

THE PACT



X. ARATARE

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Nate Whitney had always had a connection to nature, a sort of fascination that had him losing time watching the waves on the ocean, luring a wolf from the woods to come to him for a scratch behind the ears or controlling the wind to stop himself from toppling over a cliff. He feared it was a form of the madness that drove his father to kill his mother soon after he was born, but he never guessed what it truly meant. Others, however, figured it out before him including the mysterious Emrys Frost who has returned to teach at the school his family founded, Dunhaven School for the Gifted. Nate's life is upended as he sent to Dunhaven for his senior year and he discovers what being "gifted" really means.

Nathaniel Whitney



Nate fears he might be going crazy when it seems he can summon lightning from the sky. Is he like his father? The man who killed his mother after claiming she was possessed by a demon? But then the beautiful and damaged Emrys Frost enters his life and reveals to Nate that his father wasn't crazy at all and Nate ... well, Nate really can summon lightning and much, much more.

Emrys Frost



The beautiful, damaged and wild Emrys Frost returns to Winter Haven from parts and for reasons unknown. But he immediately seeks out Nate Whitney as the young man is a witch from a powerful line of witches just like Emrys is. The demon that possessed Nate's mother has possessed another and intends to bring about the end of the world and only Nate, Emrys and their friends to stop it.

The Greater Demon



The Greater Demon has haunted Nate's life since his birth. It possessed his mother and tried to kill him when he was an infant. Now, he has possessed another powerful witch, but claims to have had a change of heart. He doesn't want to kill Nate. He wants Nate to help him take over the world. But between the Greater Demon and that goal are Emrys Frost.

CHAPTER ONE - FASCINATION

“Nathaniel! Nathaniel Whitney!” Angela Baskin, the head of the catering company, screeched. “Where is that boy? I need him now! The guests are arriving!”

Nate stood on the edge of a cliff over a hundred feet away from the lighted pavilion where Angela paced and shouted for him. His eyes were fixed on the sea and his ears attuned only to the waves. His white button-down shirt flattened against his muscled chest. Even though the waves were fifty feet below him, the salt spray lifted up on the wind’s wings and stung his face. He took in a deep breath. Salty air filled his lungs.

The sea was a slate gray and the white caps looked like icy cream foaming on top. Sky and sea were becoming one as dusk fell. He could already glimpse a hint of stars. But it was the sea that called to him the most at this hour. It was irresistible. He felt his breath in the water. The rush and shush of the waves matched the movement of his blood. The crash of the waves on the rocks mirrored his heartbeat. He squinted his green eyes to look deeper beneath the water’s surface. He thought he saw something there, maybe it was fish, or seaweed, but it looked different than that. Silvery. Glittering. His heart rate rose. He leaned further forward.

“Nate!” Daniel slapped his shoulder. “Man, you deaf?”

Nate spun around to face the other boy, but his foot slipped on the loose dirt near the cliff’s edge. His heel slid off into open air. His arms pin wheeled at his sides as he began to fall backwards. Everything slowed down. He watched as Daniel’s mouth opened in an ‘o’ of terror. The scrawny boy’s eyes bugged out of his head in panic. Daniel’s fingertips scrabbled at Nate’s arm, but didn’t catch hold. Nate was falling. He could feel the emptiness behind him. He was going to topple over and smash on the rocks below.

“NO!” Nate cried out.

The wind suddenly gusted strong and sure. It held him up. *Harder. Blow harder. Just a little bit more.*

And the wind responded. It propelled him forward. He hovered there, neither falling nor ascending for long moments. But Daniel could reach him. The other boy's fingers scrapped along Nate's shirt, but finally his hands closed around Nate's forearm and he yanked Nate back onto the grass. Nate's heart thundered so hard in his chest that he couldn't hear anything else for a moment. The smell of earth filled his nostrils. The grass was cool against his cheek.

"Holy shit! Holy shit!" Daniel gasped out.

Nate turned to look at the other boy sprawled beside him. His heartbeat quieted. Daniel's face was pinched and white. Daniel was a thin, scrawny boy with a scattering of pimples on his cheeks. He clutched at the front of his shirt as he stared at Nate like he didn't believe the other boy was really there and not broken and bloody on the rocks fifty feet below. Nate felt the same way.

"Thanks for the quick thinking." Nate pushed himself up to his knees. His limbs trembled. Adrenaline still coursed through him. He lifted one hand up before his face. It shook.

"I'd say you're welcome except it was my fault you nearly fell to your death. And I really thought for a second that I'd lost you," Daniel said, his voice high and tight. His brown eyes were wide and worried.

Nate nodded. "Me, too." He realized that the wind, which had seemed so powerful before was now just a normal ocean breeze. He took in a deep shuddering breath.

"I think I lost a decade off my life." Daniel smoothed his hands down the front of his white shirt. They were dressed the same: white button down, black pants and shoes. Traditional catering-wear.

"We're eighteen, it'll take a while before you actually know whether a decade's gone," Nate responded dryly.

"I intend to live fast, die young and —"

“Leave an ugly corpse? Because without that surgery we’ve been talking about —”

“Shut up! Fuck, you’re the only guy I know who nearly dies, almost takes me with him, and can still joke!” Daniel shook his head.

Nate forced himself to stop trembling. He stood up. The sick sensation of adrenaline hitting an empty stomach had him feeling slightly nauseous. “Were you calling me before? I didn’t hear you.” Nate ran a hand through his dark brown locks. A stray curl fell over his forehead and he hastily pushed it back.

“Not me. That was Angela screaming for you. I’m just her messenger boy. I believe she burst a lung this time.” Daniel grinned.

Nate looked back over his shoulder towards the house that was all lit up for the party that he and Daniel were serving at. Between the edge of the cliff and the house there were dozens of tables swathed in expensive creamy cloth with fat yellow candles in their centers. A giant, white pavilion was set up at the base of the garden’s steps. It was lit from within with large chandeliers and filled with masses of candle-and-flowered covered tables. Tonight was the annual fundraiser for the Dunhaven School for the Gifted. Not that the school needed a fundraiser. Everyone that went there had piles of money. Nate thought it was just an excuse to party with the fig leaf of a good deed to cover it up. The rich perplexed him. If they wanted to have a party, have a party, but it seemed like they always needed a theme or cause. He sighed and dusted the grass off his knees.

“Shit. What does Angela need so bad that it nearly cost me my life?” Nate asked.

“Oh, I don’t know, something about you having to actually work for the pittance she’s paying us tonight? Maybe that was it. I mean I know she adores you, but even she doesn’t want to pay for you to do your phasing out thing.” Daniel held his sides as he laughed at his own jokes.

“Jerk.” Nate bumped his larger frame against Daniel’s smaller one. “I finished setting up. I was just taking a quick break.”

Daniel's gaze darted away from Nate. "Quick? You've been in la la land for almost twenty minutes."

"It couldn't have been that long. I just walked over here." Nate realized then that the sun had dropped behind the Abberley Mansion. More time had passed than he had thought. A trill of unease went through him. "Shit, maybe you're right."

"I know I'm right. Are you okay?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, yeah. Just ... I'm good." He resisted the urge to turn to the sea again. The wind skittered around his legs like a playful puppy. His unease grew. What was happening to him?

"Excellent. Then we must go speak to Madame." Daniel pointed towards the white pavilion.

"What's left to do? It looks like everything's done." A stab of guilt went through him. While he had been daydreaming, or phasing out as Daniel called it, the others were working.

"Angela probably wants you to double check everyone else's work," Daniel guessed. He suddenly blinked his eyes up at Nate and made his voice high in a poor imitation of Angela's, "After all, you're the best, Nate."

"Unlike reprobates like Daniel who skirt through his work." Nate grinned.

"Hell, yeah, didn't I just say that she pays us a pittance? That doesn't make all of us check, check, double-check like you." Daniel went to slap Nate's shoulder again, but he patted his arm instead. "Come on. Let's see what the boss wants before she pops a blood vessel looking for you."

Nate cast one last look at the sea. But it had grown darker now and the water was black. If there had been something down there, he wouldn't be able to see it now. The pull was strong, but with his friend there, he could turn away from it. The near death experience heightened that moment, the intensity of what he'd felt. Unnerved by the sense that the sea and air looked back at him, he hurried after his friend.

He and Daniel began to thread their way through the small circular tables that dotted the expansive back garden of the Abberley Estate. The candles flickered around them. Guests were already arriving and clustering at the upper garden. Nate quickened his step. He and Daniel had worked for Angela all summer, playing waiters, pot scrubbers, leftover food wrappers, valets and whatever else she needed to handle the busy summer party season. Tonight was their last big gig before school started. Their senior year. Not at the ritzy Dunhaven, but at the local public high school with its peeling gray paint and chipped Formica floors. He could almost taste the freedom of college though. Well, some freedom. He'd be working three jobs, going to school part time and probably still living with his grandmother, but it wouldn't be high school anymore.

"What were you looking at before?" Daniel asked suddenly. "In the ocean?"

"I — just the usual," Nate said lamely. He hunched his broad shoulders.

Daniel had been Nate's friend since they were ten, gap-toothed and too gawky for anyone to notice except to tease. Daniel still was that. But Nate had changed physically. He'd grown tall and filled out this last year. Girls had begun to notice him, but their interested looks just had him feeling cold. He almost wished he was invisible again. Daniel teased him mercilessly about that, but there was a touch of jealousy in his best friend's voice sometimes that had Daniel wincing. He wished someone would notice Daniel instead of their eyes going and staying on him. But despite this strange, unwanted rivalry, Daniel had been the only one that Nate had trusted with the strange feelings he had when he looked at the sea, or a wash of forest, or sometimes even the spill of stars against the night sky. It was a oneness that went beyond what other people said they felt. Nate got lost in nature and nature seemed to be just as fascinated by him.

"But you normally don't phase out like that at work though," Daniel pushed.

"It's getting worse, I guess." Nate grimaced. "I don't know. It was really ... powerful tonight. I think it's the changing of the seasons or something."

Fall was already starting to nip the air. Summer was fleeing. It was always during the changing seasons that the feelings became especially strong.

“What did you see this time? Were the fish dancing beneath the waves for you? Did they whisper: Nate, come swim with us?” Daniel asked. He was joking, but there was an uneasy undercurrent to it.

“Uh, no, not quite.” But Nate remembered the silvery thing that had drawn his attention. What had that been? “It’s not seeing so much as this *feeling*. The ocean reflects what’s inside of me and then I reflect what’s inside of it.” He shook his head. “I know that sounds crazy.”

“Crazy? Yeah, but it doesn’t mean it’s not real. I was there when that wolf stepped out of the forest last spring. I nearly crapped my pants when it came up to you, sniffed, and lowered its head so you could scratch it behind the ears. A fucking wolf,” Daniel said. He scratched at a pimple on his chin absently as he remembered the incident.

“Yeah, I guess. But it could have been a dog. We don’t know —”

“It was a wolf. Don’t even try to tell me it was a dog. It wasn’t.” Daniel waved him off. He grew more serious as he asked, “So what do you think this is?”

“This? I don’t know.” Nate’s lips thinned. “It’s sort of freaking me out. Yet ... I like it.” He remembered the feeling of the wind at his back, the way it had seemed to respond to his call. That had been heady. “But I’ve never lost it at work before. That’s the freaking me out part.”

“Maybe you should talk to someone about it,” Daniel said awkwardly.

Nate let out a sharp laugh. “Who would I tell? A shrink? I’m not crazy, Daniel.”

Daniel’s brown eyes slanted towards him. “I know.”

“I’m not!” Nate repeated.

A flutter of panic went through his chest. His father had been crazy. Crazy. Crazy. Bludgeoned his mother to death and tried to burn the house

down with Nate still inside in his crib. He didn't know why his father had done it. No one would tell him and the newspapers never did say. They speculated it was because he was going to lose his job and the stress had caused him to beat his wife to death and try to burn his newborn son alive. He was in a hospital now for the criminally insane. Nate had never gone to see him. But sometimes he wanted to ask his father why he'd done it.

"I'm not disagreeing with you!" Daniel said.

But it was there, left unspoken that this was weird, too different to be ignored, and it was getting worse. Or better. The wind had saved him. It had stopped him from falling.

Or am I totally imagining all that and it was all luck? Is this what Dad felt when he went nuts? It couldn't have been anything like this. The feeling doesn't make me feel violent. It makes me feel at peace. Almost like I could do ... something. But that something is good!

Whatever had driven his father to murder could not be this feeling. Nate just hoped that this wasn't craziness just with different symptoms.

A woman with bright blonde hair emerged from the pavilion's entrance. She was tapping a stylus against her lips. Her blue eyes alighted on Nate and she immediately made a beeline in their direction.

"There you are, Nathaniel!"

He skidded to a stop in front of Angela. He announced unnecessarily, "I'm here."

She raised a plucked eyebrow up at him. "So I see. Where were you?"

"Sorry about that. I was —"

"He was putting silverware out on the far tables," Daniel chimed in with a subtle elbow to Nate's side to tell him to not confess to the phasing out.

Angela brightened. "Good. That's good. This party is the crown jewel of the season. Everyone who's anyone is here. I can pretty much ensure picking up a few customers if this goes well."

“We’ll do whatever you need,” Nate said. He dug his fingers into his palms. He would not flake out again at work. Angela was a good person and he wanted things to go well for her. She’d given him a job in Winter Haven when no one else would. Maybe people remembered about his father or they just saw another teenager that couldn’t be counted on. But Angela had immediately sized him up and offered him a gig the first day he’d come into her offices with his very sparse resume in hand.

Angela was fifty, but looked forty. She always wore a dove gray skirt suit that was open at the throat to show the crisp lines of her white shirt and a large set of black pearls. Her colored blonde hair was artfully piled on top of her head with only a few wispy tendrils hanging down on the sides of her face. Her makeup was subtle yet she looked better than most of the heavily made-up women at the party. Her eyes skittered from one part of the garden to the next, tallying what was done and what still needed to be accomplished.

“Both of you are assigned to appetizers. Start picking up a few trays and circulating among the guests in the upper garden,” Angela instructed.

“Right. Got it.” Nate nodded. A stiff breeze suddenly came from the sea. It ruffled his dark brown hair and had a salty chill to it.

Angela looked out at the suddenly darkening skies. “It better not rain. The pavilion gets so hot when we shut it up. Well, get going both of you. What are you waiting for? An engraved invitation?”

Both boys grinned at her. The Abberley’s gardens were tiered. Sets of stone steps lead from one to the tier to the next. The boys took off up the steps to a side entrance to the kitchen where food was being set out. Daniel’s smaller form let him slip between the guests more easily than Nate. Soon the boys were separated. Nate couldn’t even see the back of Daniel’s head any longer. He had to slow his pace and apologize as he tried to get around the guests. Women in sheath dresses and men in suits blocked his path. The sweet smell of whiskey wafted over him as he passed a ruddy-faced man in a dark blue jacket and tan pants. The man was gesturing expansively with his hands, but Nate thought he could get past him. The person he was

talking to didn't register on Nate. He got a vague impression of a handsome face with catlike eyes and black hair.

Nate stepped forward just as the talking man closed his arms in the middle of his story. The boy was almost past him when the man unexpectedly flung his arms wide. The hand with the whiskey on the rocks and the sweet maraschino cherry hit Nate in the chest. Alcohol sloshed up and over the edge of the highball glass and soaked Nate's front. He bit back a hiss of annoyance and smoothed his expression to one of subservience as he raised his head to look at the man that had spilled the drink on him.

"Watch where you're going!" the ruddy faced man snarled.

"Sorry, sir," Nate said meekly even as he yearned to grind his teeth in frustration. He stunk of whiskey and there was a spreading golden stain on his chest. He'd have to grab another shirt for the rest of the evening. He thought he had one tucked away in one of the catering vans.

"It wasn't his fault, Carl. You tend to gesture when you talk. And the more excited you are, the bigger the gestures. I think you're the one who owes him an apology," Carl's companion said. His voice was smooth and rolled across Nate's senses pleasantly.

Nate looked over at the speaker and gaped. He felt like a deer in headlights as he took in the classically beautiful face that looked back at him. The speaker stood a little over six feet and had a perfect v-shaped upper chest. He appeared to be anywhere from late twenties to early thirties. He had one of those timeless faces that didn't show age. Unlike everyone else, he didn't wear a suit, but he looked somehow that much more elegant. He had on a cashmere turtleneck that hugged his powerful upper chest. Black dress pants encased long legs and brushed the top of shiny black shoes. Black hair the color of midnight with a subtle hint of curls at the ends was brushed back from a pale, perfect forehead. Topaz-colored eyes that seemed to shift from a light gold to a burnished bronze caught and held Nate.

"I don't owe him an apology, Emrys!" Carl huffed.

“You do,” Emrys said in that honeyed voice. “You’ve made a mess of him.” He extended one long-fingered hand and touched the center of the stain on Nate’s chest.

Nate felt his cheeks grow hot. “It’s okay. It’s so crowded already. I should have been more careful.”

“Damn straight. And I lost my drink, too.” Carl stared down at the now-empty glass with a rueful purse of his lips.

“I can get you another one, sir,” Nate offered. He could still feel Emrys’ touch through his shirt even though the man had brushed him with his fingertips only barely. That hand was back down at Emrys’ side now.

“That would be good. Manhattan. Extra cherries. No less than three.” Carl shoved the empty glass into Nate’s hands. “Now, Emrys, as I was saying. My son really needs more personal attention in class. He’s really special, you know.”

Nate slowly backed away from the two of them. Even as Carl rattled on about his son, Emrys continued to watch him. For once, Nate didn’t want to be invisible. In fact, being looked at by Emrys echoed how he felt when the wolf had come to him that one time. A hand on his shoulder nearly sent him sprawling for a second time that night. It was Angela. She was looking over at Carl and Emrys.

Nate felt his stomach clench. “I’m getting him another drink, Angela. It was a total accident about the spill and —”

“It’s all right, Nathaniel. I’m not worried about it,” she said, but still she stared at Emrys who had finally gone back to looking at Carl.

“So … what are you worried about?” Nate asked.

Angela shook herself. “I see that you met Emrys Frost.”

“Uh, yeah.” Nate’s cheeks colored again. A thrill went through him as he mouthed Emrys’ full name silently to himself.

“He’s come back to teach at Dunhaven,” she murmured. “We haven’t had a Frost in Winter Haven for over a hundred years.”

“Really?” Nate asked. “So, he’s a big deal?”

“A very big deal,” she said. “I’m surprised he didn’t take over as headmaster. He could have. After all, Dunhaven is … well, its his.”

“He owns Dunhaven?” Nate’s eyes went wide.

“Oh, yes, the Frosts founded it,” she said. “Then they … left.”

Nate watched as Emrys’ graceful neck bent as he listened to yet another party-goer. He wondered if they were telling Emrys how special their son or daughter was and how he needed to give Billy or Susie a little extra attention in class.

God, that would suck. He must feel like he’s in the Ninth Circle of Hell at his party, Nate thought.

At that moment, Emrys turned and looked directly at him with a wide grin as if he had heard Nate’s thoughts. The boy gave him an uncertain smile back. Lightening suddenly crawled across the sky and there was the low rumble of thunder.

Angela hissed, “It really is going to storm. Looks like a big one, too.”

CHAPTER TWO - GIFTED

“I’ll refill Mr. Hendrick’s drink. Why don’t you get a new shirt? You stink to high heaven.” Angela took the sticky highball glass from Nate’s hands.

“Yeah. No kidding. Okay, I’ll be right back.” Nate wiped him palms over his already ruined shirt. He cast one last glance at Emrys but the partygoers had clustered thickly around where the new teacher had been and he couldn’t see him any more. A surprising stab of regret went through him.

I’m sure I’ll see him later. The party’s just beginning after all.

Angela disappeared in the crowd as she headed towards the bartender. Nate began threading his way through the guests towards the front of the house. He found himself constantly apologizing as person after person elbowed him, blocked his way or crushed him against one of the decorative bushes. He had never been at a party where it was so crowded. Even with the size of the Abberley Estate, it seemed like everyone that had been to every other party that summer was now at this one. But Dunhaven didn't have this many students. He caught snippets of conversation as he made himself towards the mansion and through it to the parking area out front that explained why.

“... I tried to get my Edward into Dunhaven and do you know what they said?” A woman wearing too much lilac perfume whispered to her companion.

“No, what?” Her companion, a man with half-closed, hawkish eyes and thin lips asked.

Her red mouth writhed in anger. “That he didn’t have the right bloodlines! As if our family, which stretches back to the founding of this town, isn’t blue-blooded enough for them!”

“Yet here you are at their benefit. And you had to write a big check to the school to get invited in the first place,” the man responded with a cool smile.

The woman blinked. “But, of course, I am. Everyone who is anyone is here.”

Nate passed them by and scooted through the French doors into the house’s interior. It was drenched in marble and gold. He found it extraordinarily tacky, but most people oohed and ahhed over its architecture. He ran into another cluster of guests who kept him from passing by for almost a full minute. He tried going one way then the other around them, but each attempt was blocked. First, by a woman in impossibly high heels. Next by a man with a paunch that stuck out a foot from his body. Nate stopped trying to get past when he heard Emrys’ name mentioned.

"... they say he just appeared in the headmaster's office last week!" A woman dressed in a flaring orange dress gushed. "Not one word. Not a phone call. Not even an email. Just poof! There he was."

Another woman leaned towards her, exposing a wide slash of bosom. "He didn't ask to teach either. He just said he would and told what subjects he would be picking up."

"Well, he owns the place," a man with gold-rimmed glasses put in. "He can do what he wants. He could even shut it down."

"He wouldn't! Dunhaven is an institution! It's bigger than the Frosts after all. I would say he's rather commanding for someone so young," the woman in the orange dress said as she patted her hair.

"Supposedly, he didn't even raise his voice. Just calmly told the headmaster what was what," the bosomed lady pointed out. "But from what I hear the Frosts has always been that way. High-handed. Commanding. Arrogant. Sort of regal. Reminds me a bit of Alric Koenig, but ... different. Colder actually."

The orange dress woman narrowed her eyes and leaned in conspiratorially. "Well, you know the rumor about the Frost family, don't you?"

The bosomed lady shook her head. "What is it?"

"They were burned at the stake not too many years ago. That's why they founded Winter Haven. No one else would have them," she said with a fluttering hand over her heart.

Nate nearly gasped. For one moment, he envisioned Emrys' beautiful face taut with agony as flames licked up his body. He shook his head, feeling a piercing headache suddenly come on. He pinched the top of his nose hoping that would staunch the incipient migraine.

"Really? Witchcraft? Like those Wicca people —"

"No, like black magic. Devil worship. The thing that all those Puritans should have been afraid of while they were punishing poor old women. The

Frosts were the real thing,” the woman in orange said with a knowing nod of her head.

Black magic? Devil worship? How does she know these things? And what does it have to do with Emrys? He's just gotten here and already these women are totally sliming him with stupid superstitious nonsense. Nate took an instant dislike to the gossiping group. He had a ridiculous urge to defend Emrys to them. *But I don't know him. And Angela would totally can me for arguing with guests and future business opportunities.*

The man with the gold-rimmed glasses frowned. “We don’t talk about those things. Not here.”

The woman in orange retreated at his waspish tone. “Oh, well, I only meant ... well, never mind then.”

Nate smiled. Though he was no fan of the man’s, at least he has stopped them from spreading vicious rumors. After all, Emrys had just gotten here and already he was the center of gossip. Didn’t they have anything better to do?

The bosomed woman was quiet as well for a moment, but then she said, “Have you seen him? I’ve heard he’s quite handsome.”

The man with the gold-rimmed glasses smiled. “He is indeed.”

Nate was surprised at the shot of jealousy that went through him. As if only he should notice that Emrys was beautiful. Handsome was too dull a word for him. He hustled past the group as they began to break up and go their separate ways. He was grateful to walk out the front doors and onto the graveled drive. The valets were helping people out of their cars one by one so there was a more orderly, streamlined atmosphere here that he could easily navigate. His chest felt less tight as he took in deep draughts of night air. The sun had completely disappeared behind the horizon now. He nodded to Billy, one of the valets that he had done a few parties with, and headed towards the parking area where Angela’s fleet of catering vans sat like large white ghosts in the gloom. The front of his shirt was sticking to

his chest uncomfortably as he crunched his way over the gravel drive. Lightening streaked across the night sky.

It really is going to storm, Nate thought.

A shiver of apprehension and excitement raced down his spine. The air had an electric tang and the fine hairs on his arms stood on end. He picked up the pace to a half-run. He didn't want to put on a fresh shirt and then get soaked on his way back to the party. It would defeat the purpose of getting cleaned up in the first place. He headed towards the nearest truck. This one had a dent on the right bumper and he was pretty sure that's where he'd stashed his extra shirt. Angela always left the vans open so that people could get in and out of them without having to track her down for the keys. After all, who wanted to steal an old panel van anyways when you had choices like the Porsches and Maybachs?

Nate pulled open one of the back doors of the van. A single yellow light in the center of the van flickered on. Nate lifted himself into the van. Half of it was filled with a cart that was loaded with trays that were now empty, their contents having been transferred to the kitchen. He'd tucked his shirt in with a mass of clean towels just beyond the trays. He was rooting around inside when the first major clash of thunder reverberated in the air. Nate looked out the back of the van. It was a facing a line of evergreens that were clotted in darkness. A bright streak of lightening revealed the ground beneath the heavy boughs as if it were middle of the day.

"Got to hurry," he whispered underneath his breath. He tossed towels to the side, making a mess out of the neat stacks, but he didn't see his shirt. Had he got the wrong van? Had someone taken the shirt? Maybe they had moved it? He looked over his shoulder again at the base of the trees as another lightening flash nearly blinded him. He blinked. Something was moving beneath the limbs. It was low to the ground. Four legs. Gray fur.

The wolf!

Nate's heart rate sped up. He straightened from his task. Velvety night had fallen again. The tap of fat raindrops echoed hollowly on the roof of the van, but he forgot about his shirt, forgot about the party, forgot even about

Emrys at that moment. His hands curled into fists as he waited for the next lightening flash. He had to see if the wolf was really there. He peered into the darkness. Lightening crawled across the sky once more. The wolf was sitting just on the edge of the grass, not fifteen feet away. Nate hopped out of the van without thinking. Rain pummeled down on his shoulders and the top of his head, but he didn't notice it. He stepped forward even as he was practically blind. He squinted, trying to make out the wolf's figure against the rest of the darkness. Another rumble of thunder shook the ground and echoed in his chest. Water ran down his face in rivulets. His hair was now plastered to his head and covered his eyes. He swiped it out of the way, annoyed that it might be stopping him from glimpsing the wolf.

"Come on, lightening. Let me see." As if in answer, the largest bolt so far crackled overhead. The wolf had moved. It was now standing only a foot away from him. Its gray fur was wet with water yet yellow-eyes stared at him unblinking. Nate hunkered down and slowly extended one hand towards the wolf. "Do you remember me? I remember you. I could never forget you."

He was sure it was the same animal that had approached him that day in the woods. It had a notch in its left ear. Same wolf. Not a dog. Definitely a wild animal. Untamed and unpredictable. Nate kept his palm face up so that it was clear he wasn't being aggressive towards the wolf. But the animal did not appear afraid. Its eyes glowed in the low ambient light. Away from the van and now with almost constant lightening strikes, he could see the wolf clearly. It didn't move as his fingers brushed lightly over the side of its head. The fur was soft even though it was wet. Nate was smiling and he felt tears in his eyes.

"What are you doing here? Were you looking for me?" Nate asked as he ran his fingers through the thick fur.

The wolf stared at him for a long moment then turned its head towards the mansion. Nate felt a tingle of unease.

"You can't go over there. There are a ton of people and they would freak out if they saw you," Nate said as if the wolf could understand him.

Its ears twitched, but it continued to look at the lightened mansion.

“Are you hungry? Because I can get you food. I can bring it to you. You don’t have to go there to get it,” Nate offered. His unease was growing. He imagined the partygoers screaming as they caught sight of the magnificent animal loping through their midst. Security would be there with their guns and they’d try to shoot it. “You can’t go in there. It isn’t safe for you.”

The wolf started to walk towards the mansion. If Nate had been thinking he wouldn’t have acted like he did. But he was only feeling and he was afraid not of the wolf but *for* it. He threw himself after the animal and wrapped his arms around its chest. “Please don’t! Please!”

The wolf stopped. Nate felt the thump of its heart surging up his hands. His own heart mirrored that rhythm. He was transfixed by the sensation of so much life in his arms. He buried his head in its fur and just held onto it. The wolf did not growl nor snap. It merely allowed the touching. But he felt that he could only hold it for so long. The wolf was intent on going to the Abberley Estate.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you. Stay here. I’ll get you food. I’ll get you whatever you need! Just don’t go!” Nate begged.

But the wolf gave a shake and Nate was thrown off of it. Then the wolf was bounding away. Its powerful flanks were silvered by the lightening as it raced to the front of the house then veered off to the side. Nate held his breath, hoping that the wolf would stop, turn around and retreat before anyone saw it. But then it was running full speed towards the back of the property and the garden pavilion. Nate was on his feet and taking off without thought. He was in a full-barrel run. The rain was coming down in blinding sheets, but he managed to keep moving in the right direction. He slipped as the ground beneath him changed from gravel to grass. He sprawled on the ground. A sharp sting ran up from his knee. He had skinned it. He felt hot liquid pouring down his calf, but he ignored it as he scrabbled to his feet. If he could get to the wolf in time, maybe people seeing them together would believe it was just a dog, someone’s lost pet and wouldn’t

reach for a gun or start screaming. He would never forgive himself if the wolf was injured. It had come here for him, he was sure of it.

He made it to the end of the mansion and was standing on the top tier of the gardens. The rain had forced everyone inside the house or into the pavilion. Nate squinted as he looked for the wolf. He thought he saw its sleek form slip around the side of the pavilion to the next garden level. Nate gave out a harsh breath as he realized the wolf was not going into the pavilion itself.

But what's down there that's interesting it so much? Other than the cliff...

Nate shook his head. The wolf would have no interest in the cliff and the water. He hurried around the pavilion himself and scampered down the steps. He only caught the barest glimpse of the wolf threading its way down the steps to the lowest garden. The tables that Angela had them set up so beautifully were now sodden messes. The cream tablecloths were drenched and the candle flames were long since quenched. Except for one. The last table nearest the cliff edge had a candle that was still burning. Nate jumped down the steps. He thought he saw a furry body move towards the candle. He squinted and sluiced the water away from his eyes, but the candle flame continued to burn peacefully. He walked towards it. It was so odd yet peaceful seeing that single flame in the darkness. He glanced back at the house and pavilion. He could see bodies silhouetted by the lights inside. That was sane and normal. It was separate and apart from the wildness of nature where he was right now. Chasing a wolf towards an inexplicably burning candle.

The rush and shush of the waves drowned out the party sounds as he neared the last table. He stopped beside it. He put his hand above the flame. No water hit the back of his hand. Somehow it was not raining on the candle. It was raining everywhere else, but not there.

“What the hell?” Nate breathed.

He looked back at the house and pavilion again. A part of him wanted to go back there. To join in the normal life. But he was as outside of that as he often felt from others time and time again. Something flickered in the corner of his eye towards the cliff. He turned to look. Was it the wolf?

“Emrys? I mean Mr. Frost?” Nate asked as the figure walked towards him from the cliffside.

The Dunhaven teacher didn’t look like a drowned rat as Nate was sure he did. Emrys’ black hair was slicked back and shone with rainwater. His cheeks were flushed with a hectic color. His topaz eyes glowed with life and amusement. He appeared enervated by the storm. He didn’t seem to care that his dress shoes were undoubtedly ruined.

Why isn’t he in with the rest of the guests?

“You know why I’m not, Nathaniel,” Emrys said with a grin.

Nate at first boggled at how good his name sounded in Emrys’ honeyed tones, but then he realized that the other man had apparently read his thoughts. Or seemed to.

“Did I say that out loud?” Nate let out an uncertain laugh. He believed he had only thought that.

“You were wondering why I wasn’t inside with the rest of them. Hunkering away from the fury of the storm. But you already know. I saw it on your face. I loathe these people,” Emrys answered him.

“Oh, well, uhm … then why did you come back?” Nate asked. He winced at how forward that sounded, but when he saw the teacher’s widening grin he realized he hadn’t said anything wrong. His honesty looked to be appreciated.

“Because everyone here isn’t like them. And Dunhaven is mine. I’ve just come to … collect what’s mine, I guess you could say,” Emrys answered.

“You like teaching?” Nate grimaced.

Emrys laughed uproariously, holding his sides. He shook his head, giving Nate an almost affectionate look. Then he sobered as he said, “I hoped you would come out here. I saw you out here earlier. You almost fell. But then you … did not.”

Nate felt a stab of fear as if Emrys had caught him doing sometime wrong.
He saw the wind save me. It wasn't just my imagination. But I can't tell him that. Can I?

"I came out because I — uhm — did you see — uhm, there was a — a dog coming this way," Nate got out.

Emrys' eyebrows raised in amusement. "A dog?"

The emphasis on dog told Nate that the teacher knew quite well that he wasn't looking for a dog. He shuffled his feet. His shoes squished. "Actually, more like a wolf. Did you see it?"

But before Emrys could answer him there was another rumble of thunder that nearly sent Nate to his knees. He clutched the tabletop. Emrys let out a delighted laugh. He grasped Nate's hands. A tingle of electricity went through Nate and he let out shocked gasp. Emrys' topaz eyes hooded as his smile became sultry.

"Come on, Nathaniel! Let's experience this storm together!" Emrys pulled him towards the cliff.

Nate dug in his heels a bit as there wasn't enough light to see properly. And he remembered nearly falling once today. He didn't want Emrys to accidentally tip them over the edge once more. The teacher though moved with reckless assurance. He didn't seem concerned about falling at all. He stopped suddenly and pulled Nate in front of him. His hands fastened around Nate's waist. A streak of heat went through the boy. His cock twitched in his soaking pants as Emrys pressed his front to Nate's back.

"Can you feel the power, Nathaniel? Can you sense the storm's force?" Emrys asked. His breath tickled Nate's left ear.

"Y—yeah. It's great." But it was also terrifying.

Nate looked out into the blackness. A sheet of lightening showed him the ocean below. Storm surge had the water coming halfway up the cliff face before it was sucked back out again and then more waves slammed home.

The sky was a mass of billowing, black clouds. Rain pelted his face. It stung his cheeks.

“Try to control it,” Emrys said.

“What?”

Nate tried to twist his head around to see Emrys. He must have heard him wrong. But one of the teacher’s hands had fastened onto the back of his neck and forced Nate to look ahead.

“Control the storm, Nathaniel. Make it do what you want,” Emrys’ voice darkened. It was almost unrecognizable for a moment.

“You’re joking, right?” Nate gave out a sharp bark of laughter. “No one can do that.”

Emrys’ fingers tightened on his throat. “Don’t deny what you know to be true. I’m not fond of liars though I have been known to be one. Let the storm fill you then let yourself fill the storm.”

Nate had purposefully been stopping himself from identifying with the raging rain and lashing winds. The storm seemed almost malevolent. He didn’t want to lose himself in it like he had with Nature before.

“You’re freaking me out,” Nate confessed.

“I know. But denial is a powerful creature that can only be destroyed by direct action.”

Emrys breathing was soft and steady against Nate’s neck. Nate could feel the solid line of warmth of his larger body pressed again his. It would almost have been comforting if a few inches didn’t separate him from the edge of the cliff. Some of the dirt at the cliff’s edge began to break away as it was soaked through. Nate pushed back against the teacher.

“We should get back. It’s not safe here,” Nate urged. He tried to move the other man away from the cliff, but Emrys didn’t budge. A flutter of panic went through Nate as he saw more chunks of wet earth break off and fall into the raging sea below. “Seriously, it’s not safe! We’re going to fall!”

Emrys sighed disappointedly. “I see that you will not even try to defeat it. Not unless … ah, look out there!” He pointed straight ahead into the storm.

Nate saw nothing at first, but then he glimpsed a white sail bobbing on the violent seas. It was a small sailboat. It was getting swamped by the waves. Though they tried to keep the stern pointed towards the waves, the boat was being turned so that its side was facing them. It would capsize once that happened. “Oh, my god, they aren’t going to make it out there.”

He squinted his eyes. The sail was tattered. The mast broke just at that moment. He actually surged forward as if he could somehow do something.

“You’re right, Nathaniel. They will not make it. Not unless a miracle takes place,” Emrys said. “Will you be that miracle?”

“You’re crazy! We have to call the Coast Guard —”

“It will be too late. They won’t get to them in time. Only you can save them,” Emrys insisted.

“What? But how? HOW?” Nate cried. He thought he saw someone moving on the sailboat’s deck. They were being driven towards the rocks. They would die in the raging surf.

“Close your eyes,” Emrys instructed.

“But —”

“Don’t argue with me. Close your eyes,” Emrys’ voice was firm.

Nate shut them tight. “Now what?”

“Feel the storm, Nathaniel. Let it in. Become one with it. You know how to do this. You’ve been doing this since you were a child. You were born to do this,” Emrys said, his tone was soothing, coaxing.

Nate took in a shuddery breath and nodded. All he had to do was phase out. He’d done it loads of times, but not when people’s lives were in danger. He imagined the people on the boat and their sheer terror as the formerly calm sea had become a caldron of fury. What was phasing out going to do for

them? Wasn't it the worst thing he could do? He struggled to get away from Emrys. He had to call the Coast Guard.

"Focus on the storm. The people can only be saved if you forget about them. Just focus on the storm," Emrys said.

Nate's head lowered as he realized Emrys was not going to let him go. The people's only chance was if the teacher was impossibly right. And a part of him felt that Emrys might actually be correct. Nate concentrated on the howling of the wind, the feel of it whipping against his clothes, the slap of the rain on his cheeks, the ozone-tinted air in his lungs and the swirling clouds above him. It was the last that helped him the most. He imagined flowing up into those clouds, being buffeted and then smoothly moved by the powerful winds. He flowed with them, circling over the earth and sea below. He opened his eyes and instead of seeing the sea out in front of him, he saw everything as if he were far above it, a bird's eye view. The Abberley Estate looked small. The boat that was nearly being rolled in the water looked the size of a toy boat in a bath tub.

"Now calm the wind. Calm the waves. Make the rain cease," Emrys' voice floated around him, formless.

Nate found himself doing just that. It was easy like turning off a faucet or shutting a window. The crackling lightening slowed and ceased. The thunder boomed off into silence. The waves became smooth and rolling. The nearly capsized boat was bobbing calmly now.

"You did it, Nathaniel. You saved them," Emrys' voice held a note of pride.

Nate felt the brush of the older man's lips on his cheek. He blinked and he was back on the ground again. Emrys had turned him around so that they were face to face. His topaz eyes glowed.

"You are gifted," Emrys said. "You are why I have come back to Winter Haven."



On Edge

Emrys forces Nate to use his powers for the first time consciously. What are Emrys' motives?

CHAPTER THREE - THE PRETTY LIES

“Gifted?” Nate shook his head. His vision blurred for a moment. “I’m ... not. I ...”

Emrys framed Nate’s face. “You stopped the storm. You saved those people.”

“That was a coincidence. That had to be a —”

“No,” Emrys said. His voice was certain. It brooked no argument. “Nathaniel, you did this.”

Nate stared into those topaz eyes. So many questions swirled through his mind. A ton of denials as well. But he found himself asking, “Did you —

did you start the storm?"

"If you believe I started it then you must believe that you stopped it," Emrys responded softly.

It wasn't a real answer and Nate was dissatisfied with it. He closed his eyes. The world was spinning nauseatingly. "This can't be real. Things like this aren't real." He shook his head again, but suddenly the rest of his body was shaking, too. A sickening wave rolled over him. His knees gave out and he collapsed against Emrys. "H—help."

"I've got you." Emrys held Nate up.

"W—hat's h—appening to m—e? Nate was trembling so badly that he could hardly speak. His wet clothes clung to him like a second skin and were turning ice cold.

"You're in shock and drained from mastering the storm. It will be all right, Nathaniel. I promise." Emrys lifted Nate up into his arms like the boy weighed nothing and carried him towards the house.

Nate noticed that Emrys' turtleneck was now dry as was his hair even though both had been soaked with water not moments ago. He curled tight against the other man's powerful body, needing his warmth. Emrys held him close.

"S—so cold," Nate said.

"I know. We're going to get you warm." Emrys moved swiftly as if he wasn't carrying a near six-foot boy in his arms.

Nate's head lolled back. He stared upwards as the clouds parted and a wash of stars appeared. It was so beautiful that it made him forget the cold for a moment. He could feel the stars. They called to him, plucked at his soul. He felt small and insignificant and hugely important at the same time. He gasped as a half-dozen shooting stars spun overhead.

"Do you see that?" Nate felt a surprising lump form in his throat.

“I did,” Emrys said as he took the stairs two at a time up to the first tiered garden. “Everything’s connected, Nathaniel. What you feel is true. Hold on to your wonder.”

As the light from the pavilion washed over them and blocked out the sky Nate realized his predicament. He couldn’t let Emrys bring him into the party like this. He was a mess. He needed to get a new shirt and start working. His fevered mind focused on those pedestrian ideas. They were more manageable than the vast and indifferent sky overhead that seemed to want him to become a part of it.

“I’ve got to w—work.” His lips trembled again. He was freezing once more. Whatever reprieve the starry night had given him was over.

“You’re done for tonight. You saved lives. That’s far more important than busing tables and refreshing drinks,” Emrys remarked gently. He carried Nate towards the French doors into the mansion.

“The boat … those people are going to be okay … god, what’s wrong with me? I can’t think!” Nate fussed even as he clung to Emrys’ broad shoulders. His mind veered again to what he should have been doing. “Angela needs me to —”

“She’ll understand,” Emrys quieted him.

“I have to tell her I’m leaving. I need Daniel —”

“Daniel?” There was a lilt of something like jealousy for a moment in Emrys’ voice.

Nate took a second to process the fact that Emrys might be jealous, let alone jealous of Daniel. That was almost funny, but he bit down on the inappropriate laughter that wanted to spill out. “Daniel’s my best friend. He drove me here. I don’t have a car.”

Emrys’ arms tightened around him. “Foolish boy. I’m going to take you home.”

“Oh,” Nate said. He knew he sounded like a dork, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say. Pumping his fist in the air seemed wrong. At the same time his mind kept fluctuating between what he had done with the storm, which was unbelievable and then the unreality of being in Emrys’ arms.

“Almost there, Nathaniel. Just hold on,” Emrys said.

Nate’s eyelids were getting heavy as Emrys pushed open the French doors with his shoulder and brought them into the warmth of the house. Nate hissed as the heat hit him. He shook again. His body had gone numb. Now it was tingling painfully.

“I know. I know. It’s all right.” Emrys set him down on a divan that was on the side of the hall.

Nate let out a moan and reached for the other man. His hands were so cold they looked more like claws. “Where are you going?”

“My coat. My keys are in it and it’ll help keep you warm. One moment, Nathaniel, and we will have you in my car,” Emrys promised then he moved down the hallway to where the coats were being kept in a room near the front doors.

Nate drew his knees up against chest. He had a feeling his shoes were probably leaving mud on the silk upholstery, but he couldn’t seem to care at that moment. He wrapped his arms around his legs and just held on as he shook. Angela’s voice rose up from around the corner as she ordered someone to pick up the dirty glasses and take them to the kitchen. Nate’s head lifted off his knees as Angela stepped into the hall. She was staring down at her tablet, but as if she sensed his presence, her head turned towards him. Just then Emrys appeared with his long black dress coat in his arms. She started as she took in Nate’s appearance. But as always, she recovered quickly and clicked over to them on her high heels.

“My God, Nathaniel! Are you all right? Mr. Frost, what happened?” she asked. Her hands fluttered over Nate’s body as if she wanted to assure herself he wasn’t physically injured.

“He was trying to save your tablecloths out back and got caught in the storm,” Emrys lied. “I think he’s coming down with something and it simply became too much.”

Too much? Yeah, stopping a storm. Saving some lives. It was definitely too much, Nate thought weakly. He wanted to laugh, but that would sound as crazy as what he was thinking.

“He has been acting strangely today. He looked a bit peaked earlier.” Angela pressed a hand against his forehead. Her lips pressed tightly together for a moment. “He’s burning up.”

“I’m going to drive him home. Some aspirin, a warm bath and a good night’s sleep will do wonders,” Emrys assured her. He sat down beside Nate as he wrapped his coat around the boy’s shoulders after fishing his car keys out of the coat’s pocket.

