



Your Final Resting Place (SOS Hotel #7)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: An ex-adult movie star, a broke vampire daddy, and a boring human are about to try and save the world

Its probably our fault your world is doomed, if Im honest. Sorry about that. Sticking with honesty, were not great at saving people, or ourselves. You should probably pack a bag and head for the hills.

You know, just in case

My name is Adam Vex, and Im definitely not the hero we all need, but along with Zee and Victor, a whole bunch of s*x demons, one shadow beast, a sassy AI bartender, and some uncontrollable gremlins, were all youve got.

Welcome to the end of the world at the SOS Hotel.

We hope you enjoy your final resting place.

Total Pages (Source): 21

CHAPTER 1

Sebastien had been with us almost twenty-four hours. A whole twenty-three hours more than anyone would have liked. He'd been checked into his own room, just like he'd asked, and in exchange he'd give us the answer to bringing down Gideon Cain.

It seemed a simple enough deal. But in those twenty-four hours, the only answer he'd given was how many flaming sambucas one demon could consume without passing out. Although technically, we didn't have that answer either, because he was still upright when I entered the bar.

I'd expected him to have moved from the table in front of the stage, where I'd left him last night—or maybe him showing up had just been a horrible dream—but nope, he was still there. He'd propped his shiny black and white shoes on the chair opposite, his dirty white suit bore the creases of a sleepless night, and his sparkly demon wings trailed either side of him. He resembled a demon mannequin that some kids had painted in black and white, braided its long white hair, and then briefly taken a blow torch to, melting it over the chair.

Empty shot glasses littered his table.

At another nearby table, Victor wasn't happy. Victor was rarely happy, but since I'd left him yesterday evening he'd made an entire zoo of origami animals and gathered them together on his table. All those perfectly folded corners and straight lines had probably kept his murder urges at bay.

“Has Victor been there all night?” I asked, arriving at the bar counter to find Tom in

his default pose of drying an already dry glass.

“All night,” Tom said. “Taking up seating space without ordering a single drink.”

It wasn't as though we were brimming with customers. Victor and Seb were the only ones here.

Victor was guarding our unwanted guest, and I couldn't blame him. Sebastien was technically our enemy, and we'd let him walk right in. Or, I had...

I'd told myself I'd give Seb a day to settle in, to get acquainted with the hotel, and that I'd give him the benefit of the doubt—but that deadline was almost up.

“You seen Zee?” I asked Tom.

Tom slid a cup of tea across the bartop counter, and peered at me with raised eyebrows. “I saw Zee. Right around the time he told us all to go fuck ourselves and left.”

There hadn't been much time for us to discuss letting Seb stay, but there also hadn't been much to discuss. We were a hotel for Lost Ones. We didn't turn anyone away, unless they meant us harm, and the wards had allowed him in which meant he wasn't here to hurt anyone. Plus, we really needed to stop Gideon Cain. If Seb could help with that, as dubious as the idea was, we should look at it. But Zee had been in no mood to listen, and I couldn't blame him. I'd witnessed enough of his relationship with Seb to know it had not been a good one.

It hurt—hurting Zee—like Tom's tea hurt my whiskey-loving soul. But it was necessary. I sipped the tea and winced. “It's cold.”

“It's iced,” the bartender hissed.

I eyed the tepid liquid in its chipped china cup. “There’s no ice in this. It’s just cold tea, Tom.”

He slung the cloth over his shoulder and peered harder. “Have you eaten today? Breakfast? Lunch? Are you getting your minerals? How about a milkshake?”

“Milkshake? Uh, no thank you.”

“Good, I only have minotaur milk and that shit will kill you.”

Wait... Weren’t all minotaurs male? What kind of milk—never mind, I didn’t want to know. Narrowing my eyes, I huffed and pushed the tea away. Tom was taking the whole I’m-actually-human thing too far. “I did eat today, yes,” I said, answering his earlier nannying.

Tom huffed as though I’d accused him of putting pets in pies. “Fine. Then you have earned one glass of whiskey. But only the one.”

My alcoholic heart tripped. It wasn’t a problem. I’d always needed the heat, being a dragon an’ all—although I was less dragon now than I’d ever been—and when Tom finally handed over my tumbler, the first sip of whiskey confirmed how un-dragon I was by scorching the back of my throat and yanking a cough from my chest.

Zee chose that moment to poof into the bar next to me, which would have been a relief if I’d had some warning. Startled, I coughed, wheezed from shock, almost swallowed my own tongue, gulped air, and clung to the counter.

“Fuck, Kitten. Are you dying?”

A desperate gasp was my only reply.

Zee flung his arms around me, and jerked my face against his Charity Begins on Your Knees T-shirt. “I got you! Breathe .”

I tried, but breathing while being crushed by a seven-foot incubus wasn’t easy. I gulped, trying to suck in air. Zee felt me struggling, and spun me in his arms so my ass thumped his crotch. Next, his clenched fists slammed up into my middle—my lungs spasmed, my hot eyes bulged.

Was I dying?

“Zodiac, what are you doing?” Victor’s smooth voice sounded nearby.

I tried to reach for him, but my arms were pinned too.

Help .

“The fucking Himmler maneuver is what I’m doing,” Zee grunted.

“Fucking Himmler?” Victor paused for what felt like forever. “Do you mean Heimlich?”

“Whatever, Adam is dying from air!”

Crush. Spasm . Help !

“I suspect he needs air to breathe, of which you appear to be starving him.”

Yes, that! Like Victor had so calmly pointed out, I did need to breathe and Zee was crushing me. Spasm. Wheeze. Could humans die from breathing backwards? That seemed like a terrible design flaw.

“Stand back, vampire! I’m saving him!”

I loved Zee, I really did, but someone needed to step in.

“Just so everyone knows, for legal reasons, he asked for whiskey,” Tom drawled, back to casually drying a glass. I eyed him through swimming tears. “I advised against it. This is what happens when you don’t listen to the bartender. Terrible shame, he was so young.”

I wasn’t dead! But I would be soon if Zee didn’t let up.

“Looks like you’re pounding his ass,” Sebastien’s drunk drawl joined the chat.

“That’s how—” Zee grunted again, still trying to punch my lungs through my ribs. “I know—” Crush . “I’m doing —” Heave . “It right!” Zee must have only then realized who’d spoken, because he freed an arm and flung a finger at Seb. “Back the fuck off!”

With Zee momentarily distracted, I tore free of his death hug. The counter rushed up, and I clung to it like a life raft, gasping and wheezing, filling my starved lungs with precious air.

“Kitten?” Zee made a move as though to rush in and scoop me up again.

I thrust out a hand, stopping him. “I’m good! You uh... You’re real strong, Zee. I just...” I coughed, and Zee and Victor both flinched. “Just give me a second to catch my breath here.”

Tom slid my barely touched whiskey away from me, down the counter and out of reach. “And the barman was right all along.”

I mourned the loss of my drink, then caught sight of Zee's concerned face and lashing tail. "It's alright, I'm fine."

"What a bunch of fuckin' losers," Seb crooned, slumping against the counter. "How the fuck have you survived this long when your so-called leader—the demon bait—chokes on fuckin' air. I've never seen a more pathetic display in my fucking life and I used to watch desperate fucks pay to fuck more desperate dumb fucks."

What happened next took place so fast I only saw its outcome, but I figured Zee had lunged for Seb and Victor got between them, probably thinking he could prevent Zee getting hurt by the wards. Unfortunately, the wards activated fast enough to stop Zee getting to Seb, but not fast enough to stop him from colliding with Victor. As Zee was still intent on violence, Victor braced, and in that second the wards lashed out at everyone having bad thoughts. Zee was flung, swearing and wings flapping, into Victor's table of paper animals, scattering it and the entire zoo, and Victor clutched the counter next to me, visibly panting from the wards slapping him down.

Untouched, Seb calmly picked up my whiskey and downed it in a single gulp. "Losers."

I straightened and surveyed the chaos. Zee lay on his back on the floor, among the fragments of table and paper zoo animals, clutching his head.

Victor growled through clenched teeth, one wrong word away from lashing out at Sebastien too.

Enough was enough. "Sebastien, you've got two minutes to tell me what you know or we're done here."

Seb snorted. "Stupid human, I just saved your useless life. You owe me."

“Fuck you,” Zee snapped, still staring at the ceiling and massaging around his horns. “I was saving Adam.”

Yeah... No. Zee had almost kinda killed me. With love. But still.

I caught Seb’s eye, and his smirk said he knew I’d been stuck and fading fast. He’d watched it all from a distance, and he was right, his intervention had distracted Zee enough for me to get free.

Seb knew exactly what he was doing.

“Give me something on Gideon,” I said. “Give me a reason to keep you here. Give me something so I know I’m not making a mistake letting you stay.”

Seb slid onto a barstool and took his time looking about the bar, assessing its freshly painted walls, the candy-colored retro jukebox, the shiny dancing pole on the ramshackle stage Zee had built. “This place could be good. You know how much money you make selling sex by the hour? A fuck-ton. More than this dump makes in a week. Put Zodiac to work and all your money worries will be over. Everyone already thinks this is the Sex Hotel.” He grinned. “Lean into Zodiac’s best assets, and you’ll be set for life.”

“Shut him up or I will,” Zee snarled from the floor.

“Oh, you can’t, pet.” Seb pouted. “We just saw what happens when you lash out. You get the hangover without the fun. Now fuck off and let the grown-ups talk.”

“Seb,” I warned. “Give me something I can use.”

The big flashy asshole demon fluttered his painted white lashes. “Gideon Cain just came into enough power to wipe this city off the map. But I’m guessing you know all

about that, since he was celebrating your downfall. Hm?”

It hadn't been so much a downfall as a trap Gideon Cain had lured me into. During the Dine and Fight events, Gideon had been harvesting small amounts of Lost Ones power from the fighters. I'd thought we'd stopped his machine, but I'd been wrong, and he'd taken more than a small amount of me, then concentrated my power in the form of a squishy bead. “So tell me something I don't know.”

“Fine.” Seb tapped the bar, gave his wings a ruffle, and waited for Tom to serve him another shot before saying, “He tried to extract power from it like he's done with other harvested beads before, but he can't—not yet. It's too much, he says, even for him. The fucking trinket almost vaporized him, so he's trying to find a way of harnessing it without it burning him out.”

This was good. This was information we needed. Insider information. “Go on.”

“Gideon Cain keeps that bead on him at all times, on a pendant, on a chain around his neck.”

“Fuck . . .” Zee sighed out.

“Fuck indeed,” Victor eloquently agreed from his spot at the bar behind me. “That will make its retrieval difficult.”

“You've seen it?” I asked Seb.

Seb's mouth twitched into a smile. “I've seen it, I know it, and because of me, now you know it too.”

Alright, this was good information. And Seb probably had more.

Oh dear.

He was going to have to stay, at least until we could squeeze out all the Gideon Cain information he knew.

“Why are you here?” I asked. “Why tell us anything? What do you get out of this?”

“Because I have two beautiful eyes, and with those eyes I can fucking see shit. And I see a mountain of shit heading our way—not just for you, but all of us. I don’t give a fuck about you or this hotel, or about anything but keeping myself alive and the money coming in. Gideon Cain is going to fuck up the good thing we all got going on this side of the veil.”

“He hurt you, didn’t he?” Zee was sitting up now, arms resting over his bent knees. His frazzled hair had flopped around his horns, and his shirt—barely buttoned up to begin with—now gaped open, showing his scrunched abs. “That’s the only reason you’re here. You’re scared and you got nowhere else to go. Nobody will fucking have you.”

Slowly, Seb turned on the stool and leveled Zee under his glare. “Bitch, I made you. You were nothing, and now the masses worship you, feeding you lust every time you check your fuckin’ phone like an addict, making you stronger. That’s on me. You’re mine, even without a fucking contract. Deep inside, you know it. I still fuckin’ own you and I always will?—”

“That’s enough,” I snapped, although my human voice didn’t resonate with threat like it used to.

Zee calmly climbed to his feet, brushed off bits of table and paper animals, then strode over. “In those four years you owned me there wasn’t a single night I didn’t think of all the fucked-up ways I was goin’ to make you suffer. The Razorsedge staff

voted to keep you alive. I'm not them. You think you own me? I own you , Sebastien." Zee thrust a purple-painted fingernail in his face. "Every fucking step you make, every breath you take, it's because I let it happen." Zee stuffed an origami demon into Seb's drink. "The second you leave these wards, imma tear your fucking wings off and give them to Adam to eat." Zee blew Seb a kiss and wagged his fingers. "Sleep well, you unfashionable, unimaginative, limp-dicked loser."

Zee made a swaggering, wing-swaying exit, managing to pull off the attitude even with one braced broken wing, leaving the bar in resounding silence.

The jukebox kicked into life, playing "Every Breath You Take" by The Police, which seemed eerily on point.

Seb's gaze fluttered back mine. "I've missed that sassy mouth sucking my dick."

The wards' spiky touch needled my less-than-friendly thoughts as a warning. Eating Sebastien's wings seemed like a great idea, even if I was human... ish and would have to cook them first to avoid food poisoning. I'd find a way.

"The only way you're surviving Zodiac is if you help us stop Gideon Cain," I told him.

Seb grinned into his drink, but there was a tiny little crack in that smile—a fracture of fear.

After lowering his drink, he offered his hand, black and white nails shining. "We have a deal, Adam Vex."

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:15 am

CHAPTER 2

“Management meeting. Conference room. Right now.”

Zee had found Victor and me chatting with Madame Matase at reception less than half an hour after our breakthrough with Seb.

He headed on over, making the universal T sign for timeout, then dove straight into the musty, unused conference-slash-storage room. With his wings out, his presence took up most of the room that wasn't occupied by stacks of old mismatched chairs and dusty tables.

Victor and I squeezed into the cramped space and closed the door.

“Zee, can you maybe hide the wings?”

“No, I fucking cannot. I'm outta fucks.” He knotted his arms crossed. “Except for one fuck, and that fuck needs to get the fuck out of our fucking hotel.”

It took a while to decipher exactly, but Victor got there first. “Sebastien needs to go.”

“I know,” I sighed. “And he will. But as much as I hate to say it, we need him. He's the only one who can tell us about Cain.”

Zee rolled his eyes and lolled his head. “And for all we know, it's all fucking lies, Kitten.” He flung his arms wide, gesturing wildly, while his tail knotted like a headless snake beside him. “Cain kicked him out of Evil Club because Seb's a self-

centred, epic dick, so now he's yanking our chains."

That was likely true. "It's a risk for him to come here, though. He knows we hate him. Tom could poison him, we could have the gremlins attack him in his sleep, I've got an anti-ward ring and a shotgun behind the bar. He's not exactly safe with us."

"The other aspect I do not believe you have considered, Adam," Victor began in his we're - all - doomed voice. "Is that Gideon could have sent him here, like he has other spies in the past. Tom Collins, for example, and the guests we overheard while hiding in the closet."

Zee's face scrunched up. "You guys hide in closets too?" I was about to explain how it had only been once, when he added, "I thought I was the only one who did that. Frank, the new arrival in room three, has a weird thing for playing naked chess with himself... while playing with himself."

Victor blinked.

Okay. "Uhm... so, maybe don't spy on the guests, Zee?"

"It's not spying . I'm checking for gremlins. I'm not interested in what Frank does with his little pawn. Obviously."

"Shall we focus on Sebastien?" Victor steered us back on topic. "We need confirmation as to whether his information is true. Until we have that, we should treat everything he says as highly unreliable."

"Agreed. Trusting that asshole is like trusting a frog not to eat your face."

Frogs definitely did that. "Zee." I scooped up his hand and held it against my chest. His fingers spread wide, absorbing my heart's beat. "I hate to admit it, but earlier

tonight I nearly died from breathing. I kinda need to get my bead back—not just to stop him, but to be me again. Being human isn't all that great, yah know? I stubbed my toe and it hurt—a lot. An insane amount, considering it's just one toe that doesn't do anything, as far as I can tell. I have four others, and they seem real vulnerable to bed posts too." I shrugged. "What is the point of toes anyway?"

"They aid balance."

"That's your opinion, Doctor Vampire," Zee drawled. "But that's not what toes are for."

"Then what are they for, demon?"

"Sucking."

As was often the case when speaking with Zee, Victor hesitated, briefly confused. "I admit to being slightly intrigued, and somewhat envious of the interminably wondrous world you inhabit, Zodiac."

"I've no idea what you just said, but toes—and feet—are one of several erotic zones. Adam knows, he asks me to lick his feet all the time."

"Uh, no I don't, Zee."

"You haven't?" He shifted closer, filling the tiny room and looming over me, but his smile was soft and his big eyes brimmed with understanding. He scooped my hands up in his. "I know you need this, and I know I'm being an asshole. Having Seb under this roof is one fuck-off enormous trigger, and triggers are usually my to-do list, but not with him. I have a low-grade fucking ward headache trying to punch out my eyeballs thanks to the endless wards around this hotel. I'm hungry, grouchy, afraid imma hurt you, and not in a good headspace right now, so yeah... Imma be an

asshole.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to hurt you. None of us want him here. But can you tolerate him, just for a few days, while I work on getting the information we need to stop Cain? After I get my power back, assuming my glamor is in tatters now, I’ll murder Seb for you.”

“I’d like that. A lot.” Zee scooped me against his side, where I fit so perfectly. “But if you eat him, you should know he’s probably poisonous.”

“Dragons have great metabolism.”

“I bet they do.” He ruffled my hair, then beckoned for Victor. “Bring it in, Daddy Spice. Group hug.”

“I don’t believe that’s necess?—”

Zee grabbed Victor by the sleeve and hauled him into the hug. “There it is. We got this. Just the three of us. Best hotel management this side of the fucking bay. Living the fuckin’ dream.”

I caught a glimmer of Victor’s almost-hidden smile and sent him a small smile back. We were a little bit broken, a little bit lost, but we’d made it this far together. We’d see it to the end, whatever that end looked like.

The door flung open and a glitzy Sebastien loomed, pierced and jeweled wings sparkling. “Is this a fucking private orgy or can anyone join?”

Just like before, Zee lunged, only this time Victor wasn’t foolish enough to get in the way. The wards smacked Zee back. He reeled, and stumbled into the stacks of chairs, almost toppling them. “Fuckin’-piece-of-numb-nuts-ball-aching-rabid-gods-be-

damned-motherfucking-butt-plugging-fuckface-ragged-sack-of-frogs!”

The outburst left Zee panting and draped over the chairs, clinging to them so he didn't fling himself at Sebastien all over again.

Seb smirked and dug into his pants pocket. “I couldn't help but listen through the keyhole. You tiny-dicked losers want proof? I got all the proof right here.” He dug out a fake-gem-encrusted phone, flicked it open, and showed us a full-screen photograph of Gideon Cain standing at a podium, shaking hands with someone who clearly had no idea of the monster he was, and accepting a hideous gold award for something.

“All I see are two dicks stroking each other's dicks on a stage,” Zee grunted.

Seb took the phone back, pinched the screen, then showed it to us again, but this time he'd zoomed in on a grainy blue gem poking out from under Gideon's open collar. “The pendant?”

A jolt of recognition lit me up, and a more typical growl rumbled up my throat. “That's mine.”

“Boom. What did I say? There it is, around his neck. That's your magic bean, right?”

“Bead,” I corrected. Bean just . . . sounded wrong.

“We have to get it back,” I told Victor, drawing his gaze to me.

“Indeed. But how?”

“Cut off his head?” Zee suggested. “I haven't whipped out Shareen in a while and it worked for Queen Vampire.”

Seb laughed. “That was you?! Fuck... Daisy kept that quiet. Cain’ll see you coming, pet. His mansion is warded to the balls, his bodyguards are heavily into BDSM, and he has a pocket full of spells. There ain’t no way you’re getting that bean from around his neck unless he takes it off.”

“Then you’re fucking useless to us. So why are we keeping you around again if you don’t know how to get Adam’s bean back?”

“Bead,” I corrected—again.

Seb dropped his phone back into his pocket and leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. “Because, Cain trusts me, and I know how you can get to it.”

“Right, like he trusts you with his evil plan?” Zee had straightened now, and even with a wing clamped, he stood tall. “You... a pimp... and a real shitty one. Nah, dawg. You are full of bullshit.”

Seb’s smile twitched, and seeing Zee stalking forward, he backed up into the foyer. Zee ducked through the doorway and circled around Seb. He didn’t mean him harm, or the wards would stop him, but he was putting on a damn good show of puffing himself up and making it seem as though he could snap at any second.

“Agatha de La Cour. You heard of her?” Seb asked, side-eyeing Zee stalking him.

“Yeah, we know Agatha,” I said, glancing at Victor, since Agatha had been his bestie from long ago. Agatha was the fae Zee had nicknamed Tinkerbelle. She’d tried to kill us in a giant fishtank, then bargained for bits of Zee to grind up and be used in her FaeMade ? face creams. “Wasn’t she arrested?”

“Arrested and released under commissioner Musashi. Nothing sticks to her. She’s a jeweler, makes all kinds of gems—lots of ’em warded.” Seb parted his wings,

showing off their smattering of gawdy bling. Most of it looked fake, but a few could have been real. “She met with Gideon yesterday. My guess, she’s going to make him some kind of ward-infused setting for the bean, so he can tap into its power without it taking his head off. Right? She made that pendant round his neck. Makes a lot of shiny shit for him. They’re tight. Get to her, and you’ll get to the magic bean—probably.”

Zee snorted a disbelieving laugh. “Or they’re fuck buddies, and she’s just a crazy fae bitch who grinds up demon dick to rub on her face.”

“Agatha does have a chain of jewelry stores,” Victor said. “One near Union Square, in fact.”

Zee made a show of slowly turning toward Victor. “And you’re just fucking mentioning this now?”

“Her penchant for making and selling jewelry has not been relevant until this moment.”

“Okay.” I stepped in before this escalated, like it always did. “Victor, restrain Seb for his own safety.”

Victor’s dark eyes widened, and the voice that crawled out of him was a long way from his polite, haughty tone, and more like the ruthless killer I rarely heard. “My pleasure.”

“Wh—” Seb barely got a word out before Victor had collected a length of rope used to secure the stacks of chairs in the conference room, grabbed Seb’s wings, clamped them together, and looped the rope around him like a fly caught in a web. “The fuck!?” Seb dropped to his knees. “You can’t fucking do this. The wards! Your wards. I’m a fuckin’ guest!”

“Oh, we’re not hurting you. We wouldn’t want you stumbling about the hotel and getting hurt by gremlins, would we?”

Luckily there wasn’t anyone else in the foyer to witness this treatment of our latest guest. Just Madame Matase, who carried on knitting as though nothing out of the ordinary was taking place.

Seb’s shocked gaze settled on me. Was he just now figuring out how we did things at the SOS Hotel? “I’m helping you!”

“Gag him.”

Victor tore the tie from around his neck, snapped its length in his hands and did the necessary, leaving Seb mumbling on his knees, giftwrapped like Psycho Santa Claus’s next delivery.

“Fucking hallelujah!” Zee clapped his hands. “This is what I’m talkin’ about. Oh, Seb baby, did you bite off more than you can chew coming here?” He strutted over to the kneeling Seb and stopped only to tower over him. Then, absorbing every delicious moment, he used a finger to tip Seb’s chin up. The wards fizzled, tightening the air, but didn’t lash out. “How the snake has turned.”

“Do you mean how the worm has turned?” Victor provided.

“This worm is on his fuckin’ knees, where he belongs.” Zee bent double and braced his hands on his thighs, putting his face inches from Seb’s. “You had better hope your so-called lead pans out, because people who fuck with us disappear. You feel me?” Zee patted Seb’s head and straightened with a broad grin on his face.

“Put him in the conference room,” I told Victor, not even needing to look over to know it would be done.

In a blur, Seb was gone, the conference-room door slammed, and Victor strode back toward us, brushing dust from his hands. He had the look of a man on a mission, a man who'd let nothing stand in his way. A man who would kill for what he believed in. Mercy, he was hot .

He dropped the conference-room door key into my hand. Seb would not be getting any visitors.

Zee's hungry eyes blazed, and even my human body was buzzing with all kinds of excitement.

For the first time since I'd lost my powers, we had a plan! "Let's go take a quick look at Agatha's store," I told them. "Maybe there's something Gideon related there?"

"She's unlikely to be at the store at this time of night."

"Even better." I smiled. "What's the harm in us walking by? Maybe looking in? Maybe... more?"

"Wait, what?" Zee's wings fell. "No, no, no, Kitten. You're staying here."

"Not goin' to happen."

Victor grumbled a disapproving sound. "Zodiac is right. Your current situation leaves you vulnerable."

"Nope." I grabbed my coat off the hook by the desk and handed Madame Matase the conference-room key with a smile. She nodded, and dropped it into her top drawer.

"If I have to drink one more of Tom's cold decaffeinated teas I'm going to lose my mind," I told them. "I have the two most capable, badass bodyguards in all San

Francisco on either arm to keep me safe. It's just a little trip across town to check out a fae jewelry store. What can go wrong?"

"A store belonging to a fae who recently attempted to kill us," Victor reminded me.

I gave Victor a broad grin. "Who is also an old friend of yours. It's fine. We've got this."

"Adam, you are no longer a dragon," he reminded—again.

"I will be again the sooner we get this done." I headed for the door, but they weren't following. That was fine. I knew exactly how to get them moving "Better hurry along or I might trip and fall off the sidewalk into the path of an oncoming bus."

"Fuck," Zee snapped, then poofed outside, striding in front of me. "Stay behind me and in front of Fancy Fangs. You're the squishy filling in our badass sandwich, alright?"

I shrugged. That worked for me.

Victor followed. "This is not advisable."

"Objection noted." I thrust my hands into my pockets and breathed in the smell of the city at night. There was one good thing about being human. How all the little things were suddenly bigger, like the smell of the sea, the sound of the breeze in the long grasses out front, and the feeling that I had a purpose. No evil sorcerer was going to stop me from getting my power back. And when I did, everyone on my Bad People list was getting a taste of exactly what it meant to piss off a dragon.

Or more accurately... I would be tasting them.

CHAPTER 3

We hopped off a tram a few minutes' walk from the popular Union Square and its nearby big-brand stores. Victor led the way, even though he'd rarely walked the street and much preferred to be chauffeured around, he'd explained, earning Zee's exaggerated eyeroll.

"Do you know every evil villain in this city?" Zee asked, striding along the sidewalk behind us. He'd hidden his wings, but not his horns. A handful of people ambled down the street, heading home from late-night bars.

"Agatha is neither evil nor a villain. She is a shrewd businesswoman."

"That's what a villain would say. Are you defending Tinkerbell after she tried to drown you and threatened to cut off my dick?"

"Not at all. While I do not agree with her business practices, I cannot judge her as a villain when I have done worse in the past."

"Hold up." Zee scooted closer, wedging himself between us and almost knocking Victor off the curb. "Have you cut off dicks?"

"My forte was always torture." He let the unsaid answer for him.

Zee breathed in through his nose, his nostrils flaring. "Fuck." He held his breath, then after a few strides, puffed out, "Why is that so hot? That should be the fucking opposite of hot. But when you do it, it's fuckin' lust on steroids. I am broken. You

have broken me.”

With Zee discussing all the ways Victor’s old profession was hot, we rounded the end of the block and entered a street aglow with designer brands. Several jewelry stores glittered behind window barriers. One of them being Silverleaf Goldsmiths by FaeMade ? . Exactly the kind of name you’d expect a chain of fae-owned jewelry stores to trade under.

The late hour meant nobody was around.

“There’s a camera to our right. Keep walking. Keep your heads down. Don’t look up,” Victor reeled off. “It’s too high up to tamper with, but it’s also pointed farther down the street, so we should be safe from detection.”

A rush of adrenaline had my heart pounding. For the first time since learning I’d lost my power to Cain, it felt as though we were making progress. If we found something in this store that tied Agatha to Cain, then it would be a lead. And if we could get the bead from Agatha, we wouldn’t even need to go up against Cain. But I was getting ahead of myself. First, we needed to know if Sebastien’s educated guess about Agatha’s work to set the bead into ward-infused jewelry was correct.

The Silverleaf store had two large windows, and an alcove front porch tucked out of the camera’s view. Victor and I stopped to pretend to admire the cushions of earrings, watches, and necklaces, while Zee hopped into the recessed doorway.

“I’m not sensing wards,” Zee whispered.

“If she’s selling ward-infused jewelry, she won’t have wards protecting the building,” Victor explained. “Too many wards in one small space will create a feedback loop, rendering all of them useless.”

“Anyone about?” Zee asked.

I discreetly took a look up and down the street. The streetlights were spaced far apart, and most of the ambient light came from the storefronts. But no people. “Nope. You’re good.”

After tugging on the black mask he’d used when saving pets from pies—the mask with sock-like sleeves attached to cover his horns—he poofed inside, appearing behind the cashier’s counter. Despite the mask hiding his face, his tail and general Zeeness made him pretty distinctive, at least to me, but as long as he didn’t disturb too much, nobody would ever need to know we’d been here.

Zee took a second to get his bearings, then began rummaging through drawers in the fitted storage units making up the rear wall. Mirrors and lights spotlighted his scurrying.

I touched the glass and whispered, “Found anything yet?”

“Oh yeah, sure. I’ve got everything I need,” he stage-whispered back, not really whispering at all. “I’m just hanging out, soaking up the vibe of the place. No, babycakes. I’ve been here three seconds. I have not found anything yet.”

Yeah, okay, a stupid question. Victor plucked my hand off the window, and wiped the glass with his sleeve. “Forensic evidence.”

Right. Don’t touch anything. Zee had gloves on too. They were good at this. “You know... we could raid the place, steal all the jewelry, and head south? Cross the border... live happily ever after in Mexico?”

Victor’s lips twitched into a smile. “If I believed you were serious I might take you up on that offer.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Tom would get real mad at being left behind, and I don’t wanna get on the wrong side of an angry djinn who can whip up noxious poisons in his sleep.”

“I’m not finding anything!” Zee spun, but forgot his tail was loose. The swish smacked a little display of rings off the counter, sending them flying. Zee jumped at the sound, and spun again, whipping his tail around, clearing the contents of a second display shelf in the process. The whole lot crashed to the floor with a startling cacophony.

“Oh dear,” Victor said, beating me to it. “He really does not do subtle.”

“I know, but he tries.”

“Fuck!” He grabbed his tail, stopping its assault on anything shiny, then spotted something on the floor. “Ooh baby, look at you.”

“Zodiac, we’re here for a reason,” Victor warned. “Focus on the task at hand.”

