Daisy, the vampire princess, had said glamor was a type of ward we carried with us. But a curse was more like chains. What if one of the times we got all fired up and intimate, my control slipped, and I accidentally hurt Zee?

Oh no. I really needed to fix my curse. “It’s nothing,”

Zee frowned, stepped into his pants, and tugged them on. “Your face says your mouth

is talking bullshit.”

I instinctively grinned. “It’s fine. Everything is fine.”

“Adam, you know you can talk to me, right? I know there’s a lot you can’t say, and you probably think I’m just good for sex—which I am—but I’m not just here for cock. You can tell me anything, you know? Talk to me?”

“Uh-huh.” Not about my curse, I couldn’t. I threw on the change of clothes Reynard had left out. The dress shirt was too lean, and the length of pants collected around my ankles, but the clothes would do until we got back to the hotel.

I headed for the door, hoping to escape Zee’s questions. I’d cursed myself once. I could do it again. I’d look into it when we got back.

Zee’s fingers snagged my wrist. “Adam?”

“I can’t, Zee.” I looked at his hand, looped around my wrist. I wanted to tell him everything. That’s what made this worse. It would be easier to tell him. “I just... I can’t.” Raising my gaze, I found the questions all over his face. Sometime soon, he’d ask, and he wouldn’t stop asking. Then he’d try and put the pieces together—he was too curious not too. And that day would be our last day together. “Please, don’t ask.”

“Okay.” He let go, and backed off a single step, wings drooping. “I won’t.”

We left the hot, damp air of the bathroom. Reynard was engrossed in his phone, and didn’t appear to have heard or suspected anything x-rated had been happening in his bathroom.

A tiny jab of guilt poked at my insides, when I considered that we hadn’t invited him. Was he even into that? He’d seemed sort of into it in Razorsedge’s red room. But that

had been then, with me. Not with Zee. Still, I knew he liked Zee, so perhaps he might like to get a bit more personal with both of us one day?

By the stars, it was getting complicated.

I settled opposite Reynard. Zee draped himself in the seat across from us. He grinned, exuding smug confidence.

But Reynard wasn't scowling. There, this was fine.

Not awkward at all.

Nobody needed to know we'd enjoyed some vigorous personal time.

Reynard's teacup clacked. He looked up, spearing those intense eyes into me. "Now you are both thoroughly reacquainted, what do we intend to do about Sebastien?"

Oh, then he had heard.

Heat flushed my face.

He leaned back, legs and arms crossed, poised and stern, and clearly not in any way interested in also becoming thoroughly acquainted with either of us.

"I think I know what to do about Sebastien," I said, equally as businesslike, so I didn't have to think about how I'd told Zodiac to go deeper, and Reynard had heard. "As Zee is cursed with beauty, he'll be the perfect distraction."

"Fuck yes! My time has come." He preened, flicked his hair, and flashed a photoshoot grin. "Who am I distracting?"

I looked at them both—at Reynard’s keenly interested, arched eyebrow, and Zee’s cocky grin.

It was time Sebastien learned what the San Francisco vampires and Gideon Cain had already discovered: Provoke the SOS Hotel management, and we’d bite back.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

We returned to the hotel as dawn painted the San Francisco sky red. Zee went to his room to prepare, and Reynard did whatever Reynard does when he disappears. I switched out my clothes for my more typical, casual sweater and slacks, and sauntered down to the bar, where I was met with Tom Collins's scowl.

"It's about time you showed up," he grouched.

That didn't sound good. "I was only away for a day. What happened?"

He took a deep, foreboding breath. "The gift that keeps on giving, Sebastien, decided to make a scene in my bar." He gestured at Zee's dancing pole, now bent in half. Then he adjusted his hand to encompass our new cabinet, reduced to a pile of splinters. "I'd have shoved the shotgun up his ass if I didn't think he'd enjoy it."

Sebastien had been at the hotel? I huffed and sat on a stool. "Whiskey."

Tom fixed my drink, grumbling about how he should have been informed if I wasn't going to be around to settle managerial things. He slammed the glass of whiskey onto the bartop and folded his arms over his dapper burgundy silk vest. I couldn't tell if he was genuinely angry or if this was his default ragey mode. He claimed he didn't experience emotions, but the sharp way he'd moved when making my drink suggested he was definitely put out by being left to deal with Sebastien alone.

"You're looking very handsome this morning," I said, hoping to brighten his mood. Everyone loved a compliment, even a broken AI. And just because he was AI, it didn't mean he deserved to be ignored.