Nate’s flush at the thought of Emrys giving him a warm bath was hidden by the fact that his face was already red from the sudden fever. He felt oddly docile. He rested his cheek on the teacher’s broad shoulder. He didn’t think how it would look to Angela. He curled his arm around Emrys’ back. He wanted to just sleep suddenly. Sleep would stop him from having to think or feel.

“Nate?” Daniel’s voice rose as he stepped into the house from the patio.
“Holy shit —”

“Language!” Angela interrupted with a roll of her eyes. She had been trying to break Daniel from his swearing habit all summer.

The other boy scuffed his foot. “Sorry, Angela. Just what happened?”

Nate got out a mumbled ‘okay’ before another round of shivering hit him. Emrys stood to urge Nate to his feet, but Angela stepped in front of him and urged the teacher away for a moment. Emrys frowned but walked with her.

“Really, Mr. Frost, you’re so kind to offer to take Nathaniel home, but Daniel will do it. You can stay and enjoy the party. You’re the guest of

honor after all,” Angela was saying as she unconsciously blocked Emrys’ path to Nate.

Nate frowned. He wanted Emrys to take him home. It was almost a childish need. It reminded him of how he felt when he was sick and only his grandmother’s hovering was acceptable. He smiled wanly at imagining stomping a foot and demanding Emrys’ presence. So not happening.

“I assure you that it is no trouble. I’m done with the party as it is,” Emrys told her.

“Oh, but ...” Angela’s voice faded off from Nate’s hearing as he had another sickening bout of vertigo.

Daniel took his chance to slide over to Nate’s side. His gaze flickered to Nate’s still wet hair. “Tell me you weren’t phasing out by the cliff again?”

Nate grimaced and turned his head away. “It’s not like you think.”

It really wasn’t. He didn’t know how to tell Daniel what it really was all about though. It was still unbelievable to his own mind. How was he going to explain it to anyone else and expect them to believe it?

“Really? Because you look like you either jumped in a pool or stood outside in the rain for twenty minutes. What the hell is going on, Nate?” Daniel asked. His eyes were large with worry.

Nate opened his mouth to confess part of what had happened when Emrys gently pushed past Angela and swooped down upon him. His sculpted mouth was thinned as he pressed his lips together. It was almost as if he didn’t want Nate to say anything to Daniel.

“I think we’d better get you home, Nathaniel.” Emrys picked Nate up without seeking assent.

Daniel stumbled back. “Whoa! I can take Nate —”

“No.” It was Emrys who spoke. His voice was chill and the look he gave Daniel had the other boy cringing. “Go back to the party. Both of you. I have this.”

“Don’t worry, Daniel. I’m fine. Everything’s fine.” Nate just wished he felt that were actually true. He gave both Daniel and Angela a tentative smile. They stared back at him with unbelieving expressions.

Emrys didn’t wait for them to respond. He whisked Nate out the front doors. The valet jumped to his feet, but the teacher waved him off. “I know where you parked it.”

Emrys confidently strode to the second row of cars. A sleek silver Mercedes let out a discrete chirp as the teacher pressed a button on his keychain. He opened the passenger door and gently placed Nate on the seat. He tucked the coat fully around him then shut the door firmly. Nate huddled down and rested the back of his head against the headrest. The car smelled of good leather and spicy aftershave. He took in deep breaths of it even as he shivered. Emrys slid inside and pressed a button for the car to start. He immediately turned up the heat controls for Nate’s seat to the highest setting and adjusted the car’s internal temperature.

“It will warm up quickly,” Emrys said as he reached and clipped Nate’s seatbelt on for him.

“I’m sorry I’m useless.” Nate heard a slight slur in his voice that worried him. Surely when he got warm he’d be all right again.

“I pushed you too hard. But the moment seemed too perfect not to.” Emrys shook his head disgustedly as he pulled out of the Abberley Estate’s drive and onto the tree-shrouded road that led towards the outskirts of town. Nate didn’t live in the center of Winter Haven or the Hill as it was called. That was for the super rich and his grandmother and him were nowhere near even semi-rich.

“It’s s’okay,” Nate answered tiredly. The seat was already pleasantly warm beneath him and the whisper of hot air from the vents felt heavenly.

“It’s the pretty lies we tell ourselves that are the most dangerous, Nathaniel,” Emrys whispered.

“Pretty lies?” he roused himself slightly.

“Yes, the ones that sound so very pretty. So very nice and comforting. Life isn’t pretty. Just the lies are,” Emrys answered. There was only the hint of a bitter smile on his lips.

They drove in silence for a few minutes. Nate looked at Emrys’ profile through hooded eyes. The other man had classically beautiful features. A strong jaw. Full lips. A slight cleft in his chin. A straight nose. High cheekbones. Even his hair fell in rich, thick waves. He was beautiful and Nate had never let himself think that about anybody. But with Emrys it was something he couldn’t deny. He didn’t want to. He suddenly hoped that the changes to his own body were even a fraction as pleasing to Emrys’ gaze. The teacher’s eyes slid over to him and he smiled slowly.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Emrys asked.

Nate blushed. No way was he telling Emrys what he was really thinking about! “How did you know I could do that with the storm?”

“Accepting that you did indeed do something?” Emrys asked.

“I — I guess. Yeah. It — it happened,” Nate stammered out.

“I knew …” Emrys shifted in his seat. His lush mouth settled into a slight frown. “I’ve already pushed enough tonight. This is not the time for more revelations.”

Nate surprised himself by reaching over and grasping Emrys’ nearest forearm. “But it is. I have to know. I’ll keep thinking and thinking about it if you don’t tell me.”

Emrys nodded after a moment. Nate knew he should take his hand away, but he relished the play of muscles underneath his palm and let his hand linger too long. Emrys’ eyes dropped to that hand and Nate quickly drew it back. He tucked it under the coat and dug his fingernails into his palm. He felt absurdly like his limb had acted of its own accord and betrayed him.

“The reason I guessed about your gift is because it runs in your family,” Emrys said.

A cold pit opened in Nate's stomach. Any talk of heredity had him thinking of his father and burning and madness. "Oh?"

"Such a leaden 'oh'. I can see this conversation is not an easy one for you. Understandably so." Emrys sighed.

"Look, just tell me, okay?" Nate hated the testiness that crept into his voice. He didn't want to be treated like he was made of glass even if he felt a bit like that at the minute.

"I am trying. But I want you to know that nothing I say will be comforting. It will be the truth," Emrys answered. His eyes slanted over the Nate again.

"No more pretty lies?" Nate asked bitterly.

"No, not about this," Emrys said. When he saw that Nate wasn't going to object anymore, he continued, "You took the name Whitney. That's your mother's name."

It was Nate's turn to shift uncomfortably. "Yeah."

His grandmother had been disappointed when he'd told her that he wanted to go by his mother's maiden name instead of by her son's, his father's. But she had understood that it was his way of connecting with a woman he only knew through photographs. His grandmother and him never talked about his father, Shane Columb. She went to visit Shane at the institution about once a month, but she never asked if Nate wanted to go and Nate pretended not to see her leaving in the car those days. It felt like a betrayal. Even though Shane was her son. But Shane was also his mother's murderer.

"I can understand why intellectually. Though it was a more auspicious choice than you know," Emrys said.

"Auspicious to not want to be identified with a murderer? Hardly rocket science." Nate crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't want to talk about his father or his mother or any of it.

But I asked him to tell me the truth and this is clearly part of it.

“You think your mother is merely the victim and your father the villain?” Emrys asked softly.

Those words had Nate rocketed forward in his seat. It felt like a match had been lit beneath him. “Are you trying to suggest she asked for it or something?

“Not what you—”

Nate was shaking with anger and he cut Emrys off, “Maybe you don’t know. Maybe you haven’t heard. Or didn’t read it in the papers. But I would say someone is definitely a victim when they’re knocked over the head with a hammer twenty times then poured gasoline is poured over them.”

“Gruesome definitely. Overkill assuredly. Sounds like a man who was afraid that she would come back,” Emrys murmured.

Nate’s outrage clogged in his throat for a moment. “Do you think he was afraid of a little baby in his crib, too? Because he left me to burn with her. So yeah. She’s the victim. He’s the villain. Nothing more to be said about that.”

“But there is.”

Emrys pulled the car over to the shoulder of the road and put it into park. He twisted around to face Nate. Nate was breathing hard. He could feel his cheeks burning up and surprised, anguished tears on his face. His hands were balled into fists underneath the coat. Emrys reached and grasped his hands through the material. His hold was almost painful. Those topaz eyes gleamed.

“You want me to apologize for saying that. You want me to say ‘forgive me, Nathaniel,’. You want —”

“Yes! Of course! Normal people would!” Nate shouted. “Normal people would never bring it up!”

“I’m not normal. You’re not normal. So let’s put what normal people would do out in the rain where it belongs. Because it doesn’t apply here,” Emrys

answered fiercely.

“I’m normal,” Nate said mulishly.

Emrys shook his head. “Not denial again, Nathaniel. It is too late for that.”

“I’m normal!” Nate repeated.

Emrys let a hiss of air escape his mouth. “I wish I could tell you pretty lies, Nathaniel. Though it pains me to hurt you, I must tell you the truth. You *need* the ugly truth. It will hurt at first. There is nothing I can do about that.” Emrys breathed deeply. “You’ve been told so many pretty lies, Nathaniel. Or you’ve been told nothing at all. I would say it could wait. But I don’t know if it can. More than just your request moves me to tell you this now rather than tomorrow or the day after next.”

Nate shuddered. He felt the weight of unasked questions pressing down on him. He’d never asked why his father had killed his mother. Never tried to really push his grandmother on the subject. He’d only read a few newspaper articles then stopped looking a few years ago. He should want to know what drove his father, supposedly a good man, a man that had never been in trouble in his life, never hurt anyone, to do such terrible things to his wife and son. But he didn’t want to know. What if there was a reason? What would that mean?

“How could you know anything about it?” Nate asked. His voice cracked and sounded ragged to his own ears.

Emrys was so close. Nate could see veins of green in those gold eyes. Like copper that had oxidized. It was beautiful and alien at the same time. Emrys smelled of mint and wine. He must have had a drink at the party though Nate had not seen him with a glass in his hand. The pores in his skin were small, making his flesh look frighteningly flawless in the low light of the car. Why he was noticing these things when he should be angry beyond all measure was beyond him. But the air felt charged in a way he had never experienced before. Heat licked at his insides. He wanted Emrys closer at the same moment he wanted to shove him away.

“I know all about it, because the Frosts and the Whitneys have a long history that stretched up through your mother and my parents’ time. I know because of the things that have bound our families throughout the centuries,” Emrys whispered.

“No Frosts have been in Winter Haven in a long time,” Nate repeated what he’d heard at the party. It felt like a defense. The Frosts hadn’t been here so they couldn’t have known his mother. None of what Emrys said or might say would be true then. He hugged that thought to himself even as he felt like he was standing on a precipice, the wind howling at his feet, while he stared ahead, not seeing it and, therefore, pretending it did not exist.

“No, they haven’t. Mostly because they are in mental institutions, prisons or — or graves,” Emrys said with a soft, scalded laugh.

Nate drew back. An image of Emrys in a white coat, locked in a padded room, his black hair sticking up on end, screaming flashed before Nate’s mind’s eye. “Where were you? Before you came here?”

A flicker of something dark and hurt went through Emrys’ topaz eyes. “You want to pretend I’m crazy so that you don’t have to listen to what I have to say? So you can discount it? Fine. I should have known … too fast. Too soon. Too much. You’re afraid. It’s understandable, but still … I am disappointed.”

Emrys withdrew. It wasn’t just that he physically pulled away, but Nate felt his mental presence, scintillating and sparking, completely leave as well. It felt like the car was suddenly a vacuum. Nate couldn’t breathe. Emrys slammed the car into drive and stomped on the gas. The Mercedes rocketed away from the shoulder. Gravel spit out behind its back tires. The woods on either side of the road soon became a blur.

“Mr. Frost — Emrys … please … slow down,” Nate said.

“Why? Don’t you want to get home? Away from the crazy man?” Emrys asked. “So you can go back to pretending you can’t control storms?”

“No — I …” Nate saw out of the corner of his eye the nearest stoplight looming ahead of them. The light was yellow. It was going to go red in a

second. It would be red before they entered the intersection. “Look — talking about my family is —”

“Painful. Hideous. I know. I warned you.” Emrys took his eyes completely off the road, his hands off the steering wheel and turned towards Nate.

“What are you doing? Emrys!”

“Didn’t you see this movie?” A catlike tilt of Emrys’ head had Nate suddenly much more afraid. “Only this will be so much better. Trust me. Controlling storms is just the tip of the iceberg.”

Emrys pressed on the gas.

“No! Stop! You’ll kill us!” Nate reached for the steering wheel, but Emrys caught his hands. Nate gaped in horror as he saw approaching headlights coming down the side street. His heart jumped in his chest. They were going to crash. He strained for the wheel, but Emrys’ strength kept him in place. All he could do was scream, “NO!”

“Don’t worry, Nathaniel,” Emrys said with a calm smile. “Everything will be fine.”

Time seemed to slow. Nate watched as somehow the Mercedes and the Lexus hurtled past one another. The Lexus was turning unhurriedly left onto the road they were on. The nose of the vehicle was inches away from the Mercedes’ driver’s side door. Nate could see the driver of the other vehicle. He was an old man in his seventies. He had bushy eyebrows that stuck out far from his wizened face. He didn’t see them. Nate could tell that the old man had no idea how close he’d come to plowing into another car. And it wasn’t because it happened so fast. It was as if they weren’t even in the same place. For the other driver, the Mercedes had never been there. Nate turned to Emrys. He was shaking again, but this time not from cold or rage.

“How ...” But Nate swallowed the question. He already knew how even if he didn’t completely understand it. It was the same way he had controlled the storm. So it wasn’t really “how” that he wanted answered. There was another question. A bigger question. “What are you?”

Emrys smiled. "I'm what you are, Nathaniel. I'm a witch."

CHAPTER FOUR - HISTORY'S SHADOW

Nate whipped around in his seat to look out the back window. The Mercedes' headlights slowly receded into the distance. They were alone on the road once again. His heart still thundered in his chest. They had almost died. There should have been a crash. A terribly accident. But it hadn't happened.

"He should have hit us. We should have been flattened." Nate swallowed. He felt Emrys' breath on his cheek and turned to see that the other man was looking out the back window with him.

"Never had a chance of coming anywhere near us. He didn't even see we were there. Because for him, we weren't," Emrys remarked with a shrug. He patted the back of the headrest with his hands. Hands that were not on the steering wheel.

"You're not driving the car! Get your hands on the wheel! Turn around!" Nate yelled.

"Oh, ye of little faith! I am driving the car. Just not with my hands and feet," Emrys answered.

Nate's heart leaped into his throat as he realized where they were. They were entering the Narrows, a stretch of road going from the Hill to the northern outskirts of Winter Haven where Nate lived. The Narrows was aptly named, because of the slender width of the two-lane road and the hair-pin turns. Nate gaped at the wheel as it moved of its own accord. The gas pedal was pushed down and the car continued to glide over the blacktop at over forty miles an hour. Perfectly controlled. Perfectly safe. Emrys continued to thump the headrest and grin at the empty road behind them. He wasn't even looking where they were going.

"How are you doing this? The Force?" Nate let out a slightly hysterical laugh.

“In a manner of speaking, young padawan, yes.” When Nate goggled at him, he added, “Magick actually. And make sure you think of it with a ‘ck’ on the end. None of this ‘ic’ business or you’ll be thought a novice, which you are, but still. You must know the true lingo. Though truthfully I’m not so sure if magick is much different than the Force when I think about it —”

“Don’t think! I mean — keep thinking! About driving! Keep your mind on the road,” Nate urged.

“Wait! Oh, my God, you’ve distracted me now. Thinking about movies, music, alcohol and not DRIVING!” Emrys yelled.

The car suddenly swerved towards the side of the road. Nate clutched at the seat and let out a shrill sound. Emrys screamed, but it soon turned into an uproarious laugh. But when it became clear that Nate was really freaked, he gently smoothed back the boy’s hair. It was such a tender gesture that Nate’s trembling slowed and he found himself leaning into the touch even as he cursed the man under his breath. Tremors shot through him.

“It’s all right. I have you. Everything’s fine. I was teasing,” Emrys assured him.

“Teasing? Shit, don’t do that!” Nate gasped out.

“You have no sense of humor,” Emrys sighed.

“I’ve nearly died three time tonight. Give me a break!” Nate laughed.

“Ah, I see your point.”

The car was now gliding along the road easily. Nate sank down onto his seat and Emrys did the same. His hands were placed lightly on the wheel but his eyes stayed on Nate. The boy had to tell himself not to freak out, that Emrys was in fact driving the car. Emrys just didn’t need to focus like everyone else did. Because he was a witch. And he claimed that Nate was one, too.

“So magic. Witches — wait a minute! We’re boys —”

“You’re a *boy*. I’m a *man*. Though there’s nothing wrong with being a boy,” Emrys said and he smiled slowly at Nate, which had the boy flushing and looking down at his hands in confusion.

“Right. Well, the point is that we’re *male*. And witches are *female*. Aren’t we warlocks or something?” Nate asked.

“Ah! My first teachable moment,” Emrys said and rubbed his hands together. “‘Witch’ is gender neutral. ‘Warlock’ actually has a bad connotation. They are considered oath-breakers. Ones that are banished from the coven.” His smile became a grin. “Considering I’ve been banished from everywhere that title might apply to me. But not to you.”

“Why not me?” Nate asked.

“You’re too young to be breaking oaths,” Emrys answered, but there was a trace of sadness in his smile.

Emrys’ coat had fallen off of Nate when he had gotten up on the seat. He pulled it up over his lap. His clothes still felt uncomfortably damp. “Did you ...” He stopped and bit his lip. What he wanted to ask sounded almost arrogant: had Emrys come back specifically for him?

“I said I did, Nathaniel,” Emrys said, doing his mind reading trick again. “But it’s a bit more complicated than that.” He took a breath. “This was not at all how I intended things to go between us.”

Nate flushed and clamped down on the thought that Emrys meant ‘us’ in any way other than the obvious. “You didn’t know I was going to be at the party?”

“No, and certainly not serving at it,” Emrys remarked with a furrowed brow. “Are you ... slumming or something? And why do you live so far from the Hill? Didn’t your grandmother want to leave her house?”

Nate felt slightly flummoxed by the fact that Emrys seemed to know where he lived though he hadn’t thought much of it before, just let Emrys be in control. The man could read his mind. How hard would it be to know his address?

“Do you know everything I’m thinking?” Nate asked suddenly.

“Ah — no, only what’s very clearly thought by you. But back to my questions —”

“So you only know it if I’m thinking it really hard?” Nate interrupted. He was relieved when Emrys’ nodded. That was something at least. His every thought wasn’t laid bare.

“But —”

“Back to your questions. I guess, I’m confused. I mean, why do I work? I have to work, because I need the money,” Nate explained. “And we can’t afford to live on the Hill. Besides Grandma Bess’ place is great.”

Great if he didn’t look at the fact that there was a hole in the roof with a flimsy patch. Great if he didn’t think about the strange black mold that formed in the corners of the bathroom. Though there was an awesome huge claw footed tub as well. But the house was old and lived in. They didn’t have the money to keep it up like it should be. But he loved the cozy feeling about it all the same. The library stuffed to overflowing with books, a wood-burning fireplace and one of his grandmother’s hand knitted blankets over his knees. He wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Emrys frowned and his eyes narrowed. “The Whitneys were a very wealthy family.”

“It didn’t trickle down, I guess. My parents didn’t have any money. Grandma Bess used a lot of her money to … uhm, pay for a lawyer for my father for the criminal trial. So I have to work to have any spending money and for school.” Nate rubbed his hands together. He hadn’t used the word ‘father’ so much as he had that night in years. It felt heavy on his tongue as it made him think of the man and what he had done. Things he had pushed down about his life seemed to surface with that one word. “My mom didn’t have any money. I think her family cut her off when she married him.”

Nate crossed his arms over his chest. An image of his parents’ shining faces appeared in his mind’s eye. It was their wedding photograph he thought of when he pictured them. His own memory was completely blank of his

parents' faces. Instead, they were caught like insects in amber in that one moment in time before he had ever existed. In the photo and his mind, his father's hair brushed the tops of his shoulders, unstylishly long, and he wore a tux with a ruffled shirt. His mother also had long, dark brown hair that curled by her waist. Her dress reminded him of a many-tiered wedding cake. Too much lace and frou frou by more modern tastes, but she was smiling and he knew that she felt beautiful that day. Two years later, it would be over. Her head battered into a bloody pulp. Her face unrecognizable. Teeth splintered. Face bones pulverized. He knew that much after reading a newspaper article. He'd never looked into it again.

"Nate, you do know that your mother's parents are dead, don't you? You are the last Whitney," Emrys said quietly.

"Yeah. I mean they died right around the same time — uhm, my mom did." Nate frowned. He hadn't ever thought of the conjunction of those deaths. His grandparents supposed were killed in a burglary gone bad. "It was soon after or maybe a little before my mom — was killed."

"Would it surprise you to know that they died within a day of your mother's death?" Emrys' topaz eyes were fixed on his again.

Nate's stomach clenched. He told himself that it was because he still wasn't used to Emrys' eyes leaving the road. "I guess it does seem strange. But bad coincidences happen."

"Coincidences? Perhaps," Emrys answered.

It was Nate's turn to frown. "Do you know something I don't?"

"I know much that you do not." Emrys took the car around a particularly sharp turn. The road then opened up before them. The moon hung heavy and pregnant low in the sky. Another scattering of falling stars shot across the sky.

"So beautiful." Nate's heart ached, temporarily

"What do you think when you see them?" Emrys asked.

“They make me think of traveling. Going to somewhere exotic. Where I don’t recognize the language and I only know the person who walks beside me,” Nate answered.

“Who walks beside you?” Emrys asked. His voice was almost hypnotic.

Nate stared up at the stars that were spilled across the sky like diamond against a black, velvet cloth. In his imagination, he could feel the brush of another’s hand against his as they wandered down narrow, cobbled streets lined with ancient buildings. He felt their heat and the strength of their body. He turned his head in his vision and tried to see the person, but their face was obscured.

“I don’t know,” Nate said after a moment.

“But they mean something to you,” Emrys murmured. “You would give yourself to someone fully. Your life would be bound with theirs and you would never look back.”

“No,” Nate said more firmly than he intended.

“Too much like your mother if you did that?” Emrys asked. “Too easy to pick the wrong person to trust?”

Nate shrugged. “I don’t know. I never knew her and I don’t talk about her with anyone who did.”

“Why?” Emrys asked simply.

Millions of responses could be given to that question. Nate could find one that was acceptable and offer it to Emrys, but he doubted it would be believed. And he didn’t want to lie. But the truth was something he wasn’t sure of either.

“I don’t want to think of her. Or him. Or any of it,” Nate whispered. He stared out the window, but he could still see his own and Emrys’ reflections in the glass.

Emrys gritted his teeth together. “You worry about madness and murder. Is it in your blood? Your soul even? What was it about him that caused him to

kill her? Was there something about her that made him do it?"

"He just went crazy and snapped." Nate shifted uncomfortably. "It wasn't her fault."

"I could tell you that Shane McCollum never even had a parking ticket before he killed her. Never raised a hand to anyone. There was no one afterwards who said he was the quiet type that was just waiting for someone to light his fuse either," Emrys said. His hands tightened on the wheel. "They say he was a good man. That he loved his wife and son. That it was inexplicable what he did and no one understands. But that would make it all the more frightening, because that would mean it could happen to you just as easily. You could snap or ... be snapped and there wouldn't be any warning."

"It doesn't matter why he did it. He did it," Nate said.

"But it does matter. And you should want to know. But you forcibly ignore it. I'm surprised that Daniel hasn't at least pointed out how odd your attitude is or has he?" Emrys asked with a pointed lift of his eyebrow.

Nate gritted his teeth. Daniel had mentioned it. He had printed out tons of materials from the Internet to show Nate a few years back, but Nate refused to look at it. He wouldn't talk about the murders. Even when Daniel had tried to tell him things that seemed to not add up about his father's guilt, he had pushed it away. He couldn't explain why. His best friend had just wilted and taken the pages home with him. To this day, Nathaniel wasn't sure what Daniel had found.

"You sound like you know something about crazy parents," Nate said.

"You're correct." Emrys suddenly pulled down his already completed extended shirt sleeves. A nervous tick, the first that Nate had glimpsed that night. Nate frowned as he noticed that there was a raised, white line on the outside of Emrys' wrist. A scar. Not just one. A bunch of them. "The details of my life are not important now. Just trust that I know. And also trust me that I took the road you're taking right now and it won't work."

“I don’t even know what I’m doing right now.” Nate let out a mirthless laugh.

“Avoidance. You don’t want to think about your past. You don’t want to know what happened or why. You think that if you act like the past doesn’t exist then it won’t. But things don’t work that way, Nathaniel.” Emrys made a slashing movement with his hand and a grim expression transformed his handsome face into a much starker, older visage.

“But what does all of that have to do with now?” Nate nearly wailed. He had a sensation that he was standing atop the cliff again and falling. “I’ve left it behind! I have nothing to do with them! But you act as if it does. That it matters!”

“Like I said, this isn’t happening like I planned. So let me connect some of the dots before we get you back to your house,” Emrys said.

“I’m all ears,” Nate said and huddled down beneath the coat as if it could offer protection from Emrys’ words.

“As you know, I’m going to teach at Dunhaven,” Emrys said and his mouth formed a mow of disgust. “All those charming children that need my individual attention.”

“Sounds like Hell for you. I’m trying to imagine you teaching The Scarlet Letter or Geometry. It will be a disaster. You don’t seem the type to suffer fools gladly.” Nate shook his head. Emrys would totally have a ruler and rap his students’ knuckles.

“Indeed. I would surely lose my mind if those were the subjects I was teaching,” Emrys agreed.

“So what are you teaching?” Nate asked. He had turned back to the older man. Watching Emrys talk when he was animated was something to see. The play of emotion across his face was mesmerizing.

They turned onto Nate’s street when Emrys said, “Come now. You must have guessed.”

Nate held up his hands. “I really have no idea.”

Emrys sighed theatrically. “I’m teaching magick, of course.”

“Magick? No … you’re kidding?” Emrys gave him a deadpan look. “Okay, okay, I can see you’re serious about this. But if you’re teaching it at Dunhaven does that mean that Dunhaven is really Hogwarts in disguise?” Nate couldn’t hide his disbelief.

“No. Most certainly not. Unless …” Emrys grinned. “Dunhaven is Hogwarts on meth. That description might work.”

“Hogwarts on meth? Well, that’s an image.” Nate thought that the very idea of magick was out there enough without adding in drugs. “So there are other witches out there that you’re going to teach?”

“Ancient families reside in Winter Haven and many of those have magick. Unlike yourself, they know what they are. Dunhaven has always been a place where witches have gone to congregate and pass on their secrets to the next generation,” Emrys explained. He drew the car into the crushed gravel driveway of Nate’s home. Nate could see the light in the back study was on. His grandmother was probably reading by the fire with a blanket across her knees.

“Are they like Wiccans? I mean I’ve heard of those,” Nate said awkwardly.

Emrys shook his head. “I wouldn’t want to tarnish their good name by what we are. We are … different.”

“A woman at the party said that the Frosts were burned at the stake,” Nate said as Emrys put the car in park.

“No, not because they shouldn’t have been, but our magic protected us. If it wasn’t a sudden attack, there was simply no way that my ancestors could have been destroyed like that. They did send some of their enemies to the stake though,” Emrys mused.

“That’s not really comforting, you know,” Nate pointed out. He picked at a loose thread on his pants as he added, “They also said something about

black magic and devil worship.”

Emrys merely smiled as he turned in his seat to face Nate. “I want you to come to Dunhaven. I want to teach you.”

Nate froze for a second before laughing. “Uh, I’m going to the local high school. It’s my senior year. With all my friends. I’m not leaving there. Besides I can’t afford Dunhaven either.”

“You can afford Dunhaven. You can afford to live on the Hill. You don’t need to be working at a party. You should be hosting it,” Emrys said.

“Uh, no. I explained —”

“You’re the heir of the Whitney fortune,” Emrys interrupted.

“No, I’m not. I’ve never heard anything about it! I mean I would know!” Nate insisted.

Emrys’ topaz eyes seemed to glow. “Ask your grandmother.”

“She wouldn’t keep something like that from me. She would have told me. We need money. She wouldn’t just sit on a ton of cash, because — well, there’s no reason for her to!” Nate objected.

“Ask her.”

“I will, but she’ll have nothing to tell,” Nate said mulishly.

“As you say,” Emrys said quietly. His gaze slid over to the lighted window. Grandma Bess had pulled back the curtains and was peering out. “You should get in.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess.” Nate opened the door to the car. Cold air rushed inside. He shivered.

Emrys hand was suddenly on his shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Ten a.m.”

“Uh, are we getting together tomorrow?” Nate asked even as his stomach fluttered.

“Yes, you’ll need a ride,” Emrys answered dryly.

“Where?” he asked.

“To see your father,” Emrys said.

Nate froze. “I — I — no! I’m not going to see him.”

Emrys tapped his chin. “Then we’ll practice placing wards. Those are very necessary. Besides ten doesn’t leave us enough time to get to the sanitarium.”

“I’m never going to see him,” Nate said firmly. “Ever. Get it out of your head. We can hang out tomorrow if you want, but we’re not seeing him.”

“As you say,” Emrys repeated, which now sounded more to Nate like: I’m humoring you, silly boy.

“Look, why do you want me to go see him? Why do you want me to think about my parents? I don’t want to! I’m not them! I don’t even know them!” Nate was surprised at how his voice raised with emotion. He thought he hardly even considered what had happened. Now his throat clogged with emotion and tears stung his eyes.

Emrys cupped his face. “Forgive me. I seem to be saying that a lot.”

“This isn’t how you planned, right?” Nate asked.

“No, but I knew I would have to make you face this. And you do need to, Nathaniel.” His thumb caressed along Nate’s cheek. “Now go inside. And get warm.”

Nate nodded dumbly, grateful that Emrys didn’t say anything about him talking to his grandmother about the Whitneys and their supposed fortune.

But I’ll ask her about it anyways.

He stilled at that. He would ask her. Not that it could be true. And there was no way he was going to go to Dunhaven his senior year of highschool. That would be crazy. Emrys could just forget that. Emrys’ hand suddenly went

away and Nate got out of the car as if dismissed. But he hesitated. He leaned down inside and stared at the strange man that had entered his life so unexpectedly but seemed to belong there.

“See you tomorrow?” Nate asked, unable to think of what he truly wanted to say.

Emrys grinned. “Maybe sooner.”

Nate only realized as he watched Emrys drive off that he still clutched the other man’s coat in his hands.

CHAPTER FIVE - UNPLANNED

Nate watched as Emrys’ tail lights disappeared around a curve in the road. The silence that fell around him felt leaden. He wished he would hear the other man’s voice again. Just saying Nate’s name in that smooth, smoky way that caused a shiver to run up his spine. Hell, even asking him probing questions would be preferable than this heavy quiet. Nate felt alone. More alone than he’d ever felt. The sky opened up above him and seemed to mock his insignificance and swallow him whole. The shooting stars weren’t as pleasant now. They reminded him that he wasn’t with a special someone meandering through a strange land. When he’d said it to Emrys, it had felt possible. Now he just felt small and cold. He gathered Emrys’ coat into his arms so that it wouldn’t drag on the ground and headed towards the house. He’d give it to the other man tomorrow.

I’m really going to see him tomorrow. Nate found himself smiling at the thought even though his time with Emrys tonight hadn’t been without discomfort. There had even been pain. But there was something compelling about the other man. He made Nate think. He made Nate feel things he didn’t want to, but maybe he should have all the time. About his parents. About his life. About the things that didn’t add up, but he’d ignored for years. And then he offered him truths that he had never considered. *We’re witches. We can use magic. He’s going to teach me how.*

Nate let out a laugh. His mood went up and down faster than a rollercoaster. But that described how his evening had gone: good and bad and sometimes

both at once. He bit his lower lip as he approached the front door. There was a plant that was dying in the planter beside the front step. Perhaps he could will it to live. That seemed ridiculous even as an unspoken thought. But still. He looked around to see if anyone was watching him. Not a soul in sight. He extended one hand towards the plant and let it hover a few inches above the wilting top. The plant was mostly brown and withered. It should have had deep red blooms, but not even one single solitary bud had grown. Maybe not enough sunlight and water or maybe too much. Grandma Bess had been disappointed that it hadn't thrived.

Maybe there's a way for it to live up to her expectations yet.

Nate took in a deep breath and tried to connect to the flower like he had with the storm. He tried to phase out on purpose for once. He concentrated on the flower. He willed it to straighten, to reach towards the heavens and pour forth red blooms. But neither the flower nor his mind obeyed him. Instead of phasing out, his mind kept focusing on the crick in his neck or that he was breathing too heavy or the way his shirt stuck to his back or ... the list went on and on. The flower was barely in the top ten thoughts he had. He sighed and lowered his hand. The pathetic flower still was as brown and curled as it had been before. Nate tried to tell himself he didn't care. That it didn't mean anything and was a stupid idea in the first place. But he was disappointed. Had the ceasing of the storm just been a coincidence? Even if it had, he couldn't explain away what Emrys had done with the car. That was just unbelievable.

As the chill air began to gnaw at him, Nate reached for the door handle. Only the front door opened seemingly of its own accord. He took a surprised stutter-step backwards and his heart seized. A white head on a plump body emerged from the house.

"Grandma! Jesus, you scared me!" he shouted. His heartbeat thundered in his ears.

"Sorry, Nate. But I had to see what was keeping you. I saw a strange car bring you home then you never came inside," she said. Grandma Bess was a short, stout woman. Her hair was still luxuriant, that of a much younger

woman, even though it had gone near snow white when she was only in her forties. Now at sixty-three, she was proud of how lush and thick it was even if it was bone white. He noticed that she was already dressed for bed in her nightgown, fuzzy bathrobe and slippers. He wasn't sure what time it was, but Grandma Bess was known to get into her pajamas as soon as she got home from work. He wished she could be in them all day if she wanted, but she still worked fulltime as a receptionist at a law firm.

In order to take care of me. Old guilt pricked at him. She worked hard because she had to raise him. Instead of taking it easy, she's working herself into the ground.

"I got soaked at the party and a guest took me home," Nate explained. He wasn't going to even touch on what had actually happened.

It was then that his grandmother really looked at him and saw the wet clothes and mussed hair. "You must be freezing, sweetheart! Come inside quick!" Grandma Bess exclaimed and ushered him inside.

"Thanks." Nate brushed past her and went into the narrow front hall.

The only light came from the open door to the study that was about twenty feet away. The front hall was covered in wood paneling that had darkened to a burnt umber. His grandmother's furniture was mostly antique but not through choice. Rather she kept and used things that had been in her family for generations, because there wasn't enough money to replace them and they were loved.

Even though it was summer, she had put in a fire in the study. He could almost feel its warmth from the front hall. The old floor boards creaked beneath his feet. They felt a springy and rotten underneath his dress shoes. They'd need to be replaced at some point. But as he thought that, he saw the patch job he had done on the newel post. Everything was old, used, worn and falling apart. Well-loved or not, the place needed some serious help.

But Emrys thinks I'm heir to a huge fortune and Grandma Bess is hiding that fact. Please! She's no fonder of poverty than I am.

It all sounded so ridiculous. The Whitneys had probably left their fortune to some charitable cause or another. They had disinherited his mother, because she married his father. Based on that, he couldn't imagine that they would somehow leave the money to him, the spawn of this unwelcome marriage, instead. It was preposterous. Yet he kept thinking of Emrys' confidence in what he said. The man didn't guess or if he did guess, he had good reasons to believe what he said. At least that's the impression that Nate had of him already.

Grandma Bess turned away from the door and faced him. "You said a guest drove you home? Why didn't Daniel or Angela take you home? Well, maybe not Angela as she's running things, but what about your best friend? Or are you fighting again?"

"Grandma, Daniel's cool. We're good," Nate tried to shut down the flow of talk about his best friend.

"Really?" Grandma Bess raised a white eyebrow at him. "It seems to me that the green-eyed monster has been appearing more often than the Daniel I used to know and he's sniping at you."

Nate frowned as he stepped past her. He only knew of a few times that Daniel had let his disappointment get the best of him. He hadn't realized that it had been apparent to his grandmother. "What do you mean?"

"You became a very handsome young man." Grandma Bess waved away his blushing. "I don't think you realize how good looking you truly are. Which is a good thing. Wouldn't want you to get a big head about it. But poor Daniel, he'll never be a looker not even through a glass darkly."

"Daniel's a great guy. He'll find a ton of girls to date in college. Winter Haven's too small for ... well, you know. People think of you how they knew you when you were ten," Nate said. His shoulders relaxed and the incipient shivering ceased.

"I just fear that Daniel will one day do something foolish and hurtful in his quest to be wanted and you'll pay for it." Grandma Bess tutted under breath.

“He wouldn’t. I mean really, what could he do anyways? Not drive me to school or work?” Nate shook his head. His still damp hair rained droplets on the floor.

“What a mess, you are. You have to get warm otherwise you’ll take a chill. A bath! That’s what you need,” Grandma Bess said, ignoring his question about Daniel.

“Yeah, sorta cold,” Nate confessed though his thoughts were hung up on his grandmother’s observations of his best friend. He sighed. He didn’t want the attention that Daniel craved from other people. Except if it was from Emrys and he was pretty sure that Daniel had no interest in men.

I should just tell him that I’m not competition. No desire for girls. And honestly, before tonight, nothing really for anyone. Just Emrys ... Nate shook off the thoughts as his grandmother was speaking to him again and somehow thinking lustful thoughts with her there and talking was all sorts of wrong.

“I’ll start the tub filling while you get out of those wet things. Then we’ll have a bit of whiskey by the fire. Hard to believe its still summer. Fall’s thick in the air.” Grandma Bess hugged herself and rubbed her arms.

“Sounds good,” Nate agreed. Taking baths had always seemed girly when he was younger. He had a small rickety bathroom with shower attached to his room. But the water was rarely warm and the strength of the spray was more like a trickle than a deluge. Yet he’d endured that to be manly. Then last year the shower head had just stopped working. He’d had to take a bath. He learned to love the big, claw-footed tub that he could practically swim in. So sometimes girly was all right.

Besides Emrys mentioned a bath. A hot bath and I thought of him giving me one. The image of Emrys with his shirtsleeves pushed up to his elbows, holding a soapy sponge had Nate turning the color of a tomato. I bet he had great forearms. Muscular and elegant.

But then he remembered the scars. They were slender ridges of whitened skin. He also thought of how Emrys had pulled down on his shirt’s sleeves

as if to make sure they were covering every inch of him. The turtleneck had been extended up so high that it brushed the bottom of his chin. He'd practically been covered from head to toe and Nate wondered why.

Maybe the scars are all over his body. But what would cause that? Was he in an accident or something?

Nate determined to look up everything he could find on Emrys Frost online as he walked upstairs a few steps behind his grandmother who soon outpaced him and disappeared. Every stair groaned as he put his weight on it. His room was on the second floor, facing the back yard and forested area beyond. He heard Grandma Bess humming to herself and then the gush of water into the tub as he walked past the open bathroom door towards his own room. He loved his room. It was small, but it had the best view of the forest. If he didn't look too far left or right, he could just see the woods and pretend that no one else was around. The first floor of the house jutted out beyond his room and right outside one of his windows was a section of room that he and Daniel would crawl out onto and look at stars. They'd talked about nothing mostly. Who Daniel had a thing for this week. Which teacher was trying to fail him. Or how his dad's car dealership would one day take off. Nate had tried to steer the conversation to bigger things, but words had failed him and Daniel would go off on another tangent.

If it were Emrys and me out on the roof talking, I bet we would discuss big things. Huge things. Life shattering things. Look at me. Thinking I want to talk about serious stuff, but when Emrys tried, I told practically him to shut up.

Nate sighed as he unbuttoned his shirt and slid it off. He tossed it into the dirty clothes pile. He didn't have the energy to stick it in the washer right now. He toed his shoes off. They were squishing still. He put them by the window so that they might dry out. There was a cool breeze coming through the half-open screen. He figured he'd leave it open. He liked having a cold room to sleep in even if right now goose bumps rose on his bare chest. He was in the midst of shucking off his pants when he heard something at the window. His head rose and he froze. Staring in at him from the top of the

roof was the wolf. It put a paw on the screen as if to say: remove this and let me in.

“What are you doing — how did you get up here?” Nate asked. He looked past the wolf and confirmed that the roof was over fifteen feet above the ground. How could a wolf get up there. But there it was. And it wanted to come in.

The wolf placed the other paw on the screen. It was going to break just by the wolf’s weight alone.

But it’s insane to let a wolf into my bedroom. I’m not going to do that. I’ll urge him down and bring some food out in the yard.

But Nate found himself lifting the screen. The gray, furry body slipped past him into the room. Nate felt the brush of soft fur against his lower belly. All he had on were his damp boxer briefs and somehow that felt worse than being naked. He lowered the screen and turned to look at the wolf. It was prowling around his room, almost as if checking it out and not just scenting. It started at his old, battered desk where his laptop was. It was a refurbished one he’d scrimped and saved for, but it was his lifeline. The wolf stared at the black screen for a moment then went over to his bookshelf and actually seemed to pause and read the titles.

Wolves can’t read. They can’t ... Jesus Christ, I’m not sure if I’m dreaming this or what.

The wolf then headed over to his closet. Clothes spilled out onto the floor. Stinky sneakers and jeans that were about two sizes too small barely warranted a glance. Instead the wolf looked up at some of his nicer things and then back at him as if trying to picture Nate wearing them.

“Are you ... are you checking me out?” Nate started laughing before he could help himself. He clutched his belly and shook with it. He knew there was a touch of hysteria in it, but he couldn’t help himself. He had just asked a wolf, one that he had let into his bedroom, half-seriously whether it was looking at him sexually. “I’m losing my mind. I really and truly am.”

The wolf's yellow eyes glowed in what looked like amusement. Then it froze for a moment. Its ears pricked up and its head swiveled towards the closed door of his bedroom. Seconds later, Nate heard his grandmother's steps. She knocked on his door.

"Nate, I've got some towels. And I got your favorite sweatpants and hoodie from the dryer for you to put on after your bath," she said. "Can I come in?"

"Ah, no! Don't come in, Grandma! I'm — uh, not dressed!" But even as Nate said this, his near nakedness wasn't his concern. The wolf was. "Get into the bathroom," he hissed at it and urged it towards the small, mildewy room, but the wolf merely stared at it with disdain. It wasn't going in there. "Oh, for the love of — all right, you're picky? Bed. Get up there." Nate pointed to the mussed blankets and sheets. "If I cover you up, she might not notice you."

"Nate? Are you on the phone? Is that Angela?" His grandmother's voice was muffled through the wood door.

"Ah, no, I mean — yeah, I'm on the phone, but it's not Angela." Nate turned towards the wolf that was looking at him again with that amused cock of its head. "GET. IN. THE. BED."

"Nate?" His grandmother had heard him.

"Coming, Grandma!" he called with a touch of desperation in his voice. He added to the wolf, "Please, she'll have a heart attack if she sees you. As cute as you are, you're a wolf. And she really won't want you inside. But the bed is nice and soft and warm. It's good. Really."

The wolf shocking got up on the bed. It used its snout to dig under the blankets. Nate lifted them up higher so that there was a small cave beneath them. The wolf settled down on the bed in the blanket cave that Nate had created. He looked once more into those yellow eyes. Too human to be a true wolf. Had it been someone's pet? But it didn't seem like a pet. It seemed intelligent and used to humans though. He doubted he'd find any answers just staring at it. The wolf had no tags. Finally, the wolf laid its head on its paws and Nate slowly lowered the blankets down on it. Then he

rushed to the door. He opened it and just showed his head to his grandmother.

“Hey! Sorry about that. Just couldn’t get off the phone.” Nate gave her a sheepish smile and his best puppy dog eyes that begged her not to ask him questions that he wouldn’t be able to answer.

I wonder how loud her scream would be if I explained it wasn’t a girl I was ordering into my bed, but a wolf?