He was focused—on something shiny. “Come to Uncle Zee,” he sang, then ducked behind the counter. When he reappeared, he had a signet ring pinched between his fingers. A ring that looked a whole lot like the anti-ward ring I had. Gideon’s ring. He slid it onto his gloved finger and vanished—not like when he translocated vanished, which always left a splash of sparks behind—I’d blinked and he was just gone.

Pressing both hands against the window, I smooshed my face closer. “Where’d he go?”

Victor’s eyes narrowed. He scanned the store interior. “I do not know.”

A tray of earrings took a dive off a shelf. A drawer opened, then slammed shut, all by

itself.

“Oh, hello locked drawer,” Zee’s disembodied voice said. “Abraca-fuck-yah.” A cupboard in the back wall buckled and jerked open. Rolls of paper spilled out, apparently all by themselves. One of those rolls hung in the air and unrolled itself.

“He doesn’t know he’s invisible,” Victor said, eyes widening.

A blast of blue ink exploded out of the cupboard, painting the outline of a Zee ghost, highlighting his silhouette like a stencil a kid draws around to sketch a basic demon shape. Zee’s transparent smudge floated over to the window and slammed the document against the glass. “Get a good look, Daddy. Use that photographic memory of yours ’cause I’m compromised, covered in ink, and we’re fuckin’ done.”

Victor blinked, scanned the document, and nodded. “Good, now let’s go.”

“Al-fuckin’-right.”

Sirens sounded somewhere far off—probably not for us, but if the safe had been booby-trapped with ink, then it could also have a silent alarm. “Guys, we really need to go, now .”

The Zee ghost poofed onto the front step and—I assume—gave himself a shake, as blue ink rained in all directions. A few splatters dashed my shirt. At least it wasn’t blood, or squashed demon-general guts, or portal goo. As misadventures went, my shirt might survive this one.

“Ugh, not a fan of blue.” Zee’s voice floated . “Why are you looking at me like I’ve got three horns?”

“You’re invisible,” I said. “Kind of.”

“I’m in-what-now?”

The sirens grew louder, either carried on the breeze or getting real close.

“Never mind,” Victor grabbed Zee’s weirdly semi-transparent, ink-splattered arm and hurried us along. “We’ll discuss it later.”

Inky bootprints glowed on the sidewalk. “He’s leaving a trail of ink behind.”

Victor’s sigh was heavy with reluctance. “Give me your mask.”

“Huh?”

“I assume you’re still wearing the gimp mask, Zodiac? Please, hand it over.”

“Oh, right, yeah.” Zee tore off the mask—at least, I think he did, as the ink splatters on his face vanished. “Hello? Take it then?”

“I cannot see it,” Victor grumbled through gritted teeth.

“What the fuck? It’s right front of your face ? —”

Victor took a swipe at the air, and snatched the mask from Zee’s grip, which made it appear in his hand, covered in blue ink.

“What are you—” I began, then stopped when Victor pulled the mask over his head. He didn’t have horns, so the elongated horn-socks flopped down either side of his head like two sad dreadlocks. “Go. Get Adam to safety. I’ll delay and distract the authorities.”

“Distracting is my thing,” Zee whined.

“Except you’re somehow both invisible and highly visible right now, and unable to fly. You’re at a disadvantage.” Victor glanced toward the sounds of incoming cops, making the floppy socks swing. “Just go. I’ll meet you back at the hotel in a few hours.”

I made a grab for where I suspected Zee’s arm might be and caught his sleeve. “Let’s go, Zee.”

“Lovin’ the gimp look, Vampire Daddy. Definitely keep that on for later ? —”

“I prefer dominance to submission,” Victor said, voice muffled by the mask, then blurred out of sight, probably setting himself up somewhere high to ambush the unsuspecting police.

We hurried off, taking a few random turns, then out of sight from cameras and any prying eyes, I pulled Zee to a stop. “Hold up, Zee. Maybe take off the ring for a second?”

“What ring?”

“The ring you picked up in the store?”

“Oh, that ring.” He must have pulled the ring off, because Zee’s solid, ink-covered glory shimmered back into sight. “This one?”

I took it from him and squinted at it under the pale streetlight. It was definitely a Gideon Cain ring. Agatha was his personal jeweler then, just as Seb had said. She probably designed and made all his rings, and those he handed out to his subordinates like candy. “Here. Put it back on.”

“Sure.” He took the ring back and slid it back on, and this time even the ink splatters

disappeared. He'd gone.

"Wow."

"What?"

"You're invisible."

"No, I'm not."

"Yeah, you are."

"I see me." I imagined him looking at his own hands. So the ring only masked him from others—not himself. It also seemed to mask anything he was wearing or holding at the time he put the ring on, which was why the ink had vanished this time, but not before.

I slowly extended a finger and jabbed. My finger buckled against something warm and hard.

"Watch what you're poking, Kitten," Zee purred. "Should we take the bling back?"

"No... We'll borrow it. It might be useful. Keep it on until we get home. If the cops see us, they'll be looking for a human with a tall demon coated in ink. I'm just a boring human walking all by myself."

"Good plan."

"Let's grab a tram." I led the way out of the alley, toward the tramstop.

"Are you sure I'm invisible?" Zee asked after a while, his voice floating.

“Yup. Watch.” We caught a tram, and hopped on. I paid for a ticket, but Zee passed by without the driver or any of the other late-night passengers noticing him. Nobody ignored Zee—ever.

I sat, and the seat dipped next to me. “I don’t like it,” his small grumbly voice said beside me. “You live like this? Trying to be invisible?”

“I guess. I mean, I tried to.”

“It’s horrible.”

“It’s not so bad... when you’re trying to hide.”

“Ugh. I can feel myself being forgotten. It’s like being in the shadow realm all over again.”

“You can take it off when we get home, or we’ll have to pay for a ticket and answer a lot of questions about why you’re covered in ink.”

“At least we found Gideon’s plans.”

“What did you find?”

A fellow passenger glanced over, prompting my innocent smile. They probably thought I was a crazy person, riding trams at night alone, muttering to myself.

“Sketches of a locket on a chain,” Zee said. “Looked like a tiny cage. It had Gideon Cain’s name stamped on it.”

Then Seb’s guess was a good one. “Agatha is our route to getting my power back.”

But our run-in with her hadn't been friendly before, and she was unlikely to help us out of the goodness of her heart. We'd have to make it so she had no choice. But how? She'd told us Gideon was powerful. It was going to take a lot for her to switch sides. "Do you think Victor knows how to get to her?"

"Probably. You think him and Tinkerbell fucked?"

"I don't know. She doesn't seem his type."

"But a twinkly human and his worst enemy are?"

I snorted. It did seem crazy, but it worked. "Yeah, we are."

The weight of Zee's head settled on my shoulder. "I miss sleeping with you. Not just the fucking. I miss the sleeping part, and the waking up with you tucked against me part... yah know? I've never had that before."

I reached out and guesstimated where his leg might be. Whatever part of him I'd found seemed pretty firm so I gave it a comforting squeeze. "I miss it too."

"That's my cock, Kitten. But don't stop. Fuck, we could get up to all sorts of sexy shenanigans if you had a ring too. Like two horny ghosts."

I laughed and removed my hand, earning another sideways glance from the concerned passenger.

Zee promptly plonked my hand back, this time on his thigh—at least, it felt firm and thick, like a thigh. "You know what else I've never had?" he asked, sounding wistful. "Dreams of a future, where it's just me and you and Daddy Spice, living our lives, being who we want to be... Is it crazy to want that?"

“No, I want that too,” I reassured him. And we’d have it. Maybe.

But only if we stopped Gideon Cain.

CHAPTER 4

Madame Matase spent the next morning fielding complaints about ghostly goings-on throughout the hotel, which prompted me to suggest Zee hand over the ring to Tom for safekeeping.

Victor had returned just before dawn, in time to see Zee surrendering the ring. He'd looked a little ragged, but he'd achieved his goal of making sure the cops were in disarray, giving Zee and me chance to escape. After ordering a Bloody Bitch, he'd sat at the counter where Zee proceeded to tell him all about the hotel's new "ghost"—who definitely was not Zee.

While Victor listened, he sketched the locket's cage he'd seen on Agatha's blueprints so Tom and I could see its design.

We were studying that sketch, going over the details, throwing out theories for how it might work, when the world's deepest grumbling voice said, "Hello." We all turned to see a vast, hulking shadow fill the bar doorway.

"Claymore!" Zee sprang from the stool and poofed across the bar. He flung an arm around the gargoyle's broad shoulders, and dragged him toward the counter. "Fuck. Welcome home, buddy! Look at you! You get any prison ink? Give me all the prison drama. Did you form a gang? Dig tunnels?" He sat Claymore on a tiny barstool, making it creak. "Wait, wait, don't tell me... While plotting your escape you created a multi-point trading system, smuggling in and selling contraband, which put you on a collision course with a rival gang and started a troll war?"

“I mostly stared out a window,” Claymore grumbled.

Zee blinked. “Get this larger-than-life, handsome bastard a drink!”

“One Drain Unblocker, coming right up,” Tom announced with celebratory flare.

I assumed that was the name of the drink and not actual drain unblocker, although from the thick, gloopy green liquid Tom poured into a highball glass, maybe Claymore preferred Dr. Drain.

A polite throat-clearing cough announced Agent Elion Leomaris’s presence. My gaze met the ex-bounty hunter’s as they strode toward us, and that old spike of fear sharpened my senses. Then Elion smiled, and stopped in front of me. As a fae, they always looked so well put together—their green hair shone, their long coat emphasized long legs, and even the way they spoke suggested civilized authority. As a bounty hunter they’d have been relentless. As an SSD agent, I suspected they were the same. “I heard Claymore was being released so I hope you do not mind, I collected him myself.”

“Thank you.” That had been a nice thing to do. Suspiciously nice. Elion had proven to be useful and even helpful, but as an SSD agent—and with my secrets—I’d probably always be wary around them.

Victor discreetly folded his sketch of Gideon’s locket and tucked it inside his jacket. “Good morning, Agent Leomaris.”

Zee hadn’t noticed Elion’s arrival, more focused on Claymore and trying to pry every tiny bit of prison gossip out of him.

“Adam Vex... Victor Reynard.” Elion acknowledged us with a nod.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Ah, no. I am here in an official capacity.” That didn’t sound good. “Tell me, either of you, would you have any information regarding an attempted jewelry heist near Union Square last night?”

I blinked innocent human eyes. “Wow, I mean... we’re tight for money but not that tight, right Victor?” A laugh squeaked out of me.

Victor’s lips pulled into a tight, fang-revealing smile. “Indeed.”

Elion nodded along, agreeing, or so I thought, until they looked up again. “We have some footage from the scene. I downloaded it before entering your vastly overextended wards. I hope you do not mind humoring me by taking a look?”

“The wards are uhm . . . That’s not . . . We’re going to fix that . . . A total accident. And we were here all night, so I don’t . . . think . . . we . . . I mean, I don’t really do jewelry. Victor, do you wear jewelry?”

“No.”

“So we’re not really likely to have been uhm... in or near a jewelry?—”

Elion held up their phone, showing footage clearly taken from a camera inside Agatha’s store. It showed a demon with a broken wing, wearing a leather mask and rummaging through every cupboard in chaotic-raccoon fashion.

“Oh.” I pinched my lips together. “I mean, that could be any demon.”

“That is what I told my superiors,” Elion said. “You see, they didn’t receive the accompanying evidence, such as this sound file.” Elion tapped the screen and audio

sounded.

“Oh, hello locked drawer,” Zee’s disembodied voice said again. “Abraca-fuck-yah.”

“Nope. Doesn’t sound like him.” It sounded exactly like Zee. The audio was really good. Agatha had some top-shelf recording equipment in that store, which Victor would have seen had he been the one carrying out the heist. Unfortunately, Zee was the only one of us who could translocate inside, though. “I’m not hearing the resemblance,” I added.

“How about this snippet?” Elion suggested, tapping the screen again.

“Fuck—ooh baby, look at you. Come to Uncle Zee.”

Oh dear. My smile froze. “Zee is a really common demon name. It’s short for... uhm... Zebedee?”

“Also possible. However.” They reached inside their long coat. I tensed, expecting to see cuffs, but instead they brought out a rectangular poleting about the size of a phone. “The store was equipped with various security measures.”

Elion strode toward the end of the bar where Zee was simultaneously trying to welcome Claymore while also pretending he wasn’t listening in. At Elion’s approach, Zee casually leaned against the bar as though he didn’t have a care in the world. Unfortunately, his innocent expression also resembled his guilty face.

“One of those measures is a particular ink that shows up under black light even after it’s been washed off.” Elion raised the stick and flicked a switch, bathing Zee in a strange blue light. A light that made every single speckle and spot of ink glow on his exposed skin—around his tiny vest, his neck, and his wrists where the gloves hadn’t reached.

Zee looked down at himself, hesitated a beat, then said, “Betrayed by my washboard abs.”

Elion switched off the black-light stick and eased their tall frame onto a barstool between Zee and Victor, clearly getting comfortable. “Before you claim it was only Zodiac, your handprints are all over the window, Adam, and it really doesn’t take a detective to assume the third member wearing an interesting mask was Victor Reynard.”

Victor continued to sip his Bloody Bitch, thinking. All the joy of Claymore’s return had deflated out of Zee, leaving him slumped at the bar. Our future prospects were not looking good.

Zee suggested Claymore should make himself at home, probably fearing we were all about to be arrested again.

As Claymore left, Tom eyed Elion, probably wondering whether to grab the shotgun.

What if we killed Elion and stuffed his remains up a chimney? Hm, his assassin partner, Delores, would come hunting. The SSD may notice his absence too...

I scratched the back of my neck. “Look, it’s . . . There’s . . . this thing . . . Uhm . . . So . . .”

“Adam,” Elion sighed. “I have been doing my own investigation of late, collecting what I can at various chaotic crime scenes—such as a home invasion at Princess Daisy’s estate during which several vampires were maimed.”

Victor cleared his throat and turned toward the agent. “What Adam is trying to say is that while your assistance has been useful in the past, it’s time you left. And should you continue your investigation we will find you, your immediate and extended

family, and torture them over many days, weeks, and months, until you cease your investigations into us and this hotel.”

Elion went very still.

The jukebox cut to silence.

“Wait! No! Victor didn’t mean that!” I chortled. “He’s hilarious! Aren’t you, Victor?” A quick slap on his back arched one of his eyebrows. “So funny.” I gripped his shoulder and gave it a jovial shake. “I mean, he has us in fits all the time. He says these crazy things?—”

“Dementia,” Zee said, then rolled his eyes. “Fancy Fangs is really old.”

Victor, ignoring us all, picked up his drink and added, “I meant every word.”

Tom dropped a glass. “Shit.”

“Oh, my stars.” I lolled my head back and blinked at the ceiling. What was it Victor had said previously during one of his mentoring talks? The truth was always best? Elion had had plenty of chances to arrest us so far, and hadn’t. Well, apart from that one time when we’d been found surrounded by several massacred fae... although he hadn’t done the arresting part. He didn’t appear to have backup with him today—or cuffs—so maybe he’d listen?

“So, here it is.” I puffed out my cheeks, thrust my hands into my pockets and took a deep breath. “I’m a dragon. Gideon Cain is a dark sorcerer who stole my power and is going to use it to make all of us his slaves, so we broke into Silverleaf Goldsmiths to see if Agatha de La Cour might be making some jewelry for Cain to harness my stolen power—which she is—and we’re trying to stop her, so I can stop Cain, save the world, and fulfill a prophecy that’s been hanging over me my whole life.”

Cue awkward silence.

There was a whole lot more to it than that, but saving the world seemed to be something Elion might get behind. Or they might arrest me now, throw me in jail, and collect on the many Chosen One or Last Dragon bounties that would make them and their partner millionaires, setting them up for the rest of their lives.

I sighed, and peeked through my lashes at Elion's unreadable face.

They raised a finger, summoning Tom. "That's what I thought."

"It is?" I asked.

"You clearly think very little of my observational skills."

"Uhm..." Then Elion had known about me all along? I buried my face in my hands. "Just arrest me. Victor and Zee are innocent."

"Zodiac has never been innocent," Victor said.

Zee talked over him. "Fancy Fangs knew it all and should go to jail first."

Elion waited for our reactions to settle, and calmly replied, "I'm not going to arrest anyone. Adam, how do you think you've been getting away with your multitude of very obvious infractions so far?"

Victor sipped his Bloody Bitch. "Luck?"

Elion broke out into ripples of smooth laughter. "Fido's Pies? You think it was luck that investigation was dropped?"

“We don’t know anything about pets in pies,” I squeaked.

“The explosion at Cain Technologies you just happened to walk away from?” Elion said.

“It’s not a crime to go for a walk.”

“A corporate hunt gone wrong in the vampire woods?”

“That wasn’t anything to do with us. We were just driving by and those people came running out... We did the neighborly thing by taking them home.”

Elion smiled in a wolfish bounty-hunter way. They were clearly not buying our explanations. “Wherever there is trouble, you three are in the middle of it. A vampire, a demon, and a not-so-innocent human.”

I wiped my sweaty palms on my thighs. “Like Victor said. Just lucky, I guess?”

“You are lucky, yes. Lucky that I’ve been onto Cain’s exploits for many years. But with his influence having spread deep into various authorities, he had been untouchable... until you and your hotel emerged as bait delicious enough to lure Gideon Cain from his comfort zone.”

“Hold up.” Zee frowned. “You knew about Cain?”

“All this time, you’ve been helping us to rattle him?” I asked.

“Behind the scenes, yes. Our interests are aligned, but more than that... If the last dragon were to perish on my watch, well... that would be a sad day for Lost Ones.”

Elion had been onto us from opening day. They could have arrested us at any time,

but instead, they'd been helping us. "You uh... you don't mind dragons?"

"I don't mind most people, just so long as they're reasonable."

Wow, and now I felt bad. I'd assumed they were a morally vacant, money-grabbing bounty hunter this whole time. "So uhm... I'm not really a hero, though, before you start thinking I'm some kind of savior. And dragons aren't very nice. We're pretty bitey, honestly. And a bit mean."

"Who is good, Adam? Are any of us good? A baron vampire who spent centuries torturing for his queen? Is he good?"

Victor tipped his drink in acknowledgement. "Not in the least."

"A demon warrior with blood on his hands, who took money for sex and fed from his victims?"

"Excuse moi." Zee scooped up a fancy, decorative cocktail Tom had placed for him, and flicked his hair around his horns. "What I do is fucking art."

"And you, Mr. Vex. An incredibly rare, bloodthirsty, extremely powerful Lost One, on the run and apparently trapped in human skin."

"Well, I was powerful, but I'm not anymore." The rest of it was accurate though.

"The sooner you three accept I'm here to help, the more we shall get done."

"Right. I'm uh... I'm sorry I got you all wrong."

"You were not entirely wrong. I was a money-hungry bounty hunter, and I would have hunted you to the ends of the earth, but my time here has changed me, as it has

most of us. I'm sure you all understand that?"

"I hear that," Zee agreed, swallowing the cocktail in one gulp.

"Indeed," Victor conceded.

Surviving in the human world had changed all of us—changed every single Lost One. We'd learned how to get along because we'd had to. We were all in this together. And now Cain was about to upset all that. He had to be stopped.

I cleared my throat. "Just so we're clear? If I managed to get my power back and happened to accidentally eat a few bad people, how would you feel about that? Hypothetically?"

Elion smiled into his drink. "Some people require eating."

CHAPTER 5

According to Elion, Agatha wasn't pressing charges and she hadn't mentioned the missing invisible ring, probably because she didn't want the SSD looking closer at her business. After accepting a drink off Tom, Elion also explained how Agatha had been distracted by preparing for a charity gala taking place tonight, raising funds for all the Lost Ones living in shanty towns. There was probably no way any money was going to reach the likes of Junk Jim living out of his van in the shadow of an underpass, it was all just marketing spin to line her silk pockets with cash.

"Agatha's presence at the gala leaves her jewelry workshop on the East Side relatively unguarded," Elion explained. "Should anyone want to visit it out of hours." They sipped their bright blue cocktail. "Hm, this has quite the kick. What's in it?"

I caught Tom's eye and quickly shook my head. Do not mention cocaine!

"Vodka, a spritz of lemon, and my own secret ingredient that never fails to bring happy customers back for more." He said it with such harmless glee that it couldn't possibly be illegal.

"Hold up. Agatha has a workshop where she makes all the trinkets?" Zee leaned closer. "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

"So you do think?" Victor drawled.

"And not just with my dick, Fancy Fangs. If we take a little visit to Tinkerbell's lair, we might find the pendant... make it disappear." He swept a hand through the air. "

Poof . Buy ourselves more time to get Adam's bead from Mr. Evil Sorcerer... said sorcerer doesn't get to power-up. Bonus, I get to wear a hat. Win-win."

"Why is the hat necessary?" Elion asked.

"When isn't a hat necessary?"

"I see." Elion glanced at Victor whose hint of a smile said go with it. "Unlike the store, Agatha's workshop is heavily warded against intruders. However, if you were to know several gremlins, and perhaps had a way of organizing them, as vermin they might be able to slip undetected into and out of said workshop."

"That does indeed sound like a potential plan," Victor agreed.

Elion nodded. "I thought so."

"We are in agreement."

"Indeed, we are."

Zee's gaze ping-ponged between them. "It's as though they're twins. Weird, opposite, sexy twins."

"Good, we have a plan." I tried to smile as though everything was fine and I was definitely tough enough to go to the workshop without putting myself in danger, then caught Zee's narrowing glare. "Zee, we've been through this. I'm as much at risk of dying here as I am out there."

"Yeah." He booped my nose. "But no."

"I agree with Zodiac," Victor declared, sounding final.

They were impossible when they ganged up like this. “You two never agree on anything, but on this you’re suddenly besties?”

“When it comes to your safety, yes.”

I tried catching Elion’s eye but they swiftly looked away, not wanting to be dragged into our drama. “I trust you have all you need.” They pushed from the bar and flicked up their coat collar. “I’ll also be keeping an eye on proceedings from behind the scenes. Good luck, and please refrain from mass-murder, kidnapping, or setting anything on fire.”

“That’s no fun,” Zee huffed.

“Neither is jail,” Elion called, heading out the door. “Are you aware there are some concerning noises coming from your conference room?”

“Gremlin orgy,” Zee said. “Best avoid it.”

We definitely did not need Elion stumbling upon a tied and gagged Sebastien.

“I see...” Their expression became puzzled, then a little suspicious, but they finally left, probably realizing it was better left alone.

“Wow.” With a huffing sigh, I slumped at the bar. “Elion knew about us all along?”

“It does explain how we’ve been relatively untouched by any legal repercussions. It is rare for a bounty hunter to have empathy and compassion. We are lucky indeed that they appear to be on our side.”

Lucky too that Elion didn’t take Victor’s threats seriously. “Maybe don’t threaten to torture their friends and family next time?”

“It remains an option.”

“It is good to have options,” Zee agreed.

Hm. When they agreed with each other, they were impossible to argue with.

“I’m going to see that Claymore gets comfortable,” I said. “Then we’d better get the plan ready for the workshop tonight. I’m going. No discussion.”

“Uh-huh,” Zee replied, in that wishy-washy voice that suggested he had no interest in sticking to that. Victor would though.

“If you think it best.”

It would be fine. When we worked together, we could survive almost anything. Besides, it was just going to be a little drive by a workshop. It wouldn’t be our fault if some random gremlins happened to break in and steal a few things. Gremlins were chaotic and uncontrollable... unless you knew a pixie.

After bribing Jimmy with cake, and after sunset, we pulled the Love Wagon up to the back of the hotel and loaded it with thirty-ish gremlins, which went about as smoothly as trying to shove thirty feral cats into a tiny space—but with less fur. And more hissing. Even with Jimmy riding along, controlling gremlins wasn’t going to be easy.

Zee drove, Victor rode in the front passenger seat, and I sat in the back with Jimmy on my shoulder, from where he’d occasionally snap in gremlinese to keep his flock under control.

The night sky was clear, littered with stars that got brighter the further we drove from the city center.

Seeing those stars with human eyes was a new experience. I'd only reverted to my dragon form for a few seconds before Gideon had ripped my power from me, but it had been enough to remember what it felt like to be the real me under a starlit sky. My heart was the same though. I might have been an enormous armor-scaled, fire-breathing killing machine, but my heart had always been my most vulnerable part.

Hiding had never been a long-term plan.

Nobody can hide forever. But I'd gotten so used to being Adam the human that my future had become an uncertain blur. What if, when I was dragon again, I hurt the two people I loved the most in all the worlds? What if they didn't want me when they saw the real me?

"Are you alright?" Victor asked. He'd twisted in the front seat to peer over his shoulder. Zee hadn't asked, but I caught his concerned glance in the rear-view mirror.

"Yeah." I smiled, and hoped he'd believe it. "I'm fine."

His stoic mask softened some. "You know that whatever your fears or concerns, we're here for you, Adam. There is no force on this earth that can change that. Not even change itself."

"I know." Which was why the fear that I'd somehow ruin everything we had was a very real one. If we could just be a vampire, a demon, and a not-human running a hotel for supernaturals forever, that would be my dream. But with my curse broken and my glamor now temporary, when I did get my power back, change was coming.

Assuming we survived Gideon and the prophecy, would anyone want to visit a hotel where the manager might eat them? Would Zee and Victor still love me when I was a forty-five-thousand-pound mass-murdering monster? I could always shift back to being Adam, but there would be no hiding who and what I really was anymore.

Zee fiddled with the radio and found “House of the Rising Sun” by The Animals, and immediately began to sing. This was the first song he’d danced to in the hotel bar, and right after, we’d toasted to new beginnings. A whole lot had happened since then. We’d saved each other so many times, and in so many ways.

All of that couldn’t be for nothing, right?

Zee cruised the Love Wagon alongside the black-steel-clad, single-story warehouse, so we could get a look at its exterior before unleashing thirty gremlins through its chain-link perimeter fence. For a company that was just supposed to be making pretty jewelry, the razor wire and searchlights seemed a bit unfriendly.

“Are we all thinking the same?” Victor asked as soon as Zee pulled the van around the back of an adjacent building.

“That we should turn this puppy around, go back to the hotel, get wasted, and have sweaty, filthy, group sex with toys until breakfast?”

Jimmy—on my shoulder—stopped licking his balls and raised his hand.

“I should have expected that,” Victor sighed. “I was not thinking of sex—although now I am.”

“Hah.” Zee waggled a purple-painted fingernail in Victor’s face. “I got you thinking about dick.”

Jimmy flew off my shoulder, grabbed Zee’s finger, and licked it.

“Ew! Get him off!” Zee flapped his hand, flinging Jimmy back at me. I ducked, and Jimmy landed in a pile of gremlins, sending them bouncing off the van sides. The Love Wagon’s door burst open and the flurry of gremlins spilled out. Jimmy hovered,

stuck his tiny finger up at Zee, then zipped through the air, heading toward the warehouse.

“It’s probably best, demon,” Victor began, in his scolding voice. “Not to make the pixie angry before he leads a small army of chaos gremlins in a covert mission against our enemy.”

“He licked my finger, and we all know he wasn’t thinking about fingers.”

“What could have possibly made him think about penises at a time like this?”

“It’s not my fault that pixie is sex obsessed.”

Victor’s knowing glance snagged mine, then chased after the receding flock of gremlins. “We should probably find a vantage point from which to observe their progress.”

“I got this.” Zee turned the Love Wagon around and parked it up in a lot adjacent to Agatha’s warehouse. From there, we spotted the gremlins scurrying through a hole in the fence that Jimmy must have bitten his way through. Then they dashed across a grassy area, scaled a small wall, and vanished up a drain pipe.

“Now what?” Zee asked.

“Now we wait,” I said.

“Jimmy knows what the locket looks like, right?”

“Yeah.” I’d shown Jimmy the sketches before we’d left. If everything went to plan, Jimmy would find the locket while the other gremlins caused enough chaos that Gideon and Agatha wouldn’t know their special locket was missing until we’d had

enough time to plan our next move.

We played “I spy” while waiting for Jimmy to return—Victor won every time. Zee claimed he cheated, as he could see in the dark, but it was more likely that he won because Zee’s subjects were all body parts.

How long did it take a pixie and a small horde of gremlins to raid a jewelry warehouse?

We probably should have given Jimmy a time limit, not that the little pixie had a watch, or any way of telling the time.

“You don’t think they have gremlin traps, do you?” I asked, interrupting a heated discussion during which Victor was trying to explain that frogs weren’t a threat and Zee was refusing to believe him, accusing Victor of a blatant attempt to get him murdered by frogs.

They both fell silent, thinking, until Zee said, “Agent Fae would have said if there were traps. Probably.”

“Elion may not be aware of that information either way,” Victor said. “Vermin traps wouldn’t be on any building plans.”

An uneasy feeling wriggled inside me. Had we just marched our not-so-innocent gremlins into a trap?

Victor must have seen the concerned look on my face because he replied, “Experience has taught us that gremlins are proficient at avoiding traps.”

“There’s Jimmy!” Zee said, squinting over the steering wheel. “He’s coming over.”

Sure enough, Jimmy was zipping back toward us, bobbing and weaving like a large erratic firefly, weighed down by something half his size in his tiny hands.

“What’s he got there?” Zee squinted harder.

“That’s not a pendant,” Victor said.

I looked at Victor’s face, and saw the grimace. That couldn’t be good.

Jimmy made it to Zee’s open window and flung the wrinkled, fleshy, three-inch-long appendage inside. The chubby dick-shaped item landed in Zee’s lap. Zee let out a high-pitched scream and poofed to the back of the van, blasting us all in multiple waves of purple sparks.

Victor plucked the flaccid uh... member off the seat and grimaced harder.

“Is it a dick?” Zee had plastered himself to the back of the van. “It’s a dick. He brought us a fuckin’ dick. He’s fuckin’ unhinged. I have fuckin’ trauma from Victor’s cock on a cushion and Jimmy brings us a fuckin’ severed dick?”

“Finger on a cushion,” Victor corrected, lifting the as-yet-unidentified thing. “Not my penis.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t fuckin’ know that, and I don’t know what the fuck that is. Is it a dick? Just tell me. Imma pass out.” He draped the back of his hand across his forehead. “It’s getting darker. There are drums in my ears. I can see the light.”

“Zee... It’s alright.” I wasn’t sure what it was, but I was fairly certain it wasn’t a dick. “It is alright, isn’t it?” I asked Victor.

“It is unlikely to be alright for the previous owner of this... I suspect, finger.”

Jimmy hovered outside the window—wings buzzing, grinning. Was that blood on his chin?

“Are pixies carnivorous?” I asked.

“I would have thought that was obvious from your time in the meat freezer,” Victor replied, still eyeing the chubby severed finger.

“So wait, it’s not a dick?” Zee asked from the back.