His shoulders shimmied. “Oh. Well. Thank you. Someone in this sorry excuse for an establishment should take their job seriously.”

“And it is appreciated, Tom. So thank you. And I’m sorry you were left here to deal with”—I glanced at the pole—“that.”

He thawed a little and shook his head in dismay. “What are you going to do about Sebastien?”

I eyed my untouched whiskey, then the bent pole and ruined cabinet. Zee loved that pole, but I suspected Reynard would be pleased the cabinet had been destroyed. “I have an idea, but it’s risky.”

“Sebastien bent that like a paper straw. He will kill Zodiac, Adam.” Tom leaned on the bar, bringing his face inches from mine. Up close, there were tiny tells he was AI. A few flickering pixels. But those were just surface imperfections. His brown eyes burned with an intensity I wasn’t sure AIs were supposed to be capable of.

The opening notes of “Hotel California” came on the jukebox, guitar strings plucking ominously. That was... timely.

Tom waited for the right musical moment, and said, like a prophet of doom, “If Sebastien kills Zodiac, this hotel and the sanctuary it provides will cease to exist.”

“He won’t. And it won’t.” A few things had become clear to me lately, but one thing in particular: I’d protect this hotel and everyone within it, with my life. Every name in the guest book was personally guaranteed a safe stay. By me.

“I can’t leave this bar,” Tom said, still in his unhinged AI, ominous tone. “But within these gremlin-riddled walls, I see everything. You, sir, are a fine fucking example of bottled-up emotion about to blow. The quiet ones are the most dangerous. I see how

Zodiac plays to the crowd, but the only person in the room he looks for is you. Although, lately, he's begun watching Lord Reynard without the vampire knowing." Tom took another breath, and plowed on. "Speaking of Baron Victor Reynard, he spent an obscene amount of hours making a cabinet that should, at most, take sixty minutes, because he doesn't know how to process that he cares for his food and his mortal enemy. But let's get back to you, the unremarkable Adam Vex. I see how all of this is holding you together. I know desperate men. I know people who want to forget, and I help them do that with an Amnesia Ambrosia cocktail—one sip and you forget you've ordered it." I opened my mouth to suggested he maybe shouldn't sell that kind of drink, but he rushed on. "The SOS Hotel is your last stand. If Zodiac falls, so do you, so does Reynard, and so does this hotel. Including me. I don't know what your life was like prior to owning this hotel, but I know I don't want to go back into the dark place I was in before, ever again."

I swallowed, and peered into my untouched whiskey.

He saw a lot.

More than anyone else.

Normally, that would make Tom Collins a problem. I had a lot of problems. A Gideon Cain problem. A little missy, princess vampire problem. A racist detective problem. A bounty-hunting fae, federal agent problem. Not to mention the biggest problem of all. Me.

But Tom wasn't an immediate problem. Because he couldn't leave this bar, and he couldn't pass on my secrets.

Tom Collins might have been the only person this side of the veil who was beginning to know the real me. And that felt good, knowing I didn't have to pretend around him.

Tom lowered his voice. “People like Sebastien take pleasure in destroying the things others love. Give an inch, and he’ll take a mile.”

“It won’t come to that,” I told him, and picked up my drink. “If all else fails, I’ll invite him here for a drink... What’s it called, the other one you make? Ah, yes. A Long Walk off a Short Pier.”

Tom blinked, and we were on the same page. He was right about me, it really was the quiet ones who were the most dangerous. Now he knew he was right. And I knew he knew.

He straightened, and tugged his vest down, pulling out the creases. “Good talk, Adam. You want a cocaine chaser with your breakfast?”

Oh dear. “Tom, you have to stop putting cocaine in things. There are laws about that. Where are you even getting cocaine from?”

He plucked a glass from the drying rack below the bar and began wiping it down, falling back into his programmed routines. “Cocaine? Who said I had cocaine? I’m running a respectable place here. Of course there’s no class A drugs back here. That would be against the human laws I definitely abide by and have in no way circumvented.”

I downed my whiskey, then wondered if he’d already put cocaine in it, and eyed the empty glass. Tom smiled. “Did you put drugs in my drink?”

“Did I put drugs in your drink?” he echoed, scoffing a dry laugh. “Those are some serious trust issues you got there.”

“You literally just offered me cocaine, Tom.”

“Do you want some?”

I groaned into my hands, then hopped off the stool. “If any of the human authorities come by, don’t offer them drugs, alright? They really don’t like that sort of thing.”

“You need to work on your trust issues, and trust me more. Who held down this place while you were away? I did. Your dependable, reliable, not in any way corrupted, artificial barman.”