She looked at him strangely for a moment, but whatever she was thinking she decided not to tell him. Instead, she handed him an armful of towels and clothing. The warmth of the dryer still clung to them. He pressed his cheek against them.

“Come down when you’re done. I want to hear about the party. All those rich people and their foibles. At least, we’ll have some laughs over them,” she said and waddled away.

“Yeah, totally crazy.” But the words felt stilted in his mouth. His grandmother’s desire to know everything going on with the wealthy people of Winter Haven now seemed almost sinister. Was she asking for some other purpose? To check if I’m hearing anything about myself and the Whitney fortune? Nate clenched his jaw. That was ridiculous. He was seeing things that weren’t there. Yet he was a witch. There was a wolf in his bedroom. He had controlled a storm tonight. All these things he would have thought impossible not that long ago yet they were true. So why couldn’t his grandmother be asking for those reasons rather than the seemingly innocent gossiping ones?

He watched to make sure that she wouldn’t return before he looked back to the bed. The blankets didn’t move. Perhaps the wolf had fallen asleep. He knew he should stay with the wolf and not bathe, but his grandmother would find that stranger still. He guessed she would be listening for his footsteps down the hall to the bathroom.

A quick bath. In and out. I’ll tell Grandma I’m not feeling well so I’ll skip drinking with her in the study.

With that, Nate went out into the hall. He softly closed the door to his bedroom and pattered down the hallway to the bathroom. His grandmother had closed that door to keep the warmth inside. When he opened it, a wash of steam came out. He hurried inside, shutting it immediately behind him. The bathroom wasn't fancy. It was a large box that just fit the width of the tub, which was crammed against the far wall. There was a pedestal sink with cracked base, a small mirror and an ancient toilet. He set his clothes and towels on the top of the toilet's lid. The bath tub was filled up with water almost to the very top. He slid down his underwear and then stepped into the tub. He let out a contented sigh as hot water surrounded him. He sank down until his face was the only thing above the water.

The only sounds were the odd drip of water from the tap and the echoing sound of his own breathing. He relaxed more as the chill he hadn't been able to shake since the storm dissipated. His plan to get in and get out faded as he did. Sleep tugged at him. His eyes fluttered shut and he drifted. For one moment, he was in the clouds again only they were peaceful and calm. The wind was a gentle breeze and not the shredding gale it had been in the storm. He was warm and floating. But then a tendril of cold hit his nose and there was the clicking sound of the bathroom door shutting. He left the hazy dream of clouds and was back firmly in the bathroom. He opened his eyes just as a tongue dipped into the water beside his face. It was the wolf and it was drinking. And looking at his naked body beneath the water. Nate nearly levitated out of the tub. As it was, water sloshed over the sides of the tub as he jerked upright. The wolf quickly backed away to avoid getting soaked.

"What are you doing here? You were in my bed! Sleeping! How did you ... this is nuts. My door opens inwards. You couldn't have pushed it open. So what? Are you using doorknobs now? And how did you get up on the roof?" Nate stared at the animal. It couldn't be a normal wolf. There was no way. It was something else. But what?

The wolf had backed into the corner. The mist swirled around it and the wolf's form seemed to change. It rippled. Nate rose up from the tub, exposing himself to the wolf unconsciously. Almost as if in reaction, the wolf grew larger until it was no longer the size of a wolf. It was a man that was hunkered in the corner.

“EMRYS?” Nate nearly shrieked and plunked back down into the water.

The handsome man gave a lopsided smile. “Shapeshifting requires full concentration. And you ...” He gestured towards the tub with Nate’s very naked body in it. “Well, you are amazingly distracting.” He let out a self-conscious laugh as the boy continued to gape at him. “This really wasn’t how I planned things to go between us. But I think I’ve told you that already.”

CHAPTER SIX - WITCH HUNTERS

“Are you naked?” Nate gaped as he stared at Emrys in the corner.

The older man glanced down at his mist-clad form. “Yes, yes, I am.”

Nate blushed hotly. Why That was probably the least important thing about this moment. Yet his eyes kept trying to slice through the mist that surrounded the other man to see his bare skin. He could see one powerful shoulder and a slice of upper chest. Faint, but definitely there, were those slender white lines of scars that formed almost a delicate pattern flowing from the front to the back side of his arms and arching over his pectorals. Nate imagined the feeling of the ridges on the tip of his tongue. He swallowed hard.

“Nakedness is a peril of shapeshifting. You ought to be pleased. It levels the playing field between us a bit. Though I do find it rather my kink to be clothed when a beautiful young man is naked,” Emrys mused.

“Shapeshifting. So the wolf and you and the party and last spring — that was all you? All this time?” Nate asked.

He’s the wolf! I wrapped my arms around him and begged him not to leave me. I ordered him up on my bed! All of these thoughts and others crowded Nate’s mind. The wolf and Emrys being one somehow made him feel he knew the other man better and yet not at all.

“I did some reconnaissance last year and that’s when we ... met for the first time,” Emrys explained. He let out a laugh. “I believe Daniel nearly pissed

himself when I came over to you.”

“Did you know who I was?” Nate asked.

“I could sense what you were. I was drawn to you. Afterward, I confirmed your identity,” Emrys explained.

Nate felt a twinge of disappointment somehow. That the wolf was Emrys was cool, but it meant that his supposed connection to nature wasn’t as strong as he thought. It was a human being, not a wolf, that had sought him out for companionship. That it was an interesting human being was great, but he felt disturbed all the same.

“Nathaniel, you have power over the storms and many other things. I’m sure you could coax a wolf to come to you, but in this case, you coaxed a Frost and, believe me, that is a much harder endeavor,” Emrys said.

“You’re reading my mind again,” Nate said with a self-conscious laugh.

“Your face, actually. You have very expressive features,” Emrys said, but Nate had a feeling he was lying.

“So ... you’re here. You drove off and then came back?” Nate left it at a question.

“Well, yes, in all my glory, I am here.”

“Glory?” Nate raised an eyebrow. The older man was arrogant as all get out.

“Glory.” Emrys said and stood up.

Nate forgot to breathe. The older man was gorgeous. He had long legs that were lean yet muscled, a taut waist, and powerful chest. The mist kept shifting and seemingly hiding Emrys’ groin, but Nate could see that there was a thin line of hair from Emrys’ pubic area up a few inches onto his muscled belly. Emrys swaggered over to him. The mist didn’t only obscure the part that Nate suddenly desperately wanted to see, but also blurred out the scars. Nate squinted, trying to trace the pattern the scars made. He was sure that they did make one. Emrys’ confident steps stuttered to a halt and

there was something like a flicker of concern as he realized that Nate was looking at the scars. The mist grew thicker and Emrys dropped down at the edge of the tub, hiding most of his body from Nate's view. One of his hands curled over the porcelain lip . Nate pressed his front more securely against the tub's side, concealing his too interested body from the older man's view. He knew his cheeks were a nuclear red, but he tried to feign nonchalance.

Probably a little late for that. After all, we're both guys yet I've been staring at him like I've never seen another man naked before. He's not supposed to have anything I haven't seen, but he looks totally different than the kids in school. Probably because he's not a kid.

"What are you doing here?" Nate asked as the silence stretched out too long and Emrys' topaz gaze started to drift downwards into the water. His cock throbbed.

"Didn't I tell you that this wasn't going to plan? I'm sure I've said that a few times," the older man said with a smile. "You're clutching that tub like it might slip off of you, you know."

Nate deflected the question as his cock hardened more. "You didn't answer my question. Surely you don't just shapeshift, get up on someone's room and beg to come in without some kind of reason for doing so."

"I wasn't begging. I was ... asking. Ordering even. And you complied though you thought it quite mad to let a wolf into your room." Emrys chuckled.

"Let me guess: Emrys Frost doesn't beg?" Nate's voice went strangely husky.

A smile quirked Emrys' lips. "I've been known to do so in very rare circumstances."

"How rare?" Nate found himself leaning forward.

Emrys' breath puffed against his face as the older man leaned in, too. "It has to be something exceptionally good."

“You always have a strong reason for everything you do?” Nate asked. He felt a trill of excitement skitter down his spine as he sparred with the older man.

“Sometimes,” Emrys said.

“And tonight?”

“I have plenty of reasons for sneaking into your bedroom, Nathaniel, and then following after you when you’re about to bathe without there having to be some grand plan behind it,” Emrys said.

Nate felt a rush of heat go through him. He wasn’t imagining that Emrys was flirting with him. It was real. And he was even flirting back a little without making a total fool of himself. “While I’m sure seeing me naked is — uhm, something to plan for, I don’t think you went to all this trouble for just that.”

Emrys trailed his fingers through the beads of water that lined the tubs’ lip. “Seeing you *sans* clothing was not my real goal though it was an incentive.”

Nate stuck out his chin, grabbed his courage, and said, “Hey, you’re not the only one enjoying the view though you’re cheating a bit with this mist.”

The older man grinned and the mist curled around his throat then died down. “I did sort of get the feeling you wouldn’t mind seeing me here considering your little fantasies about me washing your back.”

Nate let out an uncomfortable laugh. “Can you read every thought I have?”

Emrys flicked water at him. “All your really loud and lurid ones, yes.” He grabbed the brown sea sponge and waggled it in front of Nate’s nose. “Do you want me to get you clean.”

Nate’s mouth went dry. “I —I don’t care. If you want.”

Emrys shook his head, his smile dying. “I’m an adult. You are close enough to one, but far enough to make me want a very straight answer from you. If you aren’t sure then I won’t do anything at all and everything will be fine.”

The boy blinked, surprised at Emrys' serious as death tone. Yet it made him feel much more comfortable. He could decide whether they did anything that night. Emrys wanted him to be certain. He wasn't going to make anything happen that Nate didn't want.

"I'm sure," Nate said suddenly. He drew away from the tub's side and leaned forward, exposing his back. He felt both adult and childlike though another person hadn't given him a bath since he was about five.

"Brave boy," Emrys murmured.

The only sound in the room for a few minutes came from Emrys dipping the sponge into the water and gently bringing it up to Nate's neck. He moved it down Nate's back in slow, solid strokes that ended just above the boy's buttocks. Nate drew his knees into his chest as his cock grew hard and bobbed up. There was the lightest brush of Emrys' knuckles along his spine between every stroke. Nate shivered and closed his eyes. He rested his hands on the tops of his knees and laid his cheek on top of them.

"I'm going to be your teacher. I really shouldn't be doing this. Though if I had a hot teacher at your age willing to wash my back I wouldn't have turned it down," Emrys said.

Nate cracked a smile. "You're making two assumptions."

"Oh?" Emrys' reply was arch.

"Yeah. First, you're assuming I'm going to go to Dunhaven and, even if I did have the money, I totally am not missing out on my senior year," Nate pointed out.

"Yes, needing to be by Daniel's side all the time is undoubtedly a pressing concern," Emrys said.

Nate slanted a glance at him. Though Emrys' tone had been even, the words seemed to indicate that he didn't think much of Daniel. "It is. He's my best friend."

Emrys surprisingly nodded. “That is important. You must forgive me. I didn’t have many friends. Actually, I didn’t have any friends at your age. Still don’t. So the usefulness of them is sometimes lost on me.” Nate was going to ask why Emrys didn’t have anybody, when the older man asked, “And the second reason?”

“Oh, uhm — well, you’re — ah, assuming that you’re — uhm ...”

“Hot? Yes, I am. At least in your eyes. Your reaction to me walking over here told me that already,” Emrys chided.

“Okay, so you are hot and — and rule-breakingly worthy of doing things one shouldn’t with a teacher,” Nate agreed as Emrys slid the sponge so low that the valley between his ass cheeks was touched. Suddenly, he found himself unable to articulate whatsoever and his anus quivered. His cock was like an iron bar against his belly.

Erogenous zone found, Nate thought with an internal laugh.

“It’s never the student who pays the price for getting it on with teacher so, I’m afraid, my hotness is really not the issue. At least, it’s only tangentially the issue,” Emrys mused. “It makes you open to the idea, but I’ve found that even the straightest of men can be seduced regardless of their arousal by the exterior.”

“You seduce a lot of people?” Nate asked. He shouldn’t care that the other man did. They’d just met. This could be a fun thing. Playing around. But still the fact sat there leaden in his stomach.

“I haven’t in a while,” Emrys said. “I’ve become far more choosey. Which brings me to the crux of the matter.”

“What’s the crux?” Nate asked.

“It’s not my hotness, Nathaniel, it’s yours,” Emrys breathed into his ear.

The boy’s eyes, which had been sliding shut again, widened. He let out a self-conscious laugh. “Me? Well, grandma did say I was looking pretty fine these days.”

“Your grandmother’s appraisal is right even if you don’t quite believe it. Makes you all naive and easily led into wickedness,” Emrys said with a wolfish smile.

“Isn’t it my hotness that’s leading you into wickedness?” Nate pointed out.

“It would be if I weren’t already terribly wicked. I can’t even reasonably muster any ambivalence about pursuing you shamelessly,” Emrys said.

“You’d stop if I told you no,” Nate pointed out, very sure that was true.

“Yes, non-con isn’t my thing. Been there, had it done to me, didn’t like it much,” Emrys answered. That brittle smile was back. It hurt Nate to see it.

For a moment, a whole vista opened up for Nate. He imagined Emrys at his age. He envisioned him tied spread-eagle on a bed with his mouth his only weapon. But it wasn’t enough. The image of a hooded figure mounting his body, the flash of a knife, and red blood welling along Emrys’ white skin as the cuts that caused the scars were cut into his body had Nate shuddering.

“Yeah, that sounds awful,” Nate agreed.

“Not to say losing control can’t be fun and good, but consensual is important,” Emrys said quietly.

“This — this is consensual, you know,” Nate said.

“I know.” Emrys’ smile was in his voice. “You tell me if it suddenly isn’t.”

“It’s all good,” Nate said.

Emrys’ thumbs skittered off the sponge and caressed Nate’s inner arm then trailed down his side. Nate held himself still so not to frighten Emrys away or make the older man think he didn’t want what he was doing. Emrys dropped the sponge in the water and began to use his bare hands to slide up and down the water-slick skin of Nate’s sides, arms and throat. Nate’s breathing grew heavier and so did Emrys. Nate though wouldn’t open his eyes to look at the older man. He wasn’t sure what he was afraid would happen. He just knew that the intensity between them was already so hot

that Nate feared he'd catch on fire if it got any more keen. Emrys fingers suddenly lightly caressed the line of Nate's jaw.

"I'm getting thirsty again." Emrys' throaty voice so very near had Nate envisioning the older man staring at his lips as he said it.

"You want to drink the bath water again?" Nate asked, slowly slitting his eyes open. Emrys was looking at his mouth and then sliding down to his now revealed hard cock. "Though there is the sink, too. Now that you have opposable thumbs you could drink out of that."

"But there's something so good tasting about bath water," Emrys said. His fingers feathered through the ends of Nate's hair. "So pure."

Nate's lips parted and he licked them unconsciously. "Really? Sounds ... intimate."

"It is. Ingesting them in liquid form." Emrys' hands were suddenly framing the sides of Nate's face. His wet fingers smoothed water across the boy's lips. "I'm really thirsty, Nathaniel."

One of Nate's hands rose out of the water and he wet Emrys' sculpted lips with his fingertips. "I am, too."

The kiss was stunning in its perfectness. Emrys claimed him with a skillful flutter of his tongue along Nate's lower lip that caused the boy to gasp and then the older man's tongue was inside his mouth. Stroking and tangling and liquid goodness. The water surged around his body as Emrys drew him closer. Nate's hands finally stopped futilely grasping the air and instead clutched at Emrys' shoulders. The strong muscles resisted his grip. Emrys' skin was silky inbetween the lines of scars. Nate rubbed his thumbs up and down those lines. His earlier desire to run his tongue over them suddenly burst on his consciousness. Emrys broke the kiss so that they could breathe and Nate turned his head. He kissed the center of Emrys' palm and then mouthed down towards the tempting wrist. A spike of arousal had Nate's precum squirting into the bathwater as his tongue just lightly ran over the first ridge of scar. He moaned and clutched Emrys' arm as the older man had suddenly stilled. Nate didn't want this to end.

He dragged his tongue up the spiraling scars that started at the base of the older man's palm and followed them up towards the interior of his forearm. Nate turned Emrys' arms up so that he could see the delicate pattern as he licked and sucked. The older man's terrible stillness and lack of breathing snapped Nate out of his aroused haze. He looked up with swollen, wet lips into topaz eyes that were filled with strange conflicting emotions.

"What? Did I do something wrong?" Nate asked. Something cold twisted in his belly as Emrys pulled his arm away and sat back on his haunches a foot from the edge of the tub.

"No, it's fine," Emrys said. But his expression was unreadable and the mist thickly covered him again as if he was recreating his high-necked sweater.

"It's so not fine. You're like looking at me like I did something bad! Don't lie to me!" Nate's voice rose high at the end. "Just tell me what I did wrong! I won't do it again. I — I'll be better next time. Just don't stop this!"

"Nate?" his grandmother's voice was muted through the door. "Are you all right, sweetie?"

"I'm good, Grandma. Don't worry!" Nate said and tried to impart some normality into his tone, but he knew he sounded raw and shrill still.

Nate and Emrys both turned towards the door and stared at the door knob. If she even cracked the door, she might see the older man and then the shit would really hit the fan. A wolf rather than a naked adult male in her bathroom would be preferable. The door wasn't locked, but if he had Emrys lock it now, it would make a heavy, clicking sound that she would hear and be upset about. He just prayed that she didn't invade his privacy at this moment.

"Are you on the phone in the bathroom? You know you could get electrocuted if you drop it in the bath," she chided.

"The call's over, Grandma. I put the phone on the ground," Nate lied.

Emrys' expression held amusement as he turned towards Nate. The boy gave him a 'be-quiet' look. This wasn't the time. Emrys mimicked Nate

dropping a phone in the tub and failing as he was electrocuted. Nate shook his head in mock disgust at the older man even as he was biting back giggles.

“All right. Well, do you want a sandwich or a drink when you’re done with your bath?” she asked.

Emrys nodded.

“I can get one myself, Grandma. I’m feeling sick still so is it okay if I eat it in my room and call it an early night?” Nate asked.

“Of course. But I’ll get it ready for you. I’ll even get your covers turned down,” she said and he heard her footsteps pattering off.

“It appears to be a good thing that I didn’t stay under the covers,” Emrys said, breaking the silence.

“Yeah.” Nate scrubbed the top of his head. His arousal had dropped away like it had never been though it stirred when he saw Emrys’ stomach muscles ripple as he moved. But he quickly looked away, ashamed at wanting the other man when Emrys clearly didn’t want him back.

“Nathaniel, you did nothing wrong.” Emrys read his mind once more.

“It’s the scars, isn’t it?” Nate guessed. “I saw you were freaked about me seeing them in the car before, but I thought then and not that they’re beautiful.” He gestured towards the spiral he could see between wreaths of mist.

“You find them beautiful?” Emrys had one of his brittle smiles on.

“Yeah. I couldn’t stop thinking about touching them. Kissing them.” Nate slammed his mouth shut as he saw that his words were disturbing Emrys instead of making him feel better.

God, what if what I imagined actually was true? That Emrys was held down and cut? That he didn’t want them? And here I am, talking about how they turn me on! Nate wanted to throw up as he considered that.

“You thought it was a vanity thing and wanted to assure me that you didn’t care,” Emrys said quietly.

“Sort of, yeah, and — and yeah.” Nate was definitely not going to talk about his fascination with them. He’d never want to hurt Emrys. The thought of how the scars had been made caused a sickness to well up in him, but as purely decorative, they accentuated rather than took away from the other mans’ looks.

“Most people can’t see them. In fact, you’re the first in a very long time who could,” Emrys said quietly. He leaned against the edge of the tub.

Nate’s shoulders relaxed as the other man neared him. “I don’t understand. Are they magic or something?”

Emrys’ lowered his head and a lock of hair fell across his eyes. Nate found himself pushing that lock back. Emrys turned his face into Nate’s hand and kissed it lightly. “I’m sorry that I froze on you. It was just unexpected. Not ... unwanted. I do want you, Nathaniel. Too much really.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” Nate said.

“It’s too your credit that you can,” Emrys murmured. He wrapped one arm around the boy and drew him into an embrace. “But it confirms that I was right to come here tonight. The scars are actually a good segway to discuss why I’m here.”

“So molesting me really wasn’t in your plans?” Nate laughed lightly as he rested his forehead against Emrys’ shoulder.

“No, well, partially. After I left you, I felt uneasy. Your use of magic tonight will not go unnoticed by the other families in Winter Haven and ... certain other individuals,” Emrys said quietly. “I’m sure that all of them have been watching you as I have.”

“So what I did with the storm sent up a magical flare to all of them that said: a new witch is here?” Nate asked, but even though he tried to keep it joking in tone, there was an uneasiness that underlay his words.

“Yes, that’s exactly right,” Emrys said and strengthened his hold on Nate. “There’s one more thing I should have told you right away, but with everything else … well, it got away from me.”

“Oh boy, what’s this other thing?” Nate asked. He curled tighter to Emrys.

The older man paused and then said, “Wherever there are witches, there are witch hunters.”

CHAPTER SEVEN - POSSESSED

“Witch hunters?” The words felt alien on Nate’s tongue. He let out a little laugh, thinking that Emrys must be making a joke at his expense, but the older man didn’t even crack a smile in return. “Seriously? Are you being serious?” The repetition of ‘serious’ was necessary in Nate’s mind, because if Emrys meant what he said, well, that was just seriously scary.

“I couldn’t be more serious,” Emrys said. “In fact, I would say *deadly* serious considering they will want to kill you, me and every other witch they come across.”

Nate pulled back and stared at him hard. “There are people out there that want to kill me because I’m a witch?”

Emrys smiled. “Oh, yes.”

Nate sank down in the tub, feeling slightly numb even as the water was still warm around him. “And they are in town?”

“Not yet,” Emrys said. “But they will come and they will kill as they’ve done elsewhere. Only now, they have finally decided to strike at the heart of darkness in good little Winter Haven.”

“I don’t understand how this can be possible,” Nate said. He ran a hand through his hair. “How can they kill people and get away with it? Aren’t they caught? Aren’t they afraid of going to prison or getting the death penalty?”

“They rarely get caught. Their goals are to kill as many witches as possible and getting caught would thwart their mission,” Emrys said dryly. His topaz eyes flashed as he said, “If they do get caught, they kill themselves.”

“What?” Nate gasped out the word.

“Poison in a tooth, if you can believe it. The incidents of their capture are so rare and so strange that people assume they are spies or some such thing. But no one ever considers that they are witch hunters.” Emrys spread his arms wide to encompass Nate and himself. “I mean witches, at least the kind of witches we are, don’t exist in any self-respecting law official’s mind.”

“No, no witch trials in a long time,” Nate murmured.

Emrys carded his fingers through Nate’s hair. “The Witch Trials in Salem are now looked upon with shame and committed by credulous or ill-intended people. The thought of persecuting wise women or those who did not fit in to the Puritanical view by burning them at the stake no longer is on anyone’s agenda.”

“Are you saying that the people in Salem who were burned all those years ago were witches?” Nate asked.

Emrys shook his head. “They weren’t. No witch would be caught like that or if they were caught, they would have escaped. Those captured and killed were mostly poor people, ostracized, or unfortunate. What I mean is that the thought of people having powers beyond the comprehension of science like shapeshifting or controlling storms is not believed any longer.”

“No, it really isn’t believed in,” Nate said. “I’m not sure I believe it myself.”

“The witch hunters have always stayed away from Winter Haven and the Founding Families for many reasons. The biggest of which is that the Families are powerful, moneyed and, once roused, will finally strike back,” Emrys said. His expression was grim. One of his hands curled into a fist on the lip of the tub.

“Founding Families?” Nate asked helplessly. There was so much he didn’t understand and he had a feeling he needed to.

Emrys grinned. “Ah, I’m getting too deep in the weeds for you. Just understand that until now, the witch hunters have relegated themselves to chasing those that have left the seat of power, Winter Haven, and let themselves become vulnerable. But now the hunters have decided that the only way to truly win this war is to come here and destroy the fountainhead.”

“Which includes me and you?” Nate asked.

Emrys nodded. “Yes, dear Nate, we are the last remaining members of two of the most powerful of the Founding Families.”

“Then we’re in trouble,” Nate deadpanned. “I didn’t even know I was a witch until tonight. And unless getting them wet is going to somehow stop them from killing me, I am no more dangerous to them than anyone else.”

“Special gifts aren’t the only gifts we have. That’s why you have to come to Dunhaven and let me teach you,” Emrys said. “You’ll find that you’re as dangerous as they come. Maybe more so. They fear you learning your powers and coming into your own.”

“Please tell me that if I hadn’t done that thing with the storm tonight that the hunters wouldn’t be after me,” Nate begged. Controlling the storm had been incredible, but the thought that doing that might have put his life at risk, worse, may have changed the world into something unrecognizable, had him gripping the edge of the tub for support.

Emrys was quiet for a moment. “If you had not taken control of the storm tonight those people on the boat would be dead, Nathaniel. Focus on that.”

That wasn’t an answer to his question and Nate felt his heart sink into his feet.

“You’re right and I can’t regret helping them. I would do it again even knowing what I know now,” Nate said with a sigh. He glanced up at the other man with a suspicious glint in his eye. “Not that I want the witch

hunters to be after you, but as you had already embraced magic before tonight, couldn't you have saved the boat?"

"No," Emrys said simply. "I could only have watched helplessly as it capsized and those inside drowned."

"I don't understand. If I could do it —"

"Every witch has a special gift. Mine is the power to become a wolf. Yours is to control storms. These are specific gifts from our bloodlines. They have resided in our families since this all began," Emrys explained.

"How did this all begin? And why do the witch hunters want to kill us exactly?" Nate asked.

"Your bath water is getting cold and this is too long a conversation to have in a rapidly cooling room. Let's get out of here and I'll fill you in on at least in the basics, but understand that there are hundreds of years of history to recount and most of what I know is conjectural," Emrys cautioned.

"I want to know no matter how long it takes. Damn, I just realized from what you said that I can't become cute and furry," Nate grumped.

Emrys sniffed. "Cute? I turn into a wolf not a stuffed toy that you can cuddle."

"I don't know, you were pretty cuddly. I was thinking that it would be nice to snuggle up against you." Nate tried to hide the grin on his face. He had imagined cuddling with the wolf. The strong, sleek, silky fur rubbing against his bare skin. The rise and fall of the wolf's lungs as they curled together for warmth. He had been looking forward to that.

"At least you didn't imagine that I would sleep on the floor like some pet dog," Emrys responded. He then drew a finger along Nate's jaw. "The question is now which you would rather have: a furry body or a human one lying beside you?"

Nate let out a choked sound. Emrys tipped back his head and laughed.

"Quiet! Grandma is already wondering what's going on!" Nate hissed.

Emrys put two fingers in front of his lips. “Yes, yes, mustn’t alert grandma to my presence. Do you feel a bit like Little Red Riding Hood?”

“And you’re the big bad wolf? No,” Nate responded.

“You’re no fun whatsoever. Though I am hungry like a wolf. I’m glad she’s making us a sandwich,” Emrys said.

“Making *me* a sandwich,” Nate corrected.

“But I’m starving! I left that party having only consumed a handful of canapes. They were quite good, but still. I’m fading away.” Emrys rubbed his stomach for emphasis.

Nate sighed. “All right I will ask her to make two sandwiches.”

“Good, because I don’t share,” Emrys sniffed.

Nate shook his head even as he grinned. He made a move to stand up, but froze as he caught sight of Emrys’ very interested gaze. His cheeks heated. “Uhm, would you mind turning around?”

Emrys let out a laugh. “Nathaniel, we were just kissing rather passionately. You sucked on my scars. And now you won’t let me see you naked ... *again?*”

The emphasis on again had Nate flushing harder. “I knew you were looking!”

“Of course, though your bath water was delicious,” Emrys answered serenely. He stood up and grabbed a towel, which he held out for Nate. “Come on. Out of the bath. Time to get dry.”

Nate paused for a moment then realized Emrys had to like what he had seen of Nate because they had kissed after the bathwater incident. So he stood up. Water cascaded down his body and Emrys’ hungry expression told him that he didn’t have to worry about his looks. The older man definitely liked them fine. “You’re going to teach me the mist trick. It’s not fair otherwise for you to cover up while I’m exposed here.”

“Who said life is fair, Nathaniel? I certainly didn’t. And if unfairness lets me ogle your beautiful form, I’m definitely not going to complain about it whatsoever,” Emrys remarked.

“Aren’t you going to give me the towel?” Nate asked as he stuck his hand out for it.

Emrys shook his head.

“You’re going to make me walk over to you?” Nate asked incredulously.

“Of course. More ogling time,” Emrys answered.

Nate shook his head. At least the other man was upfront. The boy was incredibly conscious of how his cock was still semi-erect and gently bounced against his thigh as he lifted one leg out of the tub and stepped onto the bath towel on the ground. He swore that Emrys’ gaze had a physical component as wherever the other man looked at him, he felt heat bloom in that spot. His nipples peaked in the cooling air of the bathroom and gooseflesh chased up and down his arms. Emrys took another step away until his back was pressed against the wall. His eyes were hooded and he held the towel taut between his hands.

“You can’t get any further away. You really that desperate to see me naked?” Nate laughed.

“Naked and moving, which is so hot actually. Forget simple poses, the way your muscles bunch and relax, the slide of silky skin, the trails of water that cling and then break free — all is irresistible to me. I’d love it if I could see the back of you at the same time. Because your sweet, pert ass, even with those terribly cut pants, was lovely. I bet divested of all clothing they’re like two peaches swimming in a bowl of cream,” Emrys said.

Nate blinked at him even as he felt all the blood in his body go rushing downwards. “You were checking out my ass at the party?”

“Half the party was checking out your ass, dear Nathaniel. I wasn’t the only one, but I intended to be the one who got to have it,” Emrys remarked.

Nate walked over to him in a semi-daze. People were looking at him? Checking him out? It sounded so stupid, but he felt a bit queasy. He realized then that he felt like he was donning a suit of armor when he put on his clothes for work. No one looked at the help. Or so he had thought.

“Nathaniel, don’t look so shocked. You’re beautiful. Why is this such a revelation that people would look at you?” Emrys clucked while he tenderly wrapped the towel around Nate’s body and began to dry him off.

“No, it’s just — I mean — I didn’t always look — most people didn’t like the way I looked! I — I don’t really like being seen!” Nate found himself admitting. He had never thought of it that way before. Unlike Daniel, he hadn’t minded being ignored. It was better than people staring and pointing.

That’s the boy whose mother died. She was killed. Slaughtered. With a hammer ...

Emrys nodded as if this made the most sense in the world. “I’m afraid to tell you that your days of being unseen are long gone.”

His father left him in his crib to burn. Who would do that to an innocent child? Maybe something was wrong with him. Maybe his father knew something ...

Nate shook his head to clear it of the sibilant memories of voices he had heard as a child. “I’ll have to take your word for that. Can’t see what the attraction is.”

“You must be blind,” Emrys remarked.

The older man continued to towel off Nate’s legs and belly thought they were now bone dry. Not that Nate minded. He let out a pleasured moan as Emrys’ hands slipped between his thighs twice. His cock throbbed. “Uhm, if you keep drying me I’m going to have an accident. Besides don’t we have to get out of here? And uh, talk in my bedroom with — with sandwiches?”

Emrys abruptly pulled the towel away from Nate’s crotch and looked at the rapidly rising cock. “How lovely.”

Nate squirmed slightly. “Lovely?”

Emrys’ gaze met Nate’s as he closed his towel-covered hand briefly around the boy’s cock. “Very lovely.”

Nate gasped and his hips jabbed forward, but then the teasing grip was gone and the boy moaned in frustration. “Why did you stop?”

“As you said, talking and sandwiches await,” Emrys responded with a chuckle. He tucked the towel around Nate’s waist. “You check if the coast is clear then we’ll make a break for your bedroom.”

Nate’s cock was throbbing, but he could tell that Emrys wasn’t going to relent and jack him off. Sighing, he went to the door and opened it a few inches. Colder hallway air whistled through the opening and his arousal drifted off slightly. He could hear his grandmother in the kitchen downstairs.

“She’s downstairs so we’re good. You head to my bedroom first and I’ll call down to her about the second sandwich,” Nate said as he looked over his shoulder at Emrys.

The other man had taken an additional towel and clasped it around his waist. The mist was gone. The bathroom’s low light showed the faint trace work of scars all over his front. Nate quickly drew his eyes away from them. He didn’t want to upset Emrys again.

“What kind of sandwich is she making us?” Emrys asked. “Because if its ham, I do so adore sweet honey mustard —”

“You’ll get what you get and like it,” Nate laughed. “She’ll make us whatever we’ve got. No more awesome little canapes for you tonight. It might be bologna.”

Emrys shuddered. “On white bread? With American *cheese* — though I doubt that that cellophane wrapped abomination is cheese in any other country.”

Nate grinned at Emrys’ food snobbery. “You never know.”

Emrys muttered to himself as he quickly exited the bathroom and headed down the hall to Nate's bedroom. Only once he was safely inside and out of sight did Nate emerge from the bathroom. His first thought was just to lean over the railing and call down to her as he told Emrys he would. But then he realized that he should go down and get the food so his grandmother didn't come upstairs. Though having Emrys hide in the moldy bathroom or his closet would be amusing when his grandmother came in, he didn't want to take the chance of detection so he padded downstairs in his towel. He tucked in the edges as he stepped into the kitchen to make sure he didn't lose his only covering. Flashing his grandmother didn't have any appeal.

His grandmother was standing in front of the worn butcher block kitchen island that her grandfather had made before such things became trendy. She had pulled out the roast chicken that she had made for them the other night and was cutting off large slices of breast meat for his sandwich. A good, strong white cheddar cheese was still sitting unwrapped beside a loaf of homemade bread. Stone ground mustard, fresh tomatoes and crisp lettuce were also set out. Her eyes rose from her task and she smiled as she caught sight of him.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

He nodded. He did feel better than when he had been in the car, but he had a feeling that was because he was giddy with Emrys' presence. If he actually considered too deeply what had changed in his life in the last few hours he would probably be curled in a ball in the corner or in complete denial.
"How was your day?"

"It was rather ... well, it was a little trying. I had to leave work early and go to — to the institution," she said.

Nate froze slightly. The institution was the mental facility his father was at.
"Oh? Did something happen there?"

She began to slice the tomato. "It was a little odd. But nothing that you need to be concerned about."

“Is — is he okay?” Nate asked. He wouldn’t use “dad”, “father” or even Shane. He couldn’t quite speak his father’s name.

His grandmother stilled, but then continued to cut and slice as she recognized how unusual it was for Nate to say anything. But it was also unusual for her to say anything so that told him that something momentous must have happened. “He’s fine, but there was — I don’t know how to describe it. I guess, an upsetting visit.”

“Upsetting visit? Do a lot of people — uhm, visit him?” Nate pushed the bread towards her as she had only cut two slices. “Can I have two sandwiches?”

“Of course, you can, dear heart.” She cut two more generous slices of bread. The warm, yeasty smell rose up mouthwateringly from it. “Only I visit. You and I are the only ones on the approved list to see him, but somehow a woman got in. Not exactly clear how all their stringent rules were violated so easily.” His grandmother’s mouth pursed in anger.

Nate mentally filed away the fact that he was allowed to visit his father if he ever wanted to go through with Emrys’ mad plan to see his dad, he’d be able to do it without much trouble. “What did she want with him? Was she a reporter or author?”

In the beginning, reporters and authors had wanted to tell his father’s side of the story. Murders happened in Winter Haven, but the sheer violence of this one had caught the national press’ attention. The local agencies knew what questions not to ask and when not to report, but others had not. At least, not at first. Nate wondered if this woman was one of those who still hadn’t gotten the message: Winter Haven did not want any publicity.

His grandmother spread mustard over the bread and sliced thick wedges of cheese before she answered, “No, she claimed to be married to someone — well, she claimed that she had the same — ah, problem as your father.”

“She killed her spouse with a hammer?” Nate asked, a trace of acid in his tone.

“Well, she asked — you see your father’s delusion is that — that your mother was a — ah, well, … forget about this, Nate. It’s over and done. She was delusional and your father was upset, but it’s all over with now,” she said as she put the rest of the ingredients on the sandwiches.

“What did he believe about Mom?” Nate asked.

His grandmother froze. Her eyes darted up to his face in surprise and with a touch of fear. “Your father is sick, dear heart. What he thought doesn’t matter, because it wasn’t true.”

“He thought she was a — a witch, didn’t he?” Nate asked. He could hardly breath as he asked that. The words were heavy. Boulders. But each one came out though it was an effort to force them.

“Who told you that?” Her voice was sharp this time.

“Just — just tell me if that’s why he hurt her,” Nate said.

“He didn’t kill her because she was a witch, Nate,” she said firmly. “He killed her because — because he thought she was possessed by the Devil.”

CHAPTER EIGHT - THE DEVIL BELIEVES IN YOU

Nate carried the plate of sandwiches and two Cokes up to his room. His grandmother had frowned slightly when he took two, muttering something about how he’d never sleep with all that caffeine and sugar, but he hardly heard her. He couldn’t get past what she had said earlier. His father believed his mother was possessed by the Devil. Before he wouldn’t have been able to keep back bitter, unbelieving laughter at that. But now he knew that magic was real. Witches were real. Could the Devil be real? Suddenly, nothing could just be laughed away any more. Anything was possible.

He hadn’t asked her any more questions about it. He had just grown silent and so had she. What could he ask without giving away what he’d learned from Emrys? Did she know about his mother being a witch? She hadn’t denied that. Just said that being a witch wasn’t the reason she died. He could have followed up on that. As he thought about it, there were tons of

things he could have asked. But he hadn't. He'd just clammed up and she'd busied herself finishing plating his foot, adding a pile of homemade chips onto each plate. For one moment, Nate wondered if she knew that there was another person in the house. Two Cokes, two sandwiches and now both plates filled with chips. His gaze had met hers for a moment.

"Oh, dear, I gave you too much," she said with a flustered wave of her hand.

Daniel stopped her from scooping some of the chips back. He was sure that Emrys would love them as much as he did. Thick cut with a sprinkling of sea salt and a bright crunch, they were the best. So much better than store-bought ones even if she made them because it was cheaper in the end. "No, no, it's good. I'm starving. I didn't get a chance to eat much today."

He felt her gratefulness then that he was acting normal, wasn't shutting down from what she had said, as she lightly touched his bare arm. "You're a growing boy. You need food. Go up and enjoy yourself."

"Just going to eat and sleep," he had told her. "Not much excitement in that."

She patted his arm again as if she knew he would be up to some mischief later that night. He had felt a touch of shame for hiding Emrys' presence from her.

But what would I have told her about him? I have a naked man in my room? Do you mind if he stays over and sleeps with me? Nate shook his head and let out a soft laugh as he padded down the hallway to his room. *That would be before I admitted to her that he's a witch and can shapeshift. So not going over well. Maybe she'd believe I was as crazy as Dad ...*

Nate's smile died on his lips. The plates clinked against the metal tray. He adjusted his sweaty palms so that he had a better grip on it and didn't dump the food on the ground as he shouldered his way into his bedroom. He kicked the door shut behind him with his foot. His thoughts skittered to a halt as he saw Emrys stretched out across his bed, arms tucked behind his head, gazing up at the ceiling.

The older man had snagged a pair of Nate's sweatpants. They rode low on his hips, but came down to only mid-calf. Emrys was that much larger than he was, which gave Nate a strange thrill. The only light in the room came from the window. The moonlight silvered Emrys' chest and the ridges of the scars were more visible rather than less. The swooping designs went underneath the waist of the sweatpants and Nate wondered if they went everywhere on that body even along the shaft of the older man's penis. Nate's gaze slid lower over the prominent bulge between Emrys' thighs. He quickly looked away as color flooded his face and his own cock twitched in response.

"You were gone a long time," Emrys remarked without looking over at him. "What were you two talking about down there? I thought you were going to just call down, but then you ... were gone. And I was alone. Forced to clothe myself from the pile of semi-clean garments on the floor of your closet."

"Yeah, those are a little tight on you. I think they're clean, but I might have worn them once," Nate said.

"I did a sniff test, but everything has an aroma," Emrys replied with a wrinkle of his nose.

Nate's eyes narrowed. "Beggars can't be choosers. You didn't have to dress in my clothes. You could have stayed naked for all I cared."

Emrys' head turned to the side. There was a grin threatening to break out across his handsome face. "I think you care very much. I think you would have preferred it. Me, spread out across your bed, naked and dripping?"

Nate's cheeks flushed a nuclear red and his cock almost hurt from the throb that went through it. "I guess being a shapeshifter is hell on clothes."

Emrys' shrugged. "I actually stripped in the car this time. I really love those pants I was wearing. No need to shred them."

"Do you change at the full moon uncontrollably?" Nate asked.

Emrys gave out a low chuckle. “No, I’m not a werewolf, Nathaniel. I’m a witch who can turn into a wolf at will. Very different.”

“Are there werewolves?” Nate asked, but immediately wished he hadn’t. Because if there were witches and werewolves then the Devil really wasn’t all that far behind in the realm of the possible.

“Yes, there are,” Emrys said. “And vampires, too.”

“Vampires! No shit!” Nate burst out.

“Are you going to stand over there with the food? Taunting me with it? Or come here and let us eat and talk?” Emrys asked.

“I’m coming. Hold on a second.” Nate carefully walked over to the bed and managed not to spill anything. He put the tray at the foot of the bed.

Emrys immediately went in and starting sniffing and picking at the meal.
“Is this bread freshly baked?”

“Yes, and the chips are homemade, too,” Nate said proudly. His grandmother did things the old-fashioned way and he thought they came out perfectly. “The tomatoes are from our garden. Only the cheese and mustard aren’t ours.”

Emrys had already taken a big bite of his sandwich. His mouth was full as he said something that sounded like, “Tastes delicious. So good. Love your grandmother.” But it was such a mumbled mess that Emrys could also have been saying, “What is this crap? I’m so hungry, I’ll eat anything. Are you trying to poison me?” Though Emrys stuffing his face probably confirmed it was the former and not the latter.

Nate chowed down on his sandwich, too. He was surprised at how natural it felt to be eating with Emrys up here. He popped open his cold can of Coke. Some of the sweet, fizzy beverage beaded up and clung to the lip of the can. He licked it off. The only other person he’d done this with was Daniel. But Daniel didn’t look like a god with too-tight sweatpants on and he chewed with his mouth open. Definitely not the image that set Nate’s heart aflame.

“So are you going to tell me about the vampires?” Nate asked.

“I met one once. In a bar. It was ... interesting,” Emrys said as he savored one of the chips.

“A real vampire? In a bar? How did you know he or she was a vampire and ____”

“I knew because I’m a witch and I know these things. And I wouldn’t get all excited,” Emrys said with a sly glance. “They are the ultimate predators, Nathaniel, far divorced from any humanity they once had. Once they get past a certain age, they are as different from us as ... well, as an alien would be. You don’t want their attention.”

“That’s — really, uhm, wow. I guess I understand why,” Nate said. “This vampire though didn’t go after you, right?”

“He thought about it. Maybe he’s still thinking about it. Time has a different meaning for someone who is immortal. But I got the hell out of there and found myself looking over my shoulder for several months and setting wards as powerful as the ones I put around your house,” Emrys said as he licked the salt from his fingertips.

Nate found himself fascinated by how Emrys’ pink tongue snaked out and lapped up the whitish-clear crystals. Emrys’ topaz eyes raised to his and the boy quickly dove back into his sandwich.

“So ...” Emrys said as he ate the last of his chips and started eyeing Nate’s.

“So?” Nate asked.

“What were you talking about with your grandmother for such a long time?” Emrys asked.

Nate’s cheeks flooded again with color. He suddenly felt like a naughty child that had been caught doing something wrong. “I wasn’t gone that long. Not really.”

“Long enough to have discussed something interesting.” Emrys stretched catlike on the bed, his toes pointing, as he let out a satisfied purr.

Nate's mouth went dry as his sweatpants clung to the line of Emrys' cock, which looked to be semi-hard. "I—interesting?"

"Yes, interesting, my little parrot," Emrys remarked.

"Parrot?" Nate parroted as all the blood in his body seemed to have left his head and fled for his groin. He shook himself as he heard the reason why he was being called that. "I — it was nothing."

"It was not nothing. Though your mind immediately went to sex when you saw me, before that, you were quite thoughtful and evasive at the same time. Which tells me that she said something that disturbed you that you wished not to think about and yet couldn't stop thinking about," Emrys said.