“No.” I tossed Zee a smile. “You’d think with your vast experience with dicks, you’d know a dick from a finger.”

“Ha ha.” Zee clambered through the row of back seats and sat himself down next to me. “I have PTSD from Victor’s penis.”

“Not a sentence I’ve ever heard before,” Victor remarked.

“Yeah, we get it, you’re old.” Zee leaned forward, getting a closer look at the chonky finger. “It’s a thumb! I see it now. Okay. I’m good. Fuck. Jimmy, you freaky little pixie psycho!”

Jimmy fluttered innocent eyelashes.

“What does it mean?” Victor asked us all.

“It means someone is missing a thumb,” Zee said.

“Thank you for stating the obvious, Zodiac,” Victor drawled. “I’m uncertain I’d have guessed that without your vast intellectual input.”

Zee grinned. “You’re welcome.”

“Jimmy,” I scooted into the driver’s seat. “Thank you for the uh... thumb, but did you find the pendant we talked about?”

The little pixie shook his head.

This would have been a whole lot easier if he’d just talk, like I knew he was capable of. But he didn’t seem to want to with an audience. He pointed at the thumb Victor had pinched between his own finger and thumb, then at the warehouse.

“One of us is going to have to go in there,” Victor said. “Adam, you should stay here with Zodiac.”

“You can’t go, it’s warded.”

“What do you suggest we do? We can’t leave without our gremlins, and there’s clearly someone missing a thumb for reasons we don’t yet know. Plus, we have not secured the pendant.”

I showed Victor my hand, and the anti-ward signet ring on my index finger. “But I’ve got this.”

Victor set the severed thumb aside and leveled his gaze on me. “It makes more sense for me to wear the ring.”

“Fancy Daddy is right. He’s stronger, faster, and with that ring, their defenses won’t work on him.”

I preferred it when they didn’t get along. Rolling my eyes, I plucked off the ring and handed it over. “Zee should go with you in case there’s trouble.”

“Can’t.” Zee folded his arms. “Guarding you, Kitten.”

“Nothing is going to happen to me out here. Nobody is around. It’s the middle of the night. I’m fine. But if there are traps inside, you can help each other out. Splitting up is always a bad idea.”

“Which is why I ain’t leavin’ your side. Every time you get left behind, you get kidnapped, arrested, or some bad shit happens. Nah-uh. I’m stayin’ right here.”

I sighed. “Fine. But Jimmy, if Victor gets in trouble, you come right back and tell us.”

Little Jimmy saluted, and with Victor now wearing the ring, he opened the passenger door and hopped out.

“Fifteen minutes should be more than enough to assess the situation.” Victor hesitated, holding the door open.

“Alrighty, off you go, bye now,” Zee urged, scooting into the front of the van to take Victor’s empty seat. “Don’t die or anything. Adam will never get over it.”

“Of course,” Victor smiled, and blurred from sight.

Jimmy buzzed after him.

Zee closed the door, and wedged himself sideways on the seat so he could kick his boots up on the dashboard and wiggle into a comfy position. “Now it’s just you and me and some rando’s thumb under the stars.”

“I think Jimmy found a security guard or someone working the night shift.”

“And brutally murdered then ate them,” Zee said.

“Yeah, probably.” It seemed likely. And it wasn’t as though Little Jimmy hadn’t mass-murdered before.

“Shit happens.” Zee popped the glove compartment. “Ooh, Doritos.” He settled down again and munched on old Doritos. “We should do this more often.”

“Do what?” I asked.

“What did that Kenzo guy say? The Scooby gang? A bunch of gays who drive around solving crimes. That’s us.” He waved a Dorito around, then popped it in his mouth.

“Yeah... except we’re kinda doing the crimes right now.”

“The Scooby people do that too,” Zee said, as though it were obvious. “How else they gonna pay for gas?”

He had a point. “I looked them up. Their van is called the Mystery Machine.”

“Pfft, Love Wagon is better.” Zee stopped chewing. “Oh fuck, wait. Would ours be the Murder Machine?”

“We don’t murder that many people. Do we?”

Zee blinked, eyes widening. “Maybe we’re the opposite of the Scooby gang? Gays who go around doing crimes in their Murder Machine?”

That probably fit us more than the other version. “Accidents happen.”

“Yes they fuckin’ do.”

We both snorted laughter.

“Hold up.” Zee jolted upright, spilling the Doritos. “We got company.”

A procession of glossy black cars snaked toward the warehouse’s gated entrance.

“They look like vampire cars to you?” Zee asked.

“Yeah.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck... We got a bunch of uninvited suckers about to join our slumber party and Fancy Fangs ain’t back yet. What we gonna do?”

Victor would probably hear any new arrivals, but we could delay them, giving him time to find that pendant. “Buy him some time.”

“Oh, babycakes, did you just say my middle name?”

“Uh... did I?” Zee had a middle name?

“I am the fuckin’ queen of distraction!” Zee reached under the van’s front seat and produced a black top hat. It resembled the top hat he’d stolen from the announcer when he’d sung “Lady Marmalade” at the Dine and Fight event. It even had the same holes punched into it for his horns. I had no idea how he’d gotten it. “Voilà! My emergency hat.”

“You have an emergency hat?”

He extended his arm, rolled the hat down his forearm, and flicked it up, catching it with a horn. “Who doesn’t?”

My lips twitched around a grin. He was such a showman. “They’ll know it’s you.”

“Kitten, everyone knows it’s me.” With a wink, he poofed outside my door and leaned in, grabbing my face in his warm hands. His big purple eyes got bigger as he pulled me close. “Just keep your cute little human ass right here. Don’t come down—for anything. I got this.”

He smacked a kiss on my lips, then poofed away, leaving me breathless.

From inside the safety of the van I didn’t see much activity, just the cars lined up to enter the gates. The low thrum of idling engines drifted on the breeze through my open window. Then a sudden flash of purple signaled Zee’s arrival. Car doors opened. Identical suit-clad vampires climbed out. There were a lot—at least twenty.

Zee seemed to be doing a lot of arm waving, pacing, wing bouncing, but I couldn’t hear what was said.

Then I remembered the other ring.

The invisibility ring.

I’d brought both rings along, just in case.

It wouldn’t hurt to pop it on and get a closer look. I wasn’t technically going down there.

I might even be able to help out. The vampires wouldn’t be able to see. Nobody had to know.

I dug out the ring, and taking a deep breath, slid it onto my finger. Nothing changed. Everything felt and looked the same. Hm... Zee had said he’d been able to see

himself. Maybe I just had to trust that the ring had worked?

I hopped out of the van and made my way down the grassy bank toward the show Zee was putting on for his audience of vampires.

The warehouse's security gate was open, waiting for them to pass through, but they were too busy staring at Zee as he strutted and ranted about the unseen danger of frogs.

With the gate wide open, and nobody having noticed me walking right up close, it seemed sensible to take the initiative and walk in.

Once through the gate, I jogged across the vacant parking lot and straight under the beady eyes of multiple cameras. Whatever wards Agatha had used, they were probably similar to the hotel wards, which stopped anyone entering who meant to cause harm or those with insidious intentions. As I wasn't there to hurt anyone—I just wanted to take a look around and find Victor—the wards might not activate. I just had to make sure my intentions remained good.

After trying the main doors and finding them predictably locked, I hurried around the side and peeked in a window. The room inside appeared to be an office. Its lights flickered on and off erratically. A chair had been knocked over. Maybe it was always like that or... maybe the gremlins had wrecked it?

Moving along to the next row of windows, I found one had been cracked. It wouldn't take much to pop it open. A quick elbow jab shattered the glass. I froze, letting the sound of raining shards settle to make sure no one was coming, then climbed inside.

This room was another office, like its neighbor, but here the lights were off. The ones outside in the hall flickered and buzzed ominously.

I creaked open the door and squinted into the erratic lighting.

“Victor?”

Besides the weird broken lights, nothing else seemed to be amiss—no alarms, no blood trails, no robot murder dogs. No gremlins either.

“Victor, the vampires are here,” I half whispered. Although invisible, I snuck down the hallway. It didn’t feel right to amble around a building I’d technically broken into.

Just as it seemed as though wandering around without any real sense of direction, or a plan, wasn’t going to get me anywhere, I rounded a corner and found the gremlins in the midst of a riot, much like the one they’d had in my room. Thirty gremlins suddenly looked and felt like hundreds as they ran from room to room, flung anything small enough to hold at each other and the walls, chewed cables, and generally did what gremlins did best—destroyed everything.

“You guys? I think you’ve done enough.”

They didn’t even stop to listen to my disembodied voice. Little Jimmy was the only one who could corral them, and he was probably with Victor. But where?

“Victor? Jimmy?” I called. We really needed to get this show on the road before the vampires realized Zee was wasting their time.

After maneuvering around the gremlins dashing about the hall, I rounded a corner and heard voices deeper within the building. Or more accurately, one voice—Agatha’s. She was not supposed to be here.

Oh dear.

Putting on a burst of speed, I dashed down the corridor, around the next corner, and stumbled to a stop outside closed double doors. Inside, countertops glistened with shiny vials, rows of sparkling gems, and glittering metals.

Agatha, dressed in an all-black pantsuit and wearing sweeping black eyeliner like a teen who hadn't outgrown their emo phase, stood behind a long countertop littered with lots of tiny jewelry-making tools. Behind her, Victor appeared to be standing in her shadow, awkwardly watching on as she waved a tiny pair of pliers around, ranting about her craft and talent.

He wouldn't just be standing there, listening to her tirade. Something was wrong... I pushed my face closer to the window, and spotted the steel pillar at Victor's back. Was he leaning against it, or tied to it?

His hair, usually so neat and precisely controlled, had fallen loose of its braided restraints—a sure sign something was wrong. Somehow, Agatha had gotten the upper hand on him, and probably tied him to that structural pillar with reinforced bindings of some kind. Or she'd gotten the anti-ward ring off him. But it seemed unlikely he'd just hand it over...

Whatever had happened, Victor was her prisoner.

"I'm trying to save you from yourself, Victor," Agatha explained. "As a friend. You should understand."

"I'd prefer you save me by letting me go... as a friend."

"If you joined us, you'd be wealthy again." She turned to face him, still holding the small pliers. Did she mean to use them on him? "You'd have your social standing back. You'd be the glorious apex predator I know you to be, instead of this terribly pathetic shadow of your former self."

“I’d also be as miserable as you knew me to be.”

Agatha gave the pliers a dramatic snip-snip motion.

Uh-oh. Was Victor about to lose another finger again? Or worse?

I’d told him he should take Zee. This was what happened when one of us went alone into danger. Although... he’d had Jimmy along. But Jimmy wasn’t here now. And Jimmy hadn’t always gotten along with vampires, in general.

Hm, time to intervene.

I gave the door a little shove, and popped the seal enough to glide in, still invisible thanks to the ring.

Agatha glanced over her shoulder. I froze, and held my breath. She didn’t have vampire hearing, so she wouldn’t hear my heart, but Victor would. And sure enough, his frown suggested he had.

“Huh?” Agatha squinted in my direction. “Who’s there?”

“Just the breeze,” Victor said. “You were saying how I should join you and Gideon Cain?”

“Ah yes.” Agatha faced him again. “Well, I think it’s time Mr. Vex understood who he’s dealing with, don’t you?”

“I’m sure he’s already aware.”

“No, I don’t think so.” She flitted about behind the workbench like a much larger version of a pixie, snip-snipping those jewelry pliers. “Or you wouldn’t have come

here. It's not me you should be afraid of, Victor." Agatha stepped in close, eye to eye with Victor. "You must know Gideon Cain will turn you to dust like the aging fossil you are."

I tiptoed toward the workbench, and spied a bunch of jug-shaped glass containers with cork stoppers in the top keeping some kind of glowing contents inside. Whatever those jugs housed, it was likely to be bad.

Sticking out a finger, I gave one of the jars a poke. It toppled over, rolled along the countertop, then dropped off the edge and smashed on the floor.

Agatha whirled. "What the—who is here?!"

Wispy blue smoke billowed in the air, expanding in rhythmic waves, like a heartbeat getting bigger and louder.

Agatha swore and strode over to the smoky mass.

I scooted around the workbench, behind Victor's pillar and spotted the restraints—and his lack of anti-ward ring. A few splatters of blood stained his collar. Perhaps she'd used one of those smoky things to distract him? Either way, the ring would be nearby.

I tugged at the knotted ropes around his wrists, and kept an eye on Agatha. She'd reached for a clamshell case no larger than a compact mirror. But the blue smoke had grown even more, taking on a ghostly, humanoid form.

"We can't have you escaping," Agatha muttered. She turned, opened the clamshell case, and the blue smoke began to whoosh into it.

"The vampires are here," I whispered into Victor's ear. He tensed, and his fingers

twitched, eager to be free, but the knots weren't coming undone. They'd likely been warded. I'd never get them off.

I needed to find that ring.

"Agatha, you do realize Gideon Cain cannot let you live," Victor told her. "You know too much about his illegal practices. After you've made the locket to harness Adam's power, Cain will kill you with it and enslave the rest of us. You are no fool. You must see where this is going?"

"I have my insurance policies, just in case. If I die, everything I know gets sent to the media outlets. Gideon will never risk harming me. We're partners. Like you and I could... should be." She set the clamshell case down on the side and turned to face Victor once more. "This is your last chance, Victor. What do you say, for old times' sake?"

I scooted around. Passing by the end of the workbench, I knocked another smoky jar over.

Agatha dashed to catch it.

With her distracted, I scanned the scattering of gems on the countertop—bits of metal and tools strewn all over. There among the bits of wire and tools, lay a simple gold signet ring with Gideon's initials stamped into it.

Agatha caught the jar and whirled. "What is going on?! Who's here?! Come out!"

I grabbed the ring, forgetting she'd be able to see it even if she couldn't see me. Her stare shot straight to the anti-ward ring, floating in the air in my invisible hand.

She tensed, then spotted me. "Adam Vex!"

The anti-ward ring had interfered with my invisibility. I lunged for Victor. All I had to do was get the anti-ward ring on his finger and he'd be able to snap those ropes.

Glass smashed.

Agatha screamed, "How dare you!"

Something small and sharp punched my chest, jerking me mid-lunge. That was fine. Whatever it was, it probably wouldn't kill me, and I was almost at Victor.

"Kill him!" Agatha ordered, and up rose the smoky figures.

Oh dear.

CHAPTER 6

Green smoke whooshed , spinning around me in a noisy, breath-taking whirlwind.

With the wind tearing at my clothes and hair, I grabbed Victor's bound hands and slipped the anti-ward ring onto a finger. "I do," I quipped, but probably shouldn't have when the green smoke spun me up in its vortex, stealing the remaining air from my lungs and lashing my skin with invisible claws.

Green eyes burned in the whirlwind. I tasted sand, and heat, and felt those claws sink inside. But under all the burning pain, those eyes seemed... familiar. And sad.

The green smoky whirlwind suddenly withdrew, washing off, leaving me gasping for air and my skin on fire. Victor stood with the clamshell cage open, vacuuming up whatever the smoky creature had been. He clapped the clamshell shut. "Adam?!" Panic fractured his voice.

He couldn't see me.

"Adam, answer me!"

Maybe being invisible wasn't helping anyone, especially as I'd begun to feel less than well. Clinging to the worktop, I pulled off my ring. Victor's arms instantly swooped around me, holding me up. His powerful voice rumbled in my ear, telling me everything was going to be alright. I believed him. I had to. He said it so it was true. And this blood on my shirt didn't matter. Whose blood was it anyway?

“Damn you, Agatha!” Victor’s growl rumbled with power. “You think me weak? You think we’re weak? You have no idea the depths from which we have climbed to get here, or the lengths we will go to for each other.”

“Victor, you are all bark and no?—”

Snap .

I’d felt him let me go—enough to grab the workbench counter so I didn’t collapse in a heap—but I didn’t see him leave my side, just the result of it.

Agatha continued to stand by the workbench. She wore the same smile she had a moment ago. But her head was bent at a right angle to her neck.

I’d heard the crack, knew what he’d done, but it didn’t seem possible. One moment she’d been talking and the next—snap. Broken neck. Dead.

Her lifeless body teetered and crumpled in a very unfaelike heap on the floor.

“Adam, you’re bleeding. I have to get you out of here.”

“Where’s Jimmy?” Why did my own voice sound so far away?

“I don’t know.” Victor’s bespelling silvery eyes locked onto mine. “He vanished into a vent when Agatha appeared. Can you stand?”

“Is she dead?”

“Very . . . Adam?”

Gideon Cain wasn’t going to like that—or any of this. Good.

I tried to get my feet under me, but they didn't seem to be cooperating, and flopped, dropping me into Victor's arms again. "I don't think my body is working right."

"You're losing blood."

"It's fine." I tried to wave him off but my hand blurred across my vision. "I'll heal any second now."

Victor cupped my face and made sure I couldn't look anywhere but deep into his eyes. "No, Adam. You won't."

Oh dear. Was I dying again? Did all humans die so easily? How did they get through each day without dying all over the place?

Victor scooped me off my feet, cradling me against his chest where it was warm and safe. I could stay there a while, maybe close my eyes... But we'd come here for a reason, and it wasn't over... Why was it so hard to think? What had we forgotten?

"The magic bean—bead!"

"Not here," he said. "Close your eyes and hold on. I'm going to move at speed."

I nodded, and buried my face against his chest. At speed jerked my insides, almost making them my outsides, and stole all the air available to breathe. The sudden rush was over as quickly as it had begun, and we were back outside beside the Love Wagon and a whole bunch of noisy gremlins.

"Tadah!" Little Jimmy said in his deep, drumming timber of a voice.

He held up a shining gold bauble that had to be the locket we'd been looking for. I gave him my thumbs up, but his little face fell, and all the gremlins went very, very

still.

Victor laid me in the back of the van, and all the little gremlin faces gathered around.

“I’m okay, guys,” I mumbled. “Just a bit cold.” Why was it so cold?

“It’s about fucking time, there’s only so many renditions of fuckin’ “Spicy Margarita” I can do before the vampires?—”

“Demon, drive ,” Victor growled, cutting Zee off.

“Oh fuck! Adam?! He’s bleeding! Why’s he bleeding?! Why didn’t he stay in the van?!”

“I’m fine,” I mumbled, shivering. Why were thirty pairs of gremlin eyes staring at me?

“Zodiac,” Victor snapped, his voice like thunder. “Drive this van to the nearest hospital, immediately, unless you can carry him quicker?”

“No, I . . . can’t fly.” Zee’s voice wobbled. “My wing . . . Adam?”

“Then drive!”

Doors slammed. The van rocked. Its rattling engines roared. Then we were racing through the dark, and I watched the pretty stars through the window slide by, wondering if I’d ever get to fly under them again.

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CHAPTER 7

“Allow me to assist you.” Victor grabbed my hospital pillow, beat it to within an inch of its life, then gently tucked it behind my head again.

“Thank you.”

“Water?”

“Uh...” My reply didn’t matter, he was already pouring a glass from a pitcher.

Victor had been fussing since I’d woken up in the hospital bed ten minutes ago. I took the glass and sipped, needing to get rid of the gritty taste in my mouth.

In contrast to Victor’s overattentive-nurse act, Zee was sprawled in a chair in the corner of the room, his wonky top hat over his face, snoring lightly.

“Should we wake him?” I croaked, shuffling upright on my newly fluffed pillows.

“No. He’s been watching you since we arrived. Let him rest.”

“How long was I out?”

“Almost a whole day and night.” Victor pulled his chair closer and perched on its edge. His gaze tracked the IV line snaking from my wrist to the empty bag of fluids. Probably blood. “They gave you a concoction of blood types,” he explained, noticing where my gaze had wandered. “You didn’t appear to have a normal one.”

“Oh.”

My shoulder ached. I lifted the pale green paper-thin gown and found a thick bandage.

“Agatha threw a jagged fragment of glass, slicing an artery. She meant to kill.” He paused, then said softly, “It was close, Adam.”

I took a few more hasty sips from my glass. “I think maybe you guys are right. Humans are really bad at staying alive.”

“Yes, we were right.” He gathered my hand in his and brought my knuckles to his warm lips. “I’ve never wanted to be more wrong.”

“Is Agatha . . . definitely . . . uhm . . . ?”

“She has expired.”

“I’m sorry.” Despite her actions, they had once been friends.

“I am not.” A fierce but cold lethality made his gaze burn. “Should anyone hurt you, I will not hesitate to bring an abrupt end to their existence. It is time certain unsavory individuals became aware of that.”

Agatha had underestimated Victor’s feelings, and she’d paid the terminal price.

“Do you think Elion’s going to be pissed we left another body for them to explain?”

“Frankly, I do not care what they feel. Agatha’s death was necessary?—”

“Kitten!” Zee poofed from the chair, appearing in a shower of sparks at the end of the

bed. “You!” He grabbed my feet through the sheet. “You’re alive! I am so mad right now.” I could tell, by the way he jerked my feet to emphasize his point. “How the fuck am I going to run the hotel if you’re dead? I can’t run it with him .” He freed one foot to fling a hand at Victor. “He’ll measure some fuckin’ thing too many times, so I’ll have to kill him and stuff his skinny ass up a chimney, then I’ll regret it the next day, fall into the bottom of a bottle like a bad-cliché trauma boy—because Tom enables that shit—and my story will end with me walking the earth alone, searching for a purpose in my empty life, selling sex to anyone who will have me just so my broken heart might feel again.”

Victor and I both fell quiet, and blinked.

Zee had really thought about this.

“That’s not going to happen, Zee,” I reassured.

He gripped my feet harder and glared. “It better not. The fanfiction will be fucking insane .”

“I suspect Adam would like his feet back,” Victor suggested, seeing me wince.

Zee plucked his hands free. “Right.” And with a huff, folded his arms. “Still mad.” He pointed at my feet tenting the sheets. “Cute feet, though.”

“I love you too, Zee.”

His whole posture softened then, and he sighed. “Yeah okay, I’m easy to love. But no more dying!”

“Okay.” It wasn’t as though I was trying to die, it just happened.

Zee and Victor were the best. They'd saved me, and they'd stayed with me. But I wasn't sure that infiltrating the warehouse had been worth the almost-dying part. "Did we get the locket?"

"Yes." Victor dug into a pocket and removed a golden locket on a chain. "Jimmy found this." He dropped it into my hand. "Without its warded control, Cain will not be able to access the full extent of your power. And it also appears there was an unfortunate fire at Agatha's workshop, weakening the structure, resulting in its collapse just a few hours after we vacated the area. Nobody will be making any further jewelry for Gideon Cain."

That was... suspicious timing. I eyed Victor, and watched his tiny smirk increase by the tiniest of measurements. Oh, he'd gone back while Zee had watched me. No more Agatha de La Cour, and no more FaeMade ? magic gems. When it came to vengeance, Victor didn't mess around.

I squeezed Victor's hand. "I am so happy you're on our side."

"So... we have some good news," Zee crooned. "Or bad news, I guess. Good for me, bad for you guys. Whatever. Uh... Seb escaped."

Of course he had. "How?"

"Madame Matase went to check on him, after it had been a really long time since we tied him up. He sweet-talked her into loosening the ties and fled. He did not fuckin' appreciate the SOS Hotel management's tough love. Oh well. We're better off without that scumball anyway."

"We suspect he's gone back to Gideon Cain," Victor added.

Seb had given us good information, but his usefulness was definitely limited. "Oh

well. Seb doesn't know anything about us that Gideon isn't already aware of."

"Uhm, so..." Zee glanced at Victor, who glanced back at him in a ping-pong of uncertain gazes. "There's more."

"What?" I asked.

"He took Tom Collins."

"Oh dear." Tom knew everything —every little secret, every flaw, every hiccup, every weakness—everything. Gideon had tried to get Tom before, via Agatha. We'd stopped her then, but not this time. Had Seb's mission been about getting his hands on Tom all along?

And poor Tom.

I suddenly felt very ineffective, here in this public hospital wearing nothing but a thin gown. "We need to get back to the hotel."

I clambered from the bed, carefully dressed, and with the help of Victor's voice on the staff, discharged myself. The eye-watering hospital bill was not helping my wound throb any less.

After catching an Uber back to the hotel, we pulled up outside to find Noreen Greene in a gray and pink skirt suit and floofy blonde hairdo waiting on the front porch.

"She can keep right on walkin'," Zee began, shoving open the cab door.

Zee had a habit of throwing gasoline on an already roaring fire and although there wasn't much Noreen could do to us to make our situation worse, we really didn't need her poking her nose up chimneys or into flower beds. "It's alright. I'll talk with

her. You two go inside.”

“Adam Vex.” Her mouth pinched around her sour voice. “The demon and the vampire.”

“Who also have names, Noreen.” I joined her on the porch.

She sniffed, and lifted her chin. “May we speak inside, Mr. Vex?”

“It’s nice out here.” The sun had set during our ride back to the hotel, and the air was cooler than of late. Plus, I’d had my fill of enemies inviting themselves in only to cause headaches.

I gestured at the porch chairs for her to sit, then sat beside her and took a few quiet moments to soak up the hotel’s evening atmosphere while she fussed about getting comfortable. Zee and Victor loomed nearby, reluctant to leave.

“Mr. Vex.”

“Noreen.”

“This is a delicate matter...” She eyed my two chaperones.

“I’ve had a tough few days. My shoulder aches. I’m all out of patience. Say your bit now or leave and go on your merry way. Either way, I’m struggling to find the heart to care.”

She tutted and lifted her heavy bag onto her knees. From inside, she took a folder and handed it over. “These are copies, of course.”

Still a little confused as to why she was here, I opened the file. Photographs of

Gideon Cain spilled out: Gideon Cain meeting with Agatha; Gideon Cain outside a trailer at a Brink Security Dine and Fight event; Gideon Cain at the aquarium lab. “What is this?”

“This is everything Agatha de La Cour’s lawyer sent me upon news of her demise, with instructions to give a copy to you.”

“Oh.”

Why would Agatha give what I assumed to be her “insurance policy” to me? Unless she’d always suspected Gideon would kill her, and I was her vengeance? Except... we’d kinda killed her first. Oops.

“The information in there is..” She took a deep drag of air and sighed out hard. “Well, it’s career-making or potentially life-ending. If Mr. Cain realizes I have this, I doubt I’ll be around much longer. Do you have a cigarette?”

“A... what? No.” I skimmed the documents, but they made little sense to me. Victor then reached over my shoulder and collected the folder from my hands.

He proceeded to flick through them. “Hm.”

“Do you have a cigarette?” Noreen asked him.

“No. And neither should you, if you cherish your health.”

“Oh, I don’t smoke.” Noreen tittered a frantic laugh. “I just... It feels like I should.”

She was clearly worried. Maybe even scared. “You didn’t have to bring this to us. We wouldn’t have known if you’d just hidden it away.”

“Why would I do that, when you’re the only one in this city who stands up to him—to Cain, I mean? Nobody else has the balls, Mr. Vex. I’ve done some things, twisted a few stories, did as he told me for long enough. I’m afraid of him. I admit it. But you’re not. So you’re either mad, or more powerful than you look.”

A little of both. “Well, uh... thank you.”

“I am going to run this story, Mr. Vex,” she said with fervor. “But if it doesn’t go to press... if I disappear, you know why, and it’s up to you to finish this—finish him.”

Noreen Greene had been working for Cain this whole time, but she hadn’t wanted to, and that made all the difference. “We’ll see what we can do.”

“Shit is about to become real, Mr. Vex. Gideon Cain owns this city. There’s nowhere to hide.”

“Actually.” I smiled. “Our rooms are sixty bucks a night and you’re guaranteed a safe stay.”

“And there’s free apples,” Zee added jovially.

Apples? “Uhm.” I caught Zee’s confident grin. “No, uh... Is there?”

“Isn’t there? Then where the fuck did the apples in my room come from?”

He had apples in his room? “I don’t know, Zee.”

“Forget the apples. On the plus side, there’s no Wi-Fi”—he counted on his fingers—“no annoying work calls, no humming air-con... it’s out of order... and definitely no gremlins.”

“Sixty dollars is a small price to pay for safety,” Victor added.

Her gaze lingered on the folder tucked under Victor’s arm, then drifted across the street. Her options were to stay with us, or step outside the wards where Gideon held all the power. “Then I suppose you have a new guest.”

CHAPTER 8

We checked Noreen Greene into the hotel, and gave Madame Matase subtle instructions to keep an eye on her. After checking that I was still breathing and hadn't died in the past few moments, Victor took his new obsession—the Gideon Cain file—into the conference room with instructions to be left alone, where he began to pour over it, leaving me and Zee to sit in the depressingly empty bar.

“I miss Tom,” I said, after a few minutes of silence. Even the jukebox was quiet, and that was rarely quiet for long.

“Yeah.” Zee nodded and sighed hard. “He was borderline in-fuckin’-sane, and a drug dealer, but who isn’t in this town?”

“You know, back in Agatha’s workshop, there were these smoky beings in jars,” I said, recalling the moments before I’d been stabbed. “Agatha had one attack me, but I saw its eyes and its heart wasn’t in it. They reminded me of when Tom Collins appeared in Agatha’s aquarium lab—kind of solid but not solid. They had the same strange glow. Do you think they were djinn too?”

“It would fit, right? I mean, Cain has others do all his bad shit for him. So someone took Tom Collins from his home, wiped his memory, and shoved him in an AI bartender unit for pick-up later. There’s no way Mr. Evil Sorcerer is going to dirty up his thick fingers with that shit.”

“You think Agatha did it?” I asked.

“I don’t know... maybe. She was into trading body parts. But she’s dead now so...”
He slumped against the bar and sighed with his whole body. “Who am I gonna get my fix from now?”

The bar lights flickered. Just a little blip—a blink, and they were back.

“Did we pay the electric bill?” I wondered aloud.

“If you gotta ask me then imma say no.”

“I’m sure Madame Matase?—”

The lights cut out altogether, but the jukebox glowed its neon hues, and with a clunk-click, began playing “The Only Way is Up” by Yazz—another track I had no idea was in its library. Did they even use records in that era?

“You’re hearing this, right?” Zee asked, his face barely visible in the gloom, and only lit by the jukebox’s candy colors. “I’m not fuckin’ high from whatever Tom put in my drink?”

He hadn’t had a drink. We’d been at the hospital all day.

The lights blazed back on. Which is more to say they sort of blinked into hazy existence from old bulbs, and buzzed like they might explode or cut off again.

Which was weird. Even for us.

“Gremlins?” I wondered.

“They fix shit now, they don’t break it.”

Zee pushed to his feet and ambled toward the jukebox. The track cut off, the jukebox clacked mechanically, and another track began to play—"Don't Leave Me This Way . " I got to my feet too, just as the lights flickered. "Hold on..." Poking my head out the bar door, everything seemed normal in the foyer, and Madame Matase confirmed the lights were all fine. Whatever was happening, it was isolated to the bar.