It was like talking with Zodiac, but without the raging libido.

“I’ll be out this evening, with Reynard and Zee,” I said. “Please don’t poison any guests while I’m gone.”

Tom smiled, but it was the kind of shallow smile that meant he’d be up to mischief as soon as I turned my back. “You can trust me to serve everyone the drinks they deserve.”

“That’s the problem.”

Tom lowered his voice, and said with the same smile, “Make that son of a bitch hurt.”

We both knew we were talking about Sebastien. I nodded, and headed off to begin another day managing the SOS Hotel, hoping it wouldn’t be my last.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

Zee smuggled me in a back door at Razorsedge, then left me in a communal dressing room, surrounded by colorful demons climbing in and out of various skimpy costumes. I sat on a chair, looking very underdressed in my beige sweater and slacks, feeling like a human doll that had been tossed into the wrong claw machine, squished among brightly colored plushies with extra adult bits.

Zee had told them I was off limits, but that didn't stop them from getting a look at the boring human who'd adopted their star performer. Ramone spotted me, and chuckled at my attempt to blend in. He pulled up a chair, sat, and offered me a puff on his vape.

"I'm good, thank you."

He shrugged, and sucked on the vape. "I hear Zee's performing at eleven." He hissed out the vapor through clenched, sharp teeth, and his eyes got a little bit larger. I suspected the vape had more in it than nicotine and peach flavor. "You ever seen his shows?" he asked.

"Uh, no. But he dances sometimes at the hotel, though."

Ramone puffed a hoop into the air. "Not like this, babycakes. He's something else. Be careful. There are no wards here to protect you, and he's potent. You might lose your mind for a while. Some folks like that, you know? In the old days, before more of us came through the veil, some incubi set up shop here, made humans think we're divine. Those early fuckers were worshipped as pagan gods. Gave the rest of us incubi a bad rep. Some folks still come here to fall under the spell though, you know? Humans are weird like that. They know what's bad for them, and crave it anyway.

But I'm guessing you're not like that?"

"Thanks for the warning, but I'll be alright."

As it approached eleven, I left the dressing room for the main bar and stage area, keeping to the fringes where I'd go unnoticed.

Despite the short notice, the club was packed, wall to wall. Zodiac had made it known all over social media that he was back at Razorsedge, and tonight's show was his comeback performance. Sebastien would be making a fortune on tickets. A fortune that went straight into his silk-lined pockets. A fortune that wasn't his, according to the ruined addendum. The contract had expired without being renewed. Everyone here was technically free, but without proof, Sebastien would never relinquish his rights.

I needed to get my hands on that proof.

Anticipation buzzed the air. The main stage was dark. Nobody had performed yet. Everyone waited for Zodiac. Everyone, including Sebastien.

He lounged in one of the booths, with two female demons on his arms. In his cream suit, blue shirt, and glossy black shoes—his "Smooth Criminal" outfit—he looked the part. His wings shimmered with silver glitter, and that same glitter sparkled in his white hair, pulled back in the savage French plait running between his spiraling horns.

I hung back, hiding where dappled, colored lights confused the shadows, and gradually made my way around the outside of the buzzing crowd.

There was no room for mistakes tonight.

Lives depended on my ability to slip through the crowd unnoticed. Be invisible. Just a boring, nobody human.

The lights above the stage began to glow.

It wouldn't be long now.

“Adam Vex.”

I jolted to a stop in front of another average human. But this one was middle-aged, shorter than me, with a neck as wide as his head, and a dash of whiskers shading his jaw. It took me a heartbeat to recognize him wearing a smart shirt. “Hello, Detective Somers.” Oh no.

The club's ambient light caught in his close-set eyes, making them gleam. “Not enjoying the show, Mr. Vex?”

“Oh, I am. I just—I'm looking for the bathroom.” I began to inch around him, which jostled me into nearby people. “Sorry... I just need to... can I just... squeeze by?”

The irritating man smiled, remaining firmly rooted in my path. “I hope there are no massacres this evening.”

“Oh, probably not.” I chuckled. Someone bumped my arm and grumbled. “Just lots of people having a good time.”

“Well, you're here, and so is Zodiac. Whenever that happens, folks usually die.”

Ugh. The last thing I needed was a nosy detective drawing attention to me. “Well, gee. It almost sounds as though you don't like demons. This is probably the wrong place to be, if that's the case, Detective.”



A few nearby demons turned their heads, glancing our way.