"That was quite a mouthful," Nate said as he picked at the remainder of the sandwich.

"Indeed, but you understood what I meant even if it wasn't that clearly stated," Emrys pointed out.

"Yeah, well, I guess," Nate said. His heart sunk into his feet. He didn't want to talk about what his grandmother had said.

"What did she say to you?" Emrys asked, spacing the words out as if Nate needed to hear them clearly spoken.

He killed her ...

"About the sandwiches? Nothing much. She knows I have a big appetite." Nate deflected as he crunched on a chip. Emrys would make a big deal about this. That he wouldn't leave it alone. He could already see the look he'd send Nate in that special way that said: you know it's true. Witches. The Devil. Pacts with the Devil. All interconnected. So would it be so far-fetched that his father had ...

... killed her ...

"Not about the sandwiches, Nathaniel. You know what I'm asking." Topaz eyes turned towards his face.

... killed her because he thought ...

Nate fixed his own gaze on the tray before him. If he looked at Emrys he'd burst out and tell the man everything. Maybe he would howl instead. It was crazy to be so shaken up about it. But if witches were real ... "She talked about her day —"

... she was possessed ...

"Nathaniel! I really think I'm going to have to shake you until that beautiful head goes snapping back and forth if you don't answer me honestly in the next three seconds," Emrys said. There was just a touch of annoyance in his voice. He was now sitting up, resting on his forearms and staring at Nate full on.

... by the Devil.

"You can read my thoughts, can't you? Why do you suddenly need me to spell out to you what we talked about?"

Nate grabbed his plate with the remainder of his sandwich on it and his drink. He sat down at his desk with his back to Emrys and proceeded to eat. He didn't taste the yeasty tang of the fresh bread or the bite of good mustard and cheese. He just wanted to shove the food down so that he wouldn't have to talk. Emrys was suddenly at his back. His hands lightly resting on Nate's shoulders.

"I can't hear your every thought. Especially when you're upset. Things get jumbled and all I feel from you is pain and confusion. I retreat when that happens. It isn't pleasant," Emrys murmured softly. "And it's happening now."

"Normal people would drop it then. Someone's upset, someone's in pain and people drop subjects that make them feel those things," Nate gritted out. His head lowered and he picked at the edge of his desk.

"Yes, they would. But we both know I'm not normal," there was a lilt of amusement in Emrys' voice, but it soon disappeared as he added, "I don't want to cause you pain, Nathaniel. But I must poke and prod in all your

forbidden places, because we have so little time to prepare for what's coming."

Nate spun around in his chair to face Emrys. His face felt hot and there was just the suggestion of tears in his eyes and voice. "What's coming? What's the big rush? You need to spell this out for me. Because all I know is that though you say you don't want to hurt me, you keep doing it!"

Emrys nodded slowly. "You have a right to know everything and as I said, I probably went about this all wrong, but —"

"Just tell me. No more excuses. Just flat out. Tell me what the big rush is for me to look at something that happened eighteen years ago!" Nate insisted. His hands balled on top of his thighs.

Emrys sank down onto his haunches and he covered Nate's hands with his own. His topaz eyes were luminous in the moonlight. He didn't blink. "All right. I told you about the witch hunters. I told you how they intend to come here. I should have said that they are here. Some of them anyways. I have felt their presences around town. And that's why — against my better judgment — I came back to you tonight."

"Against your better judgment?" Nate asked with a raised eyebrow.

"You are very beautiful. I don't know what will happen if the ... inevitable happens between us." Emrys' thumbs ran over the backs of Nate's hands. "Whitneys and Frosts have a complicated history between us of marriage, sex and murder. It's a volatile combination."

A trill of excitement flooded Nate with that simple touch. His breathing raced and he knew that his pupils dilated. It was as Emrys said. Being near the other man made his good sense leave the building. He swallowed and shook his head, "Nothing's inevitable."

Emrys grinned and waggled. "Playing hard to get are we? In a towel, no less."

Nate started laughing in spite of himself. He laughed hard and long until his chest hurt and the laughter sounded more like sobbing. He gulped down air

as Emrys held him gently.

“I don’t know why I’m so upset,” Nate confessed. He wiped the back of one hand across his eyes. “I can’t believe what she told me is real. Even if witches, vampires and werewolves are real. I just don’t believe this!”

“What did she tell you?” Emrys prodded gently.

“That my dad killed my mom because she was possessed by the Devil,” Nate said with a soft laugh. It was amazing how easy the words came now. They sounded slightly ridiculous. He waited for Emrys’ reaction, but the other man was simply still. Nate shifted uncomfortably. That cold, crawling dread he’d stuffed down had come back full bore at Emrys’ silence. “Come on. Say something.”

“What do you wish me to say?” Emrys asked. His head was tipped down and he wouldn’t look at Nate.

“That what she said was crazy! That I shouldn’t worry about possession! That the Devil doesn’t exist! That my mother wasn’t possessed! You know ... the usual,” Nate said with a nervous laugh.

“But you know I can’t say that,” Emrys answered. He raised his head. His expression was opaque, unreadable.

“What? Why can’t you?” Nate demanded to know. His hands curled in a crushing grip on Emrys’ shoulders.

“Because it wouldn’t be true,” Emrys said. “But you already know this. That is why you are upset. That is why you didn’t want to tell me in the first place, because I would confirm that knowledge.”

Nate stood up. He was rigid in the circle of Emrys’ arms that wrapped around his thighs lightly. Emrys stood as well, but did not release his grip even as he moved up Nate’s body. The boy couldn’t help but relish the touch even as he emotionally wanted to shriek.

“I don’t believe in the Devil,” Nate ground out.

“The classic response is that your belief doesn’t matter as the Devil believes in you,” Emrys answered.

“Stop saying shit like that! Are you saying the Devil exists?” Nate asked.

“Sit. I must answer your earlier question and this one together. It’s the only way you’ll understand.” Emrys pushed on Nate’s shoulders and reluctantly, Nate sat back down.

Emrys began to pace. One hand scrubbed over his face while his lips moved as if speaking. Finally, the words he said were audible, “The Founding Families gained their powers through a pact with a being that others would call the Devil, though they did not and It did not identify itself as such. It was something from the Outer Dark that heard their calls and ... came down on fluttering black wings with eyes like fire. It was something so different from us ... well, It gave them power and in return, they said that they would serve It in whatever way It wanted and all their descendants would as well.”

“So some *thing* appears to them and they eagerly say that they and all their family forever will serve It?” Nate boggled.

Emrys nodded, but waved off anything more that Nate would have said. “It lived up to Its part of the bargain. The Foundling Families were given powers to create fire with their minds, to control storms, to shapeshift, to see the future, the past and the dead. To control others’ thoughts. On and on those powers went. But the thing — the Devil — allegedly never reappeared and asked them to do anything in return to serve It.”

“Well, why not? Did It just go away then? Forget It had made the bargain?” Nate asked.

Emrys shook his head. “Time to It is probably very different than for us, just like a vampire’s experience of time is different than ours. So a few hundred years is probably a blink of an eye. But I think that what It really wanted was to see the devastation not only the Founding Families would cause to others, but to themselves.”

“How do you mean?” Nate asked softly.

Emrys stopped pacing. Strangely, he reminded Nate of a raven perched on a tree branch at that moment. “It’s not just the Frosts who end up dead, in prison or in insane asylums. Eventually, every one who is of the Founding Families’ bloodlines falls. They are corrupted. Whether it’s something in the power itself that warps their minds and darkens their souls or whether

it's just the nature of having power that corrupts, I don't know. But in the end, all are destroyed by it."

Nate blinked at him. He sat back in his chair. Nothing Emrys said was comforting. He had a feeling his calmness was from either not fully believing the other man or just shock. "And that's why the witch hunters want to kill us? Because we're destined to harm others? Because we got our powers from — from the Devil?"

"That's what they'll tell you. They'll load your head with visions of Christ on the Cross. With a Devil with a goat's head and a forked tongue. They'll say if you do their work, perhaps your soul can be cleansed or at least they'll be there when you eventually fall and cut you down." Emrys' arms crossed over his chest. His fingers dug into his flesh. "But what they really want is power, too. Trust me on this. They are as corrupt and evil as those they hunt. Perhaps it is a sickness that is passed on from one to the other."

"You seem to know a lot about them," Nate said hollowly.

"Yes, I know them well, but that is a story for another time," Emrys agreed. He shook his head as if to clear it. "Could your mother have been possessed by whatever it was that gave our families the powers long ago? The Devil? Yes, it's possible. There has never been a possessed witch that I am aware of."

"I've heard about possessions in the news. Not sure if they're real or not, but it supposedly does happen," Nate said. "Why would witches be immune? It sounds like we'd be the first ones taken over if we're consorting with things from the Outer Dark or whatever."

"That's true. Possession by creatures from beyond this world is more common than you'd think. But the Founding Families are immune to such things. I suppose it is because we are owned by one of them so the others back off," Emrys explained.

"So if my mother really was possessed —"

"Then it was likely the thing from long ago that did it," Emrys said. He wiped a shaky hand across his forehead. "And the fact that it did show up

means that its coming to collect from our generation what our families promised it so long ago.”

CHAPTER NINE -THE ORIGIN OF SCARS

“We have to go see your father, Nathaniel, and find out if this is true,” Emrys said somberly.

“Find out if what is true exactly? That my mother was possessed by the Devil? Need I remind you that my father is in a mental institution. I’m sure if we asked a bunch of people in there at least one of them would claim to be the Devil himself so what makes you think what my father says will be true?” Nate threw up his hands.

Emrys gripped his shoulders. “We are witches. Your father married a powerful one of us. That changes everything.”

“Does it make him not crazy?” Nate shook his head. “You’re asking me to believe the impossible. I just can’t ...”

“You control storms. I can shapeshift. There are people who want to kill us not because of these powers, but because of how we got them,” Emrys said.

“By making a pact with the Devil?” Nate couldn’t hide the disbelief in his tone.

“Don’t call it the Devil. Don’t even think of it like that. It will trip you up, because it’s nothing like that,” Emrys urged.

“What should I think of it as then?” Nate asked. “I keep getting the image of horns, a forked tong and a long tail. Oh, and hooves with red scaly skin.”

“I imagine it could look like whatever it wants including that,” Emrys responded dryly. “But it isn’t like anything you have ever encountered, read about or even thought about.”

“How do you know?” Nate asked, a sudden stab of curiosity making him ask. Emrys paused. Nate could see him considering whether or not to respond. “Hey! Tell me yes or no! And no lying!”

“I can’t tell you yes or no,” Emrys responded with a chilly smile. “Because I don’t know if I did or didn’t. I saw *something*. Once. When I ...” His lips writhed back from his teeth. “When I got these scars you’re so fond of.”

Nate felt like he had been slapped across the face by that statement. He swallowed and looked away. He couldn’t explain his fascination with the scars. Emrys made him feel two feet tall whenever he pointed that out. “Oh, I’m ... I’m sorry.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Forget it. Let’s just stop talking about it.”

“Why? Do you think what we have to do is going to go away?” Emrys’ voice held a waspish sting.

Nate’s head jerked up. “No! I just think that talking with you sometimes is like walking through a mine field!” Emrys pulled back. His eyes were shadowed and his mouth opened then shut. “You can say whatever you want to me, but if I innocently ask a question you get all weird! And mean! How am I supposed to know what to ask you or what not to? I don’t know you, Emrys!”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t ask me things. There are just consequences about asking questions to which you don’t already know the answers,” Emrys retorted.

“But it’s okay for you to do it? Or worse, you know that it’s going to hurt me when you ask those things, but you do it anyways. But I need to watch myself or otherwise I might hit your soft underbelly!” Nate was shaking with anger at that moment. Emrys infuriated him. He was playful and coy one moment. Brittle and chilly the next. It wasn’t fair that he got to flip on a dime while Nate somehow had to endure the probing, ruthless questions about his mother’s murder and his father’s insanity.

Emrys blinked furiously. “I don’t have a soft underbelly! I’m quite well armored, I’ll have you know.”

“You so aren’t! I mean you might think you are, but when I know more about you, I’ll bet that your weaknesses will shine out like beacons in the night!” Nate yelled.

“Do you want to hurt me?” Emrys asked, his voice quiet and somehow more deadly than if he had shouted that question.

Nate was so shocked that he stepped back. “What? No. No! I wouldn’t — I don’t! For fuck’s sake, I — you’re impossible. Why would you even ask me something like that? Why would you even think it? God, you can just leave if you think I’d hurt you on purpose!”

Nate sat back down on his desk chair and held his head in his hands. A painful silence fell between them. Emrys was in shadow so his expression was unreadable. He was completely still like a statue.

“I thought I saw the Devil — for lack of a better word — when my parents performed a blood-letting ceremony on me,” Emrys said softly.

Nate’s head rose. “Your parents scarred you?”

Emrys let out a soft laugh that had no mirth in it. He drew a hand down his chest. “Where you can see and ...” He tapped his temple. “Where you cannot.”

“Why did they do something like that?” Nate’s skin crawled at the thought of parents doing the intimate work of slicing their own child’s flesh. He knew that his father had set fire to the house with him inside, but it seemed more remote compared to what Emrys’ parents had done.

“They wanted power. And in blood, in pain, in doing the unthinkable and taboo, there is a lot of power,” Emrys breathed out. “Do you want the gory details?”

Nate stared at him, trying to read what Emrys wanted him to say, but then he realized that the other man with his sparkling topaz eyes, expressive mouth and body covered in fine ridges was harder to read than anyone he’d ever met. “Do you want to tell me them?”

Emrys shrugged as if he didn’t care, but he had to care. Though maybe the telling was necessary for him in some way. “It was Christmas Eve. It might surprise you to know that we witches celebrated Christmas. Not for the religious aspect, but for the community. It was a normal thing to do. A

reason to have a party. And I loved it.” Emrys began to pace again. “Lots of presents that only obscene amounts of wealth can bring. But I wasn’t jaded. I still loved ripping open brightly wrapped packages. I loved receiving things from people. Even if I could buy myself whatever I wanted. It was the surprise.”

“You were all big-eyed and eager for Santa?” Nate asked with a cautious grin. He tried to imagine Emrys as a kid running down a carved, curled staircase in footie pajamas with his dark hair sticking up in all directions from sleep. It was a cute image, but it wavered and disappeared as he looked at the handsome, scarred man in front of him.

Emrys chuckled. “I was sixteen. A bit old for Santa. But eager to see if my father had bought me the silver Aston Martin I had been eyeing for months.”

“A car of your own … a really expensive car …” Nate sighed. His grandmother’s Buick was on its last legs and unless Daniel gave him a ride, he hoofed it or rode his bike.

Emrys ignored his wistful jealousy. “That night, as we did every Christmas Eve, my parents threw a party. A real bacchanal. There was so much wine and rich food that every table was filled. I was drunk just on the smell of dinner. And Father kept plying me with champagne. It always made me feel like rockets are going off in my blood when I drank it. I think I had three bottles myself by the end of the night.”

“He got you drunk on purpose, didn’t he?” Nate asked, his voice small and uncertain. He found himself gripping the sides of the seat of his chair. It was like that moment when he had seen the car coming right for them and nothing seemingly able to stop it. Emrys was about to get hit by something his father did and there was no stopping it. Not Emrys’ magic. Nothing.

“He did. You’re quite right. He’d never shared booze with me and I thought it was because I was a year older. Finally, mature enough to get his notice. A man!” Emrys let out a bitter laugh. “Both my mother and father had ignored me from birth, really. I was raised by a variety of nannies and social secretaries. I’m surprised I wasn’t a complete wastrel at that point. But I —

I held some innocence. Or maybe ignorance is the truth of it. Not as pretty as innocence.”

“There you go again with pretty things,” Nate said hollowly.

“Yes, you see my whole life up to the point had been a pretty lie.” Emrys stalked over to the window and pulled back the curtain to look out. His face was alive with a sadness that hurt to see. “I thought they loved me as much as they could. Yet at the same time, paradoxically, I thought I could win more of their love if only I was a bit better. I thought that maybe I had. That night. Oh, that night.”

“It’s not a bad thing to want that, you know. To want your parents to love you,” Nate said. He itched to go over to Emrys right then and hold him as if he were the older one, the stronger one, the bigger one. But he didn’t think Emrys wanted to be touched at that moment.

“Unfortunately, it can be. Because it blinds to you to what people really are capable of. Your want does not make them different.” Emrys continued to stare out the window. “So when my father slung his arm around me, his eyes blazing with a strange light I thought was warmth and his mouth wet with wine and led me down to the cellar at two in the morning, telling me he wanted to show me something extra special ...”

“Oh, God,” Nate said unconsciously. He got up from the chair and rubbed his arms. Gooseflesh had broken out all over his body.

“God really wasn’t there,” Emrys said with a trace of amusement. “My mother was waiting at the bottom of the cellar stairs. She was wearing this long ruby-colored dress with a single sapphire at her throat. Her hands were behind her back and she was smiling as we stumbled down the steps. As I stumbled ... because he didn’t.”

Nate went to his closet with Emrys’ description of that night winding around him like a cold sheet. He blindly grabbed for a t-shirt of one of the hangars and put it on over his shaking body. He could see Emrys’ mother, picture her, with that faux smile gracing her lip-sticked mouth, but not reflected in her eyes as Emrys was led down to her like a lamb to slaughter.

“He was suddenly very steady on his feet. And his hand on the back of my neck was so very strong that it hurt. I think I made some comment. A statement to not go so fast. To let up on his grip. But he just laughed.” One of Emrys’ hands lightly traced the edge of the moonlit window sash. His body seemed relaxed, his voice calm, as he spoke of something that was terrible to listen to let alone tell.

Nate tugged on the shirt and grabbed a pair of sweats off the bottom of the closet. He didn’t even stop to sniff them to see how fresh they were. He was so cold and Emrys’ story made him desperate to be covered and warm.

“When we got to the bottom step, she pulled one hand out from around her back. In it was a sparkling black powder. I opened my mouth to ask what it was. That’s when she blew across her palm and the powder went straight into my mouth and then my lungs,” Emrys said. He touched his throat. “I couldn’t breath. I strained for air. Black spots danced before my eyes. I grabbed the front of my father’s tuxedo and pulled the white shirt out of his pants as I sank to the ground.”

Nate slid the sweatpants up underneath the wet towel. There was a slight clearing of a throat from Emrys that had Nate whipping around to face him. The older man had turned around. “I’m listening! I’m … I’m just so cold.”

“I know you’re listening.” Emrys walked over to him. He ran his knuckles down Nate’s cheek. His eyes glowed with warmth. “I can feel your agony for me. You are thinking if only you had been there! You would have —”

“Stopped them. Not let them hurt you. I wouldn’t have let them get you alone!” Nate found himself saying.

Emrys pressed their foreheads together. “Such a brave, bold boy. But you must remember that you were only six when this happened. We did not know of one another. There was nothing you could do. And now … it is a memory.”

“But it’s like you’re still there,” Nate whispered.

Emrys feathered one hand in Nate’s hair. “In a way, I always will be.”

Nate gritted his teeth. “Tell me that they’re in prison! Tell me that they were arrested for what they did!”

“But you haven’t heard it all yet. I’ll tell you their fate after you hear it all,” Emrys murmured. He drew his mouth along Nate’s cheek, kissing him lightly then pulling back. “I collapsed on the floor and the next thing I remember was waking up on my back and blindfolded. I was naked. It was cold in the cellar. I was chained spread-eagle, and from what I know now, I am sure that design in chalk beneath me. It would have had sigils of power. Then the chanting began.”

“Was it them? Your parents?” Nate asked. His hands moved to Emrys’ powerful biceps. He could feel the ridges of the scars underneath his palms and it burned him, but he held on because he had the absurd fear that Emrys would suddenly be ripped away from him if he didn’t.

“It was just the two of them and not the full coven. They wanted this power all for themselves. And perhaps, even they knew that the coven would have found their actions a step too far,” Emrys answered. “I could see slashes of things beneath the edge of the silk that bound my eyes. I saw my mother, her breasts bared and a sigil drawn in blood between them at my feet. She had a candle and a dagger. My father walked proudly into view. Both had on the hooded cloaks, but nothing else. His cock was erect and he rubbed it against the back of my mother’s head.”

Nate made a gagging sound. “They were getting off on — on hurting you?”

“Of course. Power, blood, and the forbidden. Those things were aphrodisiacs to my parents. Sometimes they are to me as well.” Emrys kissed his forehead and mouthed the orbit of his eye before speaking. “My mother turned her head and she sucked on my father’s cock in front of me for the first time. She left a smear of red lipstick along the shaft.”

“God, why? What — no, just no,” Nate breathed. He could see it in his head. He imagined the elder Frosts’ cock wet with her saliva and stained red with her lipstick.

“He batted it against her lips then took it away from her hungry mouth. She moaned and leaned after it like it was a treat he was denying her. I remember then that I saw one of her hands was busy rubbing her clit. She was wet and her juice coated her fingers. It dripped onto the floor,” Emrys said.

Nate shivered. Mixed in with his disgust though was a sliver of arousal as Emrys caressed his shoulders, his back and front while he told this horrible tale. Emrys’ breath puffed against his mouth.

“What did you say to them? You must have been afraid. Totally freaked,” Nate said.

“I was. I most sincerely was. Part of me still hoped that this was a ritual that wouldn’t hurt me, that would instead bring me fully into their world. If they were willing to do this in front of me then surely … surely, they trusted and loved me,” Emrys said with a soft laugh. “I spoke up. Asking them where I was. What was happening. I saw my mother’s head turn towards me. Her mouth was parted and her tongue snaked out and licked her lips like I was a meal.”

“Jesus Christ,” Nate whispered and gripped Emrys closer to him.

“Again, not present. But my father was. His mouth was suddenly at my ear and he asked me if I wanted to help them, if I wanted to be a good son, and give them something for Christmas just like they had given me for so many years,” Emrys said. His arms went around Nate and he began to sway them back and forth like they were dancing.

“No, no fucking way he asked you that!” Nate’s throat felt tight.

“Yes, he did. And what will make your skin crawl was how I answered: of course! I wanted to give them something! I loved them. I could hear a smile in his voice as he responded, ‘Good, Emrys. My very good boy.’” Emrys went quiet for a long moment. “Then the cutting began.”

Nate’s stomach lurched. “No.”

“The knife he had was so sharp that it just felt like something hot flicked over the skin of my arm,” Emrys said. “I felt something wet rush along my wrist and drip. Then the pain came. I realized he had cut me. I cried out. He said, ‘It’s all right to scream, Emrys. It will only make it better for us.’ They were both on me then. Mother and him. Their knives flickering all over my body. Cutting, slicing. Making sure the cuts were deep but not too deep. They worked from the outside in. My father on my arms. My mother on my legs. Then they carved my chest and down ... down to my fucking cock. They cut me there, too. I know you were wondering earlier.”

Nate nearly gagged at that. He pulled back from Emrys and rested his head against the wall. His breath came in choking gasps. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“About them? Yes, but about yourself and what you feel about the scars ... I’d rather you weren’t,” Emrys said. His body was suddenly resting fully against Nate’s. He wasn’t aroused, but Nate could tell that he could be if Nate responded to him.

“Why? I feel like them! I’m disgusting for —”

Emrys kissed the back of his neck, silencing Nate. “No, you’re nothing like them. And you are naturally responding to what your subconscious mind knows while your conscious does not.”

“What am I responding to? Your pain? I don’t want that! I would never want that!” Nate cried out.

“No, to the power. To the magic in my blood. To the timeless symbols they drew on my body. For you see, the joke in the end was on them. The ritual they performed did not give them power as they thought,” Emrys said. He turned Nate around so that they were face to face.

“What did it do?” Nate asked.

Emrys smiled. “It gave *me* power. And that’s when I saw It ...”

“The Devil?” Nate breathed.

“I called It to me I think. I was in so much pain. And my hate was like nothing I had ever known. Especially as I saw my parents kiss over my writhing body.” Emrys’ lips writhed back from his teeth. “It was a deeper darkness just at the corner of my eye. It was just ... there. And the air froze hard and cracked. My parents turned to look at what had invaded their cellar and —” Emrys suddenly stopped talking.

“Emrys? What did they see?” Nate asked.

Emrys raised a hand up in warning for him to be quiet. He growled low in his throat and suddenly dashed over to the window.

“Emrys?” Nate repeated.

“Stay here. Whatever you do, don’t follow me,” Emrys said over his shoulder as he crawled out the window. Fur had already started to sprout from his back.

“What? Why?” Nate asked, fascinated as he watched Emrys change from man to wolf for the first time.

Just before his fangs fully descended, making speech impossible, Emrys said, “One of the wards has been breached. Someone is coming.”



CHAPTER TEN - CLASSMATES

Emrys' furry body disappeared into the darkness. Nate stood at the window, dithering, his eyes straining to see anything in the blanket of blackness that covered his back yard and the woods beyond. What was out there that freaked Emrys out so much? Could it be witch hunters? Maybe even rival witches? Were there such things? He didn't know enough. Emrys hadn't gotten a chance to tell him all the important things. There was hardly time to even get to the basics. Emrys could be in danger out there. He could need backup. But here Nate was standing like an idiot in the window, pining for his man to come back to him safe. He was a witch, goddamnit. And maybe his only power was to get people wet, but he was going to use it.

“Fuck this. I’m not waiting here like a damsel in distress,” Nate hissed. He pulled on a pair of sneakers and hoisted himself out the window and onto the flat roof of the porch below.

The shingles sagged alarmingly under his weight as the rotting boards strained to hold him up. He quickly tiptoed to the side, lowered himself

down and shimmied off the edge. His dropped only four feet and landed unsteadily in a clump of rose bushes. Immediately he managed to scrape his right forearm against a particularly thorny stalk. Hissing at the pain. He staunched the beads of blood his shirt.

Rose bush: 1. Nate: 0. Lovely. I can do better than this.

Arm still smarting, he stepped out of the bushes and into his back yard. The yard's velvety blackness was starting to recede as his night vision kicked in. His old swing set swum into view with the broken swing and the warped slide. There was a pool of water beneath the monkey bars where the sand was packed down from his and Daniel's constant pounding landings. They still used the rickety set even though it was made for little kids. It seemed odd to think of those innocent, earlier times now when he was following after a shape shifting witch against potentially people who wanted to kill them.

Let's just hope it's not the Devil out here.

The skin between Nate's shoulder blades twitched. The grass was wet from the rain and dew as well. His shoes were soaked as he took only a few steps into the yard. Everything looked normal. He glanced back at the house. He could see the blue glow of the television from his grandmother's study in the back of the house. She was probably snuggled in front of the TV with a bowl of popcorn in her lap, struggling not to fall asleep quite yet before the end of her program. It was all so comfortable and normal, but Nate's position outside of that normality reminded him of how many things had changed in just a few hours. Normal wasn't for him. He was surprised by how okay he was with that.

He turned back to the swing set and trees beyond. He thought of whispering Emrys' name, but didn't want to attract attention of whatever had tripped the wards, whatever those were. He crept forward until he was past the swing set and just at the edge of the forested area. Despite Winter Haven being a city, deep woods threaded their way throughout it, creating a lush sprawling metropolis. Only the downtown was thick with gleaming towers of industry, but the wealthy liked their privacy and the ancient woods

allowed them to have it. Nate's home was tucked at the very edge of Winter Haven, but right in the midst of one of the forests. He'd always loved the isolation until now. Now he wished he lived in the bright lights of the big city.

The hooting of an owl had him jumping two feet straight up into the air.

"Jesus," he whispered, trying to calm his rapidly beating heart.

He froze as he thought he heard the crack of a branch over to his right and about twenty yards into the woods.

"Emrys?" Nate whispered hoarsely. "Emrys?"

More cracks and snuffles as if something were roaming through the underbrush. He tried to find the power inside of him that had allowed him to control the storm, but at that moment he felt all too normal and weak.

Why the hell didn't I bring something to defend myself?

He thought of going back into the house to grab his baseball bat or a knife and then venturing out into the woods. He turned to do just that when he heard a wolf's rapid bark. His heart pounded in his chest and he held his breath waiting for another sound. It didn't take long. There was a startled wolfish yelp.

"EMRYS!"

Nate was running into the woods towards the pitiful sound before he consciously made a decision to do so. His mind was offering up wild conjectures of what could make Emrys yelp like that. Had someone hurt him? After hearing what Emrys' parents had done to him, even though the other man was older and bigger, Nate felt a deep desire to protect him. He wouldn't let Emrys be injured again!

"EMRYS! I'M COMING!"

Underbrush whipped along Nate's calves. He felt his sweatpants catch and tear, but he kept moving. Water from the pounding rain from earlier trickled down from the leaves above and soaked his hair and dripped into his eyes

making everything a dark blur. He skidded to a stop as he caught sight of movement to his right. He thought he heard growling from that direction as well. There was a clearing up ahead. The moon passed out from behind some clouds and lit it up like daylight. Nate saw the glint of Emrys' fur. With is heart in his throat, he barreled into the clearing. Then a girl's voice rose up.

"Turner! Do something! Don't just stand there gawking at it!" she yelled.

"It's a wolf! What the heck am I supposed to do, Abbie? Give it wolf snacks?" Turner answered.

"There are no wolves in Winter Haven!" Abbie argued back.

"Tell him that then!" Turner shouted, pointing at Emrys with a shaking hand.

Abbie was a girl of about fourteen. She was pressed up against a large tree. Her brown hair hung in long, limp tresses on either side of a round face. She had on a gray dress that was synched in the middle by a fanny pack, high white socks and black shoes. Beside her was the boy, Turner, who appeared a couple of years older. He had a shock of brown hair that fell messily over his forehead. He looked to be mostly skin and bones, but Nate had to give him credit for courage. He placed himself steadfastly between Emrys and the girl. Neither looked dangerous. They looked to be related.

Emrys was magnificent in his wolf form. His head was low to the ground and his haunches were raised as he stared at the two intruders with glowing topaz eyes. His lips were drawn back from his sharp, white fangs. When Turner moved to shield Abbie more, Emrys let out a low growl that kept the boy frozen in place. Turner looked ready to pee himself. Nate had to put a stop to this.

They aren't the Devil. They certainly aren't witch hunters. They look like rich kids who got themselves lost in the big bad woods.

"Emrys!" Nate chastised, which had every one turning and gawking at him.

"Who are – are you?" Turner asked.

“I – I think it’s him, Turner,” Abbie said. She peered at him from narrowed hazel eyes.

Nate wasn’t sure what she was talking about, but Emrys’ continued growling, which might have sounded big and bad to someone who didn’t know him, seemed to Nate to be more for effect.

“I think the — ah — intruders are sufficiently cowed now,” Nate said to him. “You can stop — uhm baring your teeth and stuff.”

The wolf’s eyes slid over to him. Nate could almost read the irritation in him. The look said: what the hell are you doing here when I told you to wait in the house? Nate shrugged. He had to come. Emrys would just have to get over it.

Now I get to act like Emrys is a pet. Excellent. He is so going to kill me later for this. But it has to be done if we’re going to fool these two.

Nate couldn’t help but grin. He sidled up to Emrys and petted him behind the ears. The growling stopped though Emrys gave him a narrow-eyed look. He wasn’t appeased and he wasn’t sure what Nate had up his sleeve though Nate was quite certain that Emrys knew he wasn’t going to like it.

“Is that your — your wolf?” Turner asked, stuttering slightly over the words.

Mine. Are you mine, Emrys? Pretty presumptuous of me to say yes, but I think I will.

“He’s — a — uhm, yeah, he’s mine,” Nate said with a glance down at Emrys.

Emrys whapped Nate’s leg with his tail. Nate scritched him harder behind the ears, which seemed to assuage Emrys’ irritation or perhaps it was a secret spot to soothe the savage beast. Nate bit his lip to stop from giggling inappropriately.

“And you talk to your wolf like that and he listens?” Abbie asked pointedly. She stepped around her brother. Her serious, rather ugly face was focused

on Emrys as if she wanted to see what was beneath the fur.

Nate frowned. He did not like how that girl looked at Emrys. It was as if she knew he wasn't what he seemed. Maybe he had been too quick to think that these two weren't dangerous. Plus, he realized that she had caught on right away that he wasn't talking to Emrys like he was a pet. "Yeah. He's intelligent."

"More intelligent than the average wolf?" she asked with a cock of one of her thin eyebrows.

"More intelligent period," Nate answered. "Now I think it's time I asked you two the questions. Namely, who the hell are you and what are you doing on my property?"

"And you named him ... Emrys? As in Emrys Frost?" Abbie continued on, ignoring his question.

Emrys cocked his head to the side and regarded her with much too much intelligence for any wolf.

Nate grimaced. Any lie that came to him sounded lame, but he had to say something, "I named him Emrys. It just sort of stuck—"

"Give it up," Abbie said, crossing her arms over her thin chest. "I've read about how shape shifting runs in the Frost family. And Emrys has returned to town. Ergo, *the wolf is Emrys Frost.*"

"I – I – that's ridiculous!" Nate stammered. How did she know that? Was she a witch hunter? A very small witch hunter? "How can – can a person be a wolf? I mean really!"

"The same way that I can look like your grandmother," Abbie said with a twist of a smile and suddenly instead of a little girl standing before him, his grandmother stood there. The same smile. The same thick white hair. Then Abbie was standing there again.

"What – how – how did you do that?" Nate breathed.

"People see, hear and feel what I want them to," she explained.

“And believe me, she can be convincing,” Turner said, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly as if he had been on the receiving end of her powers more than once.

“You’re – you’re …” Nate broke off. There was only one thing she could be.

“A witch. Like he is. And like you are,” she said simply as she pointed to Emrys then let that finger drift right over to Nate.

But whatever Nate was going to say next was thwarted when Emrys himself responded. He shifted from animal to man before their eyes. Nate’s mouth dropped open as he watched Emrys’ body elongate. Muscles stretched and strained. Emrys shifted from four-legged to two and rose up. The fur retreated leaving his beautiful, scarred skin exposed. The fangs were gone and then the snout flattened out. Soon Emrys was standing before them, naked in the moonlight. The darkness though seemed to cast a blur on his scars.

“Emrys Frost,” Abbie whispered. There was a note of satisfaction in her tone.

“Abigail Blackwell and this must be your older brother, Turner,” Emrys said.

“You all know one another?” Nate asked.

“Only by reputation. The Blackwells are another of the Founding Families. These will be two of your classmates at Dunhaven,” Emrys explained.

“I’m not going to Dunhaven. We’ve discussed this and—”

“You’re Nate Whitney, aren’t you?” Turner interrupted, his tone seemed almost awe-struck.

Nate blinked and shifted uncomfortably. Suddenly, he had gone from nobody to known by strangers everywhere even in the middle of the woods. He hadn’t had this kind of notoriety in years since the murders. The skin on the back of his neck prickled as he admitted, “Ah, yeah.”

“You’re the one we were coming to see,” Abbie said. She clasped her small hands in front of her.

Nate noted at that moment that for a fourteen-year-old, she seemed very well spoken. Her eyes glittered with intelligence in her plain, round face.

“Why didn’t you come to the front door like normal people? You scared the living crap out of us,” Nate huffed.

“You should be asking why they came here at all,” Emrys pointed out.

“Yeah, okay, what he said. Why are you looking for me?” Nate asked.

“Beyond the obvious that you’re one of us,” Abbie said and Nate felt strangely good to be included in that statement, as if it meant something positive. He’d never been a part of anything. Always an outsider. “We’re here because there’s something … *wrong* with our father.”

“What do you mean wrong?” Emrys asked, his forehead furrowing.

At that moment, Nate remembered his grandmother’s story about how his father had a visitor that wasn’t on the approved list, a woman who was able to talk her way past security to see a murderer. “You went to see my dad today, didn’t you?”

It wasn’t really a question. It was a statement.

“I told Abbie we should come to you first, but she always likes to have as much information as possible before she approaches someone,” Turner said with an uncomfortable shift of his feet. “So she went to your father first and then she was going to come to you.”

“Clever girl. You like to know everything so nothing can go to chance,” Emrys chuckled.

Abbie narrowed her eyes at him. “Knowledge is power.”

“The Blackwells have always thought that … to their detriment,” he said.

“And the Frosts have always trusted their instincts and desires in spite of facts to *their* detriment.” Abbie drew her shoulders back, her spine ramrod stiff.

Emrys pursed his lips in response.

Nate could almost feel a fight brewing between them, which would be something Emrys would do: fight with a fourteen-year-old future student. Nate was more interested in knowing how Abbie had gotten in to see his father in the first place. “My grandmother said it was a young woman – not your age, but like twenties – who came asking my dad stuff about her husband.”

Abbie’s gaze shifted from Emrys to Nate and her posture softened. “I appropriated my stepmother’s appearance.”

“Stepmother? Are your parents divorced—”

“Our real mother died giving birth to me,” Abbie interrupted. Her hands flexed at her sides. “My mother would have known what to do when Father started acting odd. My stepmother doesn’t care enough – she probably doesn’t even notice that Father isn’t … isn’t himself. The old adage applies to her, I’m afraid.”

“Adage?” Nate asked.

“Beauty is fleeting, but dumb is forever,” she answered with a tilt of her head. “I knew they wouldn’t let a girl my age see your father and I hadn’t seen your grandmother enough times to make playing her believable. Especially since they know her at the hospital. But I’ve had plenty of exposure to Tiffany to be spot on. Besides I’ve found that her appearance tends to make certain men … stupid.”

“Ah,” Nate said. He looked at the plain and frumpy Abbie. Her looks wouldn’t stop traffic and he somehow doubted as he took in her bone structure that growing up would help much. But she held herself with a great deal of pride.

“Your stepmother is only a few years older than you, isn’t she, Turner?” Emrys asked.

Turner’s cheeks inexplicably reddened. “Yeah, just a few. She’s not from around here though. So it’s not like he married a – a friend of ours or something.”

“Not of your social circle then?” Emrys’ voice lilted. Even standing stark naked, he still managed to appear cool and unconcerned. Some would characterize it as arrogant.

“She’s a former pole dancer,” Abbie cut in sharply. “She’s probably got more silicone in her than real human flesh any more. She’s plastic and ridiculous. Her education stopped somewhere in the seventh grade.”

“My, my, not your favorite person, I see,” Emrys said.

“It’s an insult to my mother’s memory that he would pick someone so lacking in the most important of ways,” Abbie hissed.

“I’m sure your father would disagree. Pole dancers can have their charms,” Emrys prodded.

“Emrys, cut it out,” Nate said and elbowed the other man.

“You don’t need to protect me. His behavior is expected. He’s a Frost after all.” Abbie’s chin jutted out proudly.

“The Blackwell superiority just … *shines* right through her, doesn’t it?” Emrys pointed out.

“She’s a kid,” Nate said quietly.

“Does she seem like a defenseless child to you? Listen to how she cut poor Tiffany’s character to ribbons. I’m sure there is something redeeming in the young woman,” Emrys teased.

“And you’re being a jerk,” Nate said. “A jerk to a *kid* even if she acts like she’s forty, she’s not. Stow it.”

“The Frosts excel at being jerks, Nate,” Abbie said archly. “They can’t help themselves. It’s bred into them.”

“And no more of that from you either,” Nate snapped. He felt like he was stopping two children from squabbling. A wave of exhaustion went through him. Suddenly, he didn’t want to continue this conversation. He just wanted to go to bed and sleep until his head stopped aching. “This isn’t the time or the place to talk. It’s dark, wet and – and Emrys is naked. We can meet up and speak in the morning.”

“Don’t use my lack of clothes as an excuse. I’m quite comfortable in the outdoors,” Emrys responded with a quirked smile. “Unless you’re the possessive type that doesn’t like other people to see me naked.”

Turner cleared his throat and looked at the ground. Abbie’s brow furrowed as she tried to figure out what Emrys meant. Nate knew that his cheeks were nuclear red.

“You’ll find out exactly the type I am if you keep up with this,” Nate growled. “I’ll make you sleep on the floor. On the rug.”

Emrys’ eyes lit with laughter. “I can’t wait to see you try.”

Nate shook his head. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I had heard of the Frosts’ lack of boundaries, but isn’t Nate your student?” Abbie’s tone was somewhat scandalized mixed with distaste.

“He’s not my teacher. I’m not his student. We’re not classmates,” Nate said sharply. He really didn’t need a fourteen-year-old questioning his relationship with Emrys. “Which means I have absolutely no reason to hang out in the woods talking to all you crazy people. I’m going back to into the house.” He turned on his heel and began striding away. He tossed over his shoulder, “Coming, Emrys?”

“How can I refuse such an invitation? Dear Abbie has reminded me of a specific fantasy about a stern teacher and a naughty student that I’d like to try,” Emrys remarked with a laugh.

“Wait! Don’t you want to know why I went to see your father?” Abbie asked.

Nate froze in his tracks. “You can tell me in the morning. It can wait.”

“It can’t. It really, really can’t,” she said. Her voice was almost plaintive.

“A not so fair maiden in distress,” Emrys murmured in his ear.

Nate slowly turned back to her. “What is it? Make it quick.”

“My father is possessed by the same demon that possessed your mother. I need to find a way to exorcise it before it kills him and us,” Abbie rattled off. “Was that quick enough for you?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN – WITCHES IN NEED OF AN EDUCATION

Nate slowly turned around to face Abbie. Her hands were clenched at her sides and her small body was tense. He could tell she was serious. She wasn’t making it up. Before that night, he wouldn’t have believed in possession at all. Now he was trying to figure out if his own mother had been. Surprisingly, Emrys was silent. His topaz eyes met Nate’s for only a moment before he looked over at Abbie.

He wants me to listen to her. He wants me to know what she knows.

“What are you talking about?” Nate asked softly.

“Our father is possessed … like your mother was,” Abbie said.

“How do you know that? How could possibly know that?” Nate was surprised his voice was steady. He sounded outraged though and he wasn’t sure why. But he did know it wasn’t because he was defending her honor. If she was possessed, she couldn’t have helped it. If she wasn’t then her death was as horrific and innocent as he’d always thought.

“I didn’t. Not at first. It was Turner who figured it out.” Abbie glanced up at her older brother.

“My special gift is – ah, seeing evil,” Turner said with a self-conscious shrug.

“What exactly does that mean, I wonder?” Emrys asked.

“You don’t have to answer him, Turner,” Abbie said. She drew closer to her brother as if to protect him from Emrys’ keen gaze. “I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“It’s not a problem, Abbs. We should put our cards on the table. If we expect Nate’s help we have to trust a little,” he said with a strange quirked smile that didn’t reach eyes. “I don’t think just telling you what I do will convince you though. I think I have to show you.”

“Show us what?” Nate asked, stepping closer to Turner.

But Turner was looking at Emrys. His head cocked to the side.

Emrys shifted uncomfortably. “What? Like what you see? I’ll have you know that Nate is quite possessive.”

Nate resisted the urge to elbow Emrys in the ribs. Why did Emrys have to suggest that everyone was after him? Even if they were. It was like he was encouraging them! Maybe he did feel a tad possessive.

“Your parents. I can see them,” Turner said suddenly, breaking through Nate’s thoughts.

Emrys stiffened. “Unless there’s a picture album over my shoulder, you can’t be seeing them.”

“Because they’re dead? Yeah, I know that. But they’re still here. Still with you,” Turner said quietly.

“Not just because they are dead,” Emrys ground out. He took in a deep breath and forced a smile on his face. “But besides that my parents’ deaths are common knowledge. Telling me that you see them beside me really doesn’t prove you’re seeing anything other than you’ve done your Internet research. A charlatan could say the same thing to me. It doesn’t prove your power.”

Turner looked to the right of Emrys. His eyes narrowed. “She still has the knife she used that night at the ceremony.”

The skin between Nate’s shoulder blades twitched. The eerie, flat certain tone of Turner’s voice was unnerving. And that the boy was talking about something that hurt Emrys wasn’t helping matters. Nate fought the urge to protect the other man even from words. But Emrys was fighting back on his own.

“A knife? And my scars? Yes, you’ve put two and two together. Congratulations,” Emrys said blandly, but there was a spark of fragility in his gaze that Nate didn’t like.

Abbie, who had been keeping silent with difficulty as her brother was grilled, burst out, “Why don’t you believe Turner? You know that the Blackwells have had this gift—”

“Don’t, Abbie.” Turner raised one hand without looking at her. He mouthed some words silently. He nodded. “Your mother says that you had It slice her up the middle with the old railroad spike you’d found in the cellar the year before they died.”