I joined Zee at the jukebox just as it began to play "Don't You Forget About Me . "

"It's possessed," he said. "These tracks aren't even in its library. Look, it's not even picking up a record. It's riffing."

"Eighties classics?" Victor asked, pushing through the bar door. He must have heard the weirdness from the foyer.

"Of course you'd know the era." Zee rolled his eyes.

"I Want to Break Free" by Queen was up next.

The jukebox was only playing snippets of songs, not even the whole tracks... almost as though it was trying to communicate.

"What has it played so far?" Victor asked.

I recited the list.

"The first one was 'The Only Way is Up?'" Victor asked.

"Yeah . . ."

The jukebox clunked and the opening of that same track began to play a second time, as though it could hear us.

The lights went out.

“Look up,” Victor said.

I did. Neon words glowed, scrawled across the ceiling in some kind of pen.

Gone to Cain’s mansion.

Don’t fuck up my bar.

Wait for my signal.

Tom.

Wait... Tom had allowed Sebastien to take him?

“Oh my fuck, our bartender is a genius.” Green neon light illuminated Zee’s grin.

“He planned it.”

Victor nodded. “It does appear that way.”

The lights blazed back on.

“If Tom gets into Cain’s electrics from inside his home,” Victor mused aloud.

“There’s no limit to the chaos he might cause.”

“Like a pissed-off virus made of sass and spite,” Zee agreed.

We’d already seen how formidable Tom could be when unleashed from behind the bar. Even restrained as an AI, Tom was smart, quick, and potentially brutal. And he had a motive. “Do you think he’s gone there because Gideon Cain stole his life?”

“Oh, for sure.” Zee nodded.

“In all likelihood, yes,” Victor said. “He listened to us for hours and would dispense advice, some of it unwanted. However, there has always been a contemplative part to him that few saw. If he spotted an opportunity to get revenge, he would take it.”

And that opportunity was Sebastien.

“Wow.” Zee huffed a laugh, impressed. “I am never going to bitch about his prices again.”

“This could be our opportunity too.” Victor ambled behind the bar, taking the place of temporary barman like he had when Tom Collins had gone AWOL before. “If Tom is able to create enough disarray, there’s a chance we may be able to get inside Cain’s home undetected.” He casually grabbed the whiskey bottle and poured me a shot, then set about making Zee some kind of fancy iced drink in a tall, thin glass.

Zee took the drink, wet his lips with it and brightened. “You are full of surprises.” And now the pair of them were on the same track. “Vampires are made for sneaky shit.” His gaze locked on Victor. “Creep in like the slippery shadow daddy you are, find Adam’s bead, sneak out again and nobody has to know. I’ll be there with Shareen if shit does go sideways. I am liking this plan... Adam?”

Hunger for vengeance made Zee’s eyes shine. Victor’s too.

“You’ll only be able to get it if Gideon isn’t wearing it,” I said. It was good seeing them bonding over battle plans, but the risks involved in going to Gideon Cain’s mansion were many. “If he’s going to take it off, it’ll be when he’s sleeping.”

Victor nodded. “Then we’ll need to locate his bedroom suite.”

There was no stopping them. The plan had formed, and they were doing this.

“What about wards?” I asked. “You can’t wear both rings at the same time, and there will be wards.”

“I do not intend to harm Gideon Cain... not this night,” Victor said. “I merely mean to take back what is rightfully yours, Adam. And should there be anti-theft wards, well, it is not stealing when the item does not belong to him. As Tom Collins often reminded us, wards have loopholes.”

“We just gotta wait for Tom’s go-ahead.” Zee plucked his phone from his pocket. “Gah, no signal. Wait here, I’ll check it down the street.” He poofed out of the bar, leaving me sipping spicy whiskey as Victor fixed himself a cup of Irish tea.

“It’s a long shot,” I said after mulling over their crazy plan.

“Perhaps. But with Tom’s help, it may succeed. Having a djinn masquerading as an AI inside the building’s electrics gives us the upper hand. Couple Tom’s presence with an invisibility ring, and we have a chance. Gideon Cain may not see us coming.”

“Did you just make a joke?”

“Unlikely.” He smiled.

“You know, you rarely smile when Zee is around.”

“Where’s the mystery if I did?”

I chuckled into my whiskey then rubbed my sore shoulder.

“How are you feeling?”

“About the plan? I don’t like it.” There were too many unknowns. But mostly, I didn’t like that they’d be going without me. The last few days and my hospital stay had proven I was terrible at being human, though.

“I meant generally.”

“Oh, I’m okay. Tired. Grumpy. Maybe a tiny bit scared? Stopping Cain is a long shot.”

“You know what else is a long shot?” Victor’s soft voice had me looking up from the golden swirl of whiskey in my glass to find his gaze sympathetic and his smile gentle. “A vampire falling in love with an incubus and a human of questionable origins.”

My own smile had a mind of its own and grew, despite the nerves writhing inside me. “That does seem unlikely.”

“Yet, it’s true.” He reached across the bar. Firm fingers gathered mine and gently squeezed. “Amazing things can and do happen. It is time for you to be restored to your full glory.”

I still wasn’t sure what my full glory meant in a human city like San Francisco. “You can’t go up against Cain, Victor, especially if he’s found a way to use my power.” I didn’t want to say the words, but Cain would kill him. “Will you promise me at the first sign of trouble, you and Zee will get out of there? Don’t fight him.”

He held my gaze, sensing the importance of his answer. “I have no intention of ending things at Gideon’s hands. If the plan appears unlikely to succeed, I will indeed call it off.”

“Are you and Zee going to be alright together?”

“Zodiac and I are...” A whole array of emotions briefly flickered across his face, but eventually settled on a soft, peaceful smile. “We may not agree on many things?”

“On anything.”

He bowed his head. “On most things. But when it comes to the matter of saving you, we have never been more united.”

They’d be formidable—Vampire and demon—an impossible duo. But they were also both stubborn, and might go too far. I couldn’t lose them, not even to maybe save the world. I squeezed Victor’s hand in mine. “Give me your word you’ll come back.”

“You have it. My word, my heart, and my battered soul, for all it is worth.”

“Alright.” They had Tom too, and I already knew he was an unforgiving, potion-wielding badass. “Go get Tom and my power back.”

Zee poofed back into the bar. “He-llo, we are cookin’.” He showed me the text message on his phone that read: Cain mansion is open to the public. Like taking candy from a baby. Leave a generous tip on the bar. “Let’s go.” Zee’s gaze fell to my hand in Victor’s and his face softened. He squeezed my unharmed shoulder, then slammed a kiss on my forehead. “Stay here. Be safe. Shadow Daddy and the Best Fuckin’ Demon have got this.”

“I will stay right here,” I said, showing them my whiskey.

Zee ushered Victor into motion, and they made for the door together, discussing where to park the Love Wagon, what weapons to take, and the best method of getting blood out of clothing.

It was good that they were getting along so well, but we’d always done everything

together—the three of us. We were stronger as three. But right now, feeling like a fragile glass ornament, I was more of a hindrance than a help.

The hotel fell quiet around me, the bar even more so. No customers. No bartender.

I wasn't the only one missing my heart. The hotel was hollow too.

I needed to get my power back.

It had to happen, right? Else what was the point of the prophecy? My heart was supposed to save the world... or doom it. Hm, that last option wasn't great. If Gideon Cain found a way to tap into my power, he'd definitely doom us all.

But this wasn't just about me.

Victor and Zee really were out there, trying to save my power and the world—like true heroes.

“Erm, Adam, darling?” Madame Matase poked her head around the bar door. “You should see this.”

What was it now? A rampaging werewolf in the yard, pixies in the pipes? Maybe Princess Daisy wanted a room? I chuckled to myself, meandered around the vacant tables, and pushed through the bar door, entering the lobby.

A line of Lost Ones stretched from the front desk and out the main doors. They waited patiently, bags at their sides. Trolls, fae, I even spotted Abe—the werewolf who had helped us dispatch Victor's wife—and some demons from Razorsedge. Why were they all here?

“Uh... Madame Matase?” Scooting up to her side behind the desk, I rubbed the back

of my neck and plastered a confident grin on my face. “What’s going on?”

“It seems our resident reporter ran a story on Gideon Cain, exposing some of his less savory dealings. Mrs Greene mentioned the SOS Hotel was the only safe sanctuary . Now, all these people want to stay,” she said, looking up with big dark eyes.

“All of them?” I squeaked. Noreen had acted fast .

She nodded, smiled tightly too. “Darling, do we have enough rooms?”

I had no idea, but we’d squeeze them in somewhere. “Oh, I’m sure we can work something out.” I was going to need Claymore’s help with the bags, and some of the kitchen staff, and maybe even Chef étrange—he had multiple arms for multiple bags. We’d find a way. We could do this. We were ready. This was the night we’d been preparing for. The SOS Hotel was on the map!

“Everyone!” I clapped my hands together, getting the attention of our new guests. “Welcome to the SOS Hotel. Please be patient as we get you all checked in.”

“We’re safe here, right?” one of the fae near the front of the line asked.

“Oh yes, very safe. Our wards cover all the hotel grounds.” And a whole lot more.

Smiling faces stretched back through the line. Noreen’s article had them spooked, and rightly so. Gideon’s act was beginning to crumble, just like mine had. Now we’d see his true colors.

But in the meantime, I had one important job to do: make sure everyone under our roof felt safe.

CHAPTER 9

Time flew by as I got our guests settled in. It was typical that when the hotel was fully booked, Tom Collins was AWOL. I could have used his expertise in the bar. Instead, Chef étrange had stepped in and had a crash course in mixing drinks—some of which were palatable.

I checked the clock on the wall—one a.m. How long did it take to break into a real estate mogul's mansion, find his master suite, steal a precious bead, and get out again without anyone noticing?

I'd been busy with the influx and time had slipped by me, but Zee and Victor had been gone several hours.

What if they didn't come back?

What if I had to go after them?

Leaving the bustling bar, I headed for the stairs, to avoid the small queue for our single elevator.

I could ask Abe to come along... maybe some of the Razorsedge demons too?

I shoved through the door, into the stairwell.

They were probably fine. When they worked together they were formidable, and Victor had promised me he'd call off the plan if there was trouble.

“Ah, the stupid little human.”

Seb’s sickly sweet drawl pulled me to a stop on the bottom step of the stairs. He’d followed me into the stairwell. He must have been lurking in the lobby, and I’d missed his distinctive presence among the bustling, colorful crowd.

The door swung shut behind him with a solid thunk .

Seb was tall, even in his shiny black and white flat-bottomed shoes. He wore his brilliant white suit and had braided locks of his long white hair, ending each in colorful beads. His quick smile flashed with sharp teeth.

Backing up the stairs a few steps gave me some much-needed height over him. “What do you want?”

“Oh, nothing,” he purred, sidling closer. “Just a little chat.”

At eye level, I folded my arms, and tried to ignore my heart’s pounding. The wards would stop him from lashing out, but the empty stairwell wasn’t giving off safe vibes. “I didn’t think you’d be foolish enough to come back here.”

“I’m not the bad guy, Adam. I only ever wanted to help you. But Zodiac and a human? It was never going to work. You’re his food , darling. I was just trying to save you from the inevitable heartache.”

“I thought you’d figured it out? I’m not human and never have been.”

“Oh, I knew that. You never did smell right.” He gave the air a sniff. “But you smell different now.” His sharp teeth gleamed behind a smile. “Weaker... and wounded. Like a dying rabbit.”

“You need to leave. You’re not welcome.”

“Where is your vampire bodyguard? Hm?” He approached my step, pushing into my personal space. But the wards hadn’t reacted, so he didn’t mean to harm me. This was all just typical demon posturing. “I imagine Zodiac is already pleasuring the guests?”

“He doesn’t do that anymore, and unless you have something to say that’s worth listening to, this conversation is over.” I turned my back on him and grabbed the rail, to climb up.

Seb’s hand snatched my wrist and jerked me around, chest to chest.

“Hey—”

Fingers cinched around my neck, forcing my head back. I gasped, and tried to dig my nails behind his grip.

“Oh no,” he mock-whined. “Gideon Cain was right. You really are pathetic. Just demon bait, and I’m about to eat you all up.” He pushed his face close to mine. “Like the stupid little human you are.”

What was happening? Why hadn’t the wards kicked in? In the past, I’d have been strong enough to push him off, but I barely had enough strength to keep my eyes open.

My hearted drummed in my ears, darkness rushed in, and Seb’s leering grin followed me into unconsciousness.

The only place left in the hotel that hadn’t been rented out was the attic, and that’s where I coughed myself awake. Dry, musty air scratched my bruised throat, while thick rope secured my wrists to the chair I was slumped in. But it was Seb, gloating

near the boarded up attic window that really soured my mood.

He could have killed me.

But hadn't . . . Which meant he needed something.

Seb raised his right hand and waggled his fingers, displaying a glinting ring. "A gift from Gideon Cain. Aren't you fuckin' surprised?"

"Not really." I had a ring just like it on my finger, but while I could attack Seb, I'd have to get free of the ropes first, and my limited human body was as weak as a kitten. Even if I did manage to untie myself, I was no physical match for him.

Pretending to be human had been a terrible idea. What had I been thinking? Being human was fraught with danger and limitations.

"Let me go now," I warned. "And I'll consider not killing you when I do eventually get free."

Seb gave a disbelieving snort. "How fuckin' stupid do you have to be to let me stay at your hotel? Gideon sent me to steal your AI bartender, by the way. Just in case you didn't figure that out."

"We knew," I drawled. "Is this going to take long? It's just, I have a hotel full of guests?—"

"Shut up and listen!" He marched forward, shoes striking the dusty boards, and bent down to grab my chin. "I am supposed to take you back so he can grill you about the bean or heart or whatever that fuckin' thing is that he's obsessed with, but imma have some fun first, since you're the reason Zodiac hates me." Seb flicked a sharp nail down my nose.

“I think he’s mostly always hated yo?—”

He gripped my cheeks, squeezing them against my teeth. “You took him from me. You took Razorsedge. You took my life! I’ve been nice to you. Tried to warn you. Even gave you information on Cain. And what do I get? Tied up and shoved in a dark room, that’s what !”

“Maybe,” I mumbled around pinched cheeks. “If you weren’t such a horrible person?—”

“Gah!” He tore his hand free, stinging my jaw, and stomped back to the boarded window. “I found this place while snooping around this pathetic shithole hotel. Is this where you keep the bodies of all the people you kill? Yeah, I fuckin’ know you’re not as cute as you have everyone believing. You’re a psychopath. That’s what I hear. All cutsey and sweet, but you fuck people up just like Cain does, just like the rest of us have to. You’re nothing special. Does Zodiac know you’re a murdering cunt?”

I huffed, and slouched on the wooden chair. “You got me all figured out. So let me go, and we’ll go chat with your master. You know, the one holding your leash.”

“You stupid fuckin’ whatever you are, you’re not calling the shots here, I am.”

“Really?” I winced. “I don’t think so. Still seems as though you’re dancing to Gideon’s tune. You’re scared of him. That’s okay. It’s alright to be scared of someone more powerful than you.”

“No, I’m fuckin’ not,” he laughed.

“It’s okay, you don’t need to pretend with me.”

“I’m not—the fuck?! You should be scared of me!”

I shrugged. “It’s just, you’re not very scary, Seb.”

His face scrunched with disgust. “Are you crazy? Have you lost your cunt-fuckin’ mind?!” He flicked out his right hand, showing off shimmering nails. “You know I can gut you from dick to nipples, right? These pretties aren’t just for thrilling hand jobs.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “It’s just, honestly, the shadowbeast behind you is a whole lot more frightening.”

“What?” He straightened fast, like a rod had been shoved down his back, but didn’t turn.

“Shadow is real hungry since he’s not been eating gremlins. And you, with all your shiny shoes and tail bling. You kind of look like ...” Trailing off, I shrugged my good shoulder.

“Like what?”

“I shouldn’t say it.”

Seb’s eyes shifted. “Say what, fuckface?”

“Bait.”

He swallowed, then coughed a nervous laugh. “There’s nothing behind me, you dumb fuck.”

“Okay.” If that’s what he wanted to believe.

“There isn’t. You’re trying to make me look—trying to distract me! I’m not an idiot.”

“Okay.” I shrugged again... not easy with my wrists bound to the chair arms.

“I’m not the stupid one here, you are.”

“Sure,” I repeated. “I’m the stupid one.” I rolled my eyes.

He folded his arms and glowered. “You can’t trick me.”

I smiled. “Nope.”

Seb’s right eye twitched. He so wanted to turn. But if he did, he knew it would be a win for me, whether there was a shadowbeast behind him, or not.

His eye twitched again, and slowly, he lowered his arms. He’d felt something—maybe a change in the air, a tightness across his chest, a chill down the back of his neck? I couldn’t feel a darn thing, being human, but I had eyes.

Seb snorted. “You’re stalling. After Cain kills you, Zodiac will come crawling back to me, begging me to take him in.” He stomped forward. “He’ll be back on his knees, sucking me off whenever I want, like your stupid twinkie ass never existed.”

I tilted my head, and focused on the space behind him.

“Fucking fuck! There’s nothing behind me!” He spun on his heel, and barked a laugh. “See, nothing fuckin’ there! Oh, you’re gonna get it good now?—”

He twisted, turning back to face me and came face to face with a wall of humanoid darkness.

He’d been right, there hadn’t been anything behind him, but Shadow had been lurking all around us, and he was here now, a huge smoky cloud of pissed-off

incorporeal beast who really didn't like loud, shiny things in his attic.

I frowned. "Sorry, I guess. This is probably going to hurt."

Seb drew breath but didn't get to scream because Shadow swallowed him. At least, I think that's what happened. The sentient cloud of darkness whooshed over Seb in his white pantsuit, and must have taken a swipe at his soul, or some other integral part of Seb, because he froze, face locked in horror. Maybe Shadow had taken Seb to the nowhere place. I wasn't sure how these things worked, but it didn't look good.

I jerked at the knots holding my wrists and thrashed in the chair, finally working the ropes loose enough to yank my arms free. With that done, I had my legs untied in just a few seconds, and I was free.

I could have left Seb to Shadow. The gremlins would have dealt with his remains—no more Sebastien.

But Seb was on my Bad People list.

And after everything he'd done, it was time to make sure Seb could never be a risk to me, the ones I loved, or the hotel again.

"Shadow, I've got this."

Shadow's swirling mass thinned and ghosted into the corner, vanishing among cobwebs, leaving Seb panting. He dropped to his knees, swallowing great gulps of air.

"So, here's the thing..." I began, then crouched in front of him. "I might have forgiven you some foolish decisions. Like you said, you were only trying to survive, and I know what that feels like. We've all done things—bad things—but Sebastien,

some of the things you did? They're unforgivable."

Seb looked up and blinked pale, tear-brimmed eyes. "It's not my fault," he blubbered.

I wasn't buying it. "The demons voted to let you live. I respected that, just like Zee did. But then you came back, and you tried to hurt me and mine again. You had your chance to do better, and you failed."

"Wait . . ." he snuffled. "Wait, you can't hurt me. The wards . . ."

I showed him the ring on my finger. "Oh look, we match."

"How did you... It doesn't fuckin' matter. You kill me? He kills me? What have I got to live for anyway?"

"Shadow here can kill you without touching you, they don't need a ring... And I'm not going to lie, I was going to end you and maybe stuff you up a chimney. But I've got a better idea." I straightened, and looking down at Seb scrunched up on the floor, I almost pitied him. Almost.

"You're going to let me live?" he asked. "I knew you were good, really... I did?—"

"Yeah, no. Do you remember how you left Zee's friend on the hotel steps? How you killed her to get to him? You remember that, right?"

His face fell.

Mine brightened with a smile. "I'm going to send Gideon Cain a gift." I turned my back on him and headed for the attic door. "Shadow, he's all?—"

"Wait, no! You can't do this! Zee will never forgive you!"

“I’m doing this for Zee,” I growled so low Seb may not have heard.

“You have a heart?!” Seb barked. “You don’t have to do this! You’re not as bad as Cain says!”

I glanced over my shoulder, and nodded at Shadow’s form swelling inside the darkness. “No... I’m worse.”

Seb let out a desperate roar, and launched off the floor, wings and claws out, face twisted in murderous fury. There was no doubt in my mind, he’d have killed me.

But Shadow got to him first and swallowed all those screams.

CHAPTER 10

Zee poofed into the bar. “Erm, Kitten, why are people peopling in my room?!”

“Zee!” I flung my arms around him and crushed him tight. After “dealing with” Sebastien, I’d gone back to managing the at-capacity hotel, but as the night wore on, passing into the early hours of the morning, Zee and Victor’s absence gnawed on my heart.

“Yeep,” Zee wheezed, then sighed and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, hugging me back. It didn’t matter that we were surrounded by guests, after my brush with Seb I needed him squished close. “Hey, are you okay?” he asked, stroking my hair.

“I am now.” I leaned back to get a look at his face. He had a scuff under his right eye, and his leathers were dusty, but he seemed fine. No broken bones or bloody stains. “Did you uh... did you...”

His face fell. “There were guards everywhere . Alarms going off, cameras all over, security lights going batshit. Tom Collins really fucked up Cain’s electrics, but when Daddy Spice tried to sneak in there were too many people around, and the mansion is huge . Sorry Kitten, we didn’t get the bead.”

“That’s okay.” It had been a long shot, just like I’d said. I was just glad to have them back.

“But we did get something useful.” Zee brightened. “Which I will show you. But

imma ask again, why are random people in my room?”

“Oh, I erm... We had sort of a rush, and I ran out of rooms to rent, so I figured you guys could sleep with me for a few nights?”

“Huh, silver lining.”

“I moved your collection of dildos and array of sex toys first.”

“Good thinking. Gotta charge extra for add-ons.”

“Wait. What?”

He fluttered innocent lashes. “So where did the guests come from?”

I told him about Noreen’s article, which I still hadn’t seen, but assumed had done a grand job of making the SOS Hotel out to be the only safe place in San Francisco. Zee nodded along, guiding me out of the bar, into the rear of the hotel, and out the back door, where the Love Wagon waited with Victor leaning a hip against the driver’s door.

“I apologize, Adam,” Victor said soberly. “We did not succeed.”

I slipped from Zee’s arms and instantly slotted into Victor’s. “I only care that you’re back. And safe.”

“Fancy Daddy, while you and I were gone, Adam filled the hotel with paying guests,” Zee explained.

“That is a welcome surprise.” Victor’s smile soothed my strained heart. But then his smile fell away, his eyes narrowed, and the fangs glinted. “How did you get bruises

on your neck?”

“The fuck!?” Zee lunged, and gently tilted my chin. “Who the fuck touched you?!” His wings unfurled behind him, and already wrapped in warrior leathers, Zee’s body language went from Fun-Zee to Murder-Zee in the blink of an eye. Purple lightning blazed through his wings, his tail lashed, his nails glinted, and fury blazed in his beautiful eyes. “Who did this, Adam?” he growled.

Static sparks danced around him and even a rumble of thunder started up in the distance.

“Oh, this? Uh...” I rubbed my tender throat. “So, don’t get mad.” They were already mad. “I dealt with it.”

“Dealt with what?” Victor snarled.

In that moment, the two of them, standing side by side, Zee aglow in purple and Victor radiating killer energy? They had to be two of the most dangerous and powerful Lost Ones in the city—Zee was even altering the weather.

They were amazing and they were mine, and I loved them. “Aw, you guys are the best.”

Zee bowed his head, and glared through glittery lashes. “Who are we brutally butchering?”

“Sebastien came back.”

Silent purple lightning split the sky. “Where is he?” Zee’s voice was all ice now. If Sebastien had still been with us, Zee would have torn him apart. Thankfully, he didn’t have to.

“Uh, he’s not here anymore, or technically anywhere. He’s a little bit . . . uhm . . . dead?”

Zee blinked, his wings drooped, and the building energy fizzled out. “Wait, did you eat him and I missed it?”

“No, not that.” I smiled innocently and stuffed my hands into my pockets. “Oh, what have you got there?” I asked, spotting something boulder-shaped under a grubby sheet in the back of the Love Wagon . They must have brought it back with them from Gideon’s mansion.

“Adam... Kitten?” Zee grabbed my hand and pressed it over his warm chest. “Just tell me he can’t hurt you or anyone ever again.” The pain in his eyes wasn’t for him, but for all the people Sebastien had used and abused for years.

I nodded. “He cannot hurt me or anyone ever again.”

Zee sighed his relief. His face briefly paled, but after a moment’s grief he smiled, gave his wings a shake, and was over it. “Vengeance, thy name is Adam Vex.”

“Did you perchance bring an end to Sebastien’s existence, pack him into a wooden crate, and ship him back to Gideon Cain?” Victor asked, concisely.

That was exactly what I’d done. “Uh, how do you know that?”

“I saw the jukebox crate being loaded into a van on our return to the hotel—the only box large enough to contain a body. The address label clearly showed Gideon Cain’s premises.”

It was impossible to slip anything by Victor. “It seemed fitting. And Seb did fit, so there’s that.”

Zee ruffled my hair then yanked me into a bear hug. “That’s my spicy murder twink.”

“So, what is that thing?” I asked again, spying the covered item in the back of the van.

“Ah yes, well.” Victor pinched the sheet. “We didn’t entirely fail.”

He tugged off the cover, and there was the machine I’d hoped never to see again. A harvester. Maybe the exact harvester that had stolen my power from me. It looked a bit battered from where Victor had torn into it that night at the Dine and Fight finale.

“Do not worry, it’s still broken.” Zee thumped its dented casing. A rattle sounded inside it, then a bead popped from its output tray and shot through the air.

Victor caught the little projectile, scrutinized it, then dropped it into his pocket. “Not one of yours, Adam, but worth holding onto, nonetheless.”

“Don’t eat that,” Zee warned.

Victor arched an eyebrow. “What fool would?”

Zee ruffled his wings. “Anyhoo, the harvester was out back, in one of Gideon’s barns. Fancy Fangs said he might be able to fix it.”

“Why?” I asked. That thing made my skin itch. All I wanted to do with it was set it on fire, just to be sure it wasn’t ever coming back to life.

“Only as a last resort,” Victor said. “Should Gideon manage to extract your power.”

“Please cover it up.” I shuddered and welcomed Victor’s arm scooping me close again.

“Oh, uh... sure.” Zee hefted the sheet back over it.

“Oh, what about Tom?” I asked, almost forgetting our foul-mouthed saboteur.

Zee pulled his phone from his tight leathers and waggled it. “He’s inside this and portable now, but also not fuckin’ happy.” Zee donned a Tom voice. “ You two useless fuckups didn’t get the job done, after I set it all up for you.” He tossed me the phone. “You just gotta plug the phone in behind the bar.”

“Me?” It sounded as though Tom might come out swinging.

“He was exceedingly graphic in his assessment of our failure,” Victor agreed. “He is less verbally aggressive toward you.”

Really? Tom had always been pretty vocal when it came to listing my many faults too. “He’ll be alright once he sees we’ve got a hotel full of people he can sell cocktails to.”

“So, we got a harvester, one hundred percent occupancy, and the wicked bitch of Razorsedge is finally dead.” Zee’s grin bloomed. “This is a fucking awesome night. Imma get changed into sparkles.” He poofed away, probably into his own room, despite it being occupied.

Victor stayed by my side, in no hurry to leave. The night was quiet around us, the neighborhood sleeping. Zee’s storm clouds had faded, letting the stars twinkle.

“Are you truly alright?” Victor’s smooth voice rumbled through me.

“Yeah.” I dropped my head back against his shoulder. “Gideon Cain will send Daisy next.”

“Yes, I suspect so.”

We were going to have to “deal with” her too. And when Gideon was done sending his people, he’d eventually have to confront us himself. But in the meantime, he’d be desperately trying to figure out how to bleed my power dry.

“How do we stop him, Victor?”

Victor’s cheek twitched. “I do not know.”

The final battle wasn’t going to wait for us to figure it out. It was coming, whether we were ready or not.

CHAPTER 11

The vampire lawyer, Pierce, arrived on the hotel steps right after sunup, standing under an umbrella and with a full contingent of vampire bodyguards, also under umbrellas.

He handed me a sealed letter and left.

It was all very dramatic for eight a.m. I hadn't even had my morning whiskey yet, and after just a few hours of exhaustion-fueled sleep tucked between Victor and Zee, I already felt hungover without the aid of alcohol.

The contents of the letter did nothing for my mood. I handed it to Victor, who frowned and said simply, "Unfortunate."

Were the vampires going to mount a huge battle? Were they going to send in their warriors to fight us to our dying breaths?

No, they were suing us.

"We can't afford a lawyer."

Zee, dressed in an oversized T-shirt that read Daddy's Little Bitch on it, snatched the letter from Victor's hand. "Personal injury? Damage to property? Ugh, vampires are so fucking dull. What kind of grand finale is this bullshit?" He tore up the letter and tossed the pieces in the trash behind the reception desk. "Daisy can sue my ass."

“Your ass is also on the list,” Victor said.

Zee paced. His heels clipped the floor, his wings bounced, and his tail lashed. “I vote we go over to Vampire Mansion and fuck ’em up. I have Shareen. Murder Daddy has stealth and can snap necks like twigs. Adam, you’re...” He paused, pointing. “Staying here.”

“Admirable enthusiasm, but I doubt you or I can stand against several hundred well-trained vampires in their own territory.”

Victor had a point. “Then we should invite Daisy here,” I said.

Zee stopped pacing, cocked a hip, and folded his arms. “You’re kidding, right? You think Buffy’s gonna come?”

“We’ll make the invitation public. Invite her over as a show of friendship. She won’t want to be seen as afraid, so she’ll come.”

“Then what? Chop her up and put her in pies? Have Jimmy pluck out her eyeballs—wait, I got this! I stake her through the heart during an improvised stage show about demons killing vampires? Wooden stakes work, right?”

Victor blinked. “No. How do you not know this when among vampires, Lycian, Scourge of Demios, is one of the most feared and revered demon warriors of all time?”

Zee fluttered a hand. “Sssh. Your breathing is interrupting my braining.”

“I mean... I’m not saying we should do this... but Tom can make some real interesting cocktails.” I put that out there, for the sake of having options.

They both stared in silence.

I shrugged. “Just a thought. I have them. Sometimes.”

Zee checked Victor to get a feel for the mood in the room. “Tom does make potent cocktails.”

“That he does,” Victor agreed.

“What’s the point in having a djinn bartender if you don’t let him stretch his djinn bits every now and then,” Zee added. “It’s only fair.”

I nodded enthusiastically.

Victor side-eyed me. “It could work.”