Somers noticed and attempted to make himself an inch taller by puffing out his chest. “I didn’t say I don’t like demons. Every one of God’s creatures has its place.”

But, according to him, Zodiac’s place was on the other side of the veil. I knew his sort. They liked to wave crosses and preach about the second coming, about how sin would be cleansed by the second coming of their prophesied one. I knew a thing or two about prophecies. They were rarely accurate. More like guidelines, really. “Then it’s Zodiac you have a problem with?”

A big demon jostled against Somers, almost toppling him into me. “Out the way, demon bait,” the demon grumbled, shoving by.

“I h-have a problem with criminals, Mr. Vex,” Somers stammered. “Mr. Reese, the protestor, remains missing. Gruesome murders right outside this club. All the signs point to one person, don’t you think?” He nodded toward the stage, where the lights began to shift from soft white to a deep red. “Demons like him never change, Mr. Vex. They’ll always be killers.”

Zee’s show was about to begin. Remembering Ramone’s warning, I tucked a smile into my cheek. “Are you staying to watch? I hear Zodiac’s performances are mesmerizing.”

He grimaced. “I might.”

The lights dimmed again, and the opening violins from Michael Bublé’s version of “Feeling Good” played. Zee’s voice glided over our heads, teasing every single person in the crowd—demon, fae, human, all manner of Lost Ones—none could deny its smooth, delicious timbre. I’d heard him sing before, at the hotel, when he’d belted out a rendition of “House of the Rising Sun.” But that hadn’t been like this.

His voice poured over and into me like warm syrup, its physical pull undeniable.

A spotlight burst onto the curtain onstage, highlighting Zee's frozen but unmistakable silhouette behind. The dramatic outline showed his wings splayed, his tail flicked out, and his heels accentuating long legs.

"It's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life for me. And I'm feeeeelin'... good."

The beat dropped. The orchestra kicked in. The trumpets sang. And the curtain fell.

I gasped.

He wore a blood-red suit jacket over a black silk shirt, clinging on by a single button. Red tailored pants dropped to glossy black shoes. I'd thought Reynard rocked a suit like nobody else, but until this moment, I'd never seen Zee wear one. And he wore it with style.

He strutted forward, heeled shoes striking the stage floor with every drumbeat. His black wings, painted with red ladybug dots, rocked with every sway of his hips. The opening crescendo built until Zee reached the front of the stage. He dropped into a crouch, tail causing mischief off to one side with a big-eyed fan who appeared to be on the verge of losing their mind.

He sang, as though the music lived and breathed inside of him.

The crowd hollered, howled and screamed, and Zee smiled, absorbing everything. He stood, shrugged off the jacket and flung it away, then grasped the pole, hooked a leg around it, and went to work.

He owned that stage, and every single living being in the club. His incubus allure beat out in waves, washing over the audience, whipping them into a frenzy. This was what

happened when there weren't wards to temper him. And he was... glorious.

Even Detective Somers stood stunned and enthralled. He swallowed hard, his mind and body no longer his own.

A glance to my left, through the many horns and wing tips, revealed Sebastien, standing and gazing at Zee. Admiration shone in his eyes. Blatant desire parted his lips.

Zee had everyone under his thrall. Everyone except me. I wanted nothing more than to stay and watch too, but I had my own part to play.

I stepped back from the masses. Pride lifted me up. That clever, powerful demon on stage was my bestie, and part of my heart too.

Nobody stopped me from passing through the side door, and climbing up the tall, narrow staircase. But the dutiful guard outside Sebastien's suite saw me. He stepped forward. "You again?—"

Nobody expects the blond-haired, softly spoken, twenty-something human to punch above their weight. So when I thrust out a hand, grabbed his face, and slammed his head against the wall, he didn't know what had hit him. And I'd learned, from previous visits, there were no cameras here to witness it.

As he slumped, out cold, I caught him, and gently laid him down. "Just a little nap. You'll be right as rain in no time."

Inside Sebastien's apartment, Zee's voice sailed up to me, giving his all and driving me on. I dashed for the cabinets, grabbed the box file Reynard had found, and dumped its contents on the floor. Contracts fluttered, but the addendum wasn't among them.

It had to be here.

Where would Sebastien keep something capable of ruining his business? He wouldn't destroy it, in case he needed to renew it. So where would he hide the one thing that could bring all this tumbling down?

I spotted the remains of the shattered glass wall that Reynard had shoved Sebastien through, and hurried around it. Sebastien's enormous, red silk-draped bed was all kinds of hideous. And a mirror above, to add to the creeper vibe.