Emrys froze. Nate knew he believed Turner then. Maybe he had all along, but just hoped the other boy was wrong or wanted to egg him into telling more of what he saw and heard.

Emrys licked his lips. “Really? Still with me? They must be incredibly ... frustrated. I’m not dead and they are. I’m powerful and they are not. Those things alone must be driving them nuts. Or are they standing behind me, begging my forgiveness for what they did?”

Turner’s mouth flattened. “I said I see evil.”

Emrys let out a soft bitter laugh and for one moment Nate saw the kid who wished to earn his parents’ love even after what they had done to him. “Yes, yes, you did. So why are they with me?”

“They’re waiting,” Turner said.

“For what? My comeuppance? Their revenge? It won’t happen,” Emrys snapped. He stepped towards Turner. His much larger frame dwarfing the boy’s.

Abbie started to pull Turner away. Her eyes were wide with concern. “Turner!”

“It’s fine, Abbie,” he said calmly.

“Emrys, calm down,” Nate said. He touched the other man’s arm. It felt like a spark zapped between them and Nate snatched his hand away. His fingers tingled. Emrys didn’t seem to notice. His very flesh was snapping with power. Nate saw thin blue lines of light flowing over the scars.

“What are they waiting for, Turner?” Emrys growled. “I want to know so that I can laugh about how they will never get whatever means so very much to them.”

“Though they didn’t know it, though they meant to just take power for themselves, they made you the powerful one. They made you a Conduit,” Turner said. It was then that Nate noticed that Turner was swaying slightly, his blinking was slowed and his eyelids drooped halfway shut.

Emrys stared hard at the other boy. “I’m not a Conduit.”

“You know you are. You know,” Turner said almost dreamily.

“Turner? Are you okay? I don’t think he’s okay!” Abbie piped in.

Turner’s brow was covered in a sheen of sweat and his swaying had become more pronounced. Even in the moonlight, Nate could see his skin tone had gone rather gray. Nate moved over to him and helped Abbie steady him. He felt Turner’s desire to keep swaying and even though the movement had seemed gentle before when he’d just watched it, trying to keep the other boy in place took extreme effort.

“Turner? Hey, buddy, snap out of it. You gotta snap out of it now,” Nate urged. His hands slipped over Turner’s bare arms, which were suddenly slick with sweat as well.

“You’ve got to listen to me, big brother. Follow my voice. Listen to my voice.” Abbie frantically tried to move Turner’s face so that he was looking at her rather than at Emrys, but his head seemed locked in place. Nate saw the muscles in her arms contract and release as she used her full strength to try and move him, but it wasn’t working. His gaze remained over Emrys’ shoulder.

“Has this ever happened before?” Nate asked her.

“No, never. He’s never been like this.” Abbie’s breath quickened. She shook her head violently. “Don’t panic. Nothing works when you panic. Just take a deep breath and focus.”

“Uhm, are you—”

“I’m not talking to you! I’m talking to myself,” she snapped. “I have to get his focus not on Emrys. I have to – of course! I can’t move Turner, but Emrys can move.”

“Right, gotcha. Emrys! Get out of Turner’s line of sight!” Nate yelled.

But Emrys stood frozen before them. He stared at Turner with eyes wide and mouth slightly parted. He then started to sway. Panic fluttered in Nate’s chest. Was Emrys going to become like Turner?

“It came down once. But after that night, with your help, It can really come back. Really come back,” Turner’s voice was now slurred.

“Oh, my god, he’s bleeding!” Abbie cried out.

Blood was streaming out of Turner’s mouth. It ran down his chin and dripped onto his shirt and the grass.

“Emrys! Help us over here!” Nate cried out.

But the older man didn’t move, didn’t even blink. He seemed fixed in place. Nate wondered if Emrys even heard him.

Spitting blood out with every word, Turner said, “It can be in this world. And wreak havoc. Because of you.”

A shudder went through Emrys and the swaying went on overdrive. When what looked like blood started to leak out of the side of Emrys' mouth, Nate had to do something.

"No!" Nate launched himself away from Turner and directly at Emrys' chest. He hit him square on like a linebacker. Emrys and Nate went down onto the grass with a bone-jarring thump.

Perhaps that had broken the spell for as soon as Emrys was out of Turner's vision, the boy suddenly collapsed. Abbie just barely was able to hold up his weight to help him settle onto the ground without too much damage. Emrys moaned softly beneath Nate. His long lashes fluttered open and he looked at Nate with confusion.

"Did we have sex and I don't remember it?" Emrys asked, gesturing to Nate's position flush on top of him.

"If we had sex, you'd remember or you'd better remember it! But I can't believe you'd think you had sex with me after that," Nate said, getting off of the older man and helping him to sit up. "You feel good? Because you don't look good."

Emrys rubbed his temples and groaned. "Oh, my head. No, no, definitely not sex. Feels more like I imbibed enough liquor to knock out a horse."

"You didn't do that either. I'm afraid you didn't have any fun," Nate assured him. He touched Emrys' bare shoulder. The skin was soft beneath his fingers, the lines of scars were no longer sparking.

"What – what happened?" Emrys asked, blinking.

"Turner started in on your folks being with you," Nate said. He plucked some grass off his knee as he said it. He wanted to make it sound neutral, not engaging, so that Emrys wouldn't get so angry again.

But Emrys shot to his feet. He let out another groan and clutched his head. "Now I remember. Some idiotic child started playing with powers he didn't understand and nearly killed me! Ah – shit, my head. Dammit. This is why you *children* need a proper teacher."

“That’s not true! Nothing like this has ever happened to Turner before you!” Abbie cried out. “And you egged him on!”

“Because I thought even if he couldn’t control himself that I could control myself,” Emrys admitted. He let out a sigh. “Clearly, I overestimated both of us.”

Nate stood. Turner was sitting up with his sister’s help. His skin was the color of cottage cheese and he looked queasy. Drying blood streaked his chin. Abbie was fiercely petting his arm.

“This is your fault, Emrys Frost,” Abbie said. Her eyes blazed with anger and indignation.

“You think you’re so logical, so smart, so inured against emotion and here you are flapping your gums about something you know nothing about, because he’s your brother and, therefore, can’t be a right fool!” Emrys groused.

“It’s okay, Abbie. This was my fault. I knew something felt off. Especially when I saw them smiling at me over his shoulders with those dead, silvery eyes,” Turner said. He spit a wad of clotted blood into the grass. “But I was too proud to back down. I wanted them to believe me. To believe us. So that they would help.”

“Do you still see them? Emrys’ parents, I mean,” Nate asked quietly.

Turner only glanced up for a second. “No, they’re gone. But I’m not going to look very hard. It’s when I’m looking for them that they seem to appear.”

“Definitely don’t go looking for them,” Emrys said. “You don’t how to protect yourself from them. Somehow you’ve gotten damned lucky not to have brought something here that snacked on you for dinner.”

“They’ve never hurt him before,” Abbie said. “We tested. We did trials!”

“As you grow older, you get more powerful. It could have been luck before as well,” Emrys answered. There was a tiredness in his tone and a slump to his shoulders.

Nate wrapped an arm around Emrys' waist. The older man leaned against him gratefully. Nate flushed as Emrys softly kissed his cheek. "Come on. I think we have had enough excitement for tonight."

"But we need to talk to you!" Abbie cried.

Nate sighed. "Yeah, but not now. I believe you, but there's nothing we can do now for your father. None of us is in any state to do anything."

"So tomorrow? Can we come by? Through the front door?" Abbie asked.

Nate nodded. Then he realized that he didn't know one crucial thing. It would bother him if he didn't ask now. His mind would chase after the unknowns and he wouldn't be able to rest and right now he was desperate for sleep. "Just answer one thing for me."

"What?" Abbie asked.

"Did my father – did he speak to you about what happened to my mother?" Nate asked, his voice broke slightly.

Emrys' suddenly was holding him back more closely. The topaz eyes looked into Nate's. Somehow it was easier to talk about this looking at Emrys.

"No. He was so upset when he saw me. Confused and scared," Abbie said mournfully. "I just got my story out, but he was started banging his fists on the table and calling the guard. So we had to leave."

"Why do you think that Nate's mother and your father have the same demon inside of them?" Emrys asked.

"Because it told us," Turner said. "I found him sitting in his study with his laptop open, looking at old news stories about what happened to Nate's family. There was this black force around him. It shifted with him, flowed over him, like some kind of cloak. He pointed at the screen and – and grinned at me. He said: fond memories. Maybe I'll make some more. "

Nate shuddered. He could almost imagine that wide smile and empty eyes, black empty eyes, like he had seen it before. He shuddered again. He didn't

want what happened to him to happen to anyone else.

“Nate,” Emrys said quietly. “If they’re right ...”

“I know. I know,” Nate said. He twisted his head around to look at the brother and sister. He saw the signs of desperation in their faces. “Be at my place at nine a.m.”

“That early?” Turner looked like he wanted to sleep for a week.

“Visiting hours at the hospital are only from 10 am to 3 pm. If we’re going to find out everything my father knows, we’ll need as much time with him as possible,” Nate said faintly. He couldn’t believe he was suggesting this. But he knew it had to be done. “See you tomorrow.”

The Blackwells nodded and he saw them slowly get up and go back the way they must have come. Nate then concentrated on getting them back to his house.

Emrys and he hobbled through the forest in silence. He was grateful for the quiet from the normally loquacious older man. Though Emrys’ being silent was unnerving after awhile. Nate began to fear that the older man was more injured than he had thought. He darted a look over at Emrys’ handsome face. Emrys didn’t look ill, more thoughtful, and concerned. His brow was furrowed and he was raking his teeth over his lower lips.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Nate asked.

Emrys blinked and focused in on him. He shook his head with a faint smile. “I think you’ve heard enough thoughts and stories for one night, don’t you?”

“Just wanted to make sure you were okay over there.” Nate tightened his hold on the other man’s waist. “You were so quiet, I thought you must be ill. Emrys Frost not talking every second? Something’s got to be wrong.”

Emrys frowned. A peevish tone entered his voice, “I’ll have you know that most people hardly hear a word from my lips. You are being graced with – wait, you’re joking. God, you brat.”

“Half joking. Teasing. But it only works because it’s partially true.” Nate chuckled. “You talk a lot. But I like that about you.”

“Ha, ha, little boy,” Emrys said, but there was a genuine smile on his face now and Nate felt like he had succeeded at something.

They crossed the yard over to where they had climbed down. Nate looked up at the imposing height. He had no idea how they were getting back up there or how Emrys had ever made it up there in the first place. But the lights in the bottom floor were out and he was sure that his grandmother had locked the back door as she did religiously every night so his bedroom window was their only way in.

“Worried we’re going to have to camp out here tonight?” Emrys asked.

“Yeah. How the heck did you get up there before? Oh, yeah as a wolf. I’m not able to do that furry thing you know,” Nate said.

“Furry thing? You’re making me sound like some adorable stuffed animal. I’m a *wolf*. You will respect the fur,” Emrys said. “Hold on. Let me show you how we are going to get up.”

Emrys transformed into a wolf once more. It was strange to see those familiar features melt away and for a wolf’s face to replace them. But the eyes were the same. Nate was sure he would now know if an animal was a shape shifted human versus a true wild beast. Emrys padded a few feet away then he ran towards the wall of the house. At the last moment, he jumped. The powerful wolf muscles sent him flying almost to the lip of the roof. At that moment, the paws changed back into arms and Emrys caught the edge. He then pulled himself up, transforming back fully into a man.

“See?” Emrys said.

“Yeah, I see that you are up there and I am down here without the furry ability,” Nate said with a soft laugh.

Emrys snorted. He leaned over and offered Nate a hand up. “I’ll pull you up.”

“I’m heavier than you think, you know,” Nate said.

“I’m stronger than you know,” Emrys said mildly and waggled his fingers at Nate to encourage him to take them.

Nate grasped Emrys’ wrist and the older man lifted him up easily onto the flat roof beside him. Nate let out a relieved sigh as they both slid inside. His door was still shut. His room was just as they left it. The house was quiet. His grandmother had gone to bed and everything seemed all right.

Emrys let out a loud yawn and stretched his arms over his head. His back popped softly as he stretched. Nate felt his cheeks flood with color as he realized that Emrys was still naked, but no longer had the mist wrapped around him. His beautiful, masculine body was on full display. His cock was long and slightly aroused. Black pubic hair curled inviting around the base and slightly extended upwards onto the lowest part of Emrys’ taut belly.

“Like what you see?” Emrys’ voice was filled with warmth.

Nate snapped his head up. He was nuclear red again from being caught staring at Emrys once more. “Uhm.”

“I should learn not to ask you questions when all the blood in your body is in your cheeks and in your cock. I don’t think you function very well when that happens,” Emrys said with a laugh.

Nate tried to think of a good comeback, but he made some half-garbled sentence that he wasn’t even sure what it meant. Emrys ignored that and grabbed Nate’s still damp towel from the floor and cleaned off his feet. Then he pulled down the blankets of the bed and slid underneath them. His eyes closed as one arm slipped underneath the pillow.

Nate blinked. Emrys Frost was asleep in his bed. Naked and asleep. He looked incredibly lovely in repose. His dark eyelashes fanned across his cheeks. His full lips were slightly parted and almost invited a kiss. The long, lean legs were stretched out with just a sheet over them, showing their strength and grace. A line of sweat broke out on Nate’s upper lip.

Okay, I could freak out and run away. Offer to sleep on the floor. Wrap myself in the heaviest, thickest clothes I've got and sleep on the very opposite edge of the bed. Or I could just ... do this. Take advantage.

Nate stripped off his shoes, shirt and finally the sweatpants with a nervous tug. He was naked now, too. His belly was full of warm butterflies. His cock throbbed between his thighs. The slide of the skin of his inner thighs against it felt decadent. He pulled back the covers. Emrys' eyes were still shut. Was he really sleeping? He couldn't be sleeping!

"That's my side of the bed you're on," Nate said as he settled down in a pose mirroring Emrys' own yet facing the other man.

Emrys' eyes opened. He was grinning wolfishly. "I know. I figure we'd be more likely to cuddle that way all night."

Nate smiled back, but he licked his lips and firmed his resolve as he said, "Sounds great for when we're sleeping. But I was sort of hoping we'd do more than just sleep. Can we?"

Emrys trailed a hand down the side of Nate's face. "Yes, we can."



UNEXPECTED VISITOR

Nate gets an unexpected visitor while he bathes. Look really closely in the water and you'll see what Emrys is looking at.

CHAPTER TWELVE - REASON TO SIN

“So how do we start this?” Nate asked.

Emrys’ eyebrows disappeared into his hairline and his mouth opened in an ‘o’. “You really are new to this, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess I am. So shoot me.” Nate flushed and turned his head away. He felt like such a kid at that moment.

Why did I say that? Might as well stamp ‘virgin’ on my forehead in neon letters.

“Hey, hey, I didn’t mean that in a bad way.” Emrys cupped his cheek and turned Nate’s face towards his again. “I just can’t believe that someone who looks like you has no experience. We are talking about *no* experience, right?”

Nate blushed harder even though he felt slightly mollified by Emrys’ gentler tone. “Until like last year, I didn’t look like anything. I’m not even sure what you see when you look at me now. But I don’t care so long as you see it and want to be here.”

“Nathaniel, I could write poems about how beautiful you are,” Emrys said quietly.

“Poetry, huh?” Nate grinned and ducked his head. Even though it was a cheesy comment, it was also an awesome one.

“If I had a mind to, yes. And I am risking my career and reputation by being with a student,” Emrys said. “That should say something.”

Nate gave him a quirked smile. “I don’t think you care about your career or reputation.”

Emrys laughed. “You’re right. And I admit, I like to live dangerously so getting close to a Whitney of all things is probably the worst idea I’ve ever had. But I’m glad to be here.”

“Why is being with a Whitney bad?” Nate asked.

“Frosts and Whitenes are explosive combinations. They always have been. When our families have mated in the past, the most powerful witches have been born,” Emrys explained.

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Nate objected.

“They’ve also been crazy as shit, too,” Emrys added.

“Ah, I see,” Nate responded. He shifted one foot so that it brushed against one of Emrys’ calves. “Well, since we’re both guys—”

“Last time I checked,” Emrys agreed.

“Babies aren’t really going to be a problem,” Nate said. “So I don’t think we have to worry about creating crazy little Frost-Whitenes.”

Emrys grinned. “No, we don’t. Every sperm we shed will not bring new life into the world.”

“Are you the last Frost?” Nate asked suddenly.

Emrys shook his head. “There are others. Scattered. I’m the last one of the main branch. The trunk of the rotten tree more like.”

“Why aren’t they here in Winter Haven?” Nate asked.

“You do like to talk, don’t you?” Emrys laughed.

“Well! I just am interested that’s all!” Nate protested.

“When I was your age, which wasn’t all that long ago mind you, if I had the opportunity to get off, that’s all I would be focused on. But not you. You’re so curious,” Emrys said. “But I think that has something to do with your whole life not asking any questions at all.”

Nate opened his mouth to let out some quip, but he found himself nodding instead. “I’ve been so stupid. I kept thinking if I didn’t look, didn’t see, that whatever was really out there about my mom and dad, about *myself*, wouldn’t ever affect me.”

Emrys smoothed a hand through Nate’s hair. “Our pasts always catch up to us. Our only chance to minimize the blow is to face it head on.”

“I can’t look away now. I can’t pretend that there isn’t all of this out there. Witches. Demons. Possession.” Nate’s voice trailed off. He shivered. “I should be more freaked than I am.”

“Indeed. Just wait, there’s still plenty of time for freaking out,” Emrys assured him.

“You’re not making me feel better here,” Nate responded wryly.

“I don’t like the pretty lies, remember?” Emrys said. He shifted so he was nearer the boy. His breath puffed against Nate’s face. “I might not make you feel better about the real dangers out there, Nathaniel, but I can promise that I’ll be standing by your side when they come for us.”

Nate touched Emrys’ nearest arm. The ridges were more pronounced on his upper bicep. “I’m glad. I want us to be … together when that time comes.”

For one moment, Nate saw it so clearly. Emrys, him and a bunch of others facing down an oncoming blackness laced with crimson lightning. They were the only ones between this darkness and everyone and everything. The darkness would swallow all if it could.

“That image is not too far off,” Emrys said, doing his mind reading thing again.

“Do you know how it’s all going to come out?” Nate asked with a choked laugh. It was one thing to imagine yourself being heroic, but a whole other thing to actually have to be when the time came.

Emrys’ thumbs trailed back and forth over Nate’s cheeks. “No, but I am sure that you will rise to the occasion.”

“How are you so sure?” Nate asked.

“You’re a hero. We don’t get many like you in the Families. But when we do it’s quite spectacular,” Emrys said.

“I’m not a hero, Emrys,” Nate said. “I’m scared just thinking about half of what you’re saying. A quarter!”

“You will act in spite of fear. You will do the right thing in spite of what others wish. You will stand before what is coming, unbowed and unbroken,” Emrys’ voice was soft and there was a distant look in his eyes.

A chill went down Nate’s spine. This seemed sort of like what had happened to Turner, but a gentler version or something. “Uhm, Emrys, you okay there?”

Emrys snapped back with a jerk of his head. He blinked a few times and gave Nate an uncertain smile. “Did I doze off there a second?”

“Ah, no, you didn’t. It’s cool. We were just talking and I guess … I guess it’s time to stop talking,” Nate said. He wasn’t sure what had happened to Emrys, but he knew that it was undoubtedly a witchy thing. But he didn’t want any more nasty surprises for them that night. Emrys had gone through enough. Now he just wanted them to have each other, focus purely on the physical, for a moment.

“I’m fine with that. Now, you were asking how we start this thing.” Emrys feathered a hand through Nate’s hair. “The first question I have is … how lightly does your grandmother sleep?”

Nate gaped at him. “You mean there’s no spell you can do to keep her from hearing us?”

Emrys sighed dramatically. “Sure there is, but I wouldn’t have that much energy or attention to give to you. Or myself. When I’m cumming, I’m sort of involved.”

“Ah, yeah, good point.” Nate hung his head sheepishly. But then he perked up. “Don’t worry about the noise. She takes her hearing aids out at night.

Nothing wakes her.”

“It’s amazing what parents will hear when they have a mind to,” Emrys pointed out.

Nate laughed. “Yeah, but she really is hard of hearing. We’ll be okay if we don’t scream the house down.”

“All right. Good to know.” Emrys resumed his stroking.

The boy found himself leaning towards Emrys and tipping his head back so that the older man’s teasing fingers might trail downwards. Emrys though surprised him when the older man kissed the space just under his chin passionately. Heat surged in Nate’s groin and he found himself clutching Emrys’ upper arms as the sensation of being kissed and touched by another soared through him like a rocket.

“I like your aggression,” Emrys said with that wolfish grin of his.

Nate let out a nervous chuckle. “Just tell me if I’m doing anything really wrong, because—”

“*Really* wrong? What about just *a little bit* wrong?” Emrys asked.

“A little bit isn’t enough to stop me.” Nate laughed.

“Confidence, aggression, a cute, pert ass and a pretty face. What more could I ask for?” Emrys leaned in and mouthed the line of Nate’s jaw. “Oh, you taste better than your bathwater.”

Nate moaned softly and his head went all the way back. He desperately wanted Emrys’ lips, teeth and tongue all over his throat. That part of his body always responded to being touched even by himself. “Strangest compliment I’ve ever been given.”

Emrys playfully dragged his tongue along the side of Nate’s throat that had the boy clutching him again. “Lucky for you that I’m the type of wolf that doesn’t devour boys. Well, not literally devour anyways. God, I’m going to love to drink your cum.”

Nate's laughter was replaced by gasps as Emrys nibbled down his neck to the hollow at the base of his throat. He lapped at the skin there. Electric sparks ran through Nate's nervous system. His hips automatically jerked forward. The urge to hump something, anything, to ease some of the pressure building up in his cock was overwhelming. His body jumped when Emrys' hands slid down his front and grasped his wayward hips. Emrys' thumbs circled his hip bones. He stopped Nate from thrusting against him. The boy's cock though jutted forward as if it had a mind of its own to touch Emrys' taut stomach. Nate's hands scrabbled at Emrys' shoulders as to gain some purchase to break the older man's hold so that they could press their bodies together.

"Anxious?" Emrys chuckled.

"I want to touch you. I want you to touch me," Nate whined. "I thought that was the point."

"And you will and I will. It will be an orgy of touching. I just want to take my time with you. I'm imagining that you'll go off the moment there's even a chance of me touching you," Emrys said.

"Then kiss me," Nate ordered. "I really want you to kiss me again like you did in the bath."

Emrys' face, which had been filled with a mischievous light suddenly turned more serious. "Kissing you is a pleasure I cannot deny myself. I wonder if I could make you cum just by kissing you."

Nate's cock jerked at Emrys' smoky tone. "I don't know. Maybe we should find out."

Though he would mourn not cumming by being touched if Emrys really did insist on that.

Emrys leaned in and brushed his lips over Nate's. The boy opened his mouth, wanting to grasp that tempting lower lip in his teeth and suck on it. But Emrys drew back teasingly. "You squirm quite beautifully when you want something."

“Kiss me, please, Emrys?” Nate asked softly. His mouth hungered for the other man’s against his. “Don’t tease. Kiss me. Make me feel you.”

Emrys eyes flashed with something before the older man was kissing him. In a flash. His mouth covered Nate’s. His tongue probed between Nate’s lips, which opened in a gasp of surprise at the passion of the onslaught. Emrys dove inside of him and took his breath away. The tickle of the rasp of Emrys’ teeth over his tongue had Nate frantic for him to do that again. They only broke apart to take deep breaths and then were kissing once more. Nate’s lips were swollen and wet and he was sure red as a rose when Emrys drew off and began to tenderly place closed-mouth kisses over his cheeks, forehead and chin. Emrys seemed to taste him with every butterfly kiss and that drove the other man to kiss him again and again.

“You are a reason to sin,” Emrys whispered into his hair.

“So are you, you know,” Nate said breathlessly. His lungs ached from not breathing for so long, but he desired to go back to kissing.

He cupped Emrys’ face in his hands and took charge this time. He fluttered his tongue against Emrys’ slightly parted mouth. Then he was sucking on Emrys’ lower lip that the older man had denied him earlier. He raked his teeth over it and was pleased by how it flushed and looked wet and delicious after he pulled back. Emrys’ eyes were dark with passion and his body shivered above alongside Nate’s.

“You learn quickly,” Emrys said with heavy breathing this time.

Nate feathered his fingers through Emrys’ hair. It was softer than he’d imagined. He drew Emrys’ head down again and breathed in the scent of his hair; taking deep draughts of the older man’s scent. It was so intimate to be able to do this. Emrys allowed it with a slight laugh then gasp as Nate kissed him again and again.

“You smell so good. I think I’d like to taste your bathwater, too,” Nate murmured.

“I can arrange that,” Emrys said.

The older man's hands blessedly left Nate's hips and suddenly he was pressing them together. Nate's arms wound around Emrys' neck while the older man's were skimming up and down Nate's back. He finally rested just above the swell of Nate's buttocks. Emrys grasped Nate's right hip and drew the boy's right leg over his. Nate naturally spread his thighs open so that Emrys could fit between them and wrapped his other leg around Emrys' as well. They were flush up against one another.

Nate moaned as Emrys' shifted their groins together. Emrys' long, solid shaft rocked against Nate's pelvis. The head bumped against his perineum, slid along his balls and then rubbed against his own shaft. Nate felt wetness leak from his cock. His precum left wet streaks against Emrys' belly and dripped down onto his own.

"I need a bit more control here," Emrys murmured as he lifted Nate up easily and moved the boy until Nate was beneath him. Emrys' body had a pleasant weight about it that pressed Nate back into the mattress without crushing him. But there was no doubt a man was on top of him, against him, touching him.

"God, that feels so good. You feel so good," Nate moaned softly. His head tossed against the pillows as more arousal than he'd ever experienced before coursed through him.

It is so much different with some one else! Nate thought stupidly. He flushed as he thought about telling Daniel about this. But that seemed crass. Hinting that he'd done this seemed juvenile, too. Though knowing the sensation of being with another person was heady. That it was Emrys was incredible.

"It's going to feel so much better in a minute," Emrys promised.

Emrys' powerful arms were on either side of Nate's head. He leaned down and kissed the boy softly, but then deepened it into a breath-taking kiss. Nate moaned into it. Emrys rocked his body against Nate. Again, his cock ran between Nate's spread thighs. His cock and balls tingled with the friction of Emrys' larger cock rubbing up against them. He tightened his legs around the backs of Emrys' thighs and pushed up while the other man pushed down on him.

His body tingled and hot jets of arousal shot through him. They built up as Emrys' hoarse breathing echoed in his ears. He felt Emrys' cock harden further. It was hot again him. Flared at the tip. Nate imagined that head popping inside of his ass, spreading him mercilessly. Nate's hands tightened on Emrys' shoulders. Emrys moaned as Nate's fingernails dug into his skin. Arousal built like a burning fire between them. There was so much heat that Nate wouldn't have been surprised to see steam rising beneath the covers. He shoved up against Emrys wantonly. His cock slapped against his belly. Emrys' cock plowed harder against him. Nate let out a high-pitched whine as his cock surged up. His balls were pulling tight against his body. He was going to cum. He didn't want to. He wanted this to last longer. But his young body was too aroused to listen to his desires.

"Gonna ..." Nate gasped, trying to warm Emrys how close he was.

"Are you going to cum, Nathaniel?"

Nate nodded jerkily. His body was prepared to arch up and let go. There were tingles at the base of his spine warning him of his orgasm.

"Not yet, Nathaniel." Emrys paused his steady rocking and reached down between them. He gripped the base of Nate's cock hard.

"Hey!" Nate cried out and looked up at Emrys' through slitted eyes. His cock was still throbbing with desire, but the fire had ebbed to a dull burn again.

"Don't look so affronted, kitten, I just want this to last before we get all sticky. I want us sticky together." Emrys softened his action by more kisses that ringed Nate's forehead like a crown.

"How close are you?" Nate shifted his legs over Emrys' thighs and pushed up against the other man. Emrys' cock felt hard and hot against him. The flared head was a darker shade of purple than the rest of the organ. He looked quite close to cumming, but then again, Nate wasn't an expert at this.

Emrys grunted and his eyes narrowed at Nate suspiciously. "We'll just have to find out now won't we?"

“Yeah, well, see I want to touch your cock,” Nate said suddenly. His cheeks flamed. “And I wouldn’t want to send you over the edge before me. So can I do that?”

Emrys made a strangled sound. “Uh, well—”

“Have I made the great Emrys Frost speechless?” Nate teased.

One of his hands crept down from Emrys’ neck. He trailed it along Emrys’ powerful chest. The ridges of the scars sent a sizzling sensation up Nate’s arm. There was magic in the scars, which seemed so wrong and right at the same time. His hand went lower, over the ridges and valleys of Emrys’ muscled stomach. His finger trailed through the beginning of the dark pubic hair towards the base of Emrys’ cock. He was being careful not to actually touch the shaft or head.

Emrys growled low in his throat. “I thought you wanted to touch my cock, Nathaniel. It seems to be getting no attention at all.”

Nate bit back the please laughter that wanted to exit his mouth. “Think of it as my revenge, *kitten*.”

Emrys let out a chuckle at that. “Watch out. I have claws.”

Nate grasped the root of Emrys’ cock. The older man let out a hiss and his eyes closed as if he couldn’t bear to look at Nate while the boy stroked him. Nate knew what he liked, but it was harder from this angle to do that on Emrys. He satisfied himself by using a steady pressure as he drew his hand up to the tip of Emrys’ cock. Wetness slicked Nate’s palm. He used it to slide better up and down Emrys’ length. His own dick quivered as he felt the older man’s cock move in his hand. This was a part of Emrys. A living part. Sensitive. He ran his thumb over the tip and spread the slit open. More pearly precum bubbled up. Emrys shuddered. His eyes were still closed.

Nate reached further down and fingered Emrys’ balls. They were heavy and hot. The hair on them was softer than the coarse pubic hair that was in tight curls around the base of his cock. Nate rolled the balls in his hands like he had read about. Emrys’ eyes popped open as his body surged towards

Nate's. He caught Nate's hand and stared down at the boy's with eyes that were black as pitch from arousal.

"Do that much more and I'll be cumming on your flat belly," Emrys whispered.

"I want you to," Nate said. "I want to feel it."

Emrys kissed him hard. Nate moaned and submitted to the kiss even as he kept hold of Emrys' cock that twitched against his palm. Emrys' suddenly moved Nate's hand out of the way and grasped both their cocks in one of his hand. Nate whined as their two cocks slapped together. Emrys began to masturbate them together as he stared down into Nate's eyes. His movements were expert. Nate was breathing hard within seconds as Emrys tugged both their cocks upwards with powerful strokes. Emrys used his hips to keep Nate from squirming even as the boy's hips longed to thrust and jerk uncontrollably.

"Emrys! Fuck, I'm – please! Gonna ..." Nate cried out. His hips strained against the weight of the other man.

"It's all right. I'm almost there, too. Going to cum on you and you on me," Emrys said.

He quickened the rhythm of his strokes. Nate arched back. He couldn't tell anymore which was his cock and which was Emrys. It was just a mass of heat between their legs. Emrys continued to stroke them hard even as his other hand snuck behind Nate's balls and pressed upwards. The boy yelled. Something in him just let go. He watched through slitted eyes as both of them came together.

Emrys' head was thrown back. His cock jerked once, twice, three times. Creamy streams of cum exited his cock and sprayed across Nate's body. Some of the drops splattered against Nate's nipples and that made the boy moan harder. His own cock sprayed upwards and trailed across Emrys' chest and stomach. It was incredible to see some of the cum cling to the scars. Nate would swear later that there was an electric pulse between them as their orgasms hit. He could *feel* Emrys in a way he never had before.

As the last pulse of cum left Nate's body, he sank fully back onto the pillows. His body slumped. His legs slowly unwound and fell away from Emrys' sides. The older man's eyes slowly opened. His breathing was hard and a sheen of perspiration sheened his brow. He looked more beautiful and proud than ever. He slowly lowered himself to Nate's left side. He pulled the boy snug against him. Nate pushed back against Emrys even as his body didn't want to move. Their joint breathing slowed together. Nate's eye lids felt like heavy weights were attached to them. He vaguely felt Emrys use the sheet to wipe up their cum. He snuggled back more against Emrys' powerful chest. The older man curled one arm over Nate's chest while tucking the boy's head beneath his chin.

As Nate drifted into sleep, he could have sworn he heard Emrys whisper, "Though you are a reason to sin, Nathaniel, you're also a reason to stay in the light."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - LIES MY BEST FRIEND TOLD FOR ME

Emrys shimmied into another pair of Nate's sweatpants. These ones were black instead of gray. The ones from last night were shredded from his transformation, but luckily Nate's wardrobe included lots of big, comfy clothes. Emrys though still had to stuff himself into them. The muscles in his back and arms bunched and flexed as he finally got the sweatpants up to his waist.

"At least these are covering the crack of my ass unlike the other ones," Emrys groused. "Though I better not bend over or they'll be showing most of my nether regions."

It was so Emrys to complain that Nate said on autopilot, "What did I say last night about that?"

"All I can recall is something like 'ohhhh, God, Emrys, harder'. I can't quite remember anything else that left your lips," Emrys said as he rummaged on the floor of Nate's closet for a t-shirt.

"I didn't say anything like that!" Nate's cheeks heated. He hadn't, had he? No, it was more like unintelligible moans. They'd slept like the dead after

cumming together. He was still sleepy now and watched Emrys out of half-closed eyes. It was only 8:40 am and he could have used another few hours in bed.

“I guess that must have been in my dreams then. Pity,” Emrys mused as he pulled out a dark green t-shirt from the corner of the closet. He sniffed it and his nose wrinkled in distaste, but he put it on nonetheless.

“I meant when I said that beggars can’t be choosers. So you have to deal with my clothes until you can get back into your own,” Nate said and laid back down on the bed. He stretched luxuriously. He wished he had time to think about the fact that he’d cum with Emrys last night. Maybe for them to do it again. Although with his grandmother up and about that was highly dangerous.

“Nathaniel, I’m going to have to teach you about a wonderful invention called a washing machine.” Emrys smoothed down the front of the shirt that hugged his biceps and skimmed along his powerful chest.

“I know all about them. I just haven’t had a chance to actually do laundry this week,” Nate said. “I didn’t expect to have to clothe someone else.”

“Hmmm, well at least your sheets were clean. Not that they are any more.” Emrys gave Nate a wicked smile.

The boy blushed as he realized their cum was staining his bedclothes.
“Yeah, I better put these in the hamper right away.”

“You have a hamper?” Emrys cast about for the hamper like it was some kind of mythical beast.

“Yeah, it’s over there by door to the bathroom.” The hamper was overflowing with sheets, towels, and more t-shirts. He really needed to do about ten loads of wash.

Emrys’ hands went to his hips as he surveyed the whole room. “Sometimes it’s just easier to throw it all out and start from scratch. Maybe we should set a fire.”

“It’s not as bad as it looks!” Nate laughed. When Emrys gave him a cold dead stare, he added, “Okay, it might be as bad as it looks. But I can clean it up. I *will* clean it up. I promise!”

He had a momentary desire though to keep these sheets as a memento of their first time together. But he didn’t want to give Emrys any further reason to think he was a complete slob. Besides, he hoped that they would be staining lots of sheets in the future so as to make these no big deal.

“All of it. No matter what level of cleanliness you assign in that pretty head of yours. Smells migrate. Everything must be bleached,” Emrys said with another nose wrinkle. He turned his head to look at Nate still lolling in bed. “What are you still doing in there? Our Blackwell friends are sure to show up in fifteen minutes and you’re still naked. And a little ripe again despite your bath last night.

“Deodorant and a quick wash will cover it up,” Nate said hopefully.

Emrys shook his head. “Next time we stay at my place. Then we can take a proper shower together. Clean, crisp sheets in a huge bed. Breakfast prepared by staff. The only civilized way to live.”

Nate grinned. He wasn’t sure how he’d manage to spend a night at Emrys without his grandmother knowing. Maybe he’d tell her he was staying at Daniel’s and then swear his friend to secrecy. He’d have to confess all of this to Daniel in any case. He was sure that Daniel would be fine with him being gay. More ladies for him, he’d think. Coming out to his grandmother might be a little harder. He didn’t think she’d have any problem with the concept of Nate being gay, but going out on dates and spending time at a man’s house? No. She was old-fashioned and probably would want a chaperone with them every time they went out together. She’d probably not let Emrys up in his room unless the door was wide open and she had her hearing aids in. Best not to tell her yet until it was more established and sure so that Emrys didn’t want to back out of dating a kid still in high school. But the idea of confessing his sexuality to both Daniel and his grandmother was actually pleasant, because there was a reason, an Emrys-sized reason, to do it.

Besides being gay is a lot easier to accept than my much bigger secret: I'm a witch!

"So there's going to be a next time?" Nate asked, playfully, purposefully shaking off any dark thoughts.

"Practice makes perfect," Emrys said with that wicked grin. He saw that Nate still hadn't left the bed. He nudged Nate's hip with one hand. "Up, pretty boy. Time is running out."

"Right, right. Got to get ready to go see dear old dad," Nate said sourly.

His chest clenched with dismay and he found himself reluctantly moving. He didn't mean to make Emrys wait or to be late for the Blackwells. It was just that they were going to see his father. At the asylum. And it was all his doing. No one was making him go. He was responsible for this. Gloom settled over Nate's thoughts. Even Emrys' wolf whistle at his naked ass didn't make him smile as brightly as it should have.

"You're so sophisticated then you leer at me," Nate said, trying to pump amusement into his voice.

"My baser instincts can take over ... hey, what's wrong?" Emrys asked.

"Nothing. Just you know," Nate said as he began to pick at the comforter of his bed.

"I love your nothings. They make my somethings seem so very small." Emrys suddenly was behind him, turning him around, and with one of his rare concerned expressions on his face. "Nathaniel, you made the right call in having us go see your father today."

"Really? Because I just feel like I bought myself a whole lot of trouble," Nate said.

"If what the Blackwells told us is true, we really need to know everything we can as quickly as we can about this thing that possessed your mother and now their father," Emrys said gently.

"I know. It just sounds so crazy in daytime." Nate pointed to the open window. "So dramatic. Like I made a decision that's freaking huge in reaction to something. Something that doesn't seem that big or possible now."

The storm from the night before was like some kind of dream. The sky was a cloudless blue. Birds were chirping up a storm in the woods. Sunlight cascaded down onto the lawn like molten gold. It was hard to believe in anything dark and frightening right then.

Emrys sighed. "I must remember that this is all new to you. That it will take time to sink in. But in the meanwhile, I need you to remember that of all the things I'm capable of, lying isn't really one of them. Not to you. Not about this."

"I know," Nate said. Emrys told the truth. Even if it hurt. "No pretty lies. No pleasant lies."

"No lies at all," Emrys agreed. "Now despite my adoration of your pert buttocks, I want them clothed. I'll go get the car and pull it around. Hopefully by then the Blackwells will be here and ready to go." Emrys kissed Nate quickly on the mouth and then he straddled the window sill.

Nate was too shocked by the kiss, so normal and awesome, that he stood there blinking stupidly before he realized that Emrys was leaving and not through the front door.

Of course he can't leave through the front door, because he didn't come in that way. Nate could already hear his grandmother in the kitchen. She had on one of her talk radio programs and was likely to be baking bread already. He'd have to come up with an excuse for where he was going.

"Nathaniel, I am leaving. It is polite to say goodbye or see you soon or au revoir to your guest. Something. Anything at all. You look quite ... dazed." Emrys' gestured to his face.

"Uhm, right. Bye. See you later. Like in five minutes. And uh, make sure you change before you come back. I'm sure my grandmother will recognize that shirt." Nate pointed to his favorite green t-shirt that Emrys was

wearing. He was suddenly quite happy if it stayed on or around Emrys forever. It was too tight on the other man, but it showed off every curve he had. It marked Emrys as his even if no one else knew but him.

Emrys gave a mock shudder. “I am dying to get out of these garments post haste. I’m going to have to introduce you to tailoring and fashion. There are more types of clothes, Nathaniel, than jeans, t-shirts and sweats.”

Nate laughed. “Yeah, I know. But jeans, t-shirts, and all the rest are comfortable. And tailored clothes cost money, which I don’t have.”

“We did speak of this, Nathaniel. You *do* have money. You just have to ask your grandmother about it,” Emrys pointed out casually, but there was a stern undertone to it. That undertone meant: Nate you’re avoiding the truth again.

“Right. Yeah.” Nate rubbed the back of his neck. “How about one traumatic family experience a day, okay? Seeing my dad is hard enough for me to handle. I’ll deal with my grandmother and this supposed fortune I have another day.”

“I suppose. There is one plus side to you believing in your poverty. It allows me to dress you as I see fit.” Emrys got a contemplative look on his face that had Nate twitching.

“I get a say in what I wear! Even if you’re footing the bill,” Nate objected.

“We shall see,” Emrys said. Nate could almost picture him tenting his fingers evilly as he said that.

“Just consider one thing. Any clothes you get me, no matter how expensive or perfectly tailored, will end up on the floor in that pile.” Nate pointed to his closet.

Emrys shuddered. “I will insist on you keeping them at my place then. So that they may be safeguarded.”

Nate was grinning again. Keeping his clothes at Emrys’! Another good sign that things were going to keep happening between them. Even if Frosts and

Whitneys were supposedly a chaotic mix, he was keen to find out if he and Emrys weren't the exception to the rule. "I suppose that would be okay with me. As you can see, I don't have much closet space."

"You have plenty of closet space, you just don't use hangers!" Emrys cleared his throat as he caught sight of Nate's bitten lower lip. "You think to provoke me. You will not. All right. Get dressed. Get downstairs. We need to go."

With that, Emrys disappeared out of the window. Nate was smiling so hard that his cheeks hurt. He quickly went to the bathroom and did his morning ritual of tooth brushing, which he added in a bit more paste and a lot more mouthwash in case Emrys even thought of kissing him, face washing, arm pit cleansing and lots of deodorant. He sprayed some of the cologne that he and Daniel had picked up a while back as a joke. He coughed as a revolting haze of scent surrounded him. He waved a hand in front of his face until he could see again. He hoped that he smelled nice. The spraying had destroyed his ability to smell.

He was just tugging on his sneakers and getting ready to go downstairs to meet Emrys when the first obstacle to leaving presented itself in the form of Daniel. His best friend slammed inside with a determined look on his face. Nate had to stop from laughing at the fact that a "determined Daniel" looked more like a rabid hamster than anything to fear.

"Nate! Damn, man, I was calling you and calling you and calling you last night! Why didn't you pick up?" Daniel asked. "I like texted you a hundred times! I almost even called the house phone!"

Calling the land line was the last resort between them as it meant dealing with Daniel's parents or Nate's grandmother. That meant questions. That meant concern. That meant talking with adults that neither of them ever wanted to do.

Nate's eyes guiltily went to his cell phone that he'd tossed on his desk sometime last night. He hadn't checked it once. Daniel saw where his gaze went and he immediately bee-lined to the desk.

“Hey, wait, Daniel, I—”

“It’s dead,” Daniel said and some of the tightness left his voice. “You forgot to plug it in?”

Nate nodded, glad he didn’t have to completely lie. “Yeah, sorry, I wasn’t really thinking clearly last night.”

“Yeah, totally understandable.” Daniel plopped down on Nate’s bed. “But also totally uncool. You freaked me out when you left the party like that. You were white as a ghost and that Emrys guy was like all over you.”

Nate blushed hotly. “He’s cool, Daniel. Really cool.”

“You like him,” Daniel said flatly, and there wasn’t any question in his voice.

Suddenly, Nate wondered if Daniel would be okay with him being gay or if Daniel was having one of his jealous moments. He’d have them whenever Nate spent time with anyone else. He squared his shoulders and looked Daniel straight in the eyes. “Yeah, I do like him. You have a problem with that?”

Daniel wilted. “Of course not, I mean ...” He toed the rug.

Were they going to have the I’m-gay-conversation right then and there? He didn’t have time for it. Nate snuck a glance at the clock. It was five minutes to nine. He had to get downstairs.

“Of course not,” Daniel repeated. He shrugged his shoulders as he added, “I was just really worried and he stormed in there and took you away. Are you okay? I mean what’s going on?”

“I – this is a really long conversation,” Nate said weakly.

“I have time,” Daniel said quickly.