“And it will cheer Tom up.” I figured Tom had been desperate to murder someone since he’d learned he’d been lied to, had his memory wiped and been trapped behind our bar, working for three people he didn’t believe would amount to much. Our failed attempt to infiltrate Gideon’s mansion hadn’t helped.

“I’ll go talk to him. Victor, why don’t you find Noreen, and see if we can get the news out that we’re welcoming all Lost Ones, especially newly crowned vampire queens. Zee...” His wings perked up. “I really need you checking in on our guests?—”

“I’ve got this!” He immediately poofed away, and a moment later, a scream sounded from somewhere on the upper floors. Yup, he’d translocated straight into a guest’s room.

With everyone busy, I headed into the bar. Despite the early start, Tom’s bar was

half-full of folks chatting. The jukebox jingled in the corner, and Tom Collins stood behind the counter, looking like a vision of bartending expertise with his burgundy jacket, black bow tie, and slicked back hair.

“No,” he said, as I leaned on the counter.

“You don’t even know what I’m going to ask.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s no.” He thumbed at the sign behind him: Do Not Argue with the Bartender.

“We missed you.”

Tom poured my morning whiskey. “And you can tell that chef if he puts a single tentacle on my shakers again, I’ll cut it off, chop it up, and use it as a garnish in a new drink, named especially for fish-people who leave disgusting slime all over my sparkling surfaces.”

“Right.” I wrapped my fingers around the glass. “I’ll uh... tell him.”

“What do you want?”

“You know that thing we’re always telling you not to do?”

“Fucking swear?”

“Uh, no . . . the other thing.”

“Be liberal with a few bags of blow?”

“Uh, no. Not that.”

“Offer free fucking life advice to the swathes of hopeless losers that pass through those doors?”

“Er...” I pinched my lips together and winked.

Tom stopped polishing the glass and winked back.

“Yes, that,” I confirmed. “You got it.”

“Right.” He winked again.

Hopefully, we were both winking for the same reason. I should probably clarify, so he didn’t murder a random guest. “Daisy is coming to the hotel. She’s going to order a special cocktail.”

“Right.” He smiled. “What are we talkin’ here? A Long Walk off a Short Pier?”

“Yes, but . . . vampire strength.”

His grin stretched wider. “I have the perfect drink.”

“Okay.” Was I doing the right thing, asking him to do this? “Only if you’re comfortable with this. Don’t feel that you have to. I don’t want to force you into doing something you don’t want to do.”

He snorted. “It’s a fucking miracle I haven’t killed you all by now, putting you out of your misery—and mine.”

I eyed my untouched drink. “Uh. You know what? I’ll skip the whiskey this morning.”

“Your loss. No refunds.” He picked up my whiskey and downed it in one smooth gulp. I still wasn’t sure where anything he consumed went, and probably didn’t want to know. I did want to know, however, how he was able to hop a ride in Zee’s phone without his hard drive.

“Tom, are you uh . . . free range now?”

He glared, as though he was about to launch into another tirade about how stupid or pathetic I was, which was his love language. His way of showing he cared. Maybe.

“It’s just, you were able to work the jukebox, and then getting into Gideon Cain’s electrics? That’s all pretty impressive.”

“If you’re asking whether I’m still stuck behind this bar? No, I can leave whenever I want. All I need is a cable, like a landline, and I’m outta this fuckin’ half-baked hotel.”

“Oh.” So he could leave at any time. But he hadn’t. I smiled back at him. “I see.”

“Don’t look so smug. If I left, this place would be in the ground within a week. Who do you think is holding it all together? You? Ha. Have you looked in a mirror lately? You’re a mess.”

I had looked in a mirror, and he wasn’t wrong. Being human was a lot harder than it looked. “Thanks, I guess... For staying.”

“The pay’s good, since I take what I like from the profits, and the entertainment keeps things interesting,” he admitted, then shrugged. “Where else am I going to go?”

Yeah, but he also secretly liked us. I could tell by his sneer. “In Agatha’s lab, there were others like you—Djinn, I mean. Victor went back there to burn it all down. It

may be worth chatting to him about what he found.”

Tom stopped polishing the glass and gently set it down on the glossy bartop. “I know what I am, and if I ever want to go back to that life, Lord Reynard has shown me a way. But right now, I’m keeping an eye on the three most pathetic hoteliers on the west coast... because someone has to.”

Victor had helped him already? Of course he had. The ex-vampire torturer had a chaotic good streak.

“For what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re watching out for us,” I said.

“You won’t be when you see the consultancy fee.”

I snorted, and Tom laughed along, even though we both knew he wasn’t joking.

To everyone’s surprise, when Victor reached out to propose a truce, Daisy agreed to meet in the hotel bar to discuss terms. We figured she’d heard surrender, but it didn’t matter—whatever got her through the door was worth it. It probably helped that she knew I was powerless, and that the wards would prevent any harm from coming to her under my roof. In some weird twist of fate, or my own wishful thinking, I’d become the harmless human I’d been pretending to be for years.

And my trap was set.

Humans didn’t have giant claws, they couldn’t breathe fire, and they didn’t have wingspans bigger than a basketball court, but they had some similarities to dragons—such as being manipulative.

The packed hotel kept us busy until the next evening, when Daisy’s motorcade pulled up outside.

The bar had become the heart of the hotel again, and was full of folks enjoying drinks, music, and each other's company. A few glanced our way as I led Daisy toward the bar where Victor waited, but most didn't pay us much attention. Probably because Zee was on stage.

He'd noticed our arrival, but kept dancing around his pole as though our plan—now in motion—wasn't about to change our lives, and maybe the lives of all vampires too. If the plan panned out, Daisy wouldn't be leaving the SOS Hotel alive.

Victor bowed his head. "My queen."

"Hm, yes." She eyed Victor with disdain, and then the rest of the bar and its people as though we were bugs beneath her shiny pink shoes. "It's so... quaint." After hopping onto a stool, she laid her eyes on the dapper Tom Collins. "The foul-mouthed barman." Her legs swung under the stool. "I must be special, if the gang is all here."

The jukebox clunked, the lights dimmed, and Zee began to sing the opening bars of "Rebel Yell" while strutting his stuff in his stunning blood-red pantsuit—no shirt, just a black tie— instantly ensuring everyone looked at him, and not us.

"What can I get you?" Tom Collins asked.

"Milk," Daisy said.

"Milk?" he recoiled.

"Yes."

"Just milk? Shall I spice it up with some?—"

"Are you deaf, barkeep? I said milk! I want a glass of milk!"

Tom Collins's eyes narrowed to deadly slits. He flung the dishcloth over his shoulder and opened his mouth?—

“Get the queen her milk,” Victor verbally stepped in before Tom Collins could launch into a tirade about underage brats in his bar that would see all the vampires swarm into the hotel like rats.

Tom huffed, and turned his back on us to find some milk. Hopefully, he'd still be able to whip up something deadly to vampires.

“Thank you.” Daisy smoothed her hair back and flicked her ponytail, and caught Reynard staring. “Who are you again? I forget. All my underlings look alike.”

“Lord Reynard, my queen.”

“Ah yes, you failed to gift this bundle of contradictions to Mommy.”

I figured she meant me, and smiled innocently.

“No glamor, Mr. Vex. It's like seeing you naked,” she giggled.

“I'm just a normal human now,” I agreed, pretending to be sad about it. It didn't take all that much effort.

Daisy laughed. “That didn't work before, and it's not working now. Do you think I'm just a twelve-year-old girl? No. I'm the queen of the entire vampire race. The best of all races. So let us discuss your surrender.”

“Surrender? Erm, well, it was more of a truce?—”

“No, it's surrender. Here is what I want, and if I do not get it then I will have my

people sue you so hard, you will have to dismantle this hotel and sell it off, piece by woodworm-riddled piece. Number one: Lord Reynard will be returned to me for punishment and his eventual death, and that is me being lenient. Non-negotiable.”

Death by torture was lenient?

Zee was giving it his all on the stage, making the bar bounce to the beat. “I’d sell my soul... for you, babe.”

“Number two: this hotel will be my new playhouse,” Daisy continued. “Number three: that demon’s tongue shall be torn from his mouth, chopped into tiny pieces, and fed to my Guinea pigs, Mr. and Mrs. Tiddles.”

“You have Guinea pigs?”

She pointed at Zee without turning her head. “And his wings on my wall. As for you, Mr. Adam Vex, I want your heart in a jar, so I can watch it shrivel up and die on my bedside table. Then I will grind it up and sprinkle the dust on my glass of milk. Just like this one.” She picked up the innocuous looking glass of milk and brought it to her lips, then spotted the dark dusting on its surface. “What’s this?”

“Cinnamon,” Tom said. “Adds a warming kick.”

Tom was being too nice.

She’d figure out something was wrong. Tom was never nice.

I held my breath and took a nervous glance at Victor.

He wasn’t moving either. His resting Victor face was as blank as always, but he couldn’t hide that tightness around his eyes.

All she had to do was drink her milk.

Daisy slowly lifted her gaze from the cinnamon-sprinkled glass of milk. “You wouldn’t be trying to poison me, now would you, Mr. Tom Collins?”

Tom’s shoulders hardened into a line, his chin lifted. “Your words wound me. They strike at the core of my very being. These drinks?” He flung a hand out behind himself, encompassing the racks of colorful bottles. “These drinks are my children. Nurtured and cherished with my every living breath. My craft is my soul, the reason my heart beats in my chest.”

He didn’t have a heart, but he was on a roll.

“Satisfying each and every customer is my single purpose for existing. Your liquid wish is my command. Every drink I serve in this forsaken shithheap of a hotel is the pinnacle of liquid sustenance. I strive for perfection with every fiber of my artificial being. My work is my art! Why would I poison you?” He paused, and closed his soliloquy with a demure smile. “I am but a humble AI bartender, but I guarantee that glass of milk is my magnum opus. There, in your hand, is the finest glass of milk you will ever consume.”

Daisy’s eyes had gotten wider as she’d listened to his monologue, and now it was over she smiled at me. “I had to be sure.” She took a sip.

I couldn’t hear Zee anymore, just the sound of my galloping heart.

I didn’t dare look at Victor. Or Tom.

My smile stayed pinned to my face.

“It is very nice,” Daisy said. “So, back to my generous terms?—”

She began to turn to face Victor, but jerked upright. A tiny gasp left her lips, and Daisy fell forward. Tom whipped the glass of milk away just in time for Daisy's forehead to meet the bar where it had been.

My thudding heart stopped.

Tom's little smile slid down at one corner, turning into a murderous smirk.

Victor's eyes got all silvery and big.

We'd just killed the vampire queen.

Again.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:15 am

CHAPTER 12

Murder was one thing. Getting away with it was something else entirely.

Daisy lay slumped over the counter, in the middle of the packed hotel bar, and it was around then I realized we hadn't planned for what came next—disposal.

Zee continued to belt out “Rebel Yell” and hold captive every single person in the audience, except me... and Victor.

“Erm, Victor?” I said through gritted teeth.

Victor blinked at the dead Daisy, his face stuck in rigor.

“Victor?” I dropped off the stool, stepped around Daisy's hunched figure, and laid a hand on Victor's arm.

He startled. “Adam! My apologies, I... I'm surprised and somewhat alarmed that we have succeeded.”

I was too. I hadn't expected Tom's drink to be so potent, although I should have. He was nothing if not efficient. “What do we do now?” I whispered. Nobody was looking over, but we only had a few minutes before one of Daisy's entourage noticed she was face down on the bar.

“Right. Yes.” He cleared his throat. “What do we do?”

“I don’t know. I’m asking you .”

“Of course.” He cleared his throat again but his gaze kept skittering back to Daisy.

“Uh...”

Zee’s song ended to rapturous applause. Once his show was over we’d be getting scrutinized, which wouldn’t be a great time to be sitting next to a dead vampire queen.

Victor stared at Daisy. “I’ll uh... I’ll move her.” His eyebrows pinched.

“Victor?”

“Yes?”

“You’ve got this,” I told him. “We just need to move a body in a room full of people without anyone seeing, that’s all.” And he was the only one who could do that, as he moved crazy fast, but it needed to happen now .

Zee poofed to my left, raining glittery purple sparks that told everyone in the room to LOOK HERE!

He slung an arm around me. “Did you see me fuckin’ slay ‘Rebel Yell?’”

“Oh yes, it was great.” I showed him a wooden grin, then nodded toward the body.

“But we have the thing we have to do. You remember the thing we talked about?”

A blank look stalled him.

I blinked deliberately, and side-eyed Daisy again.

“Oh fuck, right. Why’s Fancy Fangs not doing the thing after Tom did the thing ? Wasn’t that the plan?”

Tom watched on, still smirking and in no way helping with our current predicament. At my glance, he winked.

The crowd bustled. The jukebox burbled. And the vampire queen was very dead in the middle of it all.

Zee ducked to get a closer look at Victor’s pale face. “Hello, Your Lordship?”

“Yes, of course, I just...” He stammered. “Goodness, it’s rather warm, isn’t it?”

I knew what was happening. “He’s having a crisis ,” I whispered, glancing around to check we still weren’t being watched. “Like you had a crisis after you—” I drew a line across my throat. “Dispatched the previous queen.”

“What?” Zee flustered. “At least I had the decency to have my crisis later! Not while we were in the middle of doing the dispatching.” He rolled his eyes. “Ugh. Do I have to fuckin’ do everything around here?”

“Oh, there you are Adam.” Noreen Greene gleefully shoved herself from the crowd, into our little circle of trust ... that included a dead vampire queen hunched over the bar. “Oh dear, is she alright?”

“What?” I squeaked. “Uhm... Yes, she is fine,” I said those last words, like it might help convey that nothing was wrong.

Zee scraped Daisy’s limp body off the bar and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Rigor mortis hadn’t yet set in, so Daisy was pliable. Thankfully, her eyes were closed. “She’s just sleepy.” He grabbed her wrist and made her hand flap. “Too much

milk does that to a vampire.”

“Milk does this?” Noreen asked.

“Noreen, wow, thank you so much for putting us on the map.” I draped an arm over her shoulders and scooted her in the opposite direction from the murder scene. “Look at what your article did. Everyone here is uh... safe from Gideon Cain.” Just not safe from us, I mentally added.

A quick glance back revealed a gap at the bar where Zee, Victor, and Daisy had been, and Tom grinning like a crazy murderbot. Maybe his homicidal stand-in hadn’t been so far from normal Tom after all. What if I’d created a serial killer? No, Tom was Tom, just like he’d always been—our barman who routinely drugged and verbally abused customers... What was a little murder anyway? We’d all done it.

“Is everything alright?” Noreen asked.

“Oh, yup, just fine.”

“How is the meeting going with Daisy?” Noreen glanced behind us, but I quickly urged her on.

“Oh, uh, you know, not great, actually. I think she had to leave, to get back for some kind of vampire emergency.”

“She did?”

“Anyhoo. Tell me all about this article. What did you say that has people lining up to stay at our amazing hotel.”

“Simply that the prophecy is real and you are the Chosen One who will save all Lost

Ones from Gideon Cain's dark ways."

I stopped dead in my tracks. "You wrote that?"

"Oh yes. I've turned over a new leaf." She preened and poked at her stiff hairdo. "I report only the truth, and as your identity is something of an open secret these days, it added that spicy pizzazz to a story that everyone loves."

"Oh . . . uh . . . yes. Good, I guess."

Everyone here knew who I was? They'd all come because they thought I could save them? Me?

Oh dear. "Er, if you'll excuse me, I just need to check on... the gremlins."

"Let's have a drink Mr. Vex, to celebrate the inevitable downfall of that terrible man."

"Uhm, yes, later..." I hurried off, leaving Noreen staring after me. Oh no, oh no, oh no. Every guest wanted me to be their hero? That wasn't part of the plan. I had to find Victor and Zee. They needed to know that the whole world knew I was the Chosen One. I had to stay calm. I could do calm.

Where would they have taken Daisy? The kitchens? To make pies? No. We didn't do that. Maybe the attic? Yes. I'd take the elevator...

I hit the elevator button and the doors immediately rumbled open, revealing Victor and Zee inside and arguing. Zee had his arm looped around Daisy's waist, and Daisy was slumped over like a pink and white ventriloquist's dummy.

"Why are you still here?" I hissed, and hopped inside the elevator. I was quickly

followed by a glamorous fae guest who had long, straight white hair and was dressed in a pale green pantsuit.

Zee and Victor fell silent.

The doors closed, and we shuddered into motion.

Well . . . this was . . . awkward.

“Is she okay?” the tall, well-dressed fae asked.

“She’s my sister,” I blurted, then laughed. “She’s so silly. We’re just taking her back to her room. A bit too much happy juice and she’s out cold. You know what sisters are like.”

“Are those fangs?” the guest asked.

“What?” I looked at Daisy... and the fangs poking out from between her lips.

Zee flopped Daisy’s head back, then tugged her lips down over her fangs. “Nope,” he said. “Just normal human baby teeth.”

“Human babies have teeth?” the guest asked.

“Yes,” Zee said, with confidence. “Huge teeth. Big chompers. So normal, not a vampire. Like Adam is normal. Aren’t you Adam?”

“Uh—”

“Adam is also not a vampire,” Zee continued. “Unlike that dashing piece of suit-clad ass looming behind you. He looks creepy, but he’s actually a softy and knows a

hundred ways to use a tie in the bedroom. Say hello, Daddy Vampire.”

Victor frowned.

“Say it, Fancy Fangs, the lady is waiting,” Zee urged through his thin smile. Beads of perspiration made his face shine under the elevator’s new, intense lighting.

“Good evening,” Victor said through his teeth, as though chewing glass.

“See, he’s a vampire. This girl is just a sleepy human who can’t hold her milk. We’re taking her to her comfy room where everything will be fine?—”

“Zodiac,” Victor said. “I suspect you have said enough.”

The elevator chimed and jolted to a stop, and the guest left, eyeing us suspiciously.

“I think she bought it,” Zee said, once the doors had closed on us and we were underway again.

“Where are we taking Daisy?” I asked.

“Housekeeping’s storage closet,” Victor explained. “Unless you know a better temporary location?”

“Okay, alright... that works.” The closet was pretty large, with a lockable door, and if I had all the keys nobody would stumble on our dead vampire.

“Get her feet,” Zee ordered Victor. “This cutesy girl is heavier than she looks.”

Victor bent and grabbed Daisy’s ankles, then picked her up so they had the vampire queen slung between them.

“This is fine,” I puffed, and willed away a wave of lightheadedness. “We’re doing so fine.”

“Are we?” Zee’s voice pitched higher. “I’m not feeling fine. He doesn’t look fine.”

Victor was even paler than before. Was he about to pass out? Then we’d have two limp vampires to deal with.

“I am fine,” he growled. “I’m internalizing the fact we have killed a second vampire queen and will likely start a war.”

“Nobody needs to panic. We’re all doing great,” I told them, hoping it didn’t sound as panicked as it had in my head. “This is great.” That one I muttered for my benefit.

The elevator pinged and the doors opened. I took a quick look at the corridor, found it clear, and waved them out. Storage was at the end. The little room would be crammed with brooms, mops, buckets, but should be large enough for a corpse.

“We look like three fuckin’ pedos right now,” Zee mumbled, walking backwards, his hands under Daisy’s armpits. “Kidnapping a twelve-year-old. This is a new fuckin’ low, and I fuckin’ know low. You must get this a lot, Fancy Fangs. There’s always an age gap with your ancient ass.”

“She’s a great deal older than twelve, and would most certainly have had us all killed as soon as our meeting ended,” Victor grumbled, holding her ankles.

I unlocked the storage room and flicked on the light. The room had never looked smaller, and wasn’t much larger than a normal closet. Shelves stocked with sheets and towels filled the walls. All the hotel’s cleaning equipment was stacked at the back. “Okay, stuff her in the back with the mops.”

Zee backed in but quickly ran out of room, so he shoved Daisy upright and pushed her floppy body into Victor's arms. "Demon?" Victor growled.

"It's fuckin' tight in here . . . I'm fabulously huge . . . and she's your problem."

"I believe she's rather a problem for all of us." Victor shimmied deeper into the tight space, dancing with Daisy, and I followed, closing the door behind us. Under the single naked bulb, we all shuffled in.

"Demon, move over," Victor urged.

"I can't." Zee had already squished himself into a gap between two shelves.

"I need to place the body behind you," Victor explained. "To do that, you have to step aside."

"I'm fuckin' trying." He scooted to his right, shuffling around, and Victor scooted to his right, also shuffling, with Daisy pinned between them in some sort of macabre threesome waltz.

"This is a terrible idea," I muttered, and spied a cabinet at the back. It wasn't big, and only came up to Zee's hip, but it could hold a folded corpse. "Try the cabinet," I told them.

They shuffled some more, bumping and growling. A wooden broom skidded sideways along the wall. A shelf unit rattled under Zee's elbow, spilling cleaning bottles. This room had seemed a lot larger without four people in it.

Zee bent, opened the cabinet door, then promptly shut it again. He straightened, eyebrows pinched close. "Uh, okay, but you know there's a portal in there, right?"

“A what?”

“Big swirly hole?”

I sighed and rubbed my face. Why did all our problems have to happen at once? You try to do one simple little murder... and it always ends up complicated. “Wait. Let me see.” For me to get anywhere near it, we all had to shuffle around in a jerking circle of bodies until I finally reached the cabinet, and opened it.

It’s not that I hadn’t believed Zee—portals weren’t new to us. But now?!

Sure enough, inside was a swirling, heaving, beating mass, just like the one that had hovered over my bed not so long ago. At least this one was much smaller.

I shut the door again.

Zee side-eyed Victor.

“The portal has nothing to do with me,” Victor replied, hiking Daisy higher against his chest.

“Like it wasn’t anything to do with you last time?” Zee huffed.

“The simple solution is to go through it,” Victor said. “You’ll not find Reynard Technologies at the other end because if you recall, we destroyed it.”

“Go through it?” Zee exclaimed. “Can you not see my fabulous red suit? Naw dawg, I’ve watched this movie and the demon gets lubed. You’re the dominant one, you control the lube, you penetrate first.”

Victor’s eyes narrowed. He struggled again to heave Daisy’s awkward body upright.

“You entered the last portal without a second thought.”

“Yes I did, and I learned a valuable lesson. You should be proud.”

“I’ll do it.” I opened the cabinet door again.

“No!” they both barked.

Zee’s tail whipped out and swatted the cabinet door shut. “No fuckin’ way. Not gonna happen. Who cares where it goes, right? Shove the preteen in— poof —trash gone, problem solved.”

That would be a convenient solution. But shoving corpses into random holes was almost as bad as entering a portal without knowing what was on the other side. I glanced at Victor.

“Frankly,” he sighed. “I do not have any better ideas, and every second we spend arguing in this closet risks our discovery.”

“I don’t know. Shouldn’t we see where it goes first?” I asked. “What if it comes out right over the police commissioner’s desk—the vice commissioner’s desk? We uh... we had the last one arrested.”

“That is highly unlikely,” Victor said.

“As unlikely as finding another fuckin’ portal in the hotel’s housekeeping closet?” Zee asked. “Ugh. Fuck. Fine. Step aside.” Zee shrugged off his red jacket and handed it to me, leaving him impressively bare-chested. We shuffled against each other, trying to get Zee back in position at the front of the cabinet.

“Hm, hello there, Kitten,” he purred, pressed up close against my chest. “Snug fit.”

His eyebrows jumped suggestively.

“Hi.” I smiled up at him.

Victor cleared his throat. “The vampire queen continues to remain deceased in my arms, so if you don’t mind, please postpone the romantics for later?”

“Ugh... You suck all the fun out of everything. If this portal ruins my fuckn’ pants imma make you pay, Fancy Daddy.” Zee opened the cabinet door, took a deep breath, dropped to his knees, and climbed in. The portal gobbled him all up until the last thing to vanish was his tail.

“He will be fine,” Victor said, seeing the concern on my face.

He probably would be okay. He’d said before that portals always popped up in Demontown. Something to do with lots of Lost Ones in one place altering the environment. But just because he’d always been fine, didn’t mean he wasn’t in danger. “How can you be so certain?”

Victor considered it and replied simply, “He is Zodiac.”

Zee splurged from the portal, thankfully not lubed. He tumbled into my legs, knocking me against Daisy, and then Victor, like a short run of dominoes. Victor growled in my ear, his patience with closet living wearing thin.

I grabbed Zee by an arm and helped haul him upright. “You okay?”

He ruffled himself and smoothed his pants. “Uhm, so...” A flurry of hand gestures flicked dust off his chest and then fluffed his purple hair. “Am I okay? Hm... Let’s fuckin’ see. I’m in a closet with my favorite people, which is fine, but then you add another dead vampire queen, and there’s a portal...” A deep breath expanded his

chest. Clearly, something bad had been on the other side and he was building up to saying it.

“A portal to . . . ?” I urged.

His gaze skipped behind me to Victor, then down.

He yelped, and leaped back. “Vampire!”

Daisy—close behind me—yelled, “Demon!” in my ear.

Zee screamed.

I might have screamed too—it felt right, at the time. There was a whole lot of screaming for such a tiny closet.

I spun, to try and see how and why Daisy was alive to scream. She kicked out. Her pretty pink shoe struck my chest. I toppled, flailing into Zee. In my arm-waving panic, I dislodged a broom. It skittered sideways down the wall. Zee shrieked, caught me, but as he reeled, he stepped on the broom, snapping the handle in half.

Zee—in full-blown protect-Adam mode—smacked the upright broken bit of broom with his tail, right as Daisy launched herself from Victor’s arms.

The jagged end of the broken broom met the flying vampire, punching into her chest. She jolted, mid-air, hung there a moment, then dropped back into Victor’s grip.

Daisy looked down at the broom sticking out of her.

Oh dear.

Zee pressed his hands to his mouth, with me tucked under his arms, and gasped, “Fuuuuccckk.”

Daisy’s head lifted. Furious vampire eyes swirled with ancient menace. “You are so fuckin’ dead!”

Zee poofed out of the closet.

He’d left us?!

No, he wouldn’t, but he had vanished.

Purple sparks fizzled from his dramatic exit.

“Victor, hold her!”

Victor bared his gritted, fanged teeth. “I am!”

He’d locked his arms around Daisy, pinning her arms to her sides.

“Unhand me! I am your queen!” She bucked, kicked, and thrashed, but Victor held firm. Now we just needed to figure out what to do with this very angry and very alive queen with a broom handle sticking out of her chest.

“Should I pull it out?” I reached out and winced as the broom bobbed in the air with her every buck. It looked painful, although she was thrashing so much, did she even feel it?

“No! Leave it!” Victor strained, having trouble holding her.

“What do we do?!”

Don't panic, don't panic. This wasn't our fault. "Uh, Daisy? About the broom? That was a total accident. You kicked me, and I fell back, and Zee was just protecting me, and the broom well... the broom..." Had very clearly ended up inside her.

Daisy seethed and snapped her teeth like a rabid dog straining at its leash. "I am going to rip off your every appendage, Adam Vex, and then hand you over to that sorcerer in pieces!"

Zee poofed back into the closet in a second dramatic wave of purple sparks. Those same sparks danced along Shareen—his sword. In the confines of the closet, there wasn't much room to move, or avoid what happened next.

Victor shoved Daisy forward. Zee had the sword held at shoulder height, or if you're a twelve-year-old vampire... neck height.

Whether Daisy accidentally cut her own head off, or Zee sliced it off... who's to know? The result was the same.

Daisy's head plopped to the floor. A comical spray of blood fountained from her neck, painting all of us in a crimson shower, then cut off, as her body hadn't yet got the message it was missing its head and attempted to heal the devastating and abrupt end to her neck.

Her thrashing ceased.

On the floor, Daisy's head wobbled, and her mouth gupped like a dead fish, but after a few seconds, even that stopped.

The whole world went quiet.

The wards hadn't activated so... it really had been an accident?

“Holy shizzle on a fuckstick!” Zee hugged Shareen to his chest. “What the fuck just happened?”

Victor blinked blood-splattered eyes and dropped Daisy’s headless corpse in a heap on the floor, the ineffectual broom handle still sticking out of her chest.

Right.

Okay.

“New plan.” I tasted blood, and grimaced.

We were back to where we’d been a few minutes ago, only now we had two bits of body to dispose of and a whole lot of blood spray to clean up.

“I told you staking doesn’t work,” Victor grumbled, attempting to wipe blood off his shirt but smearing it instead.

“It was my tail !” He lowered the sword, grasped his tail in his free hand and waved it. “My fuckin’ tail. I told you it does things.”

“Your tail murdered the queen?” Victor wiped his face, smearing all the blood splatters in a gory mask. “Is that what you’re suggesting happened, when it is quite clear your sword left an obvious mark!”

“Nobody did it,” I said. “The wards didn’t kick in for anyone. It really was an accident.”

Panting, Zee eyed his sword, then the dead Daisy. “Adam’s right. It really was an accident.” He blinked and looked up. “You missed a bit of blood there, Victor,” Zee said, flashing a grin.

“You are equally blood-soaked, Zodiac,” Victor agreed.

I sighed and blinked at Daisy. “Okay... She’s super dead this time. Let’s shove her in the portal and hope for the best.” It was our only option.

“Right. Fuck. Yes.” Zee grabbed her head, opened the cabinet, and tossed it into the pulsating hole. “Enjoy your trip, Your Highness!”

Victor neatly collected Daisy’s body and shoved that through the hole too.

Zee shut the cabinet door, brushed his hands together, and huffed. “Okay. Let’s recap. We’re still alive, and there’s one less vampire in the world. Yay for us. Now, so I don’t get fuckin’ nightmares for the rest of my life, I need the three Fs —food, then we’re gonna fuck, and some mac and cheese after.”

“That’s two Fs ,” Victor said.

Zee narrowed his eyes. “Fuck, food, and fun . Or fuck you? There, three. Happy?.”

“We need to get cleaned up and get back down to the bar.” I flicked blood from my fingers. I was probably covered in just as much as Victor. “We’ve already been missing too long.”

I’d lock the closet and ask the gremlins to clean up the blood later. Gremlins didn’t ask awkward questions.

Putting a hand on the door knob, I remembered the one question Zee hadn’t answered. “Oh, hey, Zee. Where does the portal go?”

“Fuck, right, yeah. I almost forgot. So... Okay... Right... Erm.” After a deep breath, he held it and said simply, “It goes home.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, weird right?” His little nervous laugh had a few internal alarm bells ringing. Why would he be anxious about a portal leading back here?

“Demon,” Victor stepped in. “Do you mean somewhere other than the hotel?”

“I mean home . You know, the place we’ve all been shut off from for the last four years? The place we come from. Home .”

“There’s a portal through the veil in our hotel closet?” I asked.