I dropped to my knees, lifted the sheets, and peered under the bed. A shiny reinforced suitcase lay among his sex toys. I dragged it out and popped the latches. The lid sprung open, and inside lay a messy pile of documents. A deed to Razorsedge, multiple loan agreements, several explicit photographs of Sebastien and a... goat? I shoved all that aside, and there it was, the original slip of paper. The addendum. Proof that Sebastien's reign as the king of Razorsedge was over.

I snatched it up, shoved the case back under the bed, and hurried from the apartment.

I had it.

My heart thumped.

I had what we needed to free every single demon here.

Zodiac's show had ended, and another demon was on stage, grinding against the pole, but after the splendor of Zee's show, almost everyone had gone back to drinking, chatting, and getting frisky with the staff.

"Ben..." I leaned against the bar, breathing hard and grinning like an idiot. "Where did Zee go?"

“Hey there! I didn’t know you were here. D’you see the show? Fuck, Zee kills it every time.”

“Yes, yes, where is he?”

He jerked his chin toward Sebastien’s booth. “Where he always is after a show like that—with the boss.”

My heart stuttered, and my grin cracked. I followed Ben’s glance, and saw Sebastien with Zee. Which wouldn’t have been so bad, if Sebastien didn’t have hold of the chains around Zee’s neck, making it clear who Zee belonged to.

Zee didn’t seem to mind. He chuckled at something one of their group said, but his eyes were flat, his heart far away.

This ended now.

I stole someone’s drink on the bar and gulped it down. The potent mix hit me like a slap to the face.

“Hey!”

“Sorry!” I wheezed, and shoved from the bar. The liquor mixed with the rage already burning in my gut, churning over. My head spun. It was fine. I might throw up, but everything was fine. I fought a path to the stage. Adam Vex—quiet, shy, always hiding, always running. But for this, for Zee, hiding wasn’t an option.

I clambered onto the stage, and squinted into bright lights.

The demon who’d had the impossible task of following Zodiac, stopped dancing, and eyed me up and down. “Book club’s two doors down.”

“Oh, uh, no. Hello. Do you mind if I, erm, just say a thing, and then you can continue your work?”

He rolled his eyes. “You need to sit back down, demon bait.”

“It’s just, erm...” I turned around. Mercy, it was high up. And bright. And I couldn’t really see the faces of everyone in the crowd, but I was fairly certain a few of them had begun to notice me. I raised my voice. “I just...” I squeaked, then cleared my throat and tried again, a bit louder. “Can I have everyone’s attention please?”

The music stopped.

Silence fell over the club.

Someone coughed.

“Show us your dick!”

“Oh, uhm. I don’t think that would be appropriate.” I reached into my pocket and removed the crumpled addendum. “Addendum dated February, twenty twenty-five—” My throat closed. I cleared it with a cough.

“Adam Vex.” Sebastien’s wing tips glittered out of the crowd first, then his spiraling black horns, and then he emerged at my feet, near the front of the stage. “Get naked or get off my stage.”

“I think I’ll stay.” I shifted uneasily, uncomfortable in the spotlight. “Addendum dated February, twenty twenty-five?—”

“You said that part,” a voice piped up. I shielded my eyes, to try and get a look at who was listening, but my sight blurred as my anxious insides turned over.

“Get your clothes off!”

I cleared my throat again. “Right, yes, just...” Holding the addendum in trembling hands, I blinked at its words, acutely aware of Sebastien’s narrowing eyes glaring up at me. “Copernicus to Sebastien,” I said, louder, trying to project my voice to the back.

“Get off my fucking stage right now, or I will break every bone in Zodiac’s wings,” Sebastien growled, “and fuck him so hard he’ll be nothing but dust when I’m done.”

“You are on my Bad People list!” I snapped, then kept my eyes on him, as I quoted, “The licensee shall hereby renumerate fifty percent of all earnings to the licensor for three years.”

“What the fuck?” Someone in the crowd laughed. “Who is this queer?”

Sebastien’s glare thinned.

“This shit ain’t what I paid for!”

“Keep going, I’m hard!”

My throat cinched closed again. “Okay, I just—” My growl cleared it this time.

Sebastien grabbed for my legs. I danced back, into more blinding spotlights. Fingers looped around my ankle. Then Zee leaped onto the stage, wings raised. He slammed his foot down onto Sebastien’s wrist, pinning him.

“Gah! The fuck!?” Sebastien tugged, but he was caught.

“I wanna hear what he has to say.”

Sebastien's tail thrashed. Zee had stopped him. Perhaps for the first time since being sold into servitude.