Nate opened his mouth to say something noncommittal. But Daniel was looking at him with that concerned, ferrety face and he knew that he couldn’t completely brush him off.

But I can't exactly tell him everything that's going on either! I mean the witch stuff? What would he make of that? And I'm assuming there's like some super, secret witches' code for not telling non-witches about us. I've got to ask Emrys about that ...

“Ah, Earth to Nate? Are you in there, Major Tom? What’s going on with you?” Daniel asked.

Nate let out a harsh exhale and ran a hand through his hair. “A ton of stuff.”

“Okay,” Daniel said with an open, expectant expression.

He's my best friend. I can't just lie to him!

“Here’s the thing. It’s way too much to tell you right now and I sort of have to take off,” Nate said.

“Right, well, where are you going? When will you be back? Can’t I come with?” There was a flash of hurt on Daniel’s face. He tried to hide it, but clearly he felt left out.

Nate grimaced. Daniel had rushed over here at nine in the morning just to see if he was okay. Daniel never got up before eleven if he could help it. So he must have been really worried and here Nate was blowing him off. Not cool. Not cool by a long shot.

“I’m going to —”

“Nathaniel, there’s some young people at the door for you,” his grandmother called up, interrupting his answer.

“My name is Abbie and this is my brother, Turner, ma’am,” Abbie’s voice came crisp and clear.

“Who the hell are Abbie and Turner?” Daniel asked, a scowl crossing his features. But he didn’t wait for an answer to his question. Instead he got up and walked out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

Nate grabbed his keys, wallet and dead cell phone. Maybe Emrys would have a charger in the car he could use. He quickly headed downstairs. It was

a surreal scene. Abbie, Turner and his grandmother were all standing just in the hall. The front door was wide open letting in plenty of light. Abbie looked no prettier in sunlight. In fact, it showed how sallow her skin was and lackluster her hair. But there was something compelling in her face. It shone with intelligence and Nate found himself rather liking it. Turner seemed subdued and ghostlike. Nate worried that it was because of last night's misadventure with Turner's abilities. He gave Nate a tentative wave.

Abbie was charming Nate's grandmother with some compliments about the house. She smiled at Nate as well. Daniel stood on the lowest step with his head cocked to the side. He was listening and taking it all in.

"So where are you young people off to on this beautiful day?" his grandmother asked.

The so far loquacious Abbie suddenly stopped talking. It was like a riverbed running dry after a gush of water. Her eyes flickered over to Nate's. They hadn't discussed this last night. She wasn't sure whether his grandmother knew of their plans. He was grateful for her reticence, but not happy at how it was coming across. Turner's mouth opened and shut without any sounds coming out either. Nate found his throat constricting as well. He hadn't thought of a good lie yet. He hadn't thought of how to explain who Abbie and Turner were or how he met them either. His grandmother looked from person to person as the silence went on too long. It was Daniel who saved the day.

"We're going to head over to the lake," Daniel said. "And maybe hang out downtown. Catch a movie or something."

"Yeah, that's right," Nate agreed with a deep breath of relief as he joined Daniel at the end of the stairs.

"We'll probably be gone all day," Abbie added helpfully.

"Oh, I'm so glad that you're going to spend at least some of the day outdoors! And so early, too. I'm used to Nate only getting up when the sun is going down. My vampiric grandson." His grandmother patted Nate's arm gently.

For one moment, Nate froze. He remembered Emrys telling him about an actual vampire. His grandmother had no idea they were real. Did she even know about his mother being a witch? Or if she did, he doubted she believed in magic.

“Yeah, you know me,” Nate gave out an unconvincing laugh. “Well, we have to take off, Grandma. See you later tonight.”

“All right, dear heart,” she said. Her happy expression almost hurt as he realized he was lying to her about something that mattered.

He kissed her gently on the cheek and herded his friends outside.

As soon as the door shut and they were all sure that his grandmother wasn’t within earshot, Daniel turned towards him with a touch of anger and exasperation in his expression. “So now that I’ve just lied to your sweet grandmother and saved your ass by doing so, are you going to tell me what the hell is going on, Nate?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN - IMPOSSIBLE CHOICE

“Why did I lie to your grandmother, Nate?” Daniel asked with narrowed eyes.

“I … we needed …” Nate began and then drifted off.

He didn’t know how to explain what they were doing. He didn’t know where to start. He didn’t even know if he should say anything in any case. But could he just blow off his best friend? It could damage their relationship forever. Lose Daniel’s friendship or tell him the truth? It was an impossible choice.

His gaze drifted towards the front of the house. That was when he noticed the flower pot that had held dead flowers the night before that he’d tried to magic back to life. He thought he had failed. But the flowers weren’t dead now. A profusion of blooms in vibrant colors flowed over the top of the pot and trailed onto the ground.

I did that. Nate let out a soft laugh that had Daniel scowling in confusion. He'd brought the flowers back to life. It was proof, as if he needed more, that he wielded magic. It was real.

"Nate, what the hell is going on?" Daniel asked. "It's been less than twenty-four hours since I last saw you and yet ... you're all weird and stuff."

Abbie and Turner wandered a little away to give them privacy as they heard how the conversation was going. Abbie started looking down the road for Emrys' car. Nate wasn't sure how long they had before the older man got there.

How am I going to explain Emrys being here to Daniel? Can't say it's a date, because Turner and Abbie are coming with. Can't say he can't come along when I'm willing to take them. He'd never understand. Can't blame him for that.

"I know," Nate said slowly. "I'm sorry. And thanks for covering for us to Grandma. Like I said before, some things have happened."

"Yeah, what are those things? Why are you being so vague?" Daniel flapped his arms. "Don't you want to tell me? I'm your best friend!"

The last sounded more like a question than a statement and another sliver of guilt wormed its way into Nate's heart. Daniel shouldn't doubt their friendship, but he knew the other boy was insecure at times.

And with how weird I must seem right now can I blame him?

Nate took in a deep breath, but he was saved from answering right away by Abbie calling out, "I see Emrys' car just down the way. We should go."

"Emrys? He's here? What's he doing here?" Daniel asked, a frown creasing his brow.

"Yeah, he's – uh, shit, Daniel, I –" Nate began, but Daniel was already storming after Abbie and Turner towards the Mercedes.

Emrys was dressed impeccably again. Even in last night's clothes, he looked good enough to eat. A flush of heat went through Nate. A pair of

blue-tinted sunglasses covered Emrys' eyes, which made reading his expression hard to read. His lips pursed as he caught sight of Daniel marching over to the car. Nate hurried to catch up.

Abbie opened the back door and slid in on one side. Turner did the same on the other. Daniel slipped in beside Abbie and closed the door firmly behind him. His arms went over his chest and he seemed not to care that he was crushing Abbie against Turner. His gaze was set straight forward. His body language said clearly that he wasn't leaving. Nate got in the passenger seat slowly. The smell of leather and Emrys' cologne flowed over him. He wished he could lean over and kiss the other man. It would silence everyone in the car for awhile. But it wouldn't deal with Daniel for long. Emrys licked his lips as he read Nate's mind. The boy shook his head while he suppressed a laugh.

"Where are we going?" Daniel asked tightly.

"We?" Emrys' voice lilted. His head turned towards Nate though and not Daniel.

"Yeah, we. I'm going with you. I earned the right," Daniel said. "Didn't I, Nate?"

"Oh, my Nate, what did Daniel do for you today?" Emrys asked. The corners of his mouth twitched.

Nate narrowed his eyes at Emrys. The other man could read his mind at every other time, but suddenly he now played dumb. Why wasn't he helping Nate get out of this? But though he thought hard at Emrys to help him, the other man stared back at him expressionlessly

Nate clicked his seatbelt. Fine, if he didn't get any guidance, he was going to just tell the truth. "Daniel, we're going to see my dad."

There was a momentary silence from the back seat then Daniel let out an explosive breath. "What? You're going to see your dad ... why?"

The unasked question was why Nate was doing this with practical strangers instead of Daniel, but Nate heard that in Daniel's voice as well.

Nate scrubbed the back of his neck. “It’s a long story.”

“It’s a long car ride to the sanitarium,” Daniel pointed out.

Nate stole another glance at Emrys to see if the older man was finally going to give him any guidance. How secret was this whole witch thing supposed to be? But all he saw on Emrys’ face was his own reflection in the other man’s sunglasses. There was nothing there to tell him what to do.

“Nate, I’m waiting,” Daniel said.

Nate turned in his seat to face Daniel. “My dad might not be crazy.”

Daniel’s brown eyes blinked at him. Abbie studiously looked down at her lap. Turner gave him a weak, encouraging smile. None of them were shouting at him, or even whispering, not to reveal the witch thing.

How can I hide it from him forever anyways?

“What do you mean? Not crazy as in he killed your mom and tried to kill you for some *sane* reason?” Daniel asked.

Nate nodded. “Yeah. Maybe a – a valid reason.”

“There’s a valid reason to kill a baby?” Daniel’s voice rose in incredulity.

Nate gripped the shoulder strap of the seatbelt. “I don’t know how to explain this.”

“From the beginning, maybe?” Daniel suggested.

Emrys put the car into drive and pulled away from the shoulder of the road. He started towards the highway. Emrys knew what Nate was going to do before he was sure of it. Nate was going to tell Daniel. Nate wondered if it was a good idea. Then again, what choice did he have? Lying and being vague weren’t working.

“You know how I zone out and strange stuff happens?” Nate asked.

Daniel nodded then froze. “Do you think you’re going crazy like you dad?”

“You might think I am after you hear what I’m going to say,” Nate said with a soft laugh. “That stuff I do … well, it’s magic. I’m a witch.”

Daniel stared at him without saying anything. Then he shook his head angrily. “Ha, ha, Nate. Not funny. I can’t believe you’d pull my chain with that one. What’s really going on?”

“He’s not lying to you,” Abbie said softly. “We’re all witches. Well, except you. And so was Nate’s mom.”

“Riiight. How gullible do you think I am?” Daniel laughed shrilly.

“We normally don’t tell non-witches about us. Then again, we normally aren’t best friends with non-witches,” Turner said. “But since Nate’s not exactly been in the fold … well, makes sense to tell you since you’re going to be around a lot.”

“And are a curious little bugger who won’t let things go,” Emrys put in.

“Nate, tell me this is a joke! I mean c’mon, man, you can’t be serious!” Daniel scowled.

“I’m serious, Daniel. This is real. We’re telling you is the truth,” Nate said. “I didn’t believe it at first. Not even after I performed magic. Not when I saw Emrys do it. And believe me that’s not refutable.”

“You performed magic?” Daniel repeated.

“Yeah. I saved a boat full of people by controlling the storm last night,” Daniel said.

“Are you … wait, a boat? The storm? What?” Daniel was getting less articulate as things went on, which would have been funny if he didn’t look so pale and queasy.

“Remember the flowers by the front door of the house? The ones that were dead yesterday?” Nate asked.

“Yeah, well, I guess. But they weren’t dead. Your grandmother planted new ones,” Daniel said.

Nate wondered if that were true for half a second, but he knew his grandmother hadn't done that. He knew he had brought the flowers back. "No, I brought them back to life."

It wasn't Daniel who let out a startled sound, it was Abbie. Her eyes were wide as saucers. "You – you brought something back to life?"

"Yeah," Nate said. "It didn't happen right away. I thought it hadn't worked, but then this morning ... well, let's put it this way, yesterday they were brown and now they're blooming like crazy."

Emrys was frowning and Abbie looked almost afraid. Turner pressed his lips together and stared uncertainly at Nate.

"What's the big deal, guys?" Nate asked.

"Bringing stuff back ... it's a rare gift," Abbie said quietly.

"It was just plants! You're making it sound like I raised the dead!" Nate cried.

"Same concept, Nathaniel," Emrys said. His jaw clenched.

"Are you saying that I can bring back people like I brought back the plants?" Nate let out an uncomfortable laugh.

Emrys nodded curtly. "It appears the rumors about the Whitneys being able to raise the dead are true though I don't think anyone in your family has had the power in centuries."

Daniel rocketed forward in his seat. "Whoa! Wait a freaking minute! Nate, I don't know what these crazy people have got you thinking, but you're not a witch! And you can't bring back the dead!"

"I am a witch, but the last part ... I don't know if I believe it either," Nate said.

"Nathaniel, we will talk about this other special gift of yours later. In private," Emrys emphasized the same.

“No way! You just want to fill Nate’s head with craziness if you get him alone!” Daniel yelled.

“Daniel’s not going to believe us unless he sees some magic,” Abbie said.

“Damned straight! And since none of you can actually perform magic – HOLY SHIT!” Daniel’s shout was from seeing Abbie morph from her normal homely self into her stepmother’s form in front of his eyes.

“I think he likes what he sees, Abigail,” Emrys said with flicker of a smile.
“Well, he will once his mind accepts what he thought impossible.”

Daniel poked her. The image didn’t waiver. “You’re – you’re ...”

“A witch,” Abbie said in a voice that was too high and breathy to be her own. “This is a glamour. It hides my true self.”

Daniel’s mouth opened and shut a few times. No sound came out and he was blinking rapidly. Abbie returned to her own form. She smoothed down her skirt and stared at Daniel mildly.

“You look a little freaked there, Daniel,” Nate said. He couldn’t help the twitch of his own lips into a smile.

“That – she — witches?” Daniel got out.

“Now aren’t you glad you insisted on coming with us? You earned the right, remember?” Emrys asked.

“You’re a witch, too?” Daniel sputtered.

“Oh, yes, I’m going to teach Nate magic … and other things,” Emrys said, letting his voice grow deeper on the last.

Nate resisted the urge to punch his arm about the latter part. Emrys would tease him at a moment like this when his best friend looked like he’d swallowed his tongue.

“Daniel, are you okay, buddy?” Nate asked.

Daniel shook his head to clear it. “I – I don’t know.”

“Like we said, we don’t tell non-witches. It sort of messes with people’s equilibrium,” Turner said with an encouraging smile.

“Right. Shit. Yeah.” Daniel ran a hand through his hair a few times. He slowly looked up at Nate. “Do you think that your dad killed your mom because she was a witch?”

“No, we think he killed her because she was possessed by a demon,” Nate said with a self-conscious laugh.

“Demons are real, too?” Daniel squawked.

“All too real,” Emrys said.

“Yeah. See Abbie and Turner’s dad may be possessed by the same demon that my mom was. So we’re going to talk to my dad about what happened,” Nate explained. It sounded so crazy even as he said it with nary a flicker of a smile. It was deadly serious.

Daniel’s arms fell into his lap. He looked like he was tasting something sour. “You’ve got to be kidding me. But you’re not. Demons. Witches. Holy shit.”

“It’s real,” Abbie said solemnly. “You’ve just got to let go of your preconceived notions.”

“Better yet, remember what you believed when you were a kid,” Turner offered. “Monsters under the bed? Could be. Witches performing magic? Yep, check that off as true. Just open your mind to what you closed off.”

“I keep thinking of Nate dancing around a Maypole naked or something, worshipping the earth when I think of a witch,” Daniel said.

“We’re not that kind of witch,” Emrys said.

“This is crazy,” Daniel croaked out.

“You’ve no idea,” Nate said. “But all of it is true.”

“And now you’re along for the ride. Or …” Emrys tipped his head up to look at Daniel in the rearview mirror. “Or we could make you forget all about this. Your choice. For now anyways.”

“We can?” Nate asked. He wondered if that was why Emrys hadn’t said anything or given him guidance, because the older man knew that it could all be undone anyways.

“Totally,” Abbie said with a slight smile. “You wouldn’t remember a thing.”

Daniel scrunched up against the door. “Hell, no! My memories are my own, thanks!”

“Think very carefully, Daniel,” Emrys warned as he drew the car onto the highway. “Once you’re with us, the dangers we face, *you* face. So expect to see demons, witch hunters, and all that jazz coming after you. The fact you don’t have powers will only make it easier for them to kill you.”

“Witch hunters are real, too?” Daniel’s face had turned an alarming shade of white.

“Yeah. Curses. Spells. Sex magic. It’s all real,” Emrys said.

“Did you have to mention the sex magic?” Nate asked *sotto voce*.

“I’ve got to have some fun in this conversation,” Emrys replied with a wolfish grin. He trailed a hand down Nate’s neck.

Daniel’s mouth dropped open even further at the open sensual caress.

“Teacher and student. Totally wrong and illegal. We really shouldn’t be seeing this. This should be reported,” Abbie huffed with a roll of her eyes.

“I own the school. So who are you going to tell, Abigail? I don’t believe you have any friends and Turner already knows,” Emrys snarked.

“Emrys!” Nate punched his shoulder that time.

Turner and Daniel scrunched down in the seat beside her as both boys sensed Abbie’s anger was about to boil over.

“I have friends!” Abbie screeched.

“The imaginary ones don’t count, darling. You’re a little old for those,” Emrys responded.

“Cut it out! Apologize to Abbie,” Nate insisted.

“He doesn’t have to apologize, Nate,” she said. “He just doesn’t want to get in trouble for what he’s doing so he’s being cruel.”

“You’re not reporting us to anyone, Abbie,” Nate said to her with a firm look then turned back to Emrys. “And Emrys is going to apologize for being a jerk … again.”

Emrys shrugged then said, “I’m sorry, Abigail … for saying unwelcome truths.”

“Jesus Christ, Emrys!” Nate lowered his head into his hands.

There were high spots of color in Abbie’s cheeks, but a smile played over her lips as she said, “I guess it takes one to know one, Emrys. I somehow doubt you’ve got any friends yourself.”

Emrys smiled tightly. “Friends are overrated. They can cause more damage than good. Trust people and it gets you into trouble.”

“Well, Nate can trust me,” Daniel said suddenly.

Emrys’ gaze flickered to the rearview mirror again. “Can he? I guess we’ll see. But there’s something you should know, Daniel.”

“What’s that?” Daniel stuck his chin out truculently.

“If you betray Nate … you’ll pay for it a thousand fold,” Emrys said with a cold smile.

Nate gasped a bit. “Emrys –”

“Nate, it had to be said, because it’s true,” Emrys cut him off. “All fun and games aside, Daniel’s life will be forfeit if he goes against any of us or the families.”

Daniel crossed his arms over his chest again. “I’d never betray Nate.”

“Good then this is the only conversation we shall have to have about this,” Emrys responded.

Nate sank back into his seat. “I should never have told him. If I’d have known he would be in danger from it.”

“Nate! Yes, you should! I would never out you for being a witch!” Daniel said.

“Nate is now understanding that there are consequences, far reaching ones to anyone knowing,” Emrys said.

“I have to tell him. I couldn’t risk ruining our friendship,” Nate said.

“You did the right thing, Nate. Don’t listen to him,” Daniel said and there was a trace of pride in his voice.

“I sincerely hope that is true. Most people are not to be trusted,” Emrys said.

Nate looked over at the older man, not surprised at the bitterness in his voice. Emrys’ parents and who knew who else had betrayed him badly. He reached over and squeezed Emrys’ shoulder. He knew the older man didn’t want pity the moment he did it and Emrys’ next words told him as much.

“Not while I’m driving, dear heart. Don’t want to have an accident,” Emrys quipped.

“I seem to remember you could drive this thing without even touching the wheel. Or maybe I hallucinated that?” Nate asked.

“I’m surprised that stood out in your mind after everything else we did last night,” Emrys said with another grin.

Nate knew he was blushing so hard that his face was beet red. He looked in his lap. “Yeah, maybe.”

Daniel coughed in the backseat and Nate was sure his best friend was probably as red as he was. “So … what’s the plan exactly? We go to the sanitarium and Nate asks his dad if he killed his mom because she was possessed by a demon?”

“Yeah,” Nate said.

“And you think your dad is going to say yeah?” Daniel asked. “I mean … Nate, he’s been ruled nuts. Just because he says it doesn’t mean anything. He might just say what you want to hear.”

“Magic and demons are real, Daniel. Most people don’t know that and would think anyone who believed that was nuts. But they’d be wrong,” Nate pointed out.

“True, but it doesn’t sound like much of a plan,” Daniel said.

“I’m going to look him in the face when I ask. I’m going to know if he’s lying. I’m going to know if he’s crazy,” Nate insisted with a certainty that surprised him.

“And if he tells you that it’s true, what then?” Daniel asked. “It’s not like he’s going to get out because of it. He’s stuck in there, because of your mom’s murder.”

Nate scrunched lower in his seat. He hadn’t let himself fully think about that.

“We’re not there to get Nate’s dad released … even though I wish we could,” Abbie said. “We need find out everything he knows about the demon that possessed his wife.”

“Which demon is important. At least the books we’ve got say that,” Turner added.

“We know who we think it is,” Nate said.

“Who?” Daniel asked.

Nate was not about to tell him the Devil so he explained, “The one that originally gave the Founding Families their powers.”

“Got it,” Daniel said.

“Really?” Emrys snorted.

Daniel scowled as he added, “Okay, maybe I don’t completely have it, but I’m getting there a little bit.”

The rest of the car ride was mostly in silence. Nate was glad. He felt drained and elated at the same time that they’d told Daniel and all was seemingly well. But then as the mile markers ticked by he began to feel a coldness well up in the pit of his stomach. He was going to see his father, a man he had never laid eyes on since he was a baby. What would Shane look like now? How would he react to seeing Nate?

Emrys reached over and held his hand, threading their fingers together. “It’s going to be all right.”

“You can’t know that,” Nate said.

“No one who meets you can’t help but like you, Nathaniel. You’ve got that knack,” Emrys said.

There was a sign on the side of the road for the sanitarium. Nate swallowed hard and clutched at Emrys’ hand.

“Uhm,” Daniel’s voice broke the quiet. “Nate, the theory is that your dad killed your mom because she was possessed, right?”

Nate nodded as he answered, “Yeah.”

Daniel shifted uncomfortably. “So … why did he try to kill you?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN - VISITING HOURS

Nate opened and shut his mouth without saying anything. Emrys cast a glance at him. He slid one hand over and laced their fingers together.

"I believe that's the \$64,000 question, Daniel. Nathaniel shall find that out among other things," Emrys said and squeezed Nate's hand.

"This plan is sounding better and better all the time." Nate scrunched down low in his seat and held hard onto Emrys. He asked himself why he had agreed to do this again. The day was sunny and bright. There was so little time before school. They could have gone to the lake. They could have been at the park. But no. They were going to a mad house.

"Is that the sanitarium?" Daniel pointed out the side window at a large, gothic structure. "It looks like – like ... Hogwarts."

And the Riverside Psychiatric Hospital did look just like a crenulated, English castle. Only there wasn't magic going on inside, but madness. It had a massive rectangular base with a large central tower. Other smaller towers sprouted off the sides of the larger one like branches on a strange tree.

"It started off as a hospital to house those with tuberculosis. Then once there was no longer a need for TB wards, it was turned into a mental institution," Abbie explained.

"Reuse, repurpose, recycle," Turner said.

"Oh, great," Daniel said with weak enthusiasm.

Nate's sense of dread increased. *So going to the mental hospital would be bad enough. Let's make the mental hospital creepy looking, too.*

Emrys drove into the relatively modest parking lot in front of the building. Nate would have thought for such a large space that there were be more parking for cars.

But then again, maybe they don't get many visitors here.

Emrys put the car in park. The silence was almost oppressive as they all five sat there, still and quiet, not wanting to be the first one to make a sound or get out.

Emrys was the first one to speak, “A couple of things before we go inside. First, it is unlikely that they will allow any of us to actually accompany Nathaniel to see his father so you all are here for moral support and to be our backup if something goes terrible wrong. Daniel, you are to keep out of the way or throw yourself in front of whatever it is if that wrong something happens.”

“A roadblock is all I’m good for?” Daniel squawked.

“Indeed. Maybe less than that,” Emrys quipped, which had Daniel shaking his head and smiling.

“You’ve got to go with me to see my dad, Emrys.” Nate’s hands were shaking slightly. “I can’t do this by myself.”

“You can and you will, because it must be done.” Emrys twisted in his seat and covered Nate’s trembling hands with his own. Nate plucked off his sunglasses. Emrys blinked and one of his eyebrows rose.

“I need to see your eyes. It’s the only way I know what you’re thinking,” Nate said.

“I see. Well, let me not keep you in suspense. I’m here to visit someone myself, Nathaniel. Someone that might have information of use to us,” Emrys said.

“Who?” Nate asked.

Emrys gave a quirked smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Remember I told you that Frosts are either dead, imprisoned or in a mental institutions?”

“Yeah,” Nate answered.

“My great aunt Augusta is here. She made a study of demonology and delved deeper into the lore of the Families’ beginnings than anyone else I know,” Emrys said. “I intend to pick her brain.”

“What is she in here for?” Daniel asked with a suspicious narrowing of his eyes at Emrys.

“She killed her husband with a cleaver then proceeded to can parts of him. Some of him was never found. It was unclear if she ate him or served him to unsuspecting guests,” Emrys answered swiftly.

“Holy shit,” Daniel said and whistled through his teeth.

“Wow, that’s … something,” Nate responded.

“You’ve no idea.” Emrys pinched the top of his nose. “But she is useful. Just like your father is useful. No matter how uncomfortable it may be for us in the short term.”

Nate nodded. This wasn’t just about him. “Okay, so we’ll meet up after our visits in the lobby?”

“Yes, the others can remain in the car or in the lobby themselves,” Emrys said.

“You make it sound like we’re two years old and need you to leave us with a video.” Abbie was already reaching over Daniel to pop open the back door. “There’s lots to see inside even in the areas open to the public.”

“You might want to keep to those areas, Abigail,” Emrys said with a frown.

“You worried about someone breaking the rules? I’m shocked,” Abbie said.

“Are you going to use that glamour thing? And pretend to be hot again?” Daniel asked hopefully.

Abbie shot him an acidic stare. Daniel quickly got out of the car to avoid a smack he clearly sensed coming. Abbie slid out after him. Turner let out a chuckle and got out, too. Emrys and Nate were alone in the car. Nate’s shoulders relaxed slightly. Being alone with Emrys was somehow easier. The older man cupped his chin.

“You can do this, Nathaniel,” he whispered.

“Sure, I can,” Nate answered. “The physical part of it will be the easiest. It’s just that after I talk to him … nothing’s going to be the same.”

“Nothing ever is,” Emrys said with a shrug. “But that’s oftentimes a good thing.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. But what if ...” Nate bit his lower lip. “What if he’s totally nuts, Emrys? I mean he might not have been when they brought him here, but just look at this place! It’s enough to drive anyone batty.”

They both looked at the hulking structure. There were tense lines around Emrys’ mouth that Nate hadn’t noticed before. He touched the older man’s shoulder.

“Hey, you okay?” Nate asked.

Emrys gave him a ghost of a smile. “Remind me to tell you sometime about my sojourn in one of these lovely institutions.”

“You were ruled criminally insane?” Nate asked faintly.

“Not criminally. Just regular, old crazy and I was locked up for my own good,” Emrys said. That tight smile was like a rictus on his face.

“Your parents? Wait, no, they were dead. So who put you in a place like this?” Nate asked.

“You’re the first person I’ve trusted in nearly eight years, Nathaniel. The only one,” Emrys replied, which was not an answer at all. “Come, time is wasting. Let’s get this done. Dragging it out will not make it better.”

Nate wondered if he meant both their stay at the institution or speaking about why he was in one or both.

They each got out of the car. The air smelled sweet with the last flowers of summer giving it their all. But some of the warmth of the sun was sucked away as they stepped into the building’s shadow. Abbie hurried over to Nate. She walked beside him towards the double, arched front doors at the top of a flight of ten steps. Daniel and Turner were talking companionably behind them. Emrys was on Nate’s other side, but he appeared lost in thought. Nate worried that the older man was more stressed than he had lead on about being back in a psychiatric facility, even visiting someone.

Although his great aunt didn't sound like someone anyone would want to be in a room with.

"I thought you might like an idea what you're in for," Abbie said, breaking his thoughts. When he nodded, she went on, "Immediately upon us entering the building, there will be a large octagonal room. Half of it is closed off by a Plexiglas and metal wall. The attendant at the front desk will be in the center of the room in her own little cubicle. She'll have you sign all these forms. Then you'll be asked to remove all your possessions from your pockets and head through a metal detector. They also pat you down afterward to make sure you don't have anything non-metallic either." Abbie frowned for a moment. "At least, I think that's standard procedure, but my stepmother's body causes people to do strange things."

"It must be weird to have people act differently towards you based on whatever form you choose to have on," Nate said.

Abbie's eyebrows drew together. "It actually makes me glad for how I look as myself."

Nate frowned. "I don't understand."

"People are nice to you if you're pretty. Much nicer than if you're not. But it's not because of something you do or who you are inside. It's based on something ephemeral," Abbie mused. "It can't last forever and it allows you to coast by if you want to and not develop the rest of yourself. I know when people are my friend it is because they wish to be."

"I'm sorry about what Emrys said about you not having friends." Nate cast a glance towards the older man, but Emrys wasn't paying attention.

"It's all right. He's ... correct in some ways. I have Turner and a few acquaintances and ..." She looked over at him briefly. "I believe that you and I shall become good friends."

Nate found himself smiling and nodding. "I think so, too."

A warm return smile crossed Abbie's face and he was struck by how much prettier she was when she smiled. But it was quickly replaced by her serious

expression again as they started up the steps to the lobby.

“After you get through security, you’ll be escorted to a small room with a table and two chairs. Nothing else. The table and chairs are bolted to the floor and there’s a scooped out area of the table where they can thread a patient’s handcuffs through,” she described.

“Did they do that to my dad?” Nate asked. The thought of the other man handcuffed made something in him squirm.

Shouldn’t I be glad he’s restrained? After all, Daniel’s right. He tried to kill me, too. I wasn’t possessed. I don’t think.

She nodded, but added quickly, “He wasn’t violent, Nate. Not at all. He just got agitated like a normal person would when I was talking to him about your mom.”

“Right. Was there anyone in there with you?” Nate asked.

“No, but there are security cameras everywhere and there was one in the visitor room,” she said.

“Great so when I start talking about demons that’s going to go straight to his doctor’s ears?” Nate asked.

“No,” Emrys was the one who answered. “The whole facility will have an inexplicable failure of their security cameras after we leave and they will find nothing recorded on their DVDs of what occurred while we were there.”

“That’s handy,” Nate said. “A spell?”

Emrys gave him a wicked smile and there was some loosening of tension in the older man’s expression. That amusement fled though as they were now at the top of the steps. The worn brass handlebar to open the doors felt greasy and hot under Nate’s palms as he pushed it. He’d been tempted to make it a momentous occasion and dither a little outside, but Emrys was right that it was better to just do it quick.

Like pulling a Band-Aid off a wound.

The interior of the sanitarium smelled old. Nate's nose wrinkled. It reminded him of the ancient gym at his high school that was constantly sprayed with disinfectant. The air was chilly inside and immediately Nate was wrapping his arms around his torso. The gray marble floor and ornate walls with faded frescoes reminded him of a library he'd once gone to. But the ugly Plexiglas wall with the metal detectors and uniformed men with guns beyond was enough to clear up any misconception that this place was anything other than a prison.

Just like Abbie had described, there was a woman sitting in a box in the center of the room. Her little cubical was located on the other side of the wall, but there was a small slit at the bottom to feed paperwork through and a metal disk punctured with holes to speak through. She was wearing pink scrubs and had dark brown hair and eyes. She appeared to be about forty. Nate and Emrys approached her while the others settled onto two old sofas and picked up ancient magazines. Abbie's eyes rose to his for a moment and he knew then that she wasn't going to stay put. He hoped that she was careful.

The receptionist frowned as she watched the teenagers tumble into the sofas that looked hardly used and dusty. He doubted that this place saw so much people in a month let alone one day.

Emrys stopped in front of the receptionist and leaned on the small jutting piece of metal counter that was in front of the slitted opening. He smiled at her lazily. There was a hint of catlike satisfaction as he said, "I'm here to see Augusta Frost."

The receptionist, whose name tag identified herself as Flora, flattened her lips together. She had evidently heard of Augusta Frost and didn't like her.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Emrys Frost," he said with a larger satisfied grin.

Her lips pressed harder together and her brown eyes narrowed at him then she typed in Augusta's name into her computer. Emrys name was evidently there as an approved visitor. "Identification please."

“But of course.” Emrys fished a red leather Italian wallet out of his coat pocket and took out his license. He slid it through the slot to her.

She scrutinized it for a moment then slid it back to him. “You’ll have to fill out these forms and then go through security if Ms. Frost will see you.”

“I’m sure she will,” Emrys said.

Flora’s lips tightened again. She picked up a phone and dialed a number. There was a pause then someone must have answered. She explained that there was an Emrys Frost to see Ms. Augusta Frost and was Ms. Frost available and able to see anyone. There was another slight pause before the speaker answered her. Whatever the speaker said had Flora looking at Emrys with even more dislike than before.

“She’s *eager* to see you,” she said. She sent through the slot his driver’s license and a clipboard with what looked like cryptic legalese and a signature block at the bottom. The form was in triplicate.

“Thank you so much,” Emrys said. He winked at Nate as he went over to the sitting area with the others and began to sign away.

Nate stepped up to the window. Flora’s expression softened somewhat as she took in Nate’s uncertain smile.

“How can I assist you?” Flora asked crisply.

“I’m – uh, here to see my – uhm Dad, Shane McCollum,” Nate explained.

Flora started then went very still. She didn’t start tapping in his dad’s name into the computer like she had Augusta Frost’s. Nate felt a trill of unease go through him.

“And what is your name?” she asked.

“Nate Whitney. I’m his son though I don’t go by the same last name.” Nate yanked his wallet out of his back pocket and fumbled getting the license out. He put it in the tray. “My grandmother said I was on his list of approved visitors. Maybe you could check?”

She didn't reach for it at first. But then she took it and gave it a cursory look. She held up one finger and said, "One moment please."

"Uh, sure." Nate glanced back at the others.

Emrys was still engrossed with his forms while Abbie and Turner were talking quietly with their heads together. Daniel was staring at the receptionist over the top of some hunting and fishing magazine. He mouthed, "Problem?"

He shrugged. He wasn't sure.

Flora had picked up the phone with a strange, wary look at him before turning her back and speaking quietly to the person who answered. She turned back to face him, handing back his ID, and saying too brightly, "Please have a seat for one minute."

"Why?" Nate asked.

"The doctor would like to speak with you first," she said and shooed him towards the couches with a frantic wave of her hands.

Nate slowly walked over to the others. Emrys looked up at him. There was a frown on his handsome face. He evidently was aware of Nate's distress now.

"Why don't you have any forms?" he asked, but already he was glancing towards the receptionist who was staring at Nathaniel with a mix of suspicion and concern. "Ah, I see."

Nate perched on the sofa's arm beside him. "You see? What do you see? Because I don't see anything at all."

"That's only because you'd rather be drawn and quartered than here. If you were thinking clearly, you'd realize two things. One." Emrys ticked up one finger. "You've never come to see your father before. That is big news for any patient or prisoner as the case may be. The doctor may be concerned about the effect you may have on your father ... and what effect your father may have on you."

Nate nodded. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense. But it doesn’t explain why the receptionist is all freaked out.”

It was clear that Flora was unnerved. She kept pressing her lips together after wetting them. Her eyes flickered from him to somewhere behind the wall.

“That brings me to reason number two.” Emrys pointed to the Blackwells. “The visit your father had yesterday.”

“Oh,” Nate let out.

“Oh, yes. The man who never gets visitors except his elderly mother suddenly has some sexy piece get past their security procedures and upsets the prisoner. And now … the man’s son himself appears,” Emrys explained.

“So basically they’re not sure I’m me?” Nate guessed. “She hardly looked at my ID though.”

“I think she trusts it’s you … well, as much as she trusts anything anymore after Abbie’s little escapade. But I think she’s not eager to be the one making decisions about your father,” Emrys said. He finished up his forms and tucked the clipboard under his armpit as he stood up.

“Who’s going to be making the decisions then?” Nate asked.

Emrys' topaz gaze zeroed in on a balding man with a long salt and pepper beard dressed in a white coat who was approaching them rapidly. "I believe he is."

The man exited through a door marked Staff Only. He strode directly up to Nate. Nate slowly rose. He wasn't sure he was glad that the man had no trouble recognizing him though both Turner and Daniel were about his same age.

Has he seen pictures of me? Or do I really look like my dad?

The man stopped directly in front of him. His sharp gray eyes took in Nathaniel with one sweep. He stuck a hand out. "Nate Whitney? My name is Dr. Isaac Roman. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Uh, yeah, nice to meet you, too." Nate shook the man's hand. The shake was firm, but not painful.

Dr. Roman gave him a small smile. "You look a little nervous. There's no reason to be."

"Really? Because they just gave my friend here forms to fill out while the receptionist called you out for me," Nate pointed out.

Dr. Roman's gaze slid over to Emrys Frost. Emrys looked back at him blandly. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers. "You're related to Augusta Frost, aren't you?"

"Unfortunately," Emrys replied with that slow catlike smile that was never very friendly.

"Yes, yes, I see it now. The facial structure of all the Frosts – you have it. I've treated quite a few of them. Heard about even more," Dr. Roman said quietly.

Emrys just smiled larger as if it pleased him to have such a notorious family. Nate guessed Emrys' choices were limited to being pleased or embarrassed and the former seemed much better than the latter.

“You’re Nate’s – uh, friend?” he asked.

“Among other things,” Emrys said.

Dr. Roman’s gaze became sharper. “Did you convince Nate here to come see his father?”

Emrys cocked his head to the side. “You act as if that’s not a good thing. Closure for Nate and all that.”

“I’m not sure if it’s good or bad. That remains to be seen.” He turned back to Nate. “I would rather this have been purely your decision.”

“It is,” Nate said quickly. Dr. Roman didn’t look like he believed him one bit. Nate hastened to add, “I don’t want to be here, but I think I need to be. I want to talk to my dad. Can I do that?”

“I’m sure that you heard about some of the excitement we had yesterday with an unauthorized visitor,” Dr. Roman said. His eyes darted to the receptionist who quickly ducked behind her computer as if to act like she was busy working and not listening in.

“I did. But that had nothing to do with me,” Nate said. He studiously did not look over at Abbie and Turner.

“No, no, I’m sure,” he said.

“But it did inspire me to come,” Nate said. He rubbed his hands on the front of his pants. “It was the impetus to make a visit.”

Dr. Roman tapped his chin and nodded. “I can see how that might happen.”

“So can I see my dad?” Nate asked. He was beginning to wonder if he had come all the way here only to sit in the lobby.

“You can,” Dr. Roman said carefully. “He’s been very agitated since yesterday. We were, in fact, in an extra session when Flora called about your arrival. He was quite unreserved in his desire to see you. He was most insistent on being allowed to see you.”

The emphasis Dr. Roman put by saying the same thing twice impressed Nate. His father was eager to see him in spite of or perhaps because of Abbie's visit yesterday.

"Great. So do I have to sign away my life like Emrys there?" Nate asked even as his chest seized with a mixture of anticipation and fear.

Dr. Roman clasped his shoulder. "I'll have Flora get the paperwork." He turned to go towards her before he looked back at Nate, and though it was meant to look like an afterthought, Nate believed Dr. Roman had intended to ask this last thing from the moment the doctor had caught sight of him. "I'd like to speak with you afterward, if you wouldn't mind."

Emrys slung his arm around Nate's shoulders. "If Nate feels up to it. Oh, and, doctor?"

Dr. Roman was looking at that possessive arm with a studiously blank expression. "Yes, Mr. Frost."

Emrys' smile turned cold and shark-like. "Any conversation that you have with Nate will include me as well. Understood?"

Dr. Roman pursed his lips. "Perfectly, Mr. Frost."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN - FATHER

"Just fill out this paperwork, Nate, and I'll wait for you over there beyond the metal detectors," Dr. Roman said as he handed a clipboard full of documents to Nate. His smile was friendly, but it didn't reach his eyes, probably because his gaze was on Emrys.

"He'll be there with bells on in a few minutes, doctor," Emrys answered with the more modest catlike grin than then the shark-like one.

Dr. Roman gave one last look at Nate before he went through the door marked 'employees only'. Nate let out a long breath and then turned to Emrys.

“Can I ask what all the possessive stuff was about? You were practically hanging on me like a coat,” Nate groused even as he liked the weight of Emrys’ body against his.

“I thought you liked it when I got all possessive.” Emrys gave him another squeeze then released him.

“I don’t know. It’s sort of okay and … and slightly creepy at the same time when you get like that,” Nate laughed, missing the warmth of the other man’s body pressed against his now that it was gone.

Emrys snorted. “If you think that’s slightly creepy, you haven’t seen anything yet. Including my Aunt Augusta. Now *she* brings creepy to a whole new level.”

“Speaking of your aunt, how can a witch be locked up like this? Can’t she magic her way out?” Nate asked as he laboriously began to fill out the questionnaire that seemed to ask everything about him, including blood type.

“Normally, you would be right. No prison or sanitarium can hold a witch. Not for long at any rate unless their powers have been tampered with,” Emrys agreed.

“Powers can be tampered with?” Nate finished the first page and turned to the second. He had no idea what his grandmother’s uncle’s father’s name was. Or at least that’s what he thought the form was asking. He just left the question blank.

“Not easily, but yes, they can.” Emrys’ voice took on that dry note that told Nate that he had personal experience with his powers being tampered with.

“Who tampered with your aunt’s powers?” Nate had finally gotten to the part where the form essentially asked him to waive any liability. So if his father decided to try and finish what he’d started eighteen years ago, Nate wouldn’t be able to sue the sanitarium even if they handed him the gasoline and matches. Nate signed his name and dated it.

“The Families. They ruled that she was just a bit too nuts to be good company and she was drawing all sorts of attention to them. So she had to go and be quiet somewhere else,” Emrys answered.

“Is there some kind of high counsel of mages or something then?” Nate asked as he flipped through the pages to make sure that he hadn’t missed anything that he could decipher how to fill out. He was pretty sure the thing they were really interested in was the liability waiver.

“Oh, there was one long ago. But everyone all started killing one another to get on it. Soon it was recognized that if they didn’t get rid of the counsel that there would be no one to rule over. So it was disbanded,” Emrys said. “Though when an egregious problem pops up, some of the Families get together and decide what to do about it.”

“Shouldn’t we contact some of them about the demon and witch hunter problems then?” Nate asked. He felt a momentary hope that other people could figure all this out instead of them.

“We could,” Emrys said cautiously. “But the likelihood is that they might blame the messengers.”

“What? Why?” Nate asked.

“Long story. Too long to tell you now.” Emrys gave him a perky smile that had Nate’s antenna rising.

“Why do I have a feeling it’s a horror story?” Nate sighed. The paperwork was filled out. He was just stalling now. It was time to go see his father.

“It’ll be all right, Nathaniel.” Emrys smoothed a hand down his cheek.

“You don’t really mean that.” Nate smiled sadly.

Emrys leaned in. “Maybe not. But know that I’ll be here when you get out and then we can … spend some time alone together tonight.”

Color suffused Nate’s cheeks. “Uhm.”

Emrys grinned. “I see your ability to think is still greatly impaired when sex comes into play.” He pressed his lips to Nate’s.

Nate fell into the kiss. His eyes slid shut. Everything faded away. He felt the edges of Emrys’ mind against his own. His hands wrapped around Emrys’ waist. But then Emrys was moving away. Nate followed after him. Emrys’ chuckle had his eyelids popping open.

“Time for us to part for now.” Emrys tapped Nate’s chin. He was smiling. There was a fondness in it that had grown from before that had Nate smiling back.

“You almost sound sad about that,” Nate said.

“How could I be sad when madness and family await us and maybe not in that order?” Emrys laughed. Then he was pulling back. “Let’s go, Nate.”

Nate followed Emrys to the metal detectors. Emrys gestured for Nate to go through first. Dr. Roman was standing there, waiting impatiently. His right foot beat a tattoo on the ground and he glanced at his watch. Nate walked through the metal detectors after emptying his pockets in a tray that was sent through the x-ray machine. It was when Dr. Roman approached him that Emrys said anything more.

“Remember, Dr. Roman, I’ll be there for any interviews with Nathaniel,” Emrys called as he took off his belt.

“Come, Nate, your father is eager to see you.” Dr. Roman put an arm around Nate and urged him to start walking.

Nate cast one last look over his shoulder at Emrys. Finally, he turned away. He sighed and rubbed his hands together. Dr. Roman took him a narrow hallway. The lights above them buzzed and spat electricity. His mind was strangely blank. He feared if he thought of anything it would be of fire and blood. His mother’s blank-eyed stare on the floor. Blood running down her temple. He shivered.