“That’s what I’m saying.”

My face must have mirrored Victor’s shocked expression because all the blood in my veins turned to ice.

The only communication we’d had with home for four years and we’d just sent a headless vampire corpse through it.

Oh dear.

CHAPTER 13

Victor's suite had the largest shower, so we hurried there and began to strip off our bloody clothes.

Zee whipped off his pants in a few seconds, and strutted about the room unashamedly naked until he flopped back onto Victor's bed. "Now he's not a billionaire, we should make His Lordship have a tiny room. Then we can rent out this freakin' mansion."

The hissing sounds of the shower started up, where Victor was.

I struggled with my socks, which Daisy's blood had somehow glued to my feet, but also had most of my thoughts on the fact there was a portal through the veil in our closet, and what we were going to do about it. This wasn't some inconvenient door to Reynard Technologies. A portal home was a big deal. A huge deal. The biggest of deals since the veil had shut itself entirely four years ago.

"Hey, Kitten, you okay?"

"Huh. Yeah. I just..." I sat on the chair by the dresser, huffed, and stared at the frog ornament Zee had gifted Victor a couple of weeks ago.

I'd thought me being a world-ending dragon might change things, but a doorway home could too. Change wasn't all bad, though—look at how Victor and Zee had changed. I'd changed too. I wasn't always afraid anymore, like I'd been for most of my life. In fact, lately I'd been... happy. So change was good too.

Could the portal home be a good thing?

Not if Gideon found out about it. He'd control it—control us .

There was so much to think about, and all the people in the hotel thought I was their savior?

Zee sauntered over, knowing he was a whole lot of demon to drink in. His wings shimmered behind him. They'd been hidden this whole time, so they weren't as bloody as his torso, arms, and face. He knelt, spread my knees, and leaned in, bracing an arm either side of my legs. His lashes fluttered around glittery purple eyes.

His hand came up, and his fingers skimmed my jawline so softly that his touch might not have been there at all. Warmth and kindness and love filled his eyes. "Is that sock giving you trouble?"

I beamed. "You're so romantic."

He plucked off the sock and flung it over his head, between his wings. "What about this other guy? He givin' you trouble too?"

"Yeah, he is."

"Pfft." Zee tugged that one off too, and flung it behind him. "Socks are the worst." He grabbed my bare feet and waggled them. "You should wear suspenders and stockings . Although your legs are too stumpy to really show them off, but it's nothing a pair of heels won't fix."

I couldn't stop the laugh. He always knew how to lighten the mood. "Hey, Zee?"

"Yes, my sweet, bouncy-haired bundle of human squishiness."

“Wanna lick my feet?” I waggled my toes.

“I wanna lick all of you, but you’re human and I’m the best fuckin’ incubus, brimming with lots of incubusness and a shit-ton of pent-up sexual tension, so I’m gonna say yes, but no more, just the feet. Restrain yourself, this is gonna get spicy.”

I grinned from ear to ear and waggled my toes in his grip. “Alright. Go for it.”

Victor’s “ahem” sounded from the bathroom doorway. We both looked over to find him as naked and gorgeous as a Greek statue. “As much as some light-hearted relief is required, perhaps it can wait until we have washed off the blood and satisfied the hotel staff and guests that the vampire queen’s disappearance is nothing to do with us.”

Zee slumped on his heels and rolled his eyes. “You are such a mood killer.”

“Victor’s right.”

“Of course you’d agree.”

“As do you,” Victor said, sounding and looking stern.

Zee rose gracefully to his full height. While he’d been on his knees, the part of his anatomy the tattoo arrow pointed to had taken an interest in some up close and personal time.

None of us missed how Victor’s gaze roamed over the naked demon approaching him.

“You think you can stand there like a fuckin’ Adonis and order me about, Daddy Vampire? Then you are one hundred percent abso-fuckin’-lutely correct. Just so long

as we're all gettin' in this shower together."

Victor's throat moved in a slow swallow. "The risk to Adam in his current vulnerable state is too great."

"We're both grown-ups." Zee walked his fingers up Victor's left pec. "We can fuckin' control ourselves. And if not, you can control us... Right?"

"Two of us are grown-ups." Victor almost smiled as he said it.

It was like watching one of those wildlife shows, where one of the spiders is going to eat the other right after sex, but in this scenario, nobody knew who would survive. Of course, they both would. But the game was on, and I was here for it.

Zee flung a provocative look over his shoulder. "Adam, get your cute ass in the shower. Victor is going to teach us all about control. Aren't you, Daddy?" Zee poked a sharp claw at Victor's chest, over his heart, and sauntered through the doorway, out of my line of sight.

I wasn't going to say no, even if this was probably terrible timing. We hadn't been intimate in days, not since Gideon Cain had stolen my power. They were both predators who, each in their own way, devoured humans. And I was their prey.

Which was . . . kinda hot?

I scooted after Zee, flinging off the rest of my clothes under Victor's watchful, hungry gaze. That gaze hunted me down as I hopped into the shower with Zee, who was now without his wings. The water from the high-up jets hit his horns first, then cascaded down the rest of him, quickly washing the blood off in red streams.

"Come here." Zee had lathered the soap, and began to stroke down my shoulders,

avoiding the bandage that would have to come off now anyway, and down my arms. He saw me watching as his hands tracked lower, and tipped my chin up, leaving soapy suds behind. “I got you.”

Water quickly washed my skin clean, spiralling the evidence of our regicide down the drain.

That wasn’t supposed to be hot, right? Washing blood off each other?

But it kinda was.

I looked up, blinking into water droplets, and found Zee’s eyes aglow. Maybe I was still enough of a Lost One to resist his allure, although I wasn’t sure I cared to. I knew I was safe with him. He’d never hurt me, and neither would Victor.

Zee placed his hands on my shoulders, then stroked down my chest as he lowered himself to his knees. Parts of me were excited to see him on his knees, so it didn’t take long for his hands and gaze to find my dick.

From behind, Victor’s firm, soap-lathered hands took ownership of my hips. His suckling mouth teased over my neck. No teeth, no biting. It must have hurt him to keep from doing what came naturally, but it felt damn good to surrender to them both. Water and soap suds, massaging strokes, and the weight of Victor at my back, all combined into a heady thrall. I closed my eyes, letting them have all of me.

I’d always been unbreakable, but now they treated me like a precious idol—something to be worshipped. Maybe being human wasn’t so bad after all?

Zee’s hands and mouth worked in glorious harmony, taking me far away.

“The desire to take you is almost unbearable.” Victor’s luscious voice poured into my

ear. “This need may break me... in a good way.”

I managed to moan out some appreciative noises, especially now I’d found Zee’s horns to hold on to while his head bobbed and his tight mouth sucked me off. I’d never surrendered to anyone. Ever. I’d fought, and run, and survived—but never surrendered. Here, now, I could. They had me, they’d keep me safe, and I trusted them with my heart.

A heart that would save us all. And I was beginning to believe it.

“Wait . . . indigo . . .” I gasped.

Zee pulled off, and Victor eased back. Between them, I wavered—skin buzzing, body ablaze.

“Adam?” Victor asked, while Zee’s face from his position on his knees, blinking up into the streams of water, asked the same thing. Was I alright?

“It’s alright. I just... I want to savor it. Savor us in this moment.”

We were perfect. Change was coming, we would be tested, and I needed this memory to remind me I wasn’t alone. Not anymore.

“Alright.” I ran my hand through my wet hair, sweeping it back from my face, and smiled down at Zee. “I’m good—we’re good. I just needed a second, but I’ve got it.” I reached down and traced the line of Zee’s jaw. “You guys okay?”

“Baby, I’m a pro, and Daddy Spice is old. We’re more than okay.”

Mercy.

Victor nipped at my ear. “You are in safe hands.”

“Oh, I know it.” My eyes fluttered closed again as pleasure built, heating my veins.

We really needed to be downstairs, as though we were sweet, innocent non-murderers, but sweet innocence was the last thing on our minds.

“Zodiac,” Victor warned.

“I know, I got it.”

I could feel them. Not just the physical touch, but their power trying to dive in and feast, adding to my breathless excitement. They were capable of turning me inside out with lust, but wouldn’t. Sex with them was like riding a roller coaster—one teetering on the edge of flying off and killing all its passengers. Maybe that wasn’t the best analogy? But it sure felt good.

We’d come so far, and I wasn’t far off coming again right then. “I never want us to end,” I whispered, gasping with every one of Zee’s hand pumps.

“Then we never will.” And with that, Victor spread me wide and eased in.

I braced a hand against the cool tiles and breathed hard, giving my body time to adjust.

“Fuck,” Zee panted, briefly resting. “You’re both blinding. I could feast for weeks. But won’t. Not until we get all of you back.”

“You may not be able to handle all of me,” I panted, peering down at him while Victor thrust and thrust.

Zee grinned. “Uh, excuse moi. Challenge accepted.” Then he dove back onto my dick, and worked me over until I was ready to blow. I didn’t stand a chance, not with both of them, and came suddenly, not even trying to hold back. Zee stood, and grabbed Victor’s head, dragging him over my shoulder for a messy kiss. Victor clutched onto me and Zee, and with his eyes fierce and body trembling, he came too. We clung to each other in the shower, all the bloody evidence washed away, and we each knew that just so long as we were together, nothing could tear us apart.

Not even the end of the world.

CHAPTER 14

We'd dispatched Sebastien. Queen Daisy was no more.

Two names had been struck from my Bad People list.

And nobody had noticed we were doing the murdering.

One more name to go. Gideon's.

Looking around the bar, absorbing everything we'd done and where we were right now, my heart and head were content. I'd never felt better. Maybe it was the afterglow from fantastic sex, or maybe it was because I was exactly where I needed to be.

Zee was on stage, owning his unique rendition of "Feeling Good." Victor had casually propped a hip against the bar, and held a sophisticated Bloody Bitch in his hand. Behind him, Tom Collins fixed drinks for his customers, right where he wanted and claimed he needed to be.

Life buzzed in every corner of the hotel.

The vampires were still outside, waiting for their queen who definitely was not coming back. Victor would speak with them soon, while adding some mental persuasion to convince them Daisy had already left.

We were in a good place, the three of us.

What had I been afraid of?

Look at what we'd made.

A home. A family of orphans, misfits, and outcasts.

Everything I'd fought for... everything all Lost Ones had fought for was here, under this roof. New lives played out. We'd made a whole new world for ourselves. Gideon Cain wasn't going to take all this from me—from us. He didn't get to ruin it.

I was going to stop him... We were going to stop him.

And I had an idea how to do it.

I pushed from the table and headed for the bar where Victor noticed my approach, his eyes as hungry now as they'd been earlier.

"Tom, can you unlock Daisy's phone?" I took the pink Hello Kitty phone from my pocket and handed it over. Zee had noticed it slip from her pocket just as he shoved her body through the portal. He'd retrieved it after our shower session, when he'd asked Jimmy to help with the closet cleanup.

Tom studied the pink Hello Kitty phone. "Now, why would I want to do a thing like that?"

"Daisy coming here had nothing to do with a truce," I explained, as Victor sidled over. "She made it clear, the vampires have never been interested in letting any of us go. I suspect it was Gideon who suggested she agree to our meeting."

Tom considered it while turning the glossy phone over in his hand. "Seems likely."

“She came here to capture me, assuming I’d roll over because I’m human now, then she’d take me to Cain. I need you to unlock her phone, so we can send Cain a message.”

“A message that relays what information?” Victor asked, all caught up on our conversation.

“She’s got me.”

“I can do that,” Tom agreed. “But there’s no signal in here. I’ll need to be outside the wards.”

“I’ll transport you outside the wards in my phone,” Victor said, but then turned back to me. “It will likely take more than a text message to convince Gideon Cain you’re caught.”

“It will, and that’s where you come in. You’re going to mentally control the vampires waiting outside, and take me to Vampire Mansion. We don’t need to make it all the way, we’ve just got to make it convincing.”

“As a . . . gift?” Victor asked, eyebrows lifting.

I smiled. “Exactly.”

“And what of our Zodiac?”

As if on cue, Zee finished up his performance to thunderous applause. His wings pulsed, absorbing the adoration. Sensing we were talking about him, he glanced over, and grinned.

“I need him to get in touch with some old friends.”

While Victor took Tom on a little trip outside the wards to make a phone call, I told Zee to gather the troops.

Outside, a line of black sedans waited. We wouldn't have long before the vampires started asking a whole lot of awkward questions.

But we were going to need them for what came next.

Minutes passed liked hours, but Victor soon returned to the reception and gave me the nod. The bait was set.

Alright, now we just needed this next part of my brilliant plan to be convincing.

"Ah, Victor," I announced, as though surprised to see him, and also making sure the folks chatting in the foyer heard.

Victor strode from the doors to the desk, his long dark hair a dramatic cloak behind him. "Adam Vex, I hereby claim you as a gift for my queen." His steely fingers clamped onto my arm.

"Oh, no!" I gasped. Did I sound surprised? Everyone looked surprised, including Madame Matase. I hadn't had time to brief her on our plan, so I hoped she'd be alright until I could explain later. "It was all a ruse this entire time?" Was I laying the acting on a bit thick?

Thankfully, Zee wasn't here to critique my efforts.

I glanced at Madame Matase and winked. Hopefully she wouldn't think I meant to murder anyone, which was generally what winking meant around here. She winced. Had my wink looked like a twitch?

“I object.” Madame Matase slammed down her knitting needles and stood behind her desk. “As Adam’s guardian, his friend, and the hotel’s receptionist, I will not allow him to be taken. Not even by you, Lord Reynard, whom I had given the benefit of the doubt but never fully trusted.”

Oh dear. I should definitely have warned her. “Uh, no, please, you don’t need to object. Everything is going to be alright.” I squinted, trying to convey an expression that said it was all fine, but probably looked more like I was having a stroke. “Victor and I will sort it all out and I’ll be back here by the morning, right as rain!”

“If by sort it out you mean you will soon belong to the vampires and I will take my rightful place among the council, then yes, absolutely,” Victor said.

He was very convincing.

I was convinced.

Most everyone in the foyer who gawked were also convinced.

Noreen Greene, scribbling on a pad, was convinced—hopefully enough to immediately write an article and publish it. Cain would see the news, and we’d have a reliable source to back up our ruse.

And nobody could attack or stop Victor from taking me, because of the wards.

“Zodiac will not stand for this!” Madame Matase fumed.

“That demon can kiss my suit-clad backside,” Victor told her, in a very un-Victor-like voice. It was enough to signal that all was not as it seemed. Madame Matase frowned, her fury turning to irritation. I tried to throw her a sympathetic expression, but Victor yanked me through the foyer and outside, onto the porch.

“Oh no,” I told anyone who happened to be outside and within earshot. “The mean vampires have got me.”

Victor whirled and with a whip-like snatch, grabbed my neck, yanked me off my feet, and forced my face close to his. “Apologies for my rough handling, but your acting is atrocious and we need to convince our audience,” he said, all aggressive and snarly. Just the way I liked him.

“It’s alright.” I squeezed the words through clenched teeth.

“How were you able to convince anyone you were human for the past four years?” he asked, making it look as though he was all up in my face threatening me.

I wasn’t entirely sure I had. “By looking cute?”

The vampires began to emerge from their cars.

“What’s happening here?” A vampire clad in an all-black suit climbed the hotel steps, approaching from behind Victor’s left shoulder. “Where’s the queen?”

Victor waited until the vampire had gotten close enough, then dipped his chin, and when he next spoke, his voice resonated with a deeply powerful timbre . “Daisy went on ahead. Our queen left instructions to follow my commands. Obey me now and secure my gift to her majesty.”

Dangling from a vampire’s hand while he audibly manipulated a subordinate wasn’t supposed to be hot, right? But watching Victor work was a rare treat, and I was here for it. Had I actually been in any danger, I may have reacted differently. Or not.

The vampire driver’s face fell slack, probably while Victor’s talent rummaged around in his brain, then he perked up again and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Oh, that was . . . easy.

Victor's tight little corner smile reminded me of one of the many reasons why I loved our powerful murder daddy. He'd always been dangerous, but now he was my kind of dangerous. And Zee's. He'd be so sad he missed it. Maybe we could roleplay later?

"Return to your car and use your security communications devices to inform the others of our new orders. Once you have relayed those orders, you will return us to the royal premises."

"Yes, sir." The vampire hurried back to the car.

"Adam?" Victor asked, still holding me off my feet. "Are you alright?"

"Hm?"

"My dear, are you aroused?"

"What?" I croaked through tight teeth. "No. What?" A little bit. Maybe a lot.

His smirk was worth it. "We shall explore this later." Turning, he carried me down the steps, opened the car door, and flung me in the back, then ducked in behind me.

"Did I hurt you?"

I spluttered, and rubbed my throat. "No, I'm good, just ... scratchy."

"We really must get your power back." Now we were in the snug, atmospheric back of the luxury car, when he spoke, the posh lighting caught in his deadly fangs. "So we can explore your sexual preferences in finer detail."

"Yes, that." I coughed.

But back to the moment... and our plan appeared to be working. The vampires appeared to be fooled, and we'd soon be on our way.

Victor noted me checking out the other cars through the windows. "The royal guards are excellent at following orders, but less so at thinking for themselves."

And he controlled weak-willed people like puppets on strings. "You're so damn hot, you know that, right?"

He tugged his cuffs back in line and smoothed his hair. "I've had a great deal of practice."

Mercy.

The car's engine hummed, and the vehicle pulled away from the curb, in line with the others.

"We will arrive at the mansion in approximately forty-five minutes," the driver said, glancing in the rear-view mirror.

"Good." Victor acknowledged.

"Depending on traffic. We're hitting the bridge right around Friday night peak time."

Victor gave the driver a nod. "Acceptable."

We watched the quaint city streets give way to a more industrial location, and then as we approached the bay, the enormous Golden Gate Bridge sparkled above the water in the distance. With any luck, we'd hit it at exactly the right time of night.

"Gideon will not wait for you to be locked behind the vampire gates. He'll not want

Daisy to hold that much sway over him. Are you prepared?" Victor asked softly.

The background drone of the car engine and the snug back seats lulled my mind into believing we were safe. But all that was about to change. "I think so." I checked the rear window. Strings of headlights blazed back, but I couldn't tell whether any of those beams came from the Love Wagon . Zee might—should be back there somewhere.

"We will only get one chance at this."

"I know." I faced ahead again. "But Cain won't kill me, he needs me."

"He needs you temporarily ." Victor scooped my hand off my thigh. "It goes without saying that I do not like this course of action, but I've never been able to stop you, and I do not intend to try now. Your choices are your own. The best I can do is vow to protect you with my own life, and I have no doubt Zodiac will do the same."

"You are both stronger than you know."

"Because of you."

"Who knew dragon sex amplified Lost Ones talents." I huffed a little laugh.

"I doubt anyone has survived a dragon long enough to become intimate with them."

That was likely true.

"Although, I suspect it's being with you that has made us powerful... and the hotel added to the mix, in all of its unexpected and peculiar ways."

The hotel... "Do you think the portal was always there?"

“No. I suspect the concentration of Lost Ones and our intimate highlights have altered the locale enough to effectively open a doorway. Everything is beginning to come together.”

“Destiny?”

He knew how I disliked the idea of destiny, of not having control, but he smiled. “Something like that.”

“If we survive this—when I get my power back, and we come out the other side intact—what do we do about the portal?”

“No doubt, the hotel will decide for us.”

Maybe. But it was a lot of responsibility for a human-ish dragon, an incubus, and a vampire. Or, another way of looking at it suggested we might be the hotel and its portal’s perfectly imperfect guardians?

On the road ahead, the traffic snarled up, slowing our motorcade to an inch-by-inch crawl. The Golden Gate Bridge loomed large, like enormous red gallows—which was not a helpful thought.

I glanced behind us again. No sign of the Love Wagon .

“He will be here,” Victor said.

I knew that.

Zee had never let me down. He didn’t know how to.

People in the cars beside ours might be about to witness the show to rival all outdoor

events. But hopefully, not a massacre. “Do you think San Francisco has room for a dragon like me?”

All Lost Ones were registered and graded on power, which was another way of saying all potentially powerful Lost Ones were removed from society to keep the people safe. Maybe if I saved the city, the SSD would let me go afterwards?

“I think a lot of things are about to change, and none of us can control it.”

“Not even you?” I teased.

“Not even me.”

A loud thud on the roof bounced the car. We both looked up, and found a dent in the roof lining.

“What was?—”

Victor vanished. Or more accurately, he flung open the door and dashed outside quicker than my eyes could track.

“Adam, stay inside!”

Another thump on the roof rocked the car. I braced against the seat, and tried to get a look through the windows, but all I saw was a blur of vampire and the shocked faces of people gawking from the cars around us.

Then I caught a glimpse of a large mound of fur in the reflection of the car next to ours. Fur with claws. Werewolf.

And not a friendly one.

“Protect the queen’s gift!” my vampire driver barked into his security mic. “Clear a path!” Then he slammed his foot on the gas and lurched the car between stationary traffic. He might have been easy to manipulate, but he sure made a great getaway driver.

The engine roared.

The car door tore off, and a werewolf shoved its enormous snout and upper body in through the gap where the door had been. Claws slashed in my direction.

Clearly, there was more than one werewolf.

But that was fine.

We had more than one vampire too.

The werewolf lunged again, and snapped its teeth together, too close for my liking.

I kicked out. My heel smacked its snout. A whimper sounded and the werewolf vanished, toppling outside the racing car.

“Hold on!” the driver yelled. He slammed on the brakes.

Tires screamed on asphalt and the sudden deceleration flung me against the back of the passenger seat. I dropped, slumped in the rear footwell. This had not been part of the plan.

“What the fu—” The windshield exploded and the driver’s final words lodged in his throat, stuck there by an enormous tentacle made of thick, oily darkness.

We had extra company.

“Adam!” Victor threw himself into back of the car, grabbed me under the arms and lifted me out of the footwell, onto the back seat. “Cain’s here. And he’s brought a sizable force. We are currently outnumbered.”

I held Victor’s panicked, swirling mercury eyes. “Alright, we can do this. You got your phone?”

He nodded.

We were going to need more help.

Tendrils of shadow looped around Victor’s middle and snapped him from my arms, out the back of the car.

Snarls and growls sounded outside.

It was time.

“Gideon Cain,” I vowed. “Let’s show the world what you’re really made of.”

I climbed across the back seat and hopped out of the car. People scattered, abandoning their vehicles on the bridge... and up ahead, under the first huge tower, stood Gideon Cain. He’d clearly had a rough few days, which had probably started around the time Agatha’s jewelry store got broken into and his plans to contain my power were stolen. Then Agatha was killed, and all her notes on Cain had been sent to the press. He’d been exposed as a megalomaniac, and an unregistered sorcerer. After that, someone had trashed his security at home, and sent him a dead demon pimp in a crate.

Yeah, the stress showed in his crazy salt and pepper hair and unshaven face, but mostly in the fact he wasn’t even trying to hide behind human glamor anymore.

“Adam Vex!” Gideon roared. An aura of sparkling smoke pulsed around him. His human features had been stretched over inhuman bones—his glamor too sharp, too surreal. He’d gone beyond caring what people thought. “There you are. Outside your wards and finally mine.”

Whiplike tendrils of shadow lashed from his aura. All that darkness ... that rage and hate? That was the true heart of him. A vicious, hateful creature who wanted more and more power. But mine had eluded him.

“Did you think your little ruse would work?” Gideon laughed and began walking forward. “Did you think I’d fall for your pathetic lies?” Closer, he strode. So confident. So full of himself. I was human, and no risk to him. Or so he believed.

Cain stopped with a few strides left between us. “The text messages, the fake news. Did you think I wouldn’t know this is a setup?” His dark eyes were bottomless pits that drilled down into his dark soul.

I’d known he was a monster in disguise, but seeing it was something else.

I smiled back at him and thrust my hands into my pockets. “Do you think I wouldn’t know that you’d know this was a setup?”

“What nonsense are you spouting, boy?” he snapped.

Alright, maybe that hadn’t been clear. “I mean... This is obviously a setup, right? So of course I’d know that you’d know it’s a setup.”

“I do know. I just told you that. Your ruse didn’t work.”

“I’m agreeing with you. It’s obvious. Like you said.”

Cain frowned, then snarled. “Have you lost your mind as well as your power? Enough. Come with me, and I’ll see to it your associates aren’t harmed.”

Speaking of associates, Victor blurred to my side, fangs and claws on display. He’d been fighting, so he had that dramatic, disheveled look that he wore so well.

A whole bunch of lupine shifters climbed onto cars and slunk between trucks, encircling us. They were probably mercenaries or a local gang Gideon Cain had paid to be here. He didn’t have friends—only staff.

The vampire at my side would fight until his dying breath. He was worth a thousand dime-store werewolves.

Now would be the perfect time for Zee to swoop in and do his “save the day” routine, probably while wearing a crazy hat he’d picked out especially for this occasion.

“I’m just sayin’ that if I knew you’d guess this was a trap, then I’d have planned for that... Wouldn’t I?” I continued.

Gideon’s top lip rippled. The wind whisked his aura around him, making him seem ethereal and ghostly. “I understand your point, boy.”

“And if I knew you’d know, then I’d also bring backup... Wouldn’t I?” I hadn’t meant that last part to sound like a question, but Gideon didn’t seem to catch on. Among his smoky flames he straightened, and scanned the abandoned cars.

“Yeah, that’s right. You should be worried.” I took a step forward. “All the little people you’ve trodden on over the years... everyone you’ve climbed over to get to the top... all the Lost Ones you’ve used and abused to get to the top of Cain Towers...”

I gave Victor a nod. He pulled his phone from his pocket and tossed it into the air

with a suitably dramatic flick. Electrified smoke poured from the phone's tiny speaker holes, and Tom Collins's transparent outline buzzed and shimmered to life.

"You brought the bartender?" Cain laughed, incredulously. "What's the djinn going to do? Serve me a Dirty Martini?"

Tom brushed his incorporeal clothes down and turned his slow grin toward Gideon. "This bartender serves vengeance."

"Is this it?" Cain snorted. "Is this the best you've got? A broken AI and a penniless, homeless vampire lord? And you? A pathetic shadow of your former self. That's it?"

Right now it was. Because Zee was late. "No, obviously," I huffed.

"Leave it to Zodiac to be late for his grand finale performance," Victor murmured under his breath.

Cain's evil chuckle billowed around the bridge, carried on the wind. "I'm almost tempted to wait to witness what comes next, Mr. Vex. But you see, I have a city to dominate, you're in my way, and I am done playing human ." Gideon reached up to the pendant at his neck, tore it free, and held it out. "Unlock your power, Mr. Vex, so I can rule this world. That is your destiny."

"Why would I do that?" If I even knew how. "You think I'm going to agree. Why?"

Cain's smile stretched. He'd been waiting for his moment. "Because if you don't, the demon and his colorful entourage will all meet a sudden and dramatic end. Oh, were you waiting for their arrival? A last minute save?" Cain slowly shook his head. "Your little band of porn demons isn't coming . Not here, not now, and never again !"

No . . .

He couldn't have Zee. It wasn't possible.

Cain laughed. "I expected more from you. You're even more pathetic than I'd assumed. What a sad day this is. A worthless, powerless little man who has only known how to hide in his stolen hotel and cower behind those who are stronger than him. You're a coward, Mr. Vex. A nobody. Chosen One? You're a joke. The prophecy is very obviously wrong."

"Fine! You want to know how it works? Give me that damn bead." I stomped in front of him and snatched the pendant from his hand, then raised it up. All my power, all my reason for existing, all of me was in that one little bead?

"You're not wrong about Adam," Tom said, addressing Cain. His voice was thinner, a little strained, but it carried the same snark. "You've met him a few times, but I've had to work with these idiots for seven weeks. Frankly, they have no idea what they're doing and are a risk to themselves and others."

"Thank you, Tom," I called back. "We don't need your commentary right now."

"The sorcerer has a valid point."

"That sorcerer took you from your family, made you forget, and turned you into a barman at our hotel, so... just saying, you maybe don't want to agree with him?"

Tom folded his arms and rolled his eyes. "Is this going to take long? I left the bar with the chef."

"Unleash its power for me," Gideon said, ignoring Tom. "Do it now, or you, your friends, and everyone cowering on this bridge dies."

I huffed, and with raised eyebrows, looked up. "Really? You're going to double down

on the threats? You know I'm human, right? You could just click your fingers—" Switching the pendant to my left hand, I clicked the fingers of my right. "And snap my neck."

"Not until you give me access to that ." His gaze had left the bead for a second, but skipped back again now.

"I always wondered about that line in the prophecy... The heart of me. I took it literally. I thought it meant my actual heart. My heart will save us, or doom us all ." Switching the pendant back to my right hand, I raised it between us and caught the lights from the Golden Gate Bridge in its jewel-like shine. "But now I think my heart means something else. Like... maybe... the people I love, or love in general. You know?"

Cain's already warped face twisted into a disgusted grimace. "You really like the sound of your own voice, boy."

"At least I have a heart."

"Stop delaying—" Gideon snatched my neck. Thick, oily fingers squeezed. "Or I will crush the life out of your fragile cockroach human bones."

Purple lightning split the night sky, and in its glare, the dark outline of a gloriously winged demon flash-burned into my eyes. His wings parachuted open—the broken one still bandaged but clearly healed enough to fly—and he swooped in, landing in style on the roof of the vampire's car. Zee spun Shareen in his hand and propped the sword's blade against his shoulder. "Did someone say cock?"

Cain spluttered his surprise, fingers squeezing my throat. "How did you?—"

"Ha!" Zee tipped his Stetson hat and strutted down the windshield to the hood.

“Some advice, Mr. Evil. Don’t employ lowlife scumbugs who have definitely had the pleasure of my company. I’m not cheap, but I do get around.” He smirked.

“Enough! Give me that!” Cain snatched the pendant from my hand, and flung me away. My back hit the car, my head smacked the metal. Everything flashed black, so I missed the moment when my knees hit the gritty asphalt, but the shock of pain was real.

“Adam!”

I wasn’t sure if it was Victor or Zee who spoke. The bridge and its lights spun and pulsed in time with my thumping skull. But it was going to be okay. On my knees, with Gideon Cain about to lay into the others, I opened my fist, and there in my hand, was the fragile little bead that contained all my truth, taken from Gideon’s pendant with a little sleight-of-hand and misdirection.

There would be no going back after this, no hiding, no pretending I was a sweet and innocent human. I was about to seal my fate and maybe even lose my freedom.

But Cain would kill Victor and Zee.

I had to save them.

Save them all.

With the world spinning and my body ablaze, I tossed the bead into my mouth and gulped it down.

CHAPTER 15

Nothing happened.