"Yeah, me too!" That was Ben's voice. "Keep going, Adam."

"Read it!" Ramone bellowed. I couldn't see them, but they were out there.

"Yeah, go demon bait! Give it all you got," someone else shouted. "Rub some funk on it."

My heart tried to thump its way out through my ribs.

Zee's gaze met mine. "Go on, Adam. We're listening."

I hadn't told him, just in case I couldn't find it. He didn't know the addendum existed. He didn't know he was about to be set free.

I wet my dry lips. A few faces stood out in the crowd now my eyes had adjusted. Faces full of hope. Hope like Zee'd had when we'd visited his general, only to have those hopes dashed. Ben had said they didn't need anyone to save them. But Ben had been wrong. We all needed someone to save us.

"Terms must be renewed"—my voice wobbled, and my heart lodged in my throat—"by both parties, within three years from the date of this agreement."

Sebastien's wings exploded outward. He lunged, coming straight for me with murder in his blue eyes.

Zee launched a right hook. His fist connected with Sebastien's face, knocking his head back. Momentum carried Sebastien's feet out from under him. He slammed onto his back, on the stage, wings flapping.



“Stay down,” Zee growled, “and listen to what Adam has to say, or I will rip your fucking wings off.”

“I own you!” Sebastien snarled, clutching his now-bleeding nose.

“Babycakes,” Zee planted his heeled shoe on Sebastien’s chest and leaned in. “I got a feeling whatever Adam says in the next five seconds means you can’t fucking touch me.”

Zee nodded me on.

Here it came. Six words that freed everyone who had been trapped under Sebastien’s heel, or choking at the end of his leash. “Or all contracts will be voided.”

Silence fell over the club.

I dropped my gaze to Sebastian’s fury-filled stare. “You got greedy. You didn’t renew the terms. All contracts are voided.”

“Bull-fucking-shit,” Sebastien raged. “That piece of paper means nothing! Let me up, you cunt,” he snarled at Zee.

Zee checked me. I gave him the okay, and Zee unpinned Sebastien from under his shoe.

Sebastien clambered to his feet, righting his clothes and hair. Flustered, he glared at me, then noticed we were all lit up on the stage. “Don’t listen to the stupid little human,” he barked at the crowd. “I’m your fucking boss. I fucking own all of you. Get back to work. And you? You worthless cunt.” He thrust a finger at Zee’s face. “Go to my room and get on your knees, where you belong. If you think for a single fucking second I’m ever letting you go, you’re in for a whole world of hurt. I’m

going to fuck your every hole, and some new ones.”

Zee’s tail thrashed, and the veins in his wings began to burn purple, but his face remained calm, almost intrigued. “Oh baby, keep talking, you’re making me hard.”

Sebastien’s wings ruffled. “What?”

“Yeah, you know?” Zee picked up Sebastien’s tie and smoothed his hand up and down it. “We should definitely get a room. A special room, just for you. With whips and chains. Maybe some knives? You enjoy knife play, don’t you Seb?”

Sebastien’s white lashes fluttered. His smile, like his tail, twitched, unsure if it should stay or go.

“Club’s closed,” Zee announced, smoothing down Seb’s tie. “Anyone who doesn’t work here leaves now.”

“The fuck!” Sebastien screeched, beginning to sense how the club’s ambience had turned against him. “Don’t listen to Zodiac, he’s just some piece of ass. I sign your checks. I pay you. I made all of you. You owe me, you bunch of fucking hoes. None of this works without me.”

The staff of demons began to usher the customers toward the exits.

Sebastien whirled and flung a finger at me. “You little bitch. I’ll just amend the contract, like it says. Fido needs the money. I’ll pay. And every single one of you who defies me now will feel my fucking wrath tenfold. I’ll fuck the lot of you into the ground! And you, Adam Vex. You I’m going to eat, starting with your cock.”

I slow blinked, like I’d learned from Reynard. “Okay, but you should know, General Copernicus is dead, so I guess all you just said won’t ever be happening.” I batted his

pointed finger away. “You don’t see it yet, but you’re about to have a really bad rest of your life.”

Sebastien spluttered a laugh. He looked around him, searching for a way out, but all he saw was how the crowd had thinned, leaving just a whole bunch of angry demons.

Every lash of his whip. Every time he’d held them down, leaving bruises on their wrists. Every single shameful thing he’d made them do, for four years... It was all about to come back and bite him. Hard.

“W-wait!” Sebastien spluttered. “Alright, I see you cumbuckets are upset.” He pushed out his hands, as though to hold them back, even though nobody had moved in. “Let’s talk?”