“Is my father dangerous, Dr. Roman?” he asked.

Dr. Roman stroked his beard. “No. Not in the sense I believe you mean.”

“What do you think I mean?” Nate asked.

“He’s calm. Rational … for the most part. Like you and me,” Dr. Roman said.

Nate bit his lower lip to stop an inappropriate laugh from escaping his lips. When he thought of the fact that he was a witch, that he believed in demons, that he thought his father had secret information about the devil would Dr. Roman still think they were both rational?

“What does he say about – about why he’s in here?” Nate asked. His mouth felt numb as he asked it.

“I cannot tell you, Nate,” Dr. Roman said. “Doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“But you break it to tell the judicial system, I’m assuming. You have to report about him to someone. Isn’t there like a maximum time he has to be in here?” Nate asked.

Dr. Roman’s left hand fell onto Nate’s shoulder. “Are you worried that he’ll get out?”

“And come for me?” Nate gave an uncomfortable laugh. “No, not really. Just trying to figure out how all this works.”

“What made you decide to come here today?” Dr. Roman had them turning right at a T-junction of hallways.

“I told you, my grandmother told me about the unexpected visitor he had and …” Nate stopped and licked his lips. “I just decided to go.”

“I think we both know Emrys Frost had more to do with your decision than this trespasser,” Dr. Roman’s voice was crisp and took on an acidic tone when he said ‘trespasser’.

Nate found himself looking up sharply at the other man. Dr. Roman’s glasses reflected light from the line of windows back at him so he couldn’t

see the other man's eyes. "Why do you think that, doctor? Do you know Emrys?"

"Only through reputation," Dr. Roman said. "But I've treated many Frosts and there are ... similarities among them."

"What sort of similarities?" Nate's jaw tightened. He could imagine that to outsiders Emrys might seem off, strange, an interesting head case, but Emrys wasn't that simple. He didn't fall into any neat box and Nate had a feeling that would bother a man like Dr. Roman.

"Narcissism for one," Dr. Roman said mildly.

Nate chuckled. "Emrys has a little of that."

"And a... poisonous charm," Dr. Roman added.

"Poisonous? That doesn't sound like a medical diagnosis," Nate pointed out as they slowed in front of a nondescript wooden door.

"No, it's not, but I think it's a far better description than any medical jargon I could sling at you," he said. "We're here."

That last stopped Nate from protesting Dr. Roman's description of Emrys. He stared at the pathetic wooden door. Where were the bars? It looked so normal and flimsy.

"I thought there would be more security than this," Nate said.

"This is my office. Not a cell," Dr. Roman said.

"You just left a man whose been judged a killer in your office alone?" Nate asked. His throat was suddenly tight and dry.

Dr. Roman fished out a set of old keys and put one in the lock. "Trust must be earned and your father has earned it."

Nate stared at the door as it opened like it was a deadly snake rearing back to strike at him. Inch by inch of the doctor's office was revealed and soon his father would be, too. First, he saw the industrial gray carpeting. Next

was the back of a high-backed leather chair with brass buttons and behind that was a large desk. He saw a splay of papers across the surface and a flat screen monitor. And then there was a man standing there in white scrubs with a number stenciled over his heart. He had lighter hair than Nate's that was turning gray at the temples. He had an aquiline face with intelligent green eyes. Those eyes alighted on Nate and his lips parted slightly.

Nate forced himself not to back away from the door. His heart was pounding. His hands were damp and he started swiping his hands on the front of his jeans. His mouth was dryer than dust in comparison.

"Nate, why don't you go on in?" Dr. Roman gestured for Nate to precede him.

Nate swayed slightly, but he put one foot in front of the other and entered Dr. Roman's office. His father stared at him, almost unblinking, as Nate came within five feet of the man.

I haven't been this close to him since I was a baby. Jesus Christ what am I doing here?

The click of the door shutting sounded like a gunshot in the silence of the room. Nate jerked. His father's gaze hungrily trailed over Nate from head to feet. Nate had the urge to back away and cover himself with his hands. Shane seemed to recognize that his stare was making his son uncomfortable. He lowered his eyes and a thick lock of hair fell over his forehead.

"I'm sorry, Nate. I just have only seen pictures of you and I ... I want to remember this moment," Shane said. His father's voice was deep and mellow. It was pleasant to hear.

Nate surprisingly felt tears prick behind his eyelids. "Oh, that's – that's okay."

He saw his father turn his head to the side and he realized that Shane was devouring the sound of his voice and filing it away for future reference.

What does he think seeing me for the first time? What does he feel? He only held me as a baby. He's never touched me since.

His father's hands flexed at his sides slightly as if he was thinking that same thing before he backed away from the chair on the opposite side of the desk from Dr. Roman. Shane gestured for Nate to sit. Nate wondered if it was wise to be sitting or whether he should be standing to make a quick getaway. But he found himself sinking into the seat and turning so that his father was fully in his view as well as Dr. Roman who sat down as well.

"So this is a momentous occasion for both of you," Dr. Roman said.

Nate shifted in his seat and looked down in his lap. Shane swallowed and looked over at his son.

"It is," Shane said.

"Are you going to be here for all of this?" Nate asked, his voice sounded like an angry buzz.

Dr. Roman rocked back in his seat and Shane sent him a look that said don't fuck this up.

"Do you not want me here, Nate?" Dr. Roman asked.

Again, that mild, obsequious voice that crawled up Nate's spine. He shook his head. "No, I don't."

Dr. Roman's eyes widened behind his glasses. Shane went very still, which made Nate realize he rocked slightly when he was standing still.

"Can I ask why?" Dr. Roman asked.

"Sure," Nate said and stopped speaking.

Dr. Roman sighed slightly. "Why don't you want me here?"

"Because this is fucked up as it is without you judging every word out of our mouths," Nate said.

Shane let out a dry laugh that he covered up quickly with his hand. Nate idly wondered whether his father was as plain spoken as he was. *How much am I like him? Do I laugh like him? Speak like him? Eat like him?*

“I see,” Dr. Roman said, but he didn’t budge from his chair.

“You’re not going to leave us alone,” Nate stated.

“You said you were scared of your father getting out,” Dr. Roman said.

Shane stilled again and Nate could almost feel his disappointment and pain at the thought that Nate was afraid of him.

What the hell does he expect? He killed my mom and almost killed me!

But Nate wondered if that meant that his father wasn’t guilty, that it hadn’t been a murderous rampage that had made him suddenly slaughter his wife and newborn child. *If I had done what I had to do if my wife was possessed then it would hurt me, too, if my child thought I was a murderer!*

“I actually told you I wasn’t worried about him at all,” Nate pointed out.

“You weren’t worried about him *getting out*. You didn’t say you were worried about being with him altogether,” Dr. Roman said.

“I’m not worried about either thing. And why should you be? I think the forms I signed gave you complete immunity for everything,” Nate remarked dryly.

“Those forms don’t really stand up in court,” Shane answered.

Nate’s gaze snapped to his father and he found himself smiling. A faint smile appeared on Shane’s face. The gratefulness in his eyes though had Nate looking solely at Dr. Roman. He didn’t want to think of his father as starved for his attention.

If he’s innocent and this desperate for me it means I tortured him, however, unwittingly, for years.

“Regardless, I can’t talk to him with you in the room,” Nate said to Dr. Roman.

Dr. Roman was still in his seat for a moment before he abruptly stood up. “All right. I’ll go and leave you alone. Though it is highly irregular.”

“Do you think he’s a danger to me?” Nate asked. His hands tightened on the arms of the chair.

“Not at all,” Dr. Roman said without hesitation.

“Then there’s no reason not to let me alone with him,” Nate said.

“Unless you intend to harm him. Do you intend to hurt your father, Nate?” Dr. Roman asked.

Nate let out a sharp laugh. Shane let out a hissed breath. His eyes narrowed at Dr. Roman. Did the doctor really think that Nate was a danger to his father?

He thinks I intend on taking revenge? That’s crazy.

“Even if Nate intended to harm me I don’t care. Leave us alone,” Shane said firmly.

Dr. Roman’s head reared back. “You don’t care if he hurts you, Shane?”

Nate stared at Dr. Roman, shocked that the man was really worried about Shane. His father was a convicted killer. He was more concerned with Shane’s safety than with Nate’s.

“I don’t. But Nate isn’t here to hurt me,” Shane said firmly. “If Nate is comfortable with being – being *alone* with me then I am happy with that.”

“What do you want to tell him when you’re alone, Nate?” Dr. Roman asked.

“It sort of defeats the purpose for wanting to speak to him alone if I tell you, doesn’t it?” Nate responded.

“I suppose it does.” Dr. Roman rose from his seat. “This is irregular.”

“But you’ll give us this, won’t you, Dr. Roman?” Shane pressed.

He wants to talk to me alone! Does he know what I want to ask him? Has he guessed that the only thing that would bring me here is the belief that my mother was possessed?

“Shane, you’ve come a long way,” Dr. Roman said slowly.

“I won’t fall back into my ... *delusions* if that’s what you’re wondering, doctor,” Shane’s voice shook a moment, but then it firmed up.

“I’ll be outside, Shane. Nothing is going to happen while you’re in here, understood?” Dr. Roman said.

Nate and Shane nodded solemnly. They watched as he slowly walked around the edge of the desk and walked to the door.

“I’m trusting both of you. Do not let me down.” Dr. Roman exited the office and the door clicked shut behind him.

For long moments, both Shane and Nate stared at the door, not believing that he was really gone. But when the door remained firmly shut and the doctor did not poke his head in, both men relaxed. Nate found himself grinning at Shane as if he and Shane were in some kind of plan together.

But we’re not. He’s a criminal. He could be a crazy.

But Nate couldn’t quite believe that anymore. His father didn’t look mad.

“I think he’s gone, Nate,” Shane said.

“I can imagine him listening through the keyhole,” Nate said.

“He’s probably got some listening equipment in here. It’s a prison. Not a hospital. No matter what they might tell you,” his father warned.

Nate nodded. “I don’t think we have to worry about that.”

Shane’s brow furrowed. “Why not?”

“Because Emrys will make sure that no one knows what we’ve talked about. He’ll keep us safe.”

“Emrys?” Shane’s brow furrowed further.

“Emrys Frost.” Nate took a chance then. He decided to lay it all out there. See how his father reacted. Without missing a beat, he added, “Emrys is a witch like me.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – MOTIVE

Shane closed his eyes for one long moment. “I see. So you know.”

“That I’m a witch, yeah?” Nate said. “And you know that, too.”

“Yes.” Shane swallowed. “I knew ... *knew* that you would have the gifts your mother had and ...”

Nate gripped the arms of the chair. The leather felt slick with his perspiration. “Did you ...”

“What, Nate?”

“Did you kill Mom because she was a witch?”

Shane shook his head. “No, son, never. Never for that. I couldn’t. I mean ... it would have been hypocritical if nothing else.”

Nate rocked back in his seat. “You’re a witch, too?”

“I don’t have the level of gift that your mother had or you do,” Shane said.

“So Grandma’s a witch and said nothing to me about it?”

“No, no. I received my magic through my father’s side. He didn’t share many details with her about it and she – she didn’t want to know.”

“Who was your dad exactly?”

“He was ... ah, how shall I say this?” Shane smiled uncomfortably. “He was the result of a liaison between one of the Families and a servant who

ended up being my grandmother.”

“Which Family?” Nate asked, curious about this despite all the bigger things he wanted to know.

Shane lowered his head and let out a soft laugh. “When you said the Frost name, I thought perhaps you already knew.”

“You’re – you’re a Frost?” Nate goggled.

Shane nodded. “Your mother and I joked it was the fact that I was part Frost and she was a Whitney, which attracted us so strongly to one another.”

“I – I don’t understand.” Nate shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he thought of Emrys’ face at that moment. What would his father think of him being with Emrys let alone being gay?

I shouldn’t care. He’s a murderer. But he doesn’t seem like one. He doesn’t seem crazy at all.

“The Frosts and the Whitneys have always had a powerful attraction for one another.” Shane’s gaze went distant. “All I know is that the second I saw your mother, I had to have her.” His lips curled into a smile. “And she felt the same. It was … impossible to stop once we were in each other’s presence.”

Nate cleared his throat. “Yeah, okay.”

“I’m sorry. No child likes to hear about his parents’ romance.” Shane blushed and lowered his head.

“So why haven’t you used your magic to get out of here or convince the jury way back when that you were innocent?” Nate wasn’t sure what was possible for a witch, but he was sure that Emrys could have done that.

Shane shook his head. “I’m not that powerful, Nate. My skills are enough to keep Dr. Roman in line.”

Nate blinked and looked at the closed door to the office. “You’ve spelled Dr. Roman?”

“Why do you think he’s so secure having me alone in his office? I have as many privileges as I like. No psychotropic drugs. No electroshock therapy. I’m ... free as anyone can be locked in here,” Shane said.

“No wonder he was so ... *concerned* about you. I thought maybe you and he ... I don’t know ... had a thing or something.” Nate flushed.

Shane chuckled. “That’s not altogether untrue. I’ve made him feel ... *very strongly* about me. He’s in love in a way.”

“Oh ... well.” Nate didn’t know what to say to that.

“I don’t feel the same way towards him, Nate. Your mother ...” Shane’s voice became tender. “She was the only one for me.”

Nate looked away. “Yeah.”

“You’re thinking what right do I have to say these things after I – I ... did what I did?” All the light in Shane’s face drained away.

“Yeah, there’s that,” Nate whispered. He was death-gripping the chair again. “Why did you do it? You *did* do it, didn’t you?”

Shane rubbed one hand over his jaw. “I did and ... I didn’t.”

“Did and didn’t?”

“I know how that sounds. I – I killed her, but I didn’t kill her.” Shane raised an arm helplessly. “It wasn’t her any more. Nate, I don’t know how much you’ve learned about this world – what’s really out there, but—”

“She was possessed,” Nate finished the sentence for him. That word felt heavy on his lips as if it were a boulder he had to push out.

Possessed. She was possessed.

“Yes, yes, she ... we tried everything to stop the demon inside of her, but ... but nothing worked and when it went after you that night —”

“Start from the beginning. Explain everything,” Nate interrupted. He rose up from his seat and began to pace. “Tell me. Tell me. You have to tell me.”

Shane nodded, understanding flashing over his handsome features. “You must hate me. You must—”

“But should I? *Should I hate you?*” Nate stopped in his pacing. “Or should I hate myself for not seeing you all these years? For not giving you a chance to explain? Without Emrys making me come here ... this meeting would never have happened. You’d have died in here and never have seen me.”

“I know.” Shane ran a hand through his hair. “And I felt that I deserved that, because I couldn’t save her.”

“Just – just start from the beginning,” Nate ordered. His emotions were tangled like a skein of wool. He felt like he was standing on the edge of an abyss just like he had that night at the party when he’d met Emrys. He could almost feel the wind howling around him, threatening to dash him on the rocks below or lift him up into the skies. He stood a foot from his father. He could smell the other man’s scent, almost feel the heat from his body. If he but reached out, he’d touch him.

I told myself I didn’t care about him. Wanted to wipe him off the face of the earth. At least for me, he’d be dead. But now ... now that I see him, I’m desperate for his actions to have a reasonable explanation.

“Your mother was always careful with her powers. She didn’t use them unless it was to help someone and even then only as the last resort,” Shane said.

“Did she fear someone would figure out she was using magic?”

Shane cocked his head to the side and nodded as if he understood something then. “That was only a small part of her reasoning. But the bigger part was that the more you use magic, the greater chance it has of overcoming you. Or so we thought.”

“I don’t understand.” Nate realized his father was operating in the dark as to his level of knowledge. “I just found out about magic last night. I’m still sort of reeling here. Assume I know next to nothing and you’d probably be giving me too much credit.”

“Your mother and I had noticed that the people who used magic the most seemed ... the most corrupt. Whether it is the nature of magic that does this or the fact that absolute power corrupts absolutely ... we weren’t sure.”

“So you both were careful and only used it when you needed it?” Nate guessed.

“Yes, exactly. We didn’t want to end up like many of the other people in the Families.” Shane paused and took a breath. “But something happened. Your mother’s parents called her one night. They said that something terrible had happened and that they needed her help to set it right.”

“What had happened?”

“I was working that night. I wasn’t there when she got the call so I didn’t go with her. I should have been there. Why did I think work was more than being with you and her that night?” Shane’s hands fisted at his sides.

“You didn’t know what was going to happen.” Nate shut his mouth. Why was he giving his father an excuse?

I need to let him tell me without offering him an out. I want to hear what he has to say.

“She only gave me the barest explanation for a long time afterward as to what had happened until she needed to confess. Until she couldn’t hide it from me.”

“Why did she hide it from you in the first place?”

Had his mother been afraid of his father’s reaction?

Shane leaned heavily against the wall. “She was ashamed of what her parents had done and what she had done to help them. She thought she could deal with it on her own.”

Nate’s thoughts immediately went to Emrys’ parents. How they had done terrible things to their son in order to secure greater power for themselves. Had that happened to his mother?

“What did they do to her?” Nate whispered.

“They had brought a demon into this world from the Outer Dark. Or they thought they had. But it became clear that all they done was to open a door and the creature came through all on its own. They had no control over it,” Shane explained. “They never had control of it. But they thought they could lure it back through the door and shut it again. But they couldn’t do it alone.”

“They needed Mom to help,” Nate guessed, cursing himself for again offering his father words.

“Yes.” Shane’s hair fell in front of his face as he tipped forward. “They closed the door, thinking they had succeeded in banishing it from this world. But though the door was closed, the demon wasn’t on the other side of it. It was on ours.”

Nate shuddered. “In Mom?”

Shane nodded as if he couldn’t say the words. “It wasn’t obvious at first. Your mother felt ill and drained after that night. She just assumed that it was from the amount of power she had expended to shut the door with her parents. To shut the door, they had performed the darkest of rituals. She thought she stained her soul by doing them and worried that she would never recover fully. She wasn’t sure how to tell me that.”

“When did she realize what she was feeling wasn’t that?” Nate sank back down in the chair he had vacated, suddenly not sure if he could stand and hear this.

“The next day. She woke up to your crying and went into your room. She was angry, she said. So angry that you had woken her up with your howling.” Shane’s eyes were wide and he was staring unseeingly forward.

Nate swallowed hard. “She was mad at me?”

Shane reached towards him, to comfort, but Nate stiffened and his arm fell down by his side.

“No, son, it wasn’t her. She loved you beyond life. She was always so patient with you. And, truthfully, you were a very easy child. It was the demon’s rage. It knew that if there was any person on this Earth that she would fight it for, it was you.”

“What did it want from her?” Nate asked.

His father scrubbed a hand over his hair. “I don’t know. To live in a human body? To cause havoc in this world? It’s not like us, Nate. Its motives may be unknowable.”

“Emrys said that, too.” Nate wrapped his arms around his chest.

“Her parents didn’t understand that you can’t control something like that demon. It is nothing like we know. It is … darkness.” Shane shook his head. “It is corruption given form.”

“What happened that morning when she woke up to my crying?” Nate asked.

“She told me that she took you out of the crib and held you up before her. You screamed louder when she did that. I believe you sensed what was inside of her. She gripped you by the legs and …”

“And?” Nate sounded hoarse.

“She caught herself just before …”

“Before what?” Nate snapped.

“Before she slammed your head against the wall.” Shane swallowed hard. “I walked in on her after she gained control of herself. She was backed up against the window. This look of *horror* on her face. Tears running down her cheeks. Her eyes wide and … I asked her what was wrong. She told me nothing. She was just so tired. You were screaming in your crib. All red-faced. She covered her ears then she ran out of the room, yelling at me to take care of you.”

“It wasn’t her that felt that way? She didn’t – didn’t hate me?” Nate clutched the front of his shirt suddenly feeling incredibly cold.

“Nate, she could *never* hate you.” Shane gripped his hands in front of his body. “She was terrified of what had nearly happened. She didn’t understand how she could have even contemplated doing that to you. The emotions and thoughts were completely alien to her. She was terrified, but hoped against hope that it would pass. That it was perhaps still the effects of the night before.”

“But it didn’t go away?”

Shane shook his head. “It got so much worse. I found her standing over me with a butcher knife. She was crouched on top of me while I slept.”

“Jesus,” Nate breathed.

His father looked white. “I’d never been afraid of your mother even though I knew that the powers she possessed could destroy me. A thought of hers could do it. But that night, I was terrified of her. Because *she* wasn’t *there*. The demon had taken over nearly completely.”

“What did she do when you woke up?”

“She giggled and pressed the point of the knife beneath my Adam’s apple.”

Nate curled up in the chair. “Oh, my god.”

“I talked to her. I kept calling her name. I knew if I showed the fear I was feeling that this thing would win and kill me.” Shane washed his hands together. “She came back. Slowly, but surely, your mother came back. And when she was fully herself again, she finally confessed to me what was happening. That she was being taken over. An inch at a time.”

“The demon didn’t want her to tell you,” Nate said. He felt it. “It wanted her silent.”

“Yes, I think that’s true. I believed that then and now,” Shane said.

“But what happened? She came back! She was fighting the demon! Couldn’t you – you get it out of her?”

Shane's expression went bleak. "We tried. We tried everything. And when it ... it was *clear* that we couldn't – couldn't stop it ... we had to do something else."

"Kill her ..."

"Yes. Because the thing wanted to kill *you*. To torture us and – and maybe because it knew how powerful you would be when you grew up. You were its target."

"The demon wanted to kill me." Nate sank back against the chair.

"Yes. And your mother ... she told me – she told me to – her last words as herself before she was completely overrun were ..." Shane was shaking. His face was gray.

Nate found himself moving before he realized that he was. He got up and touched his father's shoulders. His father's body was trembling. He could feel the strong muscles shift beneath his hands. And then Shane was suddenly holding him tight against his chest. Nate was subsumed in his father's embrace. He was rigid at first, but slowly he relaxed. He rested his cheek on his father's shoulder.

This is my dad. My dad. Holding me for the first time since I can remember. But Nate's comfort was soon wiped away.

His father's lips were near his ear. "She told me to – to kill her, Nate. That's what she said before she was snuffed out by that *thing*."

Nate went rigid again. He almost pushed his father away. Shoved him. Ran to the opposite side of the room. His mother asked to die? Because she was going to kill him? No, that couldn't be true! He didn't want it to be true!

But there's no other good explanation.

The thing that stopped him from reacting as he would have in the past was his father. Shane was still shaking and holding him like his life depended on it.

"She told you to kill her?" Nate's voice was small, uncertain.

“Yes, she thought it was the only thing she could do to save *you*,” his father breathed out. “And then she was gone and only *it* remained. In *her* body. Looking out through *her* eyes. Laughing at me with *her* mouth.”

Nate shuddered. “That’s when you ...”

“It started going upstairs to your room. So I ... you see it didn’t understand what it was to have a body. A frail, human body. I had to do it. Your mother was gone. No coming back. You were all I had left.” Shane’s shaking was worse now. “It was her wish ... it was the only thing to do.”

“What about the fire? Why did you try to – to burn me?”

“That wasn’t me. It did that. A parting gift after I had – had ...”

Nate felt like his father was going to collapse on the floor. Nate half carried him over to the chair and his father sank down into it. He cradled his head in one hand.

“Are you okay, Dad? Dad?”

“It’s been nearly twenty years, but it feels like yesterday. It feels actually like the moment after I did it,” Shane said hoarsely. “I’ve had to lie for so long. To tell the truth again, for the second time only, it hurts.”

“Who was the first to know?” Nate frowned.

“Your grandmother.”

“But why didn’t she tell me? Why did she let me think that – that you had killed Mom because you were a psycho?” Nate cried. Betrayal arced through him. How could his grandmother keep silent about this?

Shane gripped his hands. “Because there was no good in you knowing the truth.”

“What do you mean? I could have come seen you and —”

“No, Nate. I didn’t want you here. I didn’t want you agonizing over me being in here,” Shane stressed. “Nate, look at me. *Look at me*.”

“My whole life has been a lie,” Nate said.

“I’m sorry about that. We just wanted to protect you,” Shane said.

“And what about the magic? Were you going to protect me from that, too? I found out last night that I can – can control storms! I brought flowers back to life and—”

Shane went very still. “You brought something back to life?”

“Yeah. Why is everyone so freaked about that? I don’t understand what the big deal is!” Nate waved it away. “I want to know how you thought this was all going to work! How could —”

But Nate was cut off as it seemed the whole building shook. Shane grabbed his son as the trembling subsided. There was a moment of pure silence.

“What just happened?” Nate asked.

Shane stared at the door. “Magic just happened. A great deal of it.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN - EXORCISING DEMONS

Nate’s first thoughts were diametrically opposite, but went together: was Emrys all right? And what had Emrys done now?

“Nate, where are you going?” Shane called after him.

Nate had gotten up and run to the door without realizing it. “You said a lot of magic caused that. A lot of magic has got Emrys written all over with it. I have to see if he’s okay ... or if people around him are okay.”

“Then I’m coming with you.” Shane stood up and rushed to his side.

Nate pushed open the door and nearly bowled over Dr. Roman who was about to come inside. The psychiatrist stumbled back.

“Shane, Nate, where are you going?” Dr. Roman parroted Shane’s earlier question.

“Didn’t you feel that?” Nate asked as he pushed past the psychiatrist. “The shaking?”

Dr. Roman blinked behind his eyes behind his glasses. “Yes, I came to check to see if you were all right. We’re thinking it might be an earthquake or—”

“It’s not an earthquake. Where are Augusta Frost and Emrys meeting?” Nate interrupted.

“What do Emrys and Ms. Frost have to do with an earthquake?” Dr. Roman crossed his arms over his chest.

“It wasn’t an earthquake.” Nate spaced each word apart. Dr. Roman stared at him. Nate called over his shoulder, “Dad, I think you need to ah – convince Dr. Roman here that we really have to go.”

Shane stepped around his son to face the psychiatrist.

“Even if I believed this ridiculous notion that the earthquake has something to do with Ms. Frost, I don’t think it would be a good idea for you to see her, Shane.” Dr. Roman protectively put his hands on Shane’s shoulders.

Nate tried not to roll his eyes. His father’s spell on this man had Dr. Roman acting like an overprotective mother hen. So not what they needed when Emrys was either in trouble, causing trouble or both.

Shane smiled warmly at his psychiatrist. “I’ll be fine, Dr. Roman. You have to let me do this.”

Nate felt something in the air. A stirring. He realized then that he was actually feeling his father’s magic at work. Dr. Roman’s body seemed to relax. The psychiatrist’s eyes slid half shut and his mouth partially opened.

Shane continued, “This will be good for me. To face a woman who is a self-proclaimed witch. It will allow me to *exorcise* my demons.”

“Yes, yes, you should do this. It will help you.” Dr. Roman nodded. “You should go and see what’s happened. You’ll be able to help with the other patients. This ... *disturbance* has caused concern.”

Shane patted his arm as if he was rewarding the other man for the right answer. “Please take us to Emrys and Ms. Frost, Dr. Roman.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Dr. Roman pinched the top of his nose as if he had an incipient headache though he smiled back at Shane almost sweetly.

I sincerely hope that Dad hasn't totally scrambled this man's brain from casting a spell on him all the time, Nate thought with a touch of unease, but then he shook himself. What's Dad supposed to do? Take drugs? Go to electroshock therapy? Dr. Roman seems fine ... most of the time anyways. Dad is just doing what he has to do.

“It's this way. She's in a locked unit. No other patients are allowed in with her,” Dr. Roman explained as he lead them to a set of elevators that looked older than Nate.

There was a whirring, grinding noise as the elevator descended. Nate rocked back and forth on his feet. Time was ticking, but everything was going slowly.

“Why is she in her own unit?” Nate asked.

Dr. Roman frowned and he stroked his chin. “She has a bad effect on the other patients.” He turned to Shane with that warm, concerned look on his face. “That's why I'm not keen on you being around her, Shane. I don't want you to be upset.”

Shane light touched Dr. Roman's shoulder, which seemed to calm the psychiatrist. “She won't upset me, Dr. Roman. I'd be more concerned having you and my son go up there without me.”

“What kind of bad effect does she have exactly?” Nate pressed.

“They claimed that she was ... casting spells. It was all rather ridiculous in one sense.” Dr. Roman chuckled while Nate and Shane gave each other looks. Then he sobered and straightened his tie. “But her influence in convincing the others she was a witch, cursing them, really was causing psychological harm. So we had to isolate her. She really left us no choice.”

“She’s a witch, huh?” Nate asked.

“Of course not. Witches, magic spells, they don’t exist,” Dr. Roman said with a smug smile. “Isn’t that right, Shane?”

“Of course,” Shane murmured.

“We’ve made such good progress at that. I didn’t want you to – uhm, have a relapse,” Dr. Roman said.

“I’m quite well anchored in reality, Dr. Roman. You cured me of my delusions, remember?” Shane pointed out gently.

“Yes, yes, of course. You really are quite well now.” Dr. Roman went back to humming.

Nate tried to remember what he had read in the papers. Had his father spoken of demons and witchcraft right after his mother’s death? He didn’t know. He could imagine his father would have been beside himself.

But why would he tell people about the demon? He must have known that it wouldn’t have been believed by law enforcement, but the other Families would have known. And he would have been put here instead of in prison.

At that moment, the metal doors to the elevator cranked open revealing a space that would hardly hold the three of them. The light inside spat and hissed before it finally steadied and gave out a constant stream of dirty yellow light.

“Well, let’s go.” Dr. Roman gestured for Nate to step in first.

Hoping that the car didn’t suddenly decide to plunge into the basement levels below them, Nate gingerly stepped inside and moved to the back corner. The elevator bounced slightly, but then stayed steady. Shane got in beside him. One of his strong, warm hands touched Nate’s wrist and then lightly wrapped around it. Shane squeezed him gently and gave him a comforting smile. Nate smiled back at him. It was so strange to feel at ease with the man he had tried to forget about all his life. Shane was his dad. A stab of pain went through his chest then to match the happiness. This man

would have been a wonderful father. If Shane had raised him, he bet they would have had a lot of good times together. But that was lost to a demon.

What matters is what happens next. I've got to get him out of here. Emrys says I have money. Money means access to lawyers. Lots of money means the best lawyers. And magic, too. It's been long enough that maybe I can use both to get him out of here.

Dr. Roman stepped inside the elevator and broke Nate's train of thought. The psychiatrist was humming a tune and pushed the button for the sixth floor. The doors to the elevator creaked shut.

"We put her in the eastern most tower. She seems to like to look outside. That keeps her ... quiet," Dr. Roman explained.

"She hasn't tried to ... uhm, eat anyone else has she?" Nate asked.

Dr. Roman adjusted his glasses. "Uh, no. She's a vegetarian now."

"You've got to be kidding me," Nate whispered.

Shane's eyes flickered down to him and he squeezed Nate's wrist again as if he didn't want Nate to be exposed to Augusta's crimes. But it was too late for that.

"So what do we have to watch out for, Dr. Roman? Since you say that she is clearly not a witch," Nate said.

Dr. Roman cleared his throat. "She is a very disturbed personality. She is a sociopath. She has no boundaries. If she wants something, she takes it. And she often wants to harm others."

"Wow, okay. That's ... that's not good." Nate let out an uncomfortable laugh.

"No, it isn't," Dr. Roman said.

"But she is allowed visitors?" Nate asked, his hands bunching into fists at his sides.

“She is not physically violent. She is near eighty and frail. It is her mind that is her weapon,” he said.

“And Emrys is immune to that?” Nate asked.

“No, not exactly. I would say that Emrys is broken in a way that her brokenness cannot reach him fully,” Dr. Roman said.

“Broken?” Nate’s voice rose. Shane squeezed his wrist gently.

Dr. Roman turned and looked at Nate. “I think you already know he is.”

“But that’s not a bad thing,” Nate shot back.

“No, but it can be,” Dr. Roman said and turned back towards the door.

The elevator was crawling. They were only up to floor four. He felt like he should have taken the stairs. Nate’s unease kept growing. He should have insisted that they see Augusta together. He wasn’t sure what he could do that Emrys couldn’t handle on his own, but the other man for all his strength seemed fragile sometimes. Dr. Roman, for as much as the man’s trite statements irked him, wasn’t far off. Emrys’ parents had hurt him. Could his aunt?

“It’ll be all right, Nate,” Shane said, intuiting his unease.

“Emrys is up there alone with her and we just had the building shake again, I can’t help but think that things are getting worse.” Nate stared hard at the row of numbers that showed the car was between floors five and six. He tapped his foot impatiently. There were almost there. The light for five winked out and six was about to light up.

“We don’t know if what happened is because of—” Shane didn’t get a chance to say more as the building seemed to go topsy-turvy for a moment and the elevator groaned and shuddered then started rising again.

“What the hell was that? More mag—earthquakes?” Nate quickly amended as he glanced at Dr. Roman.

“Proof that the problem *is* coming from Ms. Frost’s quarters,” Shane said with a grim look.

“What could be causing this?” Dr. Roman cried.

“One of those things that science can’t understand, doc,” Nate said as the elevator doors opened. He shoved past Dr. Roman and ran straight into the chest of a large orderly in dirty white scrubs. He bounced off and fell back against his father. Shane caught him just before he fell on his ass.

“Bill! Thank goodness you’re here,” Dr. Roman said to the orderly.

Nate looked up at Bill’s face and felt his stomach twist uncomfortably. *Am I going to be sick? What’s wrong with me?*

Bill had a bald head. He stood over six feet five inches and was almost as wide as the elevator. A sheen of unhealthy sweat covered his bullet-shaped head. He ran one hand over the thin layer of gray stubble, keep his head down.

“... have to go ...,” Bill said, the beginning of his statement was slurred, mumbling.

“Bill? Bill? What’s wrong?” Dr. Roman stepped out of the elevator. Nate and Shane got out with him.

“...light So bright ... hurts ...”

Nate backed away from Bill. His head was throbbing painfully and the lights went really dim for a moment. He closed his eyes and grimaced. What was happening to him?

“Nate, are you all right?” Shane asked. He drew the boy away from the orderly.

The feeling faded and Nate opened his eyes. “Yeah, sorry, just ... just felt funny there.” Nate rubbed his temples. The lights were normal. The nausea passed.

“Bill, where are you going? We need you up here with Ms. Frost! What are you doing?” Dr. Roman’s voice rose up.

The orderly was now in the elevator. The doors were sliding shut. The orderly lifted his head just the, just before the doors were completed closed, and Nate saw his eyes. Nate slammed back against the wall of the hallway, trying to get as far away from those eyes

“Nate?” Shane’s face hove into view.

“Didn’t you see?” Nate gasped out.

“See? See what?” Shane asked.

“His eyes were glowing red.” Nate broke away from the wall. “EMRYS!”

He took off down the hallway while he heard his father order Dr. Roman to stay where he was. Light streamed in from the rooms that were at either end of the hallway. The doors were open to the rooms and there were wide windows looking out at the woods that surrounded the facility. It looked almost cheerful except –

— *red eyes! Glowing red like coals.*

— the hair on his arms stood up on end. The nauseating feeling flowed through him as he raced towards the door at the far north room. Something was in there. It hadn’t left with the orderly. The orderly had brought something up with him to this floor, to —

— *Emrys and his aunt!*

“EMRYS!” Nate called out again as he approached the .

“Nate! Don’t go in there without me!” Shane called after him.

But Nate couldn’t stop. He had to make sure Emrys was all right. He had images of Emrys flat on his back with a woman with wild hair perched on his chest just like his mother had done to his father. Only he didn’t think Augusta Frost loved her nephew enough to fight to stop the demon from killing him.

“EMRYS!”

He flew into the room. Light flowed around him like liquid and he was blind. The room was filled with light. So bright, it hurt. Nate stumbled to a halt. He hit something with the front of his legs. A chair. He shielded his face with one arm.

“Nathaniel! Dammit, what are you doing here?” Emrys said with a wild laugh. “I would have thought you had some sense not to run towards danger. But then I remembered what you’re really like and it all makes sense now. Foolish boy.”

Nate blinked and the light became less blinding. “What the hell’s going on, Emrys? I came here to find you!”

Nate turned his head and the light died. The room slowly came into view. It was shaped like half an octagon. The four outsides of the octagon were glass. The floor had large industrial tiles that were cracked and peeling at the edges. Nate had walked into a large recliner. Its seat was also cracked and mended with silver duct tape. The room looked ridiculously normal if you ignored the fact that an elderly woman was hanging in suspended in mid air and that Emrys was crouched in one corner with his hands upraised and a light shining out of them. Her red eyes stared at him and she smiled. Nate nearly doubled over with nausea. Shane’s hands were on him, holding him up.

Emrys snapped, “Get over here, Nathaniel! And you, whoever the hell you are—”

“My dad. This is my dad.” Nate forced himself to stand up and stumble over to Emrys. When he got farther away from Augusta, his stomach cramps eased.

“Dad, is he? Not heinous murderer? Not bastard? Dad. Wow, you turn on a dime, Nathaniel,”

“It’s like you said. He did what he had to do.” Nate sighed. “Come, Dad. Over here.”

But his father remained transfixed, looking at the woman in the gray shawl, black dress, flowing steel-colored hair and red eyes. He didn't seem afraid. It was more as if he was seeing a ghost.

"Ah, Shane, considering demonic possession can't be new to you, would you stop gawking and come the fuck over here?" Emrys asked calmly, but there were trails of sweat running down his temples and dripping. "I can't keep you and us safe for long."

Shane's head snapped towards Emrys and he immediately hustled over to the corner where Nate and Emrys were. He hunkered down beside them.

"What happened, Emrys?" Nate asked, gripping the other man's shoulder.

Emrys' adjusted his arms so that the golden glow enfolded the older woman tighter than it had before. Her head snapped back and she let out a howl. "Oh, Aunt Augusta and I were having such a lovely chat about demons – well, pleasant for her in between telling me how she was going to enjoy eating my liver – and then this orderly came in—"

"He's not an orderly. Or he's not *just* an orderly," Nate interrupted, remembering the nausea and the same red eyes as Augusta.

"Smart boy. No, he wasn't just an orderly. Not any more. I thought we were only dealing with one demon. But it seems that this demon has friends. Lots and lots of friends," Emrys said. "Meet one of its besties." He pointed to his aunt.

"Multiple demons?" Shane asked.

"Long story short, Dad, we think the demon that possessed Mom is now possessing this Blackwell guy," Nate explained. "And clearly, the demon possessing Blackwell can have his – besties, did you say? – possess others. Maybe because he's a really powerful witch or something"

"Quite a good supposition," Emrys said. "Blackwell's power is undoubtedly assisting the demon. You see, while we were having our chat, the orderly came up here and adjusted my aunt's pillow. Neither of us noticed his eyes until it was way too late —"

“Didn’t you get sick as a dog when he got near? Don’t you feel the nastiness that they give off?” Nate asked not believing that they couldn’t feel something so overwhelming.

Emrys stared at him. “An interesting tidbit about you, Nathaniel. I felt nothing.”

“Okay, well, that’s weird then. So what do we do about this demon?” Nate asked.

Shane’s eyes closed for a moment and he whispered something.

“Thought you’d got rid of the demon by killing your wife? Amateur,” Emrys snorted. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“He’s actually ... well, a witch, too. And a Frost,” Nate said.

Emrys’ eyes widened. “Another terribly interesting tidbit about you, my dear boy.”

“When you say interesting, I have this sense you really mean bad actually.” Nate let out an uncomfortable laugh, hoping he was misreading the situation.

Emrys didn’t smile. “One apocalyptic thing at a time, shall we?”

Nate’s laughter died. “That’s Okay, fine! So what the hell do we do about her? I assume you can’t keep her like this forever.”

“This is what we call a Golden Cage. About time you started learning.” Emrys’ dark hair fell over his sweaty forehead.

Nate wiped it away with the sleeve of his shirt. “And the Golden Cage is really kicking your butt, I take it?”

“It takes a considerable amount of energy, yes,” Emrys admitted. “Brush my hair out of my eyes, would you? Its driving me crazy.” Nate carded his hands through the damp strands gently. Emrys grinned. “Don’t get too excited there, Nathaniel. I need you focused.”

“I’m not the one with the one track mind.” Nate sighed. “So let me guess the Golden Cage merely keeps her in check, but doesn’t actually do anything to the demon?”

“It does not,” Emrys said.

“How do we stop the demon then?” Nate asked.

“We do nothing. We are getting you out of here. That’s what we are doing.” Shane gripped Nate’s arm and tried to wrench him up and towards the door.

“No! What are you doing? I’m not leaving Emrys!” Nate slapped his father’s hands away.

“What can you do? You’re an untrained witch! You can’t help him! You’ll just get in the way. We’ll be safer with Dr. Roman,” Shane said.

“Where is Dr. Roman?” Nate asked.

“Oh, he just wandered into the room. I guess he decided to finally check out what all the excitement is about,” Emrys drawled.

The psychiatrist stood in the doorway, transfixed by the floating woman. His mouth was agape. His eyes were so wide that they seemed to eclipse his whole face. All the color had left his face. He looked pasty white.

“He doesn’t look well,” Emrys said. He grunted as the woman shifted in the Golden Cage. “She’s really interested in him. I’m having trouble holding onto her.”

“Okay, so tell us what to do to help you,” Nate said.

Shane looked like he was gauging the distance between himself and Augusta, like he was thinking of running towards her and send them both through the windows. Nate grabbed his arm.

“Emrys told you that killing the possessed person doesn’t work,” Nate said. “And I’m not losing you after just getting you back in my life.”

“But it will keep you safe,” Shane whispered.

“For what? A few minutes? An hour? A day?” Emrys snapped. “We have to send the demons back to the Outer Dark. Do you understand? Otherwise, they’ll just transfer into someone else and we’re fighting the same battle with one last witch at our side.” Sweat was soaking the collar of his shirt now. Emrys was terrible pale and his eyes were too bright. “You get to the play the hero for a few moments. But it won’t save your son.”

Shane’s mouth flattened into a thin line. “Then what?”

Emrys began, “We need to—”

But he got to say nothing more as his aunt’s body suddenly stopped straining against the Golden Cage. She was staring at them with normal blue eyes. “Emrys, what is going on? Why do you have me like this and yet allow that demon to be loose?”

She pointed at Dr. Roman who was grinning at them with burning red eyes.

CHAPTER NINETEEN - DEMON EATER

Dr. Roman thundered towards them on all fours. He seemed to leap across the space in seconds. Emrys had no time to redirect the spell from his aunt to the psychiatrist. Instead, all he managed to do was cease it operating around Augusta. She plummeted to the ground, but managed to find her feet like a cat. That kind of agility in a woman of her age had Nate’s skin crawling. Her wild gray hair hung over her face and Nate just saw the gleam of one black eye before he was doubled over in nausea agony and saw nothing, but the dirty linoleum floor.

The nausea he had felt before with the orderly was tripled. Acid bubbled up into his mouth and his body convulsed helplessly as the demonic psychiatrist was on them. He went for Emrys first as Shane used his body to shield Nate from an attack. Weakened from performing the spell, Emrys went down. He yelped. His head snapped back and hit the linoleum floor with a frightening crack. His black eyes opened only halfway and they were groggy and unfocused. He looked frighteningly weak and that had panic scrabbling at Nate’s insides. Emrys wasn’t weak.

Dr. Roman crouched on top of Emrys like the succubus in this painting Nate had seen. The demon began to touch his face, almost tenderly, stroking his cheeks. His fingers parted Emrys' full lips, lips that Nate had just kissed that morning. Anger burned in Nate that the thing in Dr. Roman thought it could touch Emrys in any way.

"I remember you, Emrys Frost," the demon's voice was singsong and grated on the ears. Nothing at all like Dr. Roman's normal staid scholarly tones. "I remember you. Cut up. Filleted. Like a fish. Or a slice of beef. Pretty blood everywhere. Like jewels scattered on the basement floor."

"Fuck you, you demon shit!" Emrys hissed and bucked up.

The demon though rode him easily, giggling as Emrys struggled vainly beneath him. "Your movements excite me. And you look pretty on your back. I thought I'd like you best on your knees, but this is very nice."

"EMRYS!" Nate cried as Dr. Roman leaned down and put his mouth over Emrys' in an obscene kiss. Rage coursed through him now. His Emrys was being abused. Right before him. And he wasn't doing anything!

"Get Nathaniel the fuck out of here, Shane!" Emrys shouted. His lips were slick with blood. The demon had either bit something in Emrys' mouth or in Dr. Roman's. He writhed in what looked like pain as the demon caressed him.