Cain roared, Zee let out a battle cry, and I think it was Tom who made all the cars on the bridge come alive with honking and snarling engines, launching them at Cain's hired lupine shifters.

But as for me and the bead I'd swallowed?

Nothing. Happened.

Had I swapped the wrong bead?

I'd switched my bead for the one Victor had taken from the broken harvester machine, and popped that on the end of Cain's pendant when I'd clicked my fingers, distracting everyone and providing a decoy so Cain didn't notice the sleight-of-hand.

I'd definitely swallowed the right one. Maybe. The beads were small, and I'd had to roll it across my palm with the decoy in just a few seconds...

But if I had consumed the right bead, why wasn't I changing? Why wasn't I me again?

Lifting my head, I saw Victor wrestling with Cain's wicked tendrils, each one lashing at him then looping around him, crushing tighter and tighter. Victor's fangs were out, his face pinched in agony. He could take a few hits, but being crushed?

Zee roared and flew at Cain—sword raised, wings aglow. Lightning snapped from above and stabbed at nearby cars, adding to the chaos. Unnatural thunder shook the air, the bridge, and even my heart in my chest.

Cain simply raised his free hand and flung up some kind of barrier. Zee froze, mid-air, and then with Cain's sweeping hand gesture, Zee was flung against the bridge's cables, making them twang and sway. Zee poofed away and reappeared behind Cain, sword raised.

But again Cain grabbed him with some kind of force and flung him away, like a wolf toying with a rabbit before tearing it apart.

He was playing with them both.

I had to stop this. But how? My only plan hadn't worked. The bead hadn't suddenly turned me back, although I did feel nauseous and kinda achy... a bit feverish...

A pair of fine, shiny black shoes appeared beside me, and in them stood a pair of legs wearing pressed trouser pants with that neat straight line down the front. And as I looked higher, there was Tom Collins's less than impressed face. "Are you going to lay there all night while they fight for our freedom?"

"I was just thrown against a car." I winced. "It hurt."

"Boo-fucking-hoo. What do you want? A pity party? Get up, get over there, and do what you do best."

"Which is?" I struggled to sit up and slumped against the dented car door.

"Irritate the fuck out of everyone."

I spluttered a wheezing breath and fought to my feet. Cain had Victor in the air, and Victor wasn't moving.

The breeze tossed Cain's dark laugh around us. The battle was not going well.

Tom was right, I had to do something—anything.

“Hey!” I limped over. “Fine, I'll do what you want! Put Victor down.”

Cain didn't even look over. He had the mad expression of someone about to end another life. His twisted, inhuman parody of a face was lit with murderous glee.

“Cain, stop!” Everything ached now—my body, my head, my soul. Something had broken inside, but that was okay. It was all going to be fine.

Cain's all-black eyes blinked, and as he noticed me his grip on Victor eased.

“I'll do it. I'll tell you how to free my power,” I spluttered, and winced at all the aches. “Just put Victor down.”

Zee howled from above, and plummeted—wings back, sword out. Cain flicked a hand, knocking Zee sideways into the bridge suspension cables all over again.

“Zee, hold up...” I told him. “It's over. We can't beat Cain. Stop. Indigo. Surrender.”

“Adam... no.” Victor wheezed. “We must not let him win.”

“He'll destroy us all, I know. But maybe he'll let us keep the hotel, and we can stay there.” Was it so bad a thing to just survive? “Right, Cain? You'll leave us alone, let us go, and in exchange, I'll tell you how to use my power.”

Cain dropped Victor, and shuffled his broad shoulders, realigning all the dark, sweeping tendrils so they writhed in the air behind him, back under control. “It’s a deal. Deals are sacred Mr. Vex. Tread carefully or everyone dies, including you.”

“I know.” I breathed in and winced around sharp, stabbing pains from a few broken ribs. “You’ll let us go?”

“Absolutely.” Jagged teeth shone through a thin, fake smile. “Tell me how I make this mine.” He raised his pendant, and there was the bead inside.

“Swallow it.” I told him.

“Adam...” Victor growled. “Don’t do this. We can still fight.”

“Swallow it?” Gideon repeated. “That’s it? No extraction process?”

“Just swallow it, and you’ll have it all. All the power you’ve ever wanted.”

Zee fluttered to a landing at my left. “Why are you telling him this, Kitten? We could have beaten him.” Zee believed that, I saw it on his face, in his voice, but he was wrong. This wasn’t a movie, we weren’t the heroes. Or so I had to make him and Victor believe, because if they believed me, then so did Cain.

“Because I love you,” I told them, feeling the words and their weight in my soul. “Both of you. And I’ll do anything to keep you safe. Even if it means Cain wins.”

Zee’s sad eyes almost cleaved my heart in two and Victor had bowed his head, surrendering to my choice.

“I told you,” I said. “I’m not the hero. I just want to live.”

Cain's big grin grew wider. "Swallow it?" He raised the bead, catching the ambient light in its gel-like structure. The wind howled louder now, and thunder grumbled.

"This is wrong, Kitten," Zee mumbled.

"No." I clasped my hands behind my back. "It's destiny."

Zee side-eyed me, catching my smile at the exact moment Cain tilted his head back and dropped the wrong bead into his mouth.

I winked.

CHAPTER 16

My heart would save or doom us all, right?

But while everyone was distracted by Gideon's moment of glory, I knew two things.

One: I had claws.

Two: that wasn't my bead Cain had just eaten.

I launched at Cain like a sprinter off a starting block, spread my fingers, claws glinting, and swiped across his generous middle. It was so fast, so unexpected, and so not-me, he didn't see it coming. The dark sorcerer gasped, gulped, and right around then, he probably began to suspect something wasn't right.

I spun, and sliced a five-fingered slash across his chest.

Blood bloomed.

Cain lashed out, smacking me back, off my feet and into the air. A few seconds of weightlessness, and I slammed into a windshield. Glass in the corners of my vision scattered like stars. That kind of blow would have killed a human, so it was a good thing I was beginning to feel a lot less human, and a lot more like me .

A growl simmered up my throat, starting somewhere in my chest, or even deeper. Starting deep, in a primal part of me that didn't take kindly to being tossed around like a rag doll.

“He’s back, baby,” Zee crooned, then tossed a smug grin at Cain. “You about to get cooked.”

“How—” Cain gasped, clutching his lower torso. Streams of dark blood ran between his fingers.

I dropped off the hood of the broken car, onto my feet, and ruffled glass from my bouncy hair. Cuts across my hands and up my arms stitched themselves closed. Because this skin I wore? It was just a mask—just pretend.

“We made a deal, Mr. Vex!” Cain boomed.

“We did, and I told you how to access my power. Just like we agreed.” I started forward again. Zee joined me on my left, and Victor to my right. Tom Collins zipped from gap to gap like an electric ghost. “All you had to do was swallow it.”

Cain swayed on his feet. His weirdly warped human outline twitched and jerked. “Then how are you restored?”

“No idea.” I shrugged. “Although, it may have been something to do with the bead I switched mine out for earlier. Did I forget to mention that part?”

Zee’s theatrical gulp had Cain sneering. “Gasp! You ate the wrong bath bead?” Zee exclaimed in dramatic Zee fashion. “Gah, been there, done that. It is not fun.”

Cain scanned our small frontline—me, Tom, Zee, and Victor. “Doesn’t matter. I’m still more powerful than all of you combined!” His whole body pulsed, expanding. Lashing black tendrils, like a hundred Zee-tails, sprung from his back, and writhed larger and larger behind him.

Zee raised his hand and clicked his fingers, and in just a few seconds an array of

colorful stars fell from the sky.

The Razorsedge demons landed around us like candy, bristling with razorblades and a gooey center of vengeance.

And they weren't alone.

Behind us, a whole swathe of Lost Ones marched onto the Golden Gate Bridge. Some we'd saved from becoming vampire gifts, others we'd saved from illegal fights to the death. Demons who'd had their body parts stolen and sold off by Agatha de La Cour. Fae who'd been forgotten and had to live out of vans selling human trash just to get by. Wrongly imprisoned gargoyles. Pixies once trapped in glass jars, and djinn used against their will to infuse warded FaeMade ? jewelry. Those freed djinn smoked the sky, turning the air pink and purple.

And a whole bunch of others who had just wanted to survive and get along... just wanted to be left to live in peace.

We hadn't planned to be the heroes in their lives, it had just turned out that way. It had all been an accident. But a happy one.

Cain's bolstered size kept on growing. More than ever it was clear he wasn't a man and never had been. The dark mass was the man.

We had an army.

And I was its general.

Cain reached peak ugliness—nightmare-ness—and unleashed a howl, flinging out a blur of whipping tendrils.

One came at me. I slashed it back. Others darted toward Victor and Zee. They whisked into action, slicing and tearing. Cain became the eye of a Lost Ones storm, holding back the barrage of Lost Ones tearing at him.

In the chaos, a moment of calm opened up, and Zee poofed back beside me.

“This lightning is fuckin’ wild, right?” He grinned, and right on cue a jagged bolt of purple lightning snapped at the bridge’s tower, and danced down the thick cables, lighting the battle scene in neon purple.

“You know you’re doing that?” I told him. “That’s all you, Zee.”

“It is?” He looked up, and the whole sky was a spiderweb of purple zigzags. “I have lightning powers now? Fuck, yeah!” He flung himself into the fray, slashing Shareen at Cain’s enormous and endless, dark, lashing eels.

We were doing great, beating him back step by step, until Cain’s already larger than normal, human-shaped outline of vicious power gave several sudden, shuddering jerks. The bridge jolted around us. Cables twanged. Cars slid.

The Lost Ones eased off, backing up.

Something had changed.

Cain’s laughter built, howling around us, and the dark sorcerer’s outline began to split apart, swell and crack, then snap again, getting bigger with each twitch.

“Uh . . . Kitten?”

Bigger, he grew.

Enormous, smoky hands grabbed the Golden Gate Bridge's tower.

"Get off the bridge," I told Zee.

"Eh?"

Victor blurred to a sudden stop beside me. "Adam?"

"Get them all off the bridge," I told them both. "Get everyone to safety."

The bridge gave a larger, sudden jolt, and Zee flung out his wings and tail to balance himself. "What's happening?"

I peered up, and up. At the giant dark sorcerer who was about to make San Francisco look as tiny as a Lego town. "The random bead has kicked in."

CHAPTER 17

“Go! Get back!” Victor barked, turning to the ranks of Lost Ones and urging them to get off the bridge.

Zee hung back, uncertain. “Kitten?”

I knew what he was asking. He didn’t want to go. “I’ll be alright, I’ve got this.”

His pained face hurt my heart like an open wound. “I love you, Adam. Always did.” He swooped in and captured my mouth in a kiss I couldn’t help but fall into.

I gripped his hair, and a horn, clutching him close, and kissed him as though this kiss might be our last. Gasping free, I pulled him down, eye to eye. Our foreheads bumped. His horns tangled with my hair. “I’m going to be alright. This was always meant to happen. I’ll be fine. And there’s no way I’m letting Tom Collins run the bar.”

Zee’s grin was all I needed to see. “You gotta come back, Vic’s useless without you.”

“Vic?”

“Meh, I’m trying out new names for Daddy Spice.”

“Victor is a perfectly good name,” Victor said, reappearing next to Zee.

I reached for him, and with my right arm hooked around Zee’s neck, I pulled Victor

in with my left. With Zee, I could pretend to be tough. But Victor always saw behind the act.

I hugged them both. I loved them so hard it hurt.

No dragon had ever loved like this.

“I’m coming back,” I told them. A defiant tear escaped my blurry eyes before I could swipe at it. “I’m coming home.”

“You had better,” Victor said, his voice tight. He laid a gentle kiss on my forehead and whispered, “Zodiac is a mess without you.”

Cain’s thunderous roar belittled the real thunder rumbling above the city.

“Go.” I pushed them away. “Go, please... I... You have to go.” I needed them to be far away for what came next. I needed them safe.

Zee backed up, then spread his wings and took to the sky. He swooped over the retreating Lost Ones, lightning forking through the dark above him.

Tom Collins appeared at my side, his dapper attire untouched by the howling wind, the prior battle, or any of this night. A smile warmed his semitransparent face. “You know all that shit I said was to distract Cain?”

“You mean you don’t really hate us?”

He snorted. “You’ll see them again.”

I faced the AI bartender, who wasn’t an AI bartender at all but was my best friend.

Tom's eyes narrowed. "I don't do personal displays of affection."

"Really? You don't say."

He thrust out a hand. I wrapped mine around his strange, weirdly solid fingers, and ignored the strange tingling.

"Don't fuck it up," he said.

"Great advice."

Saluting, he took a step back, and vanished in a fizz of static.

The Lost Ones were off the bridge. I could barely see anyone on the bridge deck now, among the abandoned cars. I was alone.

Turning, I faced the living, breathing, enormous storm of dark intentions made real.

Whatever had been in that bead, it had made Cain a hundred times worse. Why couldn't we have gotten bubbles, instead of whatever this was?

I probably should have expected it, with our luck.

But here we were, the epic showdown.

And here I was. Adam Vex. Not human at all. Definitely dragon.

I planted my feet, spread my hands at my sides, and with Cain's laugh barreling around me like a freight train, I freed all the restraints holding the real me inside. One by one, the mental chains snapped, and the creature I was inside began to wake up.

It had been a long time since I'd been dragon... really let myself get into the role, and my true skin.

Four years in hiding. Longer if you counted my whole life running from destiny.

No more hiding.

No more running.

No more shame, fear. No regrets.

It was time to show the world who and what I really was too.

In the movies, the bad guys wait for the good guys to get their act together. This wasn't the movies, and Gideon Cain wasn't going to wait for me to power-up. I wouldn't have waited either.

Cain's sideswipe hit like a wrecking ball. Had I been human, I'd have been dead on impact. The blow knocked me into the air—but that was fine—and so was the fiery pain racing through my veins. It would all be over soon.

I fell, the wind rushed, the bridge's lights stuttered but stayed on as they shrank from me.

I hit the water hard, punching through it, back first.

I gasped. Water poured down my throat. But the renewed fire inside burned hotter, brighter.

This water was nothing.

This world was nothing.

I was fire, I was devastation, I was destruction.

My name was Mydros, and I was dragon.

A roar tore from my chest as I broke the surface. Wings stretched, I climbed the struts holding up the bridge, and made quick work of the tower.

The world seemed so small now, and everything in it miniatures of reality.

Atop the tower, I spread my wings and unleashed the burning, tumultuous rage born from a lifetime of being hunted.

I was free.

But not safe.

Not yet.

The dark sorcerer had become an enormous storm, its shape vaguely humanoid. Tendrils the size of office blocks writhed and knotted around it. And as I targeted it in my sights, all of its rage and fury turned on me.

No, I was not safe. Nobody was until this monster was dealt with.

“Glorious power!” the creature that had been Gideon Cain boomed. Whatever had been in that bead, his innate power had amplified it, like Zee’s had amplified the effects of the bead he’d swallowed.

One of Cain’s whipping limbs lashed out and cracked toward me. I beat my wings

and lifted off, spiraling higher into the sky. Lightning flashed. My heart burned, stoking the fire in my throat. Higher, I spiraled, into the clouds, until there was nothing around but darkness. Arching around, I tucked my wings in, and dove.

The fire built. Burning in my chest. Surging, broiling.

There was only one power strong enough to defeat darkness—and that was light.

Bursting from the sky, I swooped down, toward the bridge.

Gideon's spray of thrashing limbs reached for me, like a net closing in. I spread my jaws and unleashed a wave of fire, blasting the bridge deck. Cars exploded one by one, igniting the asphalt, the air, everything around Cain.

His howl churned.

I swept out, across the inky waters of the bay. San Francisco's gleaming city lights glinted at the edge of my vision. My home. I knew that now. I had a home, a family... people who needed me, loved me. I'd destroy anyone and anything that threatened that and them.

Cain, ablaze on the bridge, thrust all his limbs upright and let loose a lance of dark, pulsing power, thrusting it into the sky. Lightning scattered and the sky split, tearing apart.

That couldn't be good.

Especially as all my fire had done was warm him up.

I was going to have to get up close and personal.

With the bridge coming up fast, I beat my wings, slowing, and came in to land between the red towers. The bridge groaned, its deck stretching under my clawed feet.

Cain saw me, and flung one of those dark-funneling limbs as though to skewer my chest.

I snapped my teeth at it, and tore the limb in two.

Cain howled.

So he could be hurt.

More of those strange, funneling limbs broke off from the fountain that headed skyward and speared toward me. I got one, two, but the third struck my shoulder and plunged in.

Cain laughed and pulled, jerking me toward him.

Ugh, not a lance—a harpoon.

Another one came at me. I snapped my jaws through it and tore the limb free, but another slammed into my wing and hooked there, dragging me faster toward Cain's pulsing mass.

A tiny, purple-glittered, pixie-sized demon flew between Cain and me. "You touch my kitten, you fuckin' die!" Zee squeaked.

Shards of purple lightning tore from the sky and rained over Cain, falling like jagged pieces of glass. Cain grunted, jerking, and his mass staggered. Whatever he'd been funneling from above, he broke off the connection, and flung those horrible tendrils

all at Zee, all at once.

No!

I roared, dug my claws into the bridge, and leaped—wings back, teeth bared.

Cain hadn't been expecting it.

Neither had I.

I plowed into Cain's heaving mass, knocking him backwards off the bridge, toward its welcome center on the south bank. We tumbled, I snapped my teeth at his head, determined to sink them in and tear whatever he was made of apart. He was solid, I felt that much, but getting a hold on him was almost impossible. We sprawled over the park area, tangled together in a mass of wings, tail, and tendrils. I snapped at his limbs holding me, snipping them free. He whipped enormous lashes down my back, tearing at my scales.

And in all of this, I had no idea where Zee had ended up.

Was he alright? Had he gotten caught in the chaos?

Cain's lashing whips snapped at my face, catching my left eye. I roared, flung my head back, and raked my front claws through his body—the parts I could get a hold of. He roared too.

This wasn't working.

We were too evenly matched.

How could I stop him?

And in the chaos, I'd lost Zee... This was my fear. That I'd hurt the people I cared for.

Was Cain going to win? Even now, I had nothing else to throw at him. Fire hadn't worked. Size didn't matter. Cain matched me in viciousness. What else was there?

"Psst..." A purple pixie buzzed between my eyes. Zee! "Hey, baby." He zipped to my ear. "Get him back on the south end of the bridge. We'll do the rest."

I could do that.

I snapped my jaws together and huffed, hoping he'd know that to mean I'd understood.

Get Cain back on the bridge.

Flinging open my wings, I beat the air, and whipping up my own storm, took to the sky once more. Cain's dark limbs tried to grab at my legs, but missed. Gaining height, I circled above the bay, riding the buffeting winds.

Cain had rightened himself, and stood like a giant, vaguely man-shaped storm in the Golden Gate Bridge park.

News helicopters hovered north of the bridge like tiny mosquitoes.

The whole world was watching.

I landed on the south tower, spread my wings, and roared, turning myself into a dragon-sized target. With Cain riding high on his power, thinking he had a chance to ruin me, he took the bait and stomped across the park, then climbed onto the roadway.

That's it ... just a little closer.

Fire burned in my chest. Steam hissed from between my teeth.

I wasn't just any dragon. I was the last.

I'd eaten all the rest.

I'd survived.

That had to mean something.

But I couldn't do this alone.

Cain approached the part of the bridge where it spanned over an old Civil War fortress. There were cars in that parking lot, and two tiny specks of people.

And a beaten-up, rusty purple van.

Just a little bit closer.

Cain paused his marching.

No . . . keep coming . . .

Why had he stopped?

Cain's lashing limbs reached down, toward the parking lot and the Love Wagon .

I unleashed a blast of flame, washing Cain in liquid fire. His mass stumbled, recoiled, and then flung those reaching, horrible harpoon limbs at me.

I steadied myself, expecting the worst. But with all his focus on me, whatever Zee planned it had to be now.

Now, do it now!

One, two, three—the harpoons punched into my chest. I gasped, choking on fire, and teetered on the tower. The bay tilted, the city lights flared.

No, I had to hold on. For them.

A needle-thin pillar of light shot up from the van. Just a little shaft of light in the dark tempest of Cain's and my making. But as I watched, that little shaft of light struck at Cain's mass, instantly rocking him sideways. Like his harpoons in me had done, that thin needle of light pierced deep, hooked in, and held on.

Cain swayed, and his enormous pulsing mass began to shrink as though that light had cracked him open. Or was siphoning his power...

I knew what it was . . .

I knew what they'd done.

The harvester had been in that van.

I clung to the tower, clung to consciousness, and inside, I smiled.

Gideon Cain's night was about to be over.

It was a shame I wouldn't be around to see it.

I slipped, and tried to make a grab for the tower, but my claws skittered down metal. I

was already falling. The harpoons twanged free, reeling back into the flailing, shrinking Cain. My back struck the bridge deck, turning cars to crushed metal beneath me. The bridge bounced, its cables groaned.

If I was dying, I should probably have tried to die somewhere more convenient than in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge. Traffic would be a nightmare for days.

But hey, I'd stopped the bad guy.

Maybe I was the hero after all?

Wait. Did heroes die in the end?

CHAPTER 18

“Adam, Kitten, Adam?” Firm, warm arms scooped me up off the dirt. “Hey, you in there? Baby... Adam? Fuck! Victor?”

Zee’s chatter pulled me back from a dark place, as though he’d grabbed me and dragged me from a mental pool of deep, dark mud. I felt small again, and clammy, and bruised all over. But also, mostly alive—which was a plus.

Victor was near. His radiating sense of safety warmed me through.

“Hey,” I croaked. I was definitely small, but not human . Just all of my dragon self had been packed down into my Adam suit. “I uh... blacked out, I guess?”

Now I was gradually making my way back to consciousness, the world around us had gotten loud . Strobing police lights washed over a battleground littered with crushed and burned cars. Distant helicopter blades thumped the air and emergency sirens wailed nearby.

“Hey, hey...” Zee’s big eyes filled my vision. “You’re back with us? Fuck, are you hurt?”

“Uh...” I patted my chest, expecting holes, but finding only a torn and bloody shirt. “I guess not.”

Zee’s face was in mine again. “How many horns do I have? What’s my name?”

“Two, and it’s Zee.”

“Am I the best demon?”

A wave of emotion surged through me. They were here, we were alright. “You are my demon.” I flung my arms around him and whispered, “Zee... Tell me we did it. It’s over?”

He rocked back on his heels, holding me tight. “Oh, my fuckin’ fuck, is it ever! You getting your dragon on was the most awesome fuckin’ thing I’ve seen, and I once saw a demon swallow a fifteen-inch dick.”

Victor, with his arms crossed, standing behind Zee, said, “Was that demon you, perchance?”

“How did you know?” Zee gasped, acting shocked. “Did you pay to watch it, Daddy?”

Victor sighed through his nose, but his dark-lashed, silvery-eyed gaze skipped to me. “Adam, welcome back. You had us concerned.”

“We thought you’d vanished, but turns out you shrunk yourself back into this gorgeous, highly loveable human suit.” Zee grabbed, then smooshed my face, and slapped a kiss on my lips. “I love it, I love you, I love your squishy face, and I’m done with asshole sorcerers—oh fuck, wait!” He let go, stepping back. “You don’t know.”

I rubbed my face, sweeping off the dregs of unconsciousness. “I don’t know what?”

Victor stepped in, and helped Zee lift me onto unsteady legs.

“Look,” Zee said, gesturing toward the edge of a cordoned-off area.

Beyond the flattened cars but inside a string of police tape, Gideon Cain sat in the back of an EMT ambulance, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, reeling off a statement to two police officers and several men who had the look of SSD agents.

“He’s still alive?” I croaked.

“It’s better than that.” Zee squished himself into an excited pillar and squeaked. “You tell him, Fancy Fangs.”

I gulped and checked Victor. His smile seemed to say this was good, but it didn’t look good. “With Tom Collins’s technical expertise we were able to rig the harvester below the bridge and get it working for one final extraction.”

I knew where this went. I’d seen the little needle pierce Gideon’s side. “You harvested Gideon Cain’s power?”

“All of it.” Zee squeaked. “Look at him, he’s just a grumpy old man. One hundred percent human. That’s fuckin’ karma at work, baby!”

He did look human, and grumpy. Technically, we had ruined his life. But he’d ruined plenty of others, so it seemed only fair. “Where is it... his bead?”

“We gave it to Elion for secure keeping.”

“Elion?” My insides twisted with nerves.

“They arrived right after Gideon started holding up traffic. Saw the whole thing. Dragon fight, fire, lightning, we fuckin’ killed it. SOS Hotel style. Although ... the spicy fae didn’t seem pleased. Probably because we killed a whole lot of this fancy

bridge too. Humans seem real attached to it.”

The bridge behind us had an alarming tilt to it, and some of the cables had snapped. Others were frayed. It probably wasn’t safe. But it had caught my fall from its tower, and I hadn’t been small or light. All things considered, it had held up pretty well.

I leaned into Victor, and smiled at Zee bouncing with adrenalin. Wow, was it really over? Was this what a happy ending looked like?

“Let’s get you out of sight...” Victor steered me toward an unmarked black van, using it to shield us from the camera flashes and phones pointed our way.

There was no hiding now.

I lowered myself gingerly to the van’s side step just as Elion’s distinctive figure carved from the crowd of cops and glided over.

“Adam.” They nodded a greeting to Zee and Victor. “It’s good to see you’re awake. I had my concerns and was about to send over the EMTs. Victor, however, assured me you were alive.”

“Your heartbeat was strong,” Victor said. “You just needed time.” There was more to his concern. He’d been afraid Elion would have their people take me away and lock me up after that huge display of power. Just because we’d won, didn’t make us safe.

But I was alright, even if I did feel as though I’d been run over by a freight train. “Are we going to be arrested?” Looking at the destruction all around us, it seemed unlikely they’d let us go free. And then there was the fact I’d clearly lied about being human for a long time.

“Not right now. But there will be extensive questions. You’ll all need to give

statements when you're feeling up to it, although we of course have several thousand witnesses to your very public display of power, Adam."

"Yeah." I winced. "Kinda hard to be stealthy when you're the size of an airliner."

"It's possible I may be removed from this case, as I've been more than personally involved for some time. However, I will make sure the truth is told. Gideon Cain will suffer the full wrath of the justice system for all his crimes."

"I made some assumptions about you, and I was wrong," Victor said. "I apologize."

"We all made assumptions. When I first saw you three, I assumed you were all mad. I very quickly learned that's only half of what you are." Their twitching smile suggested they were joking—or not. It was hard to tell.

"May I have your coat?" Zee asked.

Elion smiled politely. "No."

"Fair. I guess. However, I don't know if you noticed, but I did just save the world. Adam helped. Victor didn't do a fuckin' thing, as usual. He has pretty privileges, so we let it slide."

Victor arched an eyebrow and a slow smile tugged on the corners of his mouth.

"What?" Zee asked.

"You used my name."

"No I didn't."

“You did. Elion and Adam witnessed it.”

We nodded. “You did, Zee,” I said.

“I’d never say that. Because if I had, it would mean I like him, and I don’t... Like him. At all. Not even a little bit.” Zee showed us just how little by pinching his finger and thumb together. He wasn’t fooling anyone.

Elion’s bemused expression caught my eye, and I chuckled. “May we go home?” I asked. “It’s been a wild night and I’m dead on my feet.”

“You may. An agent will visit in the morning to take your statements, and Adam, there will be an SSD test to ascertain your Lost One potency and risk factor to the public. It goes without saying, do not try to leave the city.”

I wouldn’t be able to lie and sweet talk my way out of that one. But that was tomorrow’s problem. Today, I was done for. I just needed my bed and my two favorite people tucked in beside me.

Elion bowed their head, swept their tinted green locks back, and turned to go.

“Oh, uh?—”

“There’s no need to thank me,” they said, all suave and slick.

“Oh. Right. Uhm. Sure.” I stuffed my hands into my pockets. “But uh, it’s just uhm ... Can we get a ride? The Love Wagon exploded and the vampires don’t much like us, for vampire reasons. We’re broke, so an Uber is out?—”

With a smile, Elion tossed Victor their car key. “For the love of all things bright and beautiful, do not make me regret letting you borrow it. Now all of you, go home, get

some rest. You've earned it." Elion turned away, then back again. "I found this. It's yours, I believe." They took a phone from their coat pocket and handed it to Victor... "It unleashed a slew of swearing."

That's where Tom had gone.

"Thank you." Victor dipped his chin. "My apologies for the swearing. It's Tom Collins's default setting."

Elion appraised us once more. I probably looked awful. Victor's hair and clothes were a disheveled mess. Zee looked... good, like always—one hand on his hip, the other holding Shareen resting against his shoulder, wings back, horn-ring glinting. Elion gave a soft laugh. "You three really are something special."

We chuckled with them, and watched them head over to Gideon Cain and the SSD agents.

"Did they mean special like we're great, or special like we should be in an asylum?" Zee asked around a smile.

"Both, I suspect." Victor replied. "Come, Adam. Let's get you home before the SSD change their minds."

We made our way to Elion's car, and with Victor driving, pulled away from the chaos of the battle aftermath. I dozed against Zee in the back and listened to him excitedly recall all the amazing things he'd seen.

I'd been so afraid they'd fear me after seeing what I truly was, but my fears were unfounded. After everything, they hadn't abandoned me, they hadn't run screaming, they hadn't even tried to kill me.

They loved me.

Maybe I was something special, after all.

Adam Vex, the Chosen One whose heart would save the world, or doom it.

If it was truly over, then what happened after a prophecy was fulfilled? What happened when the story ended? Did the characters get to go home and live normal lives?

What did normal even look like?

I dozed, listening to Zee and Victor bickering about how dangerous frogs are. As long as we were together and this was our new normal, then I could definitely live with it.

CHAPTER 19

“Adam Vex, you have been deemed a category five Lost One and a threat to the public,” the assessor said across the bar table from me. He seemed like a nice enough guy, although his features were all crowded close, making his head too large for his pinched face.

The test’s outcome was inevitable.

“Can I answer some of those questions again?” I leaned forward and gestured at his piece of paper. “That one about how many people I’ve threatened? I mean, I kinda guessed. Maybe I guessed wrong?”

The assessor blinked twice. “Even at a guess, Mr. Vex, you admit in your own words that the figure is likely to be in the thousands.”

“Yeah, but... when I’m a dragon, people are real small. Sometimes, I can’t even see them. I can’t help it if I have a threatening personality. I don’t mean to come off as a fire-breathing jerk, it’s just... dragons aren’t very nice.”

The assessor sighed. “I’m sorry, Mr. Vex. The results of the test are very clear. And practically, we can’t have random dragons flying about the city. It’s not a good look.” He collected his papers. “It scares people.”