Zee pulled up to my side. “I’m feeling pretty good,” he said, calling back to his earlier performance. “How do you feel, Adam?”

“I’m feeling really good too,” I agreed.

We all knew who wasn’t feeling good. Sebastian’s wings sagged and his tail flopped.

A few growls and hisses simmered from the staff. Someone flicked on the music, and blasted the “Feeling Good” instrumental track from the speakers all over again. Hungry violence shone in Zee’s eyes. He wrapped his fingers around his neck chains, and tore them off, then laid his predatory glare on Sebastien.

A thrilling shiver trickled down my spine.

“Fuck!” Sebastien spun on his heel, shoved me into Zee’s arms, and bolted.

He might have made it, if we hadn’t suspected he’d try to run and brought a backup

plan.

Reynard blurred onto the stage and thrust out an arm, clotheslining Sebastien in the throat. Down Sebastien went for a second time. He screamed a high-pitched cry and bucked, until Reynard stood on his neck, choking off the noise.

Sebastien stopped thrashing.

“That’s for choking Adam,” Reynard snarled, leaning on his knee, making Sebastien gurgle. “For ruining my cabinet, and for mistreating Zodiac, whom I have recently begun to experience a complicated array of emotions for. I suggest, demon, during what happens next, you shouldn’t fight. It will be over more quickly that way.” He straightened, lifted his foot off Sebastien’s neck, and adjusted his sleeves.

“Daddy Vampire is fucking hot when he gets his dom on,” Zee remarked from the corner of his mouth.

Reynard really kinda was.

“Please?” Sebastien whimpered. He rolled onto his front and scanned the faces of his ex-staff. They’d all closed in, and although they were wearing candy-colored, skimpy outfits lined with feathers and fluff, each of them in another life, was more than capable of chopping Sebastien into sushi. And now they were free to do exactly that. “I’m a victim too!”

“Don’t go easy on him,” I told Zee.

Zee chuckled. “Kitten, there’s no chance of that.”

I hopped off the stage, joining Reynard, and together we walked from the main room, through the club corridors, and out the main door. In a rare, quiet moment in

Demontown, a bloodcurdling scream rose up, then was silenced by Razorsedge's heavy door swinging shut.

We climbed into the waiting car, and left the demons to their justice.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:45 pm*

As the sunset in the bay, its descent cast long shadows across the street. Shadows that hadn't yet reached the hotel's flowerbeds.

I stood on the porch steps with Zee, watching the heat fade from the day. The city hummed pleasantly, and the hotel groaned and ticked, making settling noises. Or that may have been gremlins munching through the floors.

Zee had returned from Razorsedge early in the morning. I'd been tempted to rush to him, but Reynard had suggested he might need space, and that he'd come looking for us when he was ready.

Reynard had also suggested, it was time to talk about the flowers.

Zee emerged a little while ago, and met me in the foyer. He wore casual baggy pants and a torn string top. He didn't look angry or upset. He just seemed content. His neck chain was missing, its symbolism no longer required.

I looked down at the flowers. This was the right moment.

"So, there's a thing I need to tell you, and I should have told you before, but there was a lot going on, and you were dealing with so much. Reynard said I should tell you, but I couldn't. So this isn't on him. It's my fault. I should have said before. I was scared I'd lose you, and well... it was selfish, I know. I was trying to protect you, and myself, but I think I maybe hurt you instead, and I'm so sorry, Zee, but?—"

He pressed a finger to my lips. "Cherise is under the flowers."

“You knew?” I mumbled around his finger.

He plucked his finger away and looked down at the rows of happy flowers. “She fuckin’ loved flowers. And knives. But mostly flowers. She’d like it there.”

“I should have told you when he... When it happened.”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything.” He slung his arm around my shoulders and tucked me against his side. We stayed like that a while, watching the sun set and the shadows crawl over the flowers.

“Do you forgive me?” I asked quietly.

He ruffled my hair. “There’s nothing to forgive. If you hadn’t noticed, I worship the fucking ground you walk on. I’ve got no fucking idea why you keep fighting to save people who don’t deserve it, but I’m here for it, and you. And mac and cheese.” He booped my nose. “Also, I really like fucking you. Like, so fucking much. Did you keep those fluffy pink cuffs I got in LA?”

I grinned. “Maybe.”

“Maybe we can try them later?”

His being so understanding, proved I should have told him sooner. I tried to be a good person, but sometimes it was hard. Sometimes, doing the right thing hurt the most, and I already knew I wasn’t cut out to be anyone’s hero.

We walked, side by side, back into the lobby. Guests bustled. Madame Matase chatted on the phone. A new gremlin hole had opened up in the wall—I’d have to move the chair in front of it later. But the hotel was still standing, still offering a safe place for Lost Ones who needed it. Zee was right, coming home to the SOS Hotel felt good, in a world where there wasn’t much good to be found.

“I’m afraid to ask, but was Sebastien unalived?”

“We voted. It was close, but the prick gets to live. We all had to make the best of a shit sandwich after the veil sealed. Some think he was just trying to survive. Like that forgives him for being an epic, abusive asshole. But he sure ain’t in a happy place. Probably wishes he was dead.”

I didn’t want to know the details. Although, I kinda really did want to know every painful thing that had been done to him, so I could relish the taste of vengeance. Wait, I mean... vengeance is bad. An eye for an eye leaves two people blind. Or something.

“We persuaded him to sign over the club deed, so it’s owned by the team now. Team of demons? Horde of demons? Throng of demons? What’s a group of demons called? Whatever, he’s no longer the boss of us. Ramone’s the manager. He’s fair, he’ll be good at it.”

Would Zee leave the SOS Hotel and go back to Razorsedge? He had that right. He clearly loved the club, just not its boss, and his performances were a gift to any and all who watched them. “And you? Will you go back?” I asked quietly, hoping he didn’t hear how much it hurt to ask.

He could leave. That was his choice. We didn’t have contracts. We had made a deal to fix up and open the hotel together, but technically, that deal had been fulfilled.

Today, for the first time ever, he got to choose his tomorrow.

“Me? Go back there? Fuck that. I got a good thing going in this place. My own pole—which I will fix. My favorite human, free food?—”

“You don’t mean the guests, right?”



“Pfft, no. Why would I need to feed on the guests when I’ve got you? Oh, and hey, I almost forgot. You’re our general now.”

I stopped in the middle of the foyer. “Huh?”

He turned, casually cocking a hip and added, “Yup. You slayed Copernicus in combat, so you’re the general.”

I was the what now? “But I didn’t mean to do that.”

Zee rolled his eyes. “Not this again. Okay, sure. He just happened to trip and fall into the mincer with you right there?” Zee mock-gasped, and put on a dramatic voice. “Oh no, it was another terrible accident, that the sweet, innocent Adam Vex had nothing to do with.”

“Uh, yes. That’s exactly what happened.”

He snorted. “I was there, Kitten. I saw it. You ninja-kicked his ass into that machine. You knew exactly what you were doing, and you executed it perfectly. But sure, it was an accident.” He air-quoted. “It’s fucking strange how all these accidents”—air quotes—“seem to happen around you, huh?”

“Strange? No, I don’t think so. Accidents happen all the time.” Oh dear.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh. All the time around you.” He poked me in the chest. I looked down, and he flicked my nose. “So cute, so bloodthirsty. So fuckin’ hot.”

A strained laugh tumbled out of me. “Oh, Zee. You’re so silly.” I shifted my gaze sideways. Nobody had heard him, which was good. It turned out, I really wasn’t very good at being a plain, boring human. Who knew it was so difficult?

My cover-up chuckling faded. “What does that mean, if I’m your general?”

He shrugged. "It's just symbolic."

"Oh, well," I sighed. "I suppose that's alright, then."

"Probably."

"Probably?" My voice cracked.

Zee snorted. "Nothing is going to happen unless we're called up for war, and since there's no war here, you're good."

Reynard chose that moment to emerge from the bar and grace us with his lordly presence. "What has you so alarmed, Adam?"

"He's a demon general now. General Vex," Zee emphasized, sweeping a hand through the air while tasting the title on his lips. "He sounds like a badass motherfucker. What do you think, Your Lordship?"

Reynard's cool silver-eyed gaze settled on me. "Remarkable, Adam."

"I'm really not." This was getting out of hand. Somehow, I needed to be more boring and less remarkable. "This is just a misunderstanding. How do I unbecome a general? Can't I make you the general?" I asked Zee. "It's more your thing."

"The next general kills you," Reynard explained. "It's the demon way."

"Daddy Vampire's right," Zee agreed, standing next to him.

"Well, that's silly," I huffed, frowning at them both. "I can't be a demon general when I'm just a boring human."

Zee smirked at Reynard, whose eyes glittered with sly satisfaction, and whose thin

lips ticked up at one corner.

Almost as though they no longer believed me.

To be continued . . .