“But I did stop an evil sorcerer?”

“You also caused multi-million dollars’ worth of damage to a national landmark. It’s

a miracle nobody died last night.”

I huffed and leaned back. “Maybe next time I should let the bad guy win?”

“Mr. Vex, according to your test results, you have killed people?—”

“Just bad ones.” Mostly.

“And others you have no explanation for how they disappeared?”

That was because I’d eaten a few of them, but at that point in the test, I’d figured telling the truth wasn’t helping my case.

“You should get your affairs in order and prepare for transportation. I’m sorry.” He stood but lingered long enough to add, “For what it’s worth, I’m glad you did what you did, and I thank you on behalf of all San Franciscan citizens. But in the eyes of the law, Lost Ones of your caliber cannot be allowed to roam free.”

The assessor left, and after a few moments Zee poofed into the chair next to mine. “How’d it go? You’re a fuckin’ hero, right? They should give us a medal, or the key to the city, or summin’. Do we get a reward?”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him I was going to be locked up for my service to humanity. “It’s fine.” I smiled. “They said everything is fine and they thanked us.”

“That’s fuckin’ it? After everything we went through? Ugh. Whatever. We’ll celebrate anyway. Cain’s a flaccid old man who’s gonna spend the rest of his dull, miserable days shouting at clouds. I know for a fact all the Lost Ones are queuing up to thank you. Noreen Greene wants an exclusive interview, and she’s said her editor will pay a shit-ton of cash for the scoop.” He leaned forward, his eyes bright with enthusiasm. “She knows an agent who wants to buy my story for a movie. Imagine,

me on the big screen, exactly as it fuckin' should be. I was destined for Hollywood. We are set for life, Kitten." He shoved from the chair and flicked his wings out. "Imma tell everyone. We're celebrating. Party of the century tonight, right here."

"Sounds great, Zee."

He trotted off to tell Tom.

A party would be great. He deserved it. And I'd enjoy what might be my last night at the hotel.

Tom and Zee tossed ideas back and forth, Zee getting more excited with every new, outlandish idea. Then he poofed off to find Victor. Tom's gaze found me sitting alone among the crowd. He jerked his chin, plucked a bottle of whiskey from the rack behind him, and poured me a drink, summoning me to the bar.

"So, when you gonna tell them?" he said, sliding the whiskey into my hand.

Nothing got past Tom.

"When the SSD come to get me, I guess." I sipped the whiskey and let it burn all the way down. "Not tonight."

"That's the end of the hotel, then?"

"No, Zee's here, and Victor will see it safe. The hotel will be fine."

"Adam." Tom tossed his cloth over his shoulder and braced an arm on the bartop. "You still don't get it? Without you, this shithole fails."

I tried to smile, but his words rang true. Whatever happened to me, the hotel was

important. It had to survive. Not least because we had a portal home in one of our closets. “Have a little faith, Tom.”

“Ah, Adam.” Victor perched himself on the barstool beside me. “Bloody Bitch, please Tom.”

“Coming right up.” Tom busied himself fixing Victor’s drink.

“Are you alright?” Victor asked, sensing something was off.

I tried to show him my most normal, bravest smile. “Yup, it’s all good.”

“I just had an interesting call from Pierce, the royal lawyer. Of course, I had to go outside the wards to speak at length with him. It seems the council would like me to join them.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Really? Just like that, you’re pals now?”

“It seems they’ve been trying to end the royal line of succession for a long time. As Daisy hasn’t been seen and has, ahem, likely passed without an heir, the council are about to step in. But they need to be seen to be united, and have someone among them who others can get behind. While I was never more than a minor player in the background, I am well known here.”

“Wow. What about them suing us?”

“All Daisy’s idea. If I join them, the legalities will be dropped.”

“Wow, that’s... I did not see that coming. Are you going to accept?”

Tom handed Victor the bright red Bloody Bitch. “If you ask me,” Tom said. “Which

I'm sure you were about to do. The vampires could fuckin' benefit from someone like you as the handsome face of their PR."

"Tom, is that a compliment?" Victor asked.

"Ha. No. But ever since you arrived this place has gone to hell."

"He arrived on opening day, Tom."

"Exactly. Coincidence?"

I huffed a laugh. "You sound like Zee."

"I have not decided. If I were to accept, it would mean I'd have to spend a great deal of time away from the hotel. Away from you."

Which was about to happen anyway, as I'd be locked behind bars in a powerful Lost Ones holding facility. "You were meant for more than running a three-star hotel, Victor."

Tom snorted. "Two stars, at best."

"What of Zodiac?"

"He'll be fine," I said. "He's got some hotshot Hollywood agent wanting to buy the rights to his life story. There will be movies, books, the works. He thrives in the spotlight."

"Hm. I shall consider my options." Victor sipped his drink, making thoughtful noises.

It seemed as though everyone had a future—everyone but me. But maybe that was

how it should be? I had done terrible things. I did eat people, which wasn't very socially acceptable. But nobody was perfect, right?

It didn't matter.

I'd enjoy the party, and tomorrow would come whatever happened.

"Have you seen Zee? He's organizing a big shindig tonight to celebrate everyone being alive. At least, I think that's what it's for."

"I have not. I will make sure to avoid him. He's incorrigible when party planning." He said it with a smile.

"Or." I puffed out a sigh. "We could all hop into the Love Wagon and tour the country, solving crimes. Or doing them?"

"That would be an appealing alternative, if it weren't for the fact the Love Wagon exploded with the harvester right after we'd extracted Cain's power."

"Oh, right, I forgot. Y'know, why did it turn him human?"

"The same reasons it turned you mostly human. Gideon Cain had been hiding in human glamor, just like you. With the harvester turned up to its maximum potential, and the majority of his power extracted, he was reduced down to whatever was left. In his case, a late fifties mortal man."

I finished up my whiskey. "At least it's over."

"Indeed. At least it is over," he repeated, sounding about as happy as I was. Which is to say, not much.

“Well, you two are rays of fuckin’ sunshine,” Tom grunted. “Go mope somewhere else, you’re scaring off real customers.”

I had hotel chores to do, and Victor had some life choices to make, so we left the bar. The rest of the day passed by in a blur of fielding multiple calls from the press, room changeovers, folks checking out now the Gideon threat appeared to be over, and new guests checking in. The gremlins were causing a riot in the kitchens, so I sent Claymore down there with Jimmy to sort them out. Shadow had decided they wanted to travel outside the attic and maybe attend some night classes on how to blend in with humans.

The sun inevitably set, and the time to party soon came around. As promised, Zee had decorated the bar in extravagant streamers and dick-shaped balloons—I figured he’d got them from Razorsedge. The evening passed in a blur of celebration, Zee’s performances, demons dancing, and a whole lot of general fun. And nobody died. Which had to be a good thing.

But it was tough staying jubilant, knowing it was all about to be over.

Why did good things have to end?

Zee found me later on the roof, where I’d climbed to admire the twinkling city under the stars like we used to. He didn’t say anything, just sat next to me, pulled his knees to his chest, wrapped his tail around his boots, and stared at the view.

Victor arrived later, making quick work of the window and the drainpipe, to climb up and sit on my left.

“Told you Murder Daddy was capable of dragging a body in through a window without anyone noticing,” Zee said, taking a swig from an unmarked bottle that Tom had probably given him.

He handed the bottle to me. I sniffed it, figured what was the worst that could happen, then drank from it too, and handed it to Victor.

“Do we know its contents?”

“Let your hair down and fuckin’ live a little, Vic,” Zee said.

“My hair is down.” Victor smirked around the bottle and gulped it down, making the rest of us look like lightweights.

“So, this is what the end looks like, huh?” Zee said.

“It’s the end in one sense, but a beginning in another.”

Zee rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Fancy Fangs. I’m not a fan of this fucked-up nervous feeling inside. We won, we should be feeling great.”

“Guys, so... tomorrow... Uh...” I looked up and found them both waiting for me to finish. The ache in my heart grew heavy. I couldn’t say it. I didn’t want our story to end. It wasn’t right.

There was the portal? I could go through that, but that place wasn’t my home anymore. I wasn’t sure it had ever been a home. This world was. San Francisco was. The SOS Hotel was. Victor and Zee were my home. “We should uh... look at converting the attic into rooms. I spoke with Madame Matase and she said if the occupancy rates stay this high, we’ll be making a profit real soon.”

“Fuckin’ awesome. We are the best hoteliers ever.”

“Right,” I agreed.

“I concur.”

“Wait, hold up, did Lord Fuck-Hard just say I was the best?”

“I think he said we , but . . .”

Victor smiled. “Demon, you are the best of your kind... the best demon, the best lover. Indeed, you’re the best thing to ever happen to me. The both of you are. And I’ve lived a great many lives, seen a great many things, but never truly loved like I do in this moment, with you.”

Zee beamed. “Fuck, you’re old.” He laughed, and we passed the unnamed drink around. “We got this, right?” Zee asked.

I wasn’t sure what this was, but we definitely had it. “Yeah,” I agreed, my heart warming.

“Of course,” Victor said confidently.

“Great, now let’s get back down there, because imma dance and you two are joining me. No arguing.”

Zee stood, his outline sparkling in the moonlight. Then Victor was on his feet too, suitably dramatic with the city sparkling behind him. I offered my hands, and they both pulled me to my feet.

We returned to the bar and danced the night away, as though tomorrow wasn’t right around the corner, when we all knew, everything was about to change.

CHAPTER 20

The armored van pulled up outside the hotel at six a.m., under the brilliant sunshine of a glorious San Francisco day.

I'd left Zee dozing, his tail wrapped around a sleeping Victor, and snuck out. Maybe letting this happen without them knowing wasn't a great idea, but it seemed like the only way to keep them safe. Knowing them like I did, they'd try and stop the inevitable, and get themselves tossed in Lost Ones jail.

Three armed and armored agents entered the foyer, dressed for trouble.

"Adam, darling?" Madame Matase stood at the desk, concern written all over her face.

"It's alright. They're here for me."

After the party last night, most of the hotel's staff and guests were sleeping off hangovers. Nobody else was in the foyer, just me, Madame Matase, and my destiny.

After ruffling my hair, I tucked my hands into my pants pockets. "What happens now?"

The lead agent flicked open a pair of cuffs. "These are warding for your protection and ours."

I nodded and held out my hands, palms up. This was really happening. "I'm not going

to resist.”

“They all say that,” an agent at the back grumbled.

Zee poofed into the foyer, shirt loose and pants barely buttoned around his hips. “Oh, hell no! You sneaky sons of bitches aren’t taking my kitten. Not today, not ever.” He reached into the air and pulled Shareen from a purple tear in reality. “You wanna dance? I’m right here.”

The agents went for their guns, even though the wards would stop all of this from kicking off.

“Zee, no.” I thrust out a hand. “Don’t.”

“Adam? I . . .” His face fell. “What’s happening?”

“It’s over.”

Victor blasted through the stairwell doors, his hair a messy black flag and his face stricken. “Stop! I can stop this... The vampire council have sway. Just... I need time, just... Please, do not take Adam from us.”

This was exactly what I’d been trying to avoid. I shook my head and offered my wrists to the agent with the cuffs again. “Let’s get it over with.”

Victor ventured closer, moving slower, uncertain. “Adam, my dear?”

“Guys, please... It’s fine. Everything is fine, okay?” My little laugh came out strained. “You’ve got your own lives. I’ve fulfilled my prophecy. It’s over. This is how it ends.”

“I refuse to accept that.” Victor straightened. His top lip rippled in a snarl.

“Yeah, what he said,” Zee agreed, joining Victor at his side. “Nobody takes our kitten against his will.”

“I signed off on this,” I told them. The cuffs clicked home, underlining my acceptance.

“Adam, why?” This came from Victor, and the depth of feeling behind it had me briefly doubting my decision. Maybe we should have escaped in the Love Wagon—or whatever vehicle we could find—and gone on a countrywide people-eating spree. But it wouldn’t change anything. I’d still be a dragon and too dangerous to let roam free.

“I love you guys.”

Zee staggered, and slumped against the front desk, as though my love had wounded him. He turned his face away, eyes squeezed closed. Victor reached out to him and rested a hand on his shoulder. And that’s how I knew they were going to be okay.

I nodded at the agent. “Alright, let’s go.”

“Wait!” A voice sounded outside. “Wait! Halt!” Agent Leomaris burst into the hotel with a dramatic flair of their long coat. Striding over, they flashed a badge, dropped a black tote bag by their feet, and panted, “SSD Agent Elion Leomaris on special command from the newly elected police commissioner.” They tore a document from inside their coat and handed it to the lead agent, making the man remove his helmet to read it.

“Adam.” Leomaris turned to me. “You have broken and flaunted multiple laws, are a suspect in several missing persons cases, the prime suspect in damage to public

property, and a slew of other crimes that are frankly, too long to list.”

I winced. “I did do all of that, yeah.”

“And in any normal circumstance, you’d be incarcerated and relocated to a Lost Ones holding facility, but it appears as though we have a situation. Several tears have begun to open in the veil, and with the situation becoming volatile, the police commissioner has created a new position among the SSD to help counteract this potential threat to peace.”

“That’s a whole lot of fuckin’ words when all I wanna hear is that Adam’s free,” Zee said. “And who your tailor is.”

“Adam, this is for you.” Elion handed me a shiny piece of card with my name and a very official looking stamp on it.

My cuffs rattled as I took it. “What is it?”

“A certificate.”

“A . . . what?”

“A certificate of appreciation for your helping to subdue the threat from the dark sorcerer, Gideon Cain,” Leomaris elaborated.

“A fuckin’ certificate?” Zee growled. “We saved the world and we get a certificate, and Adam goes to jail? You know this is bullshit, right?”

Elion half shrugged. “Whether the entire world was at risk remains up for debate.”

“Excuse moi.” Zee stomped over. “You think Cain would have stopped at San

Francisco? You saw that great big hole he was opening in the sky, right?"

Leomaris stood firm under Zee's intimidation. "Adam, please read the names on the certificate."

"Alright, uh... Me, Victor, and Zodiac," I read aloud.

"And what else does it say?"

"Uh, it says, under our names, that we are hereby granted the title of Heroes of the City ... Oh." That sounded official. They wouldn't send a hero of the city to jail, right?

"And as our new heroes, you have some... leniency when it comes to the law," Leomaris explained.

"You mean we got wiggle room?" Zee asked, brightening.

Leomaris took a deep breath. "Adam, Victor, Zodiac, it appears as though we're going to need heroes to protect this side of the veil, should anything as insidious as Gideon Cain decide to make its presence known in the human world again. Inexplicably, the vampires beyond the veil have preempted any war by surrendering in the face of our gift ... although nobody quite understands what that gift was. There are still a great many insidious beings who may threaten the peace of this world."

"Erm... There was a, uh, gift?" The vampire queen's decapitated body?

"No, we have no idea what that gift could be. No idea at all," Victor emphasized, giving me his side-eye.

"While I am authorized to offer you this position," Elion continued. "You must of

course agree to accept the new title and its responsibility. We are not forcing you. It's your choice."

I opened my mouth to agree, as going to jail definitely was not somewhere I wanted to be, when Zee raised a finger. "Hold up. This is all fine and dandy an' all, but we need to know the important shit, like is there a uniform and do I get a swishy coat?"

Leomaris handed the tote bag to Zee.

Zee narrowed his eyes, glared, and only after he'd made sure everyone around us knew he was suspicious of gifts from a fae, he opened it. Zee gasped, his eyes got all big and emotional and his wings popped out in surprise. "You got me a coat?!" he squeaked.

Leomaris clearly knew exactly how to get Zee on side. "Made especially to your dimensions."

"Oh my fuckin' fuck, you know my stats?" Zee pulled the coat from the bag, gave it a flick, and swept it on, slotting its specialized slits around the base of his wings. It was similar in style to Leomaris's coat but a dark, rich purple velvet. And it looked fine on him.

"My stars!" He spun on the spot, making the coat flare. "Fuck Hollywood. I'm a fuckin' Hero of the City now. Adam—" He scooted close, and whispered in my ear. "I want this coat. And also, would like it a lot if you did not have to go to jail, which would mean me having to save your cute ass and us being fugitives for the rest of our fabulous, criminal lives. Tempting, but messy. So please, say yes."

I glanced at Victor, then held out the certificate for him to check over. He scanned it, and while Zee pranced around the foyer, swishing his new coat, Victor asked, "On your word, this is a legitimate offer with no hidden motives?"

“No hidden motives,” Leomaris confirmed. “This world is not prepared for some of the more powerful beings that are now eyeing human cities as prime real estate. We need your help. And what better deterrent to testing us than the last dragon who happens to run a sanctuary for Lost Ones?”

Victor’s gaze slid to me. He nodded.

“We accept,” I said. I was going to be a real hero after all.

The agent unlocked my cuffs and pulled them free.

Leomaris nodded, and dismissed the other agents with a few terse instructions, sending them back outside.

Zee swept up to Leomaris. “I could kiss you. But won’t. Boundaries. You need anything? Drugs, sex toys? I’m your guy.”

“Uh... maybe don’t offer the SSD agent drugs and sex, Zee?”

“Fuck. Right.” Zee sprang back. “Joking... obviously.” He slid his attention toward Victor, and struck a pose in front of him. “You like, Fancy Fangs? Wanna take it off, Your Lordship?”

Victor huffed a sigh. “It’s delightful, and yes, but perhaps later and in private?”

I smiled at their antics, and then at Leomaris. “Am I really free?”

“You are, yes. Just make sure you don’t turn into the type of Lost One we need to guard against. No more eating people.”

A little nervous laugh tittered free. “What? Me?” I only ever ate the bad ones. Mostly.

“Your normal human act isn’t fooling anyone anymore, Mr. Vex. In fact, we need you to be exactly who you really are so the world sees we are ready to protect those who need it—Lost Ones and humans alike. There will be a ceremony, mostly to show the city you are...” Leomaris swept a hand toward me. “Relatively harmless.”

The city wanted me, all of me, exactly as I was. I didn’t need to pretend anymore? My insides got all zingy and light. “I can definitely do that.”

“Best day ever!” Zee squeed. He grabbed Victor’s hand and yanked him away from the front desk. “Excuse us. Adam? Kitten? Join us. We’ll be waiting.”

I swallowed and fought back a shy smile. “Alright...”

Victor extracted himself from Zee’s grip to march over and pin Leomaris under his strict glare. “While Zodiac can be bought with pretty things, and Adam has a good heart so naturally believes in doing the right thing, I am not so easily quelled, and should you or the SSD attempt to take Adam from us again, please know my undying wrath is no trivial thing.”

“Oh, my fuck.” Zee eye-rolled and stomped up to Victor. “They get it, you’re a vampire badass. Now let’s go to your room and find a nice silk tie you can use to roleplay that wrath. I wanna make a nest for Adam, and we’ve got some catching up to do now he can take it like a dragon again. Adam,” Zee purred my name. “Do not keep us waiting.” He dragged Victor after him, back through the stairs doorway.

“Thank you,” I told Elion.

Their smile bloomed slowly. “Frankly, if you hadn’t accepted the offer, we’d all be on our way to Lost Ones prison. Our fates are in the hands of a vampire, a demon, and the last dragon. Please do not make me regret it.”

“We won’t. We’re good at this. Mostly. I mean... together, we’re generally pretty good at saving people. Sometimes. We’re not perfect, but who is?”

They laughed. “Alright. Well, you had better go be with them before they start arguing, no?”

“Right. Yes.” I glanced at the door Victor and Zee had passed through and back to Leomaris. “So, uhm... About those portals that are opening up. We might have one? Just a little one.”

They nodded and gazed about the foyer. “This is a better place than most. Guard it, and in time, the authorities will see about sending those home who want to return. As it should be. I suspect the SOS Hotel will pave the way in that regard.”

“Okay, sure. You uh... you don’t want to go home, if it turns out we can?”

“There was a time I preferred hunting people, now I prefer saving them. This is my home, as I suspect it is yours. Good day, Mr. Vex. And do not give me cause to regret our association.”

I gave a little wave, and Elion returned a soft nod.

Message understood. They would absolutely put me down if I happened to get the wrong idea about being a hero.

With Elion gone, and the reception’s phone ringing, doors slamming, elevator pinging, and Madame Matase chatting with a guest at the front desk, I studied the certificate.

Heroes of the City.

It must have been right, if it was on a certificate.

As it turned out, I'd been the hero of this story all along. I grinned, and briefly soaked up the SOS Hotel atmosphere. Me? A hero? How crazy was that.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:15 am

I climbed from the black sedan under a hail of camera flashes and placed shiny shoes onto the red carpet. A tiny little flutter of nerves constricted around my heart. Just seven weeks ago, I'd shied away from the spotlights, hidden in average, pretending to be nobody.

“Adam! Adam! A photo for your fans? Adam! We love you Adam!”

I smiled, tugged at my cuffs, fiddled with my collar, and tried to look casual. The limelight was going to take some getting used to.

A kerfuffle was happening inside the car I'd climbed from. Zee was urging Victor to hurry up, but Victor would not be rushed. He'd coached me on how important this was. We were to project normal, friendly appearances, not mayhem and murder vibes.

Victor emerged from the back of the car, wearing a classy black suit with subtle purple stitching and a lining of purple silk inside. The hail of camera flashes ignited all over again. He'd never looked more handsome. He reached out and looped his arm with mine. My grin had my cheeks aching.

But our moment was over as soon as Zee stuck a knee-high laced-up boot out of the car, then followed it with the next. He had the best legs out of all of us, so when he emerged like a butterfly from a chrysalis, and his wings unfurled behind him, the crowd of press and fans we'd collected lost their collective minds.

He was born for this. While Zee soaked up all the attention, Victor and I climbed the steps and entered the concert hall, where our Heroes of the City ceremony was about

to take place. It was a glitzy affair, paid for in part by the vampires, who wanted their new council member to project nothing-bad-here vibes.

I wasn't sure what it meant, that Victor would be on the council, or what tomorrow would bring. But we would be together. That much I was certain of.

Some of the staff guided us to our table, where Leomaris and their partner Delores were already seated. Claymore was here too, filling space for three at the table. He grumbled a hello. Jimmy had draped himself in an empty champagne glass, having already consumed his weight in wine.

Even Tom was here, projected from a phone on the tabletop, arms crossed, berating everything and everyone around us for their shoddy service. Madame Matase had remained at the hotel, holding down the fort until our return.

Victor and I took a seat, and Zee joined us a few minutes later, poofing into his chair, bringing with him his brilliant smile and a sprinkling of purple sparks. "Now this is what I'm fuckin' talkin' about. This..." He sat back and circled his hand in the air. "This is our fuckin' destiny. Totally worth almost dying for on multiple occasions."

"I'm glad you approve." Leomaris smiled.

"Heroes of the city!" Zee laughed. "Joke's on the SSD, I can't even protect my dildo drawer from gremlins."

Leomaris paled some.

"I'm joking. Lighten up, Legolas. We're pros at this."

"There is one issue we need to discuss?—"

"Is it a mood killer?" Zee was quick to ask.

“Potentially. It’s regarding Cain, and a minor recent instance of a potential esca?—”

“Nope, zip, shh.” Zee shushed Leomaris. “Save it till after.”

Leomaris saw us all nodding our agreement, and with a resigned sigh, agreed. “Alright, it can wait.”

We chatted between ourselves, going over the events from the past seven weeks since the hotel opened that had brought us to this seemingly impossible night: Gideon Cain’s first attempt to stop us, using Shadow to disrupt the hotel; Sebastien’s meddling that had seen good people get hurt; Victor’s wife and the vampires attempting to cut pieces off him; Tom being kidnapped; gremlins taking over the hotel; Reynard Technologies getting blown to tiny pieces; the death of the vampire queen... and more.

“It’s been fuckin’ wild,” Zee laughed.

Victor squeezed my hand. “Adam, please know that first and foremost, I am yours, and I belong with you and Zodiac at the hotel. Any position I accept on the council is for us, not them. It will benefit us greatly to have a foothold inside the vampire door, so to speak.”

“You had better not leave us, Murder Daddy. Personally, I don’t fucking care, obviously, but Adam loves you or something.” Zee shrugged. “Besides, we’re just getting warmed up in the bedroom. I’m not done until I hear indigo from between your fancy fangs.”

Leomaris spluttered their drink, Claymore groaned, Delores laughed, and Jimmy’s wings perked up as the little pixie tuned in to our conversation now sex was involved.

“That is a tall order, demon. I’ve had centuries of experience. Your mere decades are trivial, and frankly unimaginative compared to my learned sexual exploits.”

Zee gasped. “Did you just call moi boring ?”

Smiling at their banter, I sat back and absorbed how far we’d come. If anyone had told me we’d be about to accept awards for being heroes in front of the entire city, just a few months after opening the hotel, the old Adam Vex probably would have run away. Now, I couldn’t imagine wanting to be anywhere else.

The new police commissioner took to the stage and spoke about a new world in which Lost Ones lived in harmony with humanity, but also about sacrifice. Not everyone had survived recent events. Peace came with a cost. She continued, explaining that events from the Golden Gate Bridge were a sign humanity needed more than just the SSD. It needed firepower. And it just so happened, there was one dragon left.

To rapturous applause, Victor, Zee, and I took to the stage. We each shook the commissioner’s hand and accepted our framed Hero of the City certificates. The audience of humans and Lost Ones were on their feet.

Seven weeks ago, if anyone had suggested the SOS Hotel management team would be onstage, in full view of a potential worldwide audience, accepting titles as Heroes of the City , we’d have laughed, and I probably would have dropped everything and gone into hiding—again.

But this was it. Things were looking up. We’d survived, and had our whole futures ahead of us.

We should have expected what happened next. When had an SOS Hotel management team date ever happened without some kind of incident?

“Adam Vex!” a male voice boomed through the applause, coming from offstage.

The hulking mass of a ragged man staggered toward us, panting and disheveled in

blue overalls. The bright lights from above washed out the details, but I couldn't miss the gun in his hand.

“What the actual fuck?” Zee said what we were all most likely thinking.

The figure stumbled forward, and looked up.

“Holy frog balls on a stick, it's Cain?!”

We definitely weren't all thinking that, but close enough.

Gideon Cain had looked better. It was only the shark-like grayness to his eyes and tousled salt and pepper hair that gave him away.

“You have them all fooled!” Cain boomed. “You're no hero!”

“Security!” the commissioner barked.

I raised a hand. “It's alright. Commissioner, please leave the stage. For your own safety.”

“Mr. Vex, this man is clearly unstable?—”

I shared a slight smile. “We're acquainted, and this is what I'm here for. Please step back, we've got this.”

The commissioner nodded and backed off the opposite end of the stage.

“Wait, we have this?” Zee echoed.

“Guys, I think it's best if I talk with him, one on one.”

Zee scowled. “Uh, how about, no?”

“It’s alright,” I told him with a sinister smile. “He can’t hurt me or anyone anymore.”

Victor knew what came next, and with a squeeze of Zee’s shoulder, he steered him toward the edge of the stage, but didn’t leave.

Spotlights burned down. Faces in the crowd all blurred into the background.

“You have them all fooled, but not me. I knew what you were from the very beginning. You’re a monster.”

He wasn’t wrong. I was all those things.

“You lost, Gideon.” I eyed the gun in his hand. His aim was the only steady part of him. “Put the gun down.”

“You lie, and you cheat. I outbid you. That hotel is mine! This victory is mine! I was going to save all you fools from yourselves!”

I raised both hands, holding them out. “I don’t know how you escaped the SSD or what you think you’re going to accomplish, but you need to lower that gun. You’re just making it worse for yourself.”

“I came to this world, I built an empire, and you got in my way. It’s not over, Mr. Vex. I have connections. You think I’m going to be stuck in this human suit forever? No, this is just a temporary state. I’m working on a way to stop you, stop you all. Hero?” He laughed. “This man is no hero, he’s no man, he’s not one of you.” Gideon waved the gun at the audience, eliciting a series of frightened gasps. “He’s a bloodthirsty killer!”

“Hey.” I snapped. “Point the gun at me, Gideon. I’m the one you want.” I spread my

arms, making myself an easy target.

Zee poofed to my side and growled at Cain. “Is this the part where you get your evil monologue on? Because honestly, nobody got time for dat.”

Gideon’s aim swung toward Zee. He tugged the trigger, the gun barked.

No! I dodged into the path of the bullet.

The round punched me in the shoulder, almost jerking me off my feet. I staggered and fought the burn. I could take a bullet to the chest, but Zee couldn’t.

Zee’s growl had his wings sparking. The stage lights sizzled, growing brighter.

“Oh, you dead now, bitch !”

Victor dashed around the back of the stage, avoiding the spotlights. Zee sprang into the air.

They were going to engage. Gideon would shoot.

No, nobody threatened the people I loved.

I dropped my glamor in less than a second. All my enormous dragon self exploded onto the stage, filling the space from floor to ceiling.

Gideon’s face was the picture of surprise. Even now, he’d thought I’d hide.

He raised the gun up... and up. Higher and higher, until it pointed at my snout. “It doesn’t matter what you do, or how many names you get, you’ll always be a killer! Just like me!”

I opened my jaws and snapped my teeth shut around the irritating man. He was kinda crunchy, a bit gristly, and horribly sour. One gulp, and he was gone. It's a whole lot easier eating people when you're the size of a house. A whole lot less messy too.

A sea of gasps drew my attention toward the audience.

Oh, right. Big bad dragon. Oops. With the threat gone, I willed my glamor back into place, packing all my dragon self into its tiny, non-assuming, innocent human packaging, and brushed down my nice new suit, back in my normal, average Adam Vex body.

Silence muffled the concert hall.

I stood on that stage, while the whole world held its breath.

Would they believe it had been an accident? Hm, probably not. "Uhm ... so... Uh." Rubbing the back of my neck, I swallowed hard. "So... uh..." I had this. I was the hero. I'd done what they'd wanted me to do. It was time to be myself.

Straightening, I breathed in, smiled, and shrugged. "Some folks just need eating."

Cheers erupted. Applause surged.

Zee and Victor appeared at my sides.

"Ain't nobody gonna mess with us now, Kitten." Zee winked, grabbing my hand and lifting it to take a bow.

Contentment, love, and acceptance made my heart swell.

Who knew being me was the right way to be? It had only taken the best demon and a vampire lord in my life to figure that out.

“And if they do, we know where to hide the bodies,” Victor mumbled from the corner of his mouth, then winked. “Those you don’t eat.”

He was right.

We were going to be fine, just so long as we had each other, the SOS Hotel, and somewhere to hide a body.

THE END

If you enjoyed our bonkers adventures, please leave a review . For every new review, a gremlin is saved from being shoved through a random portal and Zee gets a new hat.