Shane lifted his son up. "Nate, come on!"

"Not without Emrys!" Nate pulled away from his father, but he was flopping over uselessly in moments. His stomach seemed to squirm inside of him as if it wanted to escape. Another wave of nausea rose up and he gagged, but only yellow bile came up.

"I'll come back and get him. But we must go!" Shane insisted and grabbed the back of Nate's shirt and began to drag him out of the room.

But then Dr. Roman found the scars on Emrys' neck and began to trace them with the tips of his fingers. "I think we need to make some more of these. So very pretty."

All Nate could think of was Emrys tied down by his parents in that filthy cellar, unable to move, innocent and trusting, then being cut. Nate thought of his bone deep belief that he would have done anything to save Emrys from that pain.

Now's my chance. Don't let history repeat itself. Be there for him. Be there.

Nate moved. The back of his shirt ripped before Shane's grip loosened and slipped. Nate lunged across the short space that separated him and Emrys. He wrapped his arms around Dr. Roman's middle and yanked him off Emrys. As soon as he touched the demon, the thing wailed as if scalded by boiling water. Nate's nausea though ceased. He felt filled with energy. A tingling sensation was running up his arms from where he touched the demon and ran inside of him, deep into his belly.

"Nathaniel?" Emrys looked up at him from the floor, blood streaming down his chin, his beautiful shirt torn away and a dazed look in his black eyes.

Someone in the background started clapping as if watching a really good show. "I knew it was so. He is one! HE IS ONE! Do it! DO IT!" It was Augusta.

"Nate?" Shane's voice was high and tight. He was standing a few feet away, trying to figure out how to get Dr. Roman away from his son while Nate held onto the psychiatrist with disturbing ease.

"What do I do?" Nate had no idea what to do now that he had demon.

"Eat it! Demon Eater! Devourer of Souls! EAT! EAT! EAT!" Augusta cried out.

"What?" Nate yelled. *Demon Eater? What the heck is she talking about?* His eyes sought out Emrys and Shane.

Emrys struggled up. He was looking at Nate with a sad, almost anguished expression. "Nathaniel, take the demon's energy. Fill yourself up with it."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Nate cried.

“Don’t do anything like that! Nate, just throw him away from you! We’ll take care of it!” Shane called, casting an angry glance at Emrys.

Emrys just stared at Nate without blinking. “You can do it, Nathaniel. Just close your eyes and you’ll know how.”

“Demon Eater! Demon Eater! Do it! DO IT!” Augusta was clapping again.

Emrys’ black eyes caught and held him. “Do you trust me, Nathaniel?”

“NO!” Shane cried out.

“Do you trust me?” Emrys’ voice was a whisper, but it reverberated in Nate’s chest.

“You’re – that’s – fuck! FINE!” Nate closed his eyes. What else could he do? If he let the psychiatrist go he would be after Emrys in a shot. That wasn’t acceptable. He couldn’t let his father deal with it. The demon would take him down, too. So he closed his eyes and did this crazy thing.

He saw nothing, but the backs of his eyelids. He let out a shrill laugh. Dr. Roman began to flail wildly. The psychiatrist was letting out a long, wailing cry that went on and on and on. The sound was maddening. He couldn’t bear it. Nate’s eyes opened in frustration. Nothing was happening. Emrys was wrong. Or maybe he wasn’t.

Everything looked different. The light looked as if he were peering through a prism. The voices of the people in the room sounded like he was hearing them at half speed down. He couldn’t identify any of the words at first. The psychiatrist’s movements were slowed down as well.

Nate easily wrestled Dr. Roman around so that they were face to face. The psychiatrist’s expression was wild. His eyes were bulging and red. His face was pasty and sallow. He could see burst blood vessels on the sides of his nose. The oil on his forehead. The dry patch beneath his nose. His breath smelled of rotting meat. Nate found himself putting one hand over the psychiatrist’s mouth to stop the deep bellowing he was letting out and squelch the smell.

“Be quiet!” he ordered. His voice was deeper, older. He also sounded like he was talking through a mouthful of mush.

The wailing didn’t cease exactly. It changed tenor and suddenly it was more of a sucking wail. The back of Nate’s hand glowed. His eyes widened as he could see light pulsing through it. He could see his veins and bones almost like an x-ray, but red. The light was coming from Dr. Roman’s mouth. It was streaming out of him and into Nate. His veins lit up with a golden-red glow. The glow streamed up his arm and into his chest then it spread outward until every vein and artery in his body glowed that hot, magma red. He was filled with it. His vision became red. But then he began to feel like he was a balloon being stretched to its limit.

Just as he thought he could bear to take in no more, the fiery light ceased to stream from Dr. Roman. Instead, the psychiatrist sagged in his arms, unconscious. He knew the demon was gone from him, but he wasn’t sure how.

Is it in me?

But Nate knew it wasn’t. He was filled with energy, but nothing of the creature whose power it had been. Pure and pulsing power that was intoxicating and sickening at the same time. He dropped Dr. Roman on the ground. He couldn’t help it. His arms suddenly weren’t working. Thankfully, Shane was there to grab the man before his head hit the ground. Nate stumbled against a nearby recliner. The power was throbbing inside of him. His skin felt like it was going to burst open.

“Nathaniel?” Emrys’ voice came through loud and clear.

Nate wanted to yell out for help. But he couldn’t. He let out a croak and another frightening wave of redness swamped him.

“Doesn’t he know how to convert it?” Augusta asked.

“He just found out he was a witch yesterday so no, he doesn’t. I don’t either,” Emrys hissed.

“Oh, well, that’s bad then,” she said and sniffed.

“Nathaniel?” Emrys’ touched Nate’s back but then let out a cry and jerked his hand away as if he’d been burned.

“He really needs to convert that energy, nephew, or … well, it will go not only badly for him, but for us as well,” Augusta remarked.

“How comforting. Nathaniel, you need to listen to me carefully,” Emrys began.

“It was by listening to you in the first place that this happened,” Shane growled. He had left Dr. Roman laying on the ground, unconscious, with his suit coat under his head as a pillow. “What have you done to my son?”

“Now is not the time to go yelling at me about what I have and want to do to your son,” Emrys said calmly. “This … this Nathaniel did all on his own.”

“MY SON HAS GLOWING RED VEINS!” Shane yelled. “Because you told him to – to eat that demon!”

Nate clutched at the front of the recliner. The power did another throb and roll. His head fell back and he let out a gasp. He was so hot. So very, very hot. His body hurt. His skin sizzled.

“He’s filled with demonic energy and he needs to let it out since he doesn’t know how to convert it for later use” Emrys explained.

“I really think we should all just back away from him now,” Augusta said. “Though I wonder what a safe distance would be?”

“That’s really not helping, Aunt,” Emrys replied.

“DO SOMETHING! My God, Nate!” Shane touched him and quickly snapped his hand away as well, shaking it as if it stung.

“Doing *something* won’t help, Nathaniel. We need to do the *right* think.” Emrys paces. “So he needs to release the energy. But if he does it in here then we’ll all fry so … of course!” Emrys suddenly was brushing past him and going over to the windows. He tried yanking one of them up, but it wouldn’t open.

“They nail them shut in case one of us decides to try and throw ourselves out.” Augusta sniffed. “The food alone here could drive one mad. So tasteless and bland. Not at all *juicy* and *succulent*.”

“Don’t start on that now, Aunt. You know how you get when you start talking about food.” Emrys muttered something and thrust his hands above his head. The windows did the same. Rows of nails that had been used to keep them locked down hung from the bottom of the window frames like rusty icicles. Emrys stuck his head out of the window. He gestured for Nate to come to him. “Nathaniel, we need you to do the one spell you know.”

One spell? What spell? I don’t know any spells! The thoughts were blown away as the power had his bones creaking as it sought to find a way out of him.

“Help him over to me, Shane.” Emrys waved them over.

“What? Why? I don’t want him by the window!” Shane cried out.

Emrys glared at Shane. “Unless you want a lightening strike *inside* this structure, I sincerely ask you to assist your son over here. *Right now.*”

Lightening? Oh, yeah, the storm!

Nate tried to take a tottering step over to Emrys, but his legs didn’t want to assist him.

“Don’t use magic to move him, Shane. Otherwise … boom,” Augusta said. She had seated herself on one of the loungers and was knitting something fleecy. Nate wondered that they would give her anything sharp.

“It’s going to be all right, Nate. Just hold on one more moment.” Shane took in a deep breath and grabbed his son. A pained expression raced across his features and he let out a moaning cry, but he didn’t let go as he lifted his son and dashed to the window. He set Nate down right against the sill.

Emrys touched the top of Nate’s head and helped him duck under the nails. Cool air hit his face. The sunlight dimmed slightly as sudden clouds

appeared. Nate smelled rain. The sky was like a giant canvass for him to write upon. The energy in him quivered. It knew what was to come.

“Shane, we have to step back,” Emrys said, plucking at his father’s sleeve.

“I’m not leaving my son!” Shane snapped.

“If you don’t leave him physically right now, you’ll be leaving him permanently in a few moments. The storm is going to use Nathaniel as a lightening rod. He’ll be fine. You will not,” Emrys remarked dryly. “And while I am happy to have Nate all to myself, I do not relish having him distraught over having caused your death. Grief gets in the way of fun, you see.”

Shane sighed. “Nate, I’ll be right here. Not that far away.”

Nate wished he could smile. Shane sounded like a father who was putting his son on a bike for the first time.

No training wheels this time. I’ve got to control the storm myself. Emrys is right. It’s going to be a doozy. It’ll make the one last night look like a warm up.

He waited until Shane and Emrys were over ten feet away. He hoped that would be far enough.

“A Demon Eater and a Storm Bringer. How fascinating,” Augusta said. “He’s going to be quite a handful, nephew. I wonder if he’s going to bring about the apocalypse with you! You already seem so close in less than twenty-four hours.”

And that was the last thing Nate heard for a long time. He tilted his head back. His mouth fell open. It also felt like his chest opened as well. And the power shot up into the sky. Black clouds boiled out of nothingness. Lightening streaked above him in intricate branches. Thunder boomed so loudly that the ground shook. The sun seemed to be snuffed out as the day became like night. Nate would have been afraid of what he’d conjured except that he could not stop it nor even step away. He was just a conduit

and the power ran without any effort into the storm. His eyes were fixed open at the broiling sky.

Rain sheeted down. Then there came hail the size of softballs. Car alarms sounded as the hail punched through the windshields of vehicles in the parking lot. One of the nearby trees was split in two down to the roots by a lightening strike. It began to burn. There was a thunderous crack and parts of the sanitarium itself began to rain down as lightening strikes crumbled the stone that made up its walls. Strike after strike after strike streaked down onto the ground and the building. The thunder was deafening, like a child at a set of drums pounding with all her might. The smell of ozone filled the air and was almost suffocating. The blinding flashes of lightening had Nate seeing only whiteness.

It seemed for long minutes as if the storm would never end. As if it the power would never stop. But then it did. Turning from a flood to a trickle in seconds, the power was gone and Nate was empty. Drained nearly completely, Nate fell forward like a stuffed doll that had been punctured, his sand running out. He pitched out the window and began to fall helplessly.

“NATHANIEL!”

Someone grabbed the back of his pants just as he almost slipped completely away and down the six stories to the ground. He was yanked back up and into the sanitarium. Emrys’ strong arms pulled him into an embrace. Emrys’ was shaking. It was the first time in all of this that Nate had seen Emrys afraid. And it was for him. He smiled even as he sagged against his boyfriend’s chest. Emrys’ still smelled nice even with a whiff of demon on him. He was warm and solid and strong and Nate knew he was now safe.

“Oh, my God!” Shane called. His hands frantically ran up and down Nate’s back as if searching for wounds. “Nate! Nate!”

“He’s all right. Not even singed, surprisingly. Though I think he needs to be reminded that he cannot fly,” Emrys remarked dryly. “This is the second time I’ve found you attempting to soar into the sky, Nathaniel. I’m beginning to think you don’t understand the theory of gravity.”

“I’m a witch. Gravity doesn’t work on me,” Nate mumbled against Emrys’ shirt.

“He’s definitely all right,” Shane let out a relieved laugh. “Oh, my boy. My beautiful, amazing boy.”

“Indeed. Come on. Let’s get him lying down. His legs aren’t working and for such a slender chap, he weighs a lot.” As if to belie Emrys’ own words, he lifted Nate up quite easily and placed him gently on the worn sofa.

Shane sat on the edge of the sofa. One hand pushing Nate’s hair away from his forehead and the other patting his chest. Emrys’ perched on the wooden table and observed Nate in that intense way he had.

“I thought …” Shane began then ducked his head and swallowed hard. When he looked up at Nate again, there were tears of fear and relief in his eyes.

“Don’t go saying what you feared, Shane. It didn’t happen,” Emrys said firmly though he, too, looked almost shaken. He gave Nate a wicked grin that trembled just slightly. “We’ve had enough real excitement without needing our imaginations add to it.”

“Things are always exciting with you around, nephew, and now a Demon Eater to boot,” Augusta clucked as she continued to knit.

“Could she stop calling me a Demon Eater? That’s really disturbing,” Nate rasped out. His voice was hoarse and he sounded like he’d been screaming for hours.

“But that’s what you are!” Augusta cast a look of derision at him as if he should know and accept that.

“My son is *not* a Demon Eater or whatever!” Shane yelled.

Emrys though was not yelling nor arguing about what she said. He was ineffectually cleaning blood and bits of shattered wood from his sweater.

“Emrys?” Nate said. “I’m not … I mean … what is a Demon Eater?”

Emrys' gaze met his and he smiled briefly, but it quickly died. "It's what you did. You consumed the demon and used its energy to fuel your storm spell."

Emrys tipped his head towards the window. The sun was back. Even from Nate's vantage point he could see the huge amounts of destruction his spell had caused. He felt ill.

"Oh," Nate said softly.

"But tell him the best part, nephew! Tell him what he can really do with that power! Forget the pyrotechnics! He's already done *something* in regards to it, I'm sure. I guessed that when you were so cagey about him. I know he has," Augusta wheedled.

"Aunt, I think you need some more of your medication. Perhaps its nap time?" Emrys suggested.

She clucked. Her dark eyes, so disturbingly like Emrys' fixed on Nate. "You brought something back to life, didn't you?"

Nate blinked at her and opened his mouth to object. But then he remembered the flowers. "Just some ..."

Emrys drew one hand across his neck to indicate that Nate should be silent. But it was too late. Augusta went on, intuiting what Nate was going to say.

"Ah, yes, you have." She nodded sagely. Those bright eyes fixed on him without blinking. "You see Demon Eaters are *always*, and I do mean *always*, Necromancers and Necromancers are always ... well." She smiled at him. "Well, Necromancers make things so very interesting. I can't wait to see what happens next."

CHAPTER TWENTY - PERSONAL DEMON

"Necromancer? NECROMANCER?" Nate's voice went high and tight.

"He's quite lively, too!" Aunt Augusta chortled as she knitted.

Shane began to pet him gently. "Don't listen to her. She's mad."

But Nate wasn't looking at Aunt Augusta, clucking and rocking in her seat like some maleficent old granny, but at Emrys. The older man was giving him a pained grin that wasn't at all amused.

"It's true, isn't it? Emrys! EMRYS!" Nate's voice was rising again and Emrys' smile was becoming more rictus-like as he wasn't answering.

At that moment, shouts and cries of fear and dismay erupted from the parking lot.

"Ah, looks like I'm saved by the bell – er, I mean scream." Emrys jumped up from his perch on the table and went to the broken window.

"We are not done with this subject! You're going to explain this to me!" Nate cried even as he tried to leverage himself up to join Emrys at the sill.

"Stay down, Nate. The last thing you need is more excitement," Shane urged.

But Nate's gaze was focused on Emrys. If the other man left to help with whatever new crisis was brewing, he would, too.

"It appears that the orderly we passed in the hall has caused some ruckus in the parking lot. Oh dear," Emrys said mildly. "Cars appear to be exploding."

There was another cry. It sounded like Abbie. "Dad! Dad, what are you doing here? Get away from my dad!"

Nate blinked. "The orderly. He was possessed, too. More than one demon."

"And it appears the head demon that's possessing Mr. Blackwell is in the parking lot. Goodness, Abbie can scream," Emrys said as he pulled back from the window. "I do believe we need to get down there."

"Definitely." Nate tried to get up, but Shane pushed him down again.

"You will stay here, Nate. Emrys and I will go," Shane ordered.

"No, Dad, I've got to help you guys! Abbie, Turner and Daniel are *my* friends!" Nate pushed his father's hands away and got up to his feet. "And

I'm hardly helpless."

"Nate, you are white as a sheet, shaking and swaying!" Shane objected.

Nate forced his muscles to firm up. "I'm not letting you guys go alone."

Shane gripped his shoulders. There was a determined glint in his eyes as if he was trying to think of a way to physically keep Nate there when Emrys broke in.

"Look, it's admirable you are protective of your son, Shane, but we really do need his help. He's a Demon Eater and if you didn't notice from before, our butts were being handed to us without his intervention," Emrys said. "What's downstairs will only be worse."

"I don't want my son hurt!" Shane said with a parent's bewildered pain in his voice.

"I don't want him hurt either. But this is life and you, of all people, should know the dangers that simply existing as a witch entails," Emrys said quietly. Shane shuddered. The memory of what had happened to his wife was all too fresh in his mind. Emrys continued, "Nathaniel has a gift, Shane. A gift that can save people. Like your wife. You have to let him use it."

Slowly, Shane released Nate. He turned to Emrys and his expression was fierce. "He does have a gift. But don't you make him abuse it. And if there's a chance for you to stand between him harm's way, *you do it.*"

Emrys was surprisingly serious as he answered, "I swear I will."

Nate had a terrible premonition then. He saw Emrys smiling as he walked into darkness so that it would give Nate a few more moments in the light. It was such a real and painful scene that he nearly reached for Emrys' hand, to clutch it and keep him right by Nate's side.

There was another cry and something that sounded like the whump of an explosion. "What was that another car?"

“Yes. The security officers are scurrying around like ants. Wonder where the cops are. We really better get down there.” Emrys gestured for Nate and Shane to come with him.

“I’ll stay here and take care of Dr. Roman. Poor man is still unconscious. Pity that he’s so bony,” Aunt Augusta said.

“Don’t eat Dr. Roman, Auntie,” Emrys said in all seriousness.

She tapped her chin. “Of course, I won’t!” There was a slight pause while Emrys continued to look at her hard. “Even if I wished to, I couldn’t. I have no utensils nor salt and pepper. The human body is so very bland.”

Nate blinked and shook his head. He wasn’t sure if Augusta was joking or serious. He had a feeling he didn’t want to find out. He hoped that Dr. Roman would be okay in Aunt Augusta’s care. He started to shuffle down the hall. His footing slowly became surer. Emrys slid an arm around his waist and helped him until his legs started moving right again.

“Thanks,” Nate muttered.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart,” Emrys said and kissed Nate tenderly on the cheek.

Shane, who was walking behind them, cleared his throat. Nate blushed hotly. He gritted out, “Thanks, Emrys.”

“Did I just out you to your father?” Emrys’ eyes were sparkling with mirth as they stopped in front of the elevator.

“In all the excitement, I didn’t have a chance to tell him that you and I are together,” Nate whispered.

“I would have thought all the ‘Emrys! Emrys, my love, are you all right?’ would have keyed him in before.” Emrys punched the button for elevator.

“I did not say that!” Nate hissed, trying to remember if he had. He’d been quite upset.

“It was *implied*,” Emrys said with a smug smile. He cuddled Nate to him. “Besides, Nate, sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words and this,” he kissed Nate again, “will stop you from having that really uncomfortable talk about how sometimes Billy loves Bobby instead of Suzy with your father. Don’t you think?” Another kiss and nip of Nate’s ear followed with an impish grin thrown over his shoulder at Shane.

“You do realize I’m in here for killing someone who threatened my son, don’t you?” Shane said mildly.

Nate and Emrys turned towards him. Shane was smiling coolly at Emrys.

“Oh, yes, *that*.” Emrys let out an uncomfortable laugh.

“Yes, *that*. You’re quite a bit older than my son, Emrys. I’m not sure I’m comfortable with you, too, being in a relationship. He’s only eighteen, an impressionable age,” Shane observed.

Thank God he doesn’t have a problem with the guy thing! But this is not going well.

“Dad, really –”

Emrys nodded sages as he said, “Very impressionable! He hasn’t been with anyone before me. I mean I was surprised by how very inexperienced he was considering how beautiful he is –”

“EMRYS!”

Shane crossed his arms over his chest. The muscles in them bulged and he looked rather formidable. “I see. Does your grandmother know about your relationship with him, Nate?”

“Actually, I stayed last night in Nate’s room and she was home,” Emrys said brightly.

Nate elbowed him. “It’s not like what you’re thinking, Dad.”

Emrys winked. “It’s exactly what you’re thinking. It was even *better* than what you’re thinking although I don’t think you’d consider it *better*. Maybe

worse?"

Nate elbowed him again. "Look, you don't have to worry about me being taken advantage of by Emrys."

"Why not?" Emrys almost sounded hurt.

"Indeed, why not?" Shane was staring down his nose at Emrys as if judging whether he could take him on.

"Look at Emrys. His maturity level, at its best, is like a two-year-old's on sugar with a new toy. And that's when he's *focused*. Considering that, how could *he* take advantage of *me*?" Nate asked.

Emrys frowned, realizing that this wasn't going his way.

Shane suddenly smiled and nodded. "I think I see your point, Nate."

"I don't!" Emrys cried, completely affronted. "I will have you know that I'm quite the playboy and your son is in my clutches."

Shane bit back laughter.

"See what I mean, Dad? Nothing to worry about," Nate said. "The elevator's here. Let's go."

Nate dragged a scowling Emrys into the elevator car. Shane followed after them.

"I really am a dangerous fellow, I'll have you know," Emrys pouted in the back of the car.

Shane just shook his head and turned away from them, facing the front of the car. Nate decided it was acceptable to give Emrys a small, quick kiss to mollify the affronted Frost. Emrys immediately brightened and one arm slung companionably around Nate's shoulders. The complete turn around in mood had Nate slightly suspicious.

Not that Emrys doesn't turn on a dime, but ...

Nate whispered directly into Emrys' ear, "Did you act silly with Dad out there in order to –"

"Completely throw him off the track of how serious and sexual our relationship really is? Why yes, Nathaniel, I did," Emrys whispered back. "He is a killer after all. But then again ... so am I."

Our relationship is ... serious? That caused a pleasant trill to run up Nate's spine.

The elevator doors opened and the three of them raced out into the lobby that was empty. The rude receptionist from before was nowhere to be found. All the security guards had left their posts and were outside. Nate could see that some of them were crouched behind cars, guns drawn, and white-faced. The one nearest to the front doors was trying to reach police.

They pushed through the front doors. Smoke drifted up from a few cars that were overturned. The acrid scent burned his nostrils. They crossed the short space from the doors to the car bent over.

"He better not have wrecked my Mercedes," Emrys muttered.

Nate heard the nearest security officer say, "We can't raise anyone! It's like all our communications are blocked! Shit! Shit! What the fuck is he doing now?"

The 'he' referenced was Abbie and Turner's father who stood, looking pristine in a suit, beside his vehicle with all the wreckage of a dozen others cars upended surrounding him. His silver hair was slicked back. He had dark eyebrows and a rather heavy, fleshy face. Nate could see that Abbie had his nose and chin, which made him look almost distinguished, but made her look beakish. Mr. Blackwell looked to all appearances like a wealthy business man, like one of the hundreds that Nate saw being driven in their limousines all over Winter Haven, puffing on cigars, drinking cognac and laughing their deep bellowing laughs. Somehow even the red, flaming eyes didn't go against that image.

Emrys, Nate and Shane ducked down behind the car beside the swearing officer.

“You should go back in! It’s not safe out here! There’s this guy who – I don’t know! He blows things up! He – he levitates them!” The officer, a young blonde man with a smattering of acne on his cheeks, was nearly hyperventilating as he told them this.

Emrys raised a hand up to stop him from saying anything further. “Actually, I think you and your men should probably head inside.” The officer stared at Emrys as if he was a complete nut for a moment, but then his eyes went unfocused. “Go tell the others. They’ll follow you inside.”

“Getting civilians out of the way?” Shane asked with a touch of respect.

“I’d send each of them at him if I thought it would do us any good,” Emrys said with a shrug. “But that might just energize him.”

“And you want me to trust you with my son when you say things like that?” Shane asked.

“Ah, but see that’s not really your call. You are locked in a mental institution while Nathaniel and I are outside,” Emrys said serenely.

“Nate is not a fool. I can tell that about him. He must see something very valuable in you,” Shane said.

“Emrys is great … when he doesn’t speak,” Nate said.

Emrys laughed. “Nate has such a way with words.”

“Where are Abbie, Turner and Daniel?” Nate asked.

“Right there.” Emrys pointed towards another car that was nearest Mr. Blackwell.

“Let’s go to them,” Nate urged. He couldn’t see if they were all right and the memory of Abbie’s scream haunted him.

They got up and hustled towards the car where the others were. Halfway there, the officers walked single file into the hospital. Each one had a strange blank expression.

“Don’t worry, Nate. They’ll be right as rain by tomorrow,” Emrys assured him.

“Does that do anything to their minds permanently?” Nate asked, thinking of Dr. Roman as well again.

Daniel was the first to spot them. His brown eyes were wide, but there was a flush to his cheeks. As scared as he must have been, he was also enjoying himself on some level. He gestured for them to come over quickly.

“You look quite excited, Daniel. Life and death experiences are rather invigorating,” Emrys remarked as he crouched down by the young man.

“Well, after that freaky storm this orderly with red eyes came charging out into the lobby, attacking people, until he then rushed out here so we followed him. And then there was Abbie’s dad totally like setting cars on fire and shit was exploding everywhere!” Daniel eagerly related.

“Where is the orderly?” Shane asked.

“Dead,” Daniel said. “Big time dead. Abbie’s dad like turned him into gray ash! Where have you guys been? You’ve missed all the excitement.”

“Oh, doing a little of this and that,” Emrys said mildly, adjusting his ruined shirt.

“Did something happen to you, too?” Daniel asked. His eyes grew bigger.
“Wait! The storm … was that you, Nate?”

Nate nodded. “Tell you all about it later.”

Abbie and Turner were whispering to one another as Nate crouch-walked over to them.

“Are you guys all right?” Nate asked.

Abbie was pale as snow, but she had a determined set to her jaw. Turner also looked rather drawn. When he glanced over at Nate his eyes widened.

“Nate, are you okay?” he asked.

“Don’t worry, Turner, you aren’t seeing evil in Nathaniel. Not really. Just the remains of the demon that he devoured,” Emrys said.

“Devoured?” Abbie blinked. “He’s a Demon Eater?”

“It’s really amazing how much I don’t know about witchcraft that everyone else seems to,” Nate said.

“Indeed. But you’ll learn. Yes, he is, Abigail,” Emrys said.

“But that means he’s also ...” Her eyes went wide.

“I’m a Necromancer, too,” Nate filled her in, perversely glad to know something that the others didn’t blurt out first.

“He’s part Frost, too. So we’ve had all sort of revelations since we saw you last,” Emrys informed her. “But better to focus in on the most current world-ending problem: your father.”

Abbie’s mouth opened and shut a few times, but then she nodded as she realized his description was apt. “I tried to talk to him, but it’s not him in control at all!”

“No, I imagine not. Considering he sent his friends in to take care of us,” Emrys remarked. “I’m rather impressed that you’ve managed to hold him off from here.”

“He’s not really tried to do anything to us. Just tossing the cars around to impress the officers, but nothing else. It’s like he’s waiting for something,” she answered, sounded regretful.

“What is he waiting for?” Nate asked.

“More people to kill,” Shane murmured.

“He had three chances right here, witches to boot, so he could have indulged that pleasure easily,” Emrys pointed out.

“We have to save him! Nate, you have to eat the demon in him! You’ve got to!” Abbie gripped the front of Nate’s shirt and shook him.

She looked so fragile and wild at that moment, so unlike the normal unflappable, cool Abbie that Nate was fully ready to stand up and do exactly what she wanted just to see her back to herself again. But Emrys and Shane clamped their hands down on his shoulders to keep him in place.

“No,” they both said in unison though Nate had a feeling that they didn’t have the same reasoning.

“But why not? My dad is in trouble!” Abbie cried. “And my powers are *nothing* against his! But a Demon Eater can save him!”

“This demon is much too powerful and he’s just absorbed another’s power. Nathaniel won’t be able to devour him until he’s trained to store some of the power he absorbs or else ...” Emrys made an exploding gesture with his hands.

“I’ll explode? That’s charming!” Nate scowled.

“Not literally, well ... maybe literally. I’m not quite sure. But I do know that you wouldn’t be able to drain it fast enough to stop it from doing something very nasty to you in the meantime,” Emrys said.

“Is that the demon who was in ... in my wife?” Shane asked.

“Is this your dad, Nate?” Turner asked.

Nate nodded.

Turner’s eyes narrowed. “This confirms it. There’s no evil in him. I would see it.”

Nate explained, “It was like you guys suspected. My mom was possessed. Dad had to ... to kill her.”

One of Abbie’s hands crept to her mouth. “I don’t want my dad to die.”

“He’s not going to die.” Nate stared her straight in the eyes. “He is *not* going to die.”

She took in a deep shuddery breath and nodded. “Sorry. I’m ... I’m okay. It was just when I saw him and it wasn’t him. I don’t know. I lost all hope.”

Turner wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed her to him. “It’s going to be okay, Abbs.”

“So what is the plan?” Nate asked.

“I think he’s not waiting for something, but for *someone*. So let’s see who that is,” Emrys said and abruptly stood up and walked around the car towards the demon.

“Emrys!” Nate leaped to follow him, but Shane grabbed him by the back of his pants and held him back. “Dad, we talked about this!”

“Emrys promised to stand between you and danger. He’s doing that. If he needs you, we’ll know it,” Shane said.

“Would you let Mom go out there on her own?” Nate asked.

Shane blinked and looked down at him. “Are you saying that you feel about Emrys like I did about your mother? I was under the impression you had just met.”

Nate blinked. He almost blurted out ‘yes.’ *I’ve only known Emrys for a day. But I know – I KNOW – that I want him in my life forever.*

Abbie was the one who spoke, “Nate’s a Whitney and Emrys is a Frost. It’s fate.”

“If it was the first day you met Mom, what would you do?” Nate pushed.

Shane looked rather stricken. “Are you sure – how can you be sure? You’re eighteen! Everything seems certain at that age!”

Nate laughed. “I know! But I’ve never felt this before. It’s bigger than me, Dad. I can’t explain it.”

“You’re still staying here until he calls, Nate,” Shane said. “Because if he feels the same as you then he won’t want you out there with him.”

“Let me get close enough to see and hear then.” Nate crept over to the edge of the car and peered around.

Emrys had strolled half-way out to the demon. His hands were in his pockets and though his shirt was torn and there scratches on his face, he looked completely relaxed. *And handsome*, Nate admitted.

“Emrys Frost,” the demon said with a strange mix of derision and respect.
“What brings you here on this fine day?”

“Me? I was visiting a relative,” Emrys remarked.

“I’d say you were meddling.” The demon stuck a finger towards the center of Emrys’ chest.

“This is my town, my planet, my *universe*. What right do *you* have to be here? I’d say your action were more *meddling* than mine,” Emrys said with a touch of ice.

“I was *invited*.” The demon thumped his chest.

“I believe your invitation was revoked,” Emrys said.

The demon’s smile died. “That was just bad manners on their part. I decided I wasn’t going to go.”

“What are you doing *here*? In particular?” Emrys pressed.

“I was visiting, too. But he wasn’t in his room,” the demon frowned.

“You mean Shane McCollum?” Emrys asked.

Shane stiffened by Nate’s side. He could see his father’s jaw working in anger. Nate felt a flare of rage himself. This was the demon that had killed his mother, sent his father to a lunatic asylum, and destroyed his life.

“Yes, I wanted to say hello,” the demon said. “But he was otherwise engaged.”

“With his son, yes,” Emrys said. “I believe one of your associates met Nathaniel … with interesting consequences.”

The demon's eyes narrowed, but it said nothing.

"It is an odd time to come see Shane. He's been locked up here eighteen years. Why the sudden interest?" Emrys probed. "Could it be you had hoped to silence him before he told Nathaniel the truth? That you killed his mother? That you are the one he should be coming after?"

The demon's lips writhed away from his teeth. "He is nothing compared to me."

"I think that's a lot of talk. I think you're very afraid of Nathaniel. I think you've known since the beginning that he is the one person who can send you packing." Emrys smiled.

The demon suddenly grinned back. "I've had eighteen years to destroy the boy if I was so worried about him. But I'm not. In fact, I'm thrilled he's gotten so powerful so quickly. Because, you see, Emrys Frost, he's not going to stand in my way." The demon's grin widened. "He's going to *help* me bring more demons here."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: CONSEQUENCE

"Nathaniel? Help you? Oh, I don't think so. He's not the type," Emrys scoffed.

"And what about you, Emrys Frost?" the demon's voice was lilting. "Are you the type?"

"Me? I've learned my lesson. There's nothing *you* can offer *me* either," Emrys said with a wave of his hand.

"One of my kind made you an offer in regards to your parents' lives. I believe you took that offer up," the demon responded.

Nate's hands clenched into fists. He hated that the demon could so blithely bring up the most painful thing in Emrys' past. *It's a demon. That's part of its shtick.*

“That was my price to serve it for a time,” Emrys said. “But my parents are dead now so can’t offer that to be a second time.”

“Even if they were brought back?”

“Killing them a second time just wouldn’t give me the same thrill,” Emrys said.

“Bringing parents back is an interesting idea. I wonder if young Nathaniel would feel the same about resurrecting his own mother?” the demon suggested. “To hear her voice. To feel her touch. To have her with him. Create the family that was so cruelly torn away before he was old enough to know it.”

Nate froze. He felt his father still beside him. *Bring Mom back? I’m a necromancer. I guess bringing back the dead is something I can do, but I’ve seen too many horror movies to not realize that never turns out well.* But one part of him wondered if the movies were right. He knew so very little to really judge. Could he really bring his mother back to life and not have her be a brain-eating zombie or like that kid in Pet Semetary by Stephen King?

“You see, *I* can teach him how to fully harness his powers,” the demon continued.

“Ah, the old I’ll-teach-him-how-to-raise-the-dead in exchange for the very small request of giving the Earth to demons. Nathaniel will just *jump* at that offer,” Emrys said with a laugh.

“You are so quick to speak for him. I wonder if you’re afraid of what Nathaniel will say for himself,” the demon mulled.

“He’s annoyingly good,” Emrys said with a sigh as if Nate’s goodness were a personal affront. “He thinks about others. He thinks about consequences. He doesn’t himself above everyone else. He is a hero. That is not the type that will fall for your *offers*.”

Nate smiled fondly. Emrys saw him in a way that he could never really see himself. But it was gratifying.

“I still think I need to hear it from Nathaniel’s own lips,” the demon suggested. “And he should have a chance to truly hear what my offers are.”

The car that they were all hiding behind lifted up and went flying across the parking lot only to crash on its roof. The tinkling sound of glass and the screech of metal as it rocked back and forth set Nate’s teeth on edge. He looked at his friends and father, huddled on the ground, suddenly in the demon’s full view. They looked ridiculous.

Considering what the demon did with the cars before, why did we think we were safe hiding behind one?

Nate stood up and dusted his knees off. He tried to move slowly and unconcernedly even though his stomach curdled as the demon gazed at him. He had a feeling that showing fear would please it. Shane immediately placed himself between Nate and the demon. His father’s body was shaking. Nate looked at his father’s face and realized it wasn’t fear that made the older man tremble, but rage. Daniel unabashedly hid behind Abbie and Turner who clutched one another’s hands.

I’m the Demon Eater. I should be the one out front. Besides the demon wants to speak with me. Maybe it will let us leave if I do.

Nate walked around his father, avoiding Shane’s hand that reached out for him. “Stay here, Dad.”

“Don’t even ask that of me, Nate. I can’t do it. You know I can’t.” Shane walked with him.

“Then stay behind me at least. We don’t need to all be by the demon,” Nate hissed under his breath.

“It tried to kill you, son. I don’t want to give it another chance,” Shane pointed out.

“Oh, yeah,” Nate responded faintly. “Well, then stay near me, but not in front. I really don’t want to lose you again now that I’ve just found you.”

Shane's hand took his for a moment and squeezed it. "You've never lost me, Nate. I've always been and always will be by your side."

Nate blinked away a haze of tears that shocked him with its suddenness. "Right, well, we'll both be careful."

If Nate had hoped it would just be him, Shane and Emrys facing the demon, those hopes were dashed. Abbie and Turner were hot on their heels. Daniel also came though he hunkered behind them. Clearly, he had decided being the one non-witch in the group meant he should hide and not become canon fodder like Emrys had suggested earlier.

"How's it going?" Nate asked.

Emrys gave Nate a tight smile as the whole group approached. Nate knew that this wasn't what the older man had wanted. "Oh, brilliantly."

"I thought so, too. Decided we all needed to be in on the fun," Nate said with a smile. He though stood firmly by Emrys. It felt good not to be hiding and worrying about the older man's safety while crouched behind the car. At least they were together.

The demon tilted its head to the side and stepped closer to Nate. Unlike the lesser demons that had made him feel nauseas, the one inside Mr. Blackwell gave off waves of cold. He resisted the urge to rub his arms in reaction. He would not do anything that looked weak to the demon.

"So good of you to join us," the demon said.

"Yeah, it was good of you to remove the car so we had to," Nate said.

"I see that you have decided to take on Emrys' insolent tone with me," the demon clucked.

"Besides stroking your ego, I don't think my tone is going to stop you from hurting us," Nate said.

Emrys was biting his lower lip with a look of wonder crossed with worry on his face as Nate sparred with the demon.

“You are quite right. I see that you understand certain things about our relative positions clearly,” the demon said.

“That I’m going to devour you at some point like a three course meal? That I do understand, but the question is: do you?” Nate asked.

Shane grabbed his hand as the demon’s expression darkened slightly.

“Your fresh mouth is only so amusing, Nathaniel. Your father is right to warn you from irritating me overly much,” the demon said.

“Dad?” Abbie’s voice rose up uncertainly.

“No, Abbie dearest,” Emrys said under his breath. “That is not your father in there.”

“Dad, if you’re in there, show us,” she pleaded.

The demon’s lips curled up, but then he blinked and the redness faded from his eyes. “Come here, sweetie. I think I can fight him if you help me.”

Turner clamped a hang down on Abbie’s shoulder. “There’s no change, Abbs. It’s still the demon.”

“Abigail, please! Let me have your hand,” the demon pleaded. He stretched out one arm towards her.

Abbie, however, did not reach back. She looked incredibly sad. “If Turner says you’re not Dad, you’re not. Do you see him in there at all?”

“I don’t know,” was all Turner would say, which meant he didn’t.

The redness returned with sulfurous intensity into the demon’s eyes. “You never were daddy’s little girl in any event so my approach was perhaps a bit off. He rather dismisses you, doesn’t he, Abbie? Would you like to know how he really feels when he sees your ugly, pinched visage heading his way ___”

“Shut the hell up!” Turner exploded.

“It’s okay, Turner,” Abbie assured him.

“He can’t believe when he looks at you that such an ugly little bit—”

“ENOUGH!” Nate stepped forward and placed himself firmly in front of the demon. The cold increased and gooseflesh broke out over his bare arms. He kept expecting to see his breath frost in the air. “What do you want? Because if it’s to insult us, we can end this right now.”

“Not in the least! I just wanted to see you and speak to you.” The demon spread his arms wide, smiling, at Nate. “My, my, how you’ve grown!”

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Nate snapped.

“All business! And yet we have such a long history together,” the demon said.

“You mean the fact that you are the cause of my mother’s death, the reason my father is in a sanitarium and that you tried to burn me alive? Does that sound like a walk down memory lane that you really *want* to take?” A faint rumble of thunder echoed in the distance and the demon glanced up at the sky with an amused smile.

“Nate, don’t! Please, don’t use the storm! All you’d be doing is hurting my dad, not the demon,” Abbie begged.

“It’s true, Nathaniel. The storm really can’t affect me. But it does all you fleshly beings.” The demon rocked back and forth on its heels. “We could see how accurate your range is with a lightening bolt.”

“I don’t believe anything out of your mouth so why should I believe that?” Nate couldn’t let go of the storm. He felt its power and desire to swell. The smiling, cackling demon was feeding that desire. The day began to darken.

“Nate, please!” Abbie begged.

“Nate.” Shane squeezed his hand.

“Nathaniel,” Emrys said simply.

Nate pulled the power in and the sunlight returned to full force. He let out a breath and looked over at Emrys who nodded in approval. Nate felt a trace

of surprise that one word from Emrys had him stopping when neither Abbie's words or his dad's touch could reach him.

"Fine. Just ... just get to the point. I don't want to talk to you," Nate said to the demon.

The demon sighed. "Perhaps the past is not the best place for us to begin. After all, it is immutable ... for humans in any case. The future is what matters. And your future, Nathaniel, is bright."

"There is one question I want answered about the past," Nate said. "This bright future you seem to think I have, why did you try to kill me and end it then? Why didn't you just possess my mom and try to raise me to be your own little demon helper?"

The demon's smile became slightly stiff. "That was shortsighted of me in some ways. I forgot how the future is always changing ... until it's not."

"What do you mean?" Nate frowned.

"At the time I tried to burn you to a crisp, the only future I could see with you all grown up was one in which you sent me away, but that has *changed*," the demon said.

"Changed how?" Emrys snapped.

"You see, I fully intended to kill you, Nathaniel, for many years. I bided my time, waiting for the perfect moment that would harm all the most through your passing," the demon admitted.

Shane made a wounded, angry sound. Nate wasn't exactly feeling cheery about this line of conversation either.

"But then you, Emrys Frost, made contact with the most powerful of our kind and the future became uncertain again. More options opened. And in those options, there were many in which Nathaniel helped me, helped all demon-kind," the demon said. "So my plan to kill Nathaniel was set aside."

Emrys' expression went dark for a moment, but then he shook his head and laughed. "I see you think to link something I did long ago with Nathaniel's

future. How clever.”

“It is not clever. It is a *consequence*,” the demon said. “One you didn’t realize. Another reason for you to wrongly regret your past actions. But it is true. I’m not lying.”

“I’m not going to help you. I’m *never* going to help you,” Nate said. “You can claim to see a million futures in which I do, but they are not going to happen.”

The demon just smiled. “You think there’s nothing I can offer you that will make you assist me, but that is just a *lack of imagination* on your part.” The demon began to pace. “You see, I’m not offering you *one* thing. I’m offering you the *power* to do *all* the things you want.”

“Right, sure,” Nate laughed.

“Let me give you one simple example.” The demon pointed at Shane with a well-manicured nail. “Your father, Nathaniel. He will have to go back into the sanitarium after you leave here today. He cannot go with you.”

Nate’s acidic retort died on his lips. He shifted uncomfortably. Intellectually, he knew that his father would have to go back into the sanitarium that day, but part of him had thought that it was just temporary, would soon be changed. But there was no guarantee of that and his father’s sentence was for life.

“You know that he is innocent. You know that he was truly protecting you. But he’s been rotting in this place for eighteen years. His youth stripped from him. All those wonderful moments you could have had together stolen,” the demon said. “Now, getting back that time isn’t possible. But surely you don’t want to waste any more, do you?”

“Nate, do not listen to it,” Shane said fiercely.

“But he can’t help listening to me. He knows the truth of it. You see, Nathaniel, I can give you the power to have your father leave here right now, this *minute*. He won’t have to go back into the grim sanitarium. He won’t have to control Dr. Roman so that his mind won’t be poisoned with

psychotropic drugs. Having him go back inside means he risks all that again,” the demon said. “He can leave with you and there will be no muss, no fuss. He could be at his mother’s table this evening having dinner. Or ... he could be back in his locked room, alone, eating institutional food and trying to ignore the other inmate’s screams.”

“I have it under control, Nate. Nothing like that is going to happen to me,” Shane said.

“Are you threatening my dad?” Nate asked the demon, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides.

The demon raised its hands. “On the contrary! I have no desire to harm you or those that matter to you. That would foreclose the futures that are most palatable to me. But the truth is that your father is in terrible danger from Dr. Roman and the other patients.”

Emrys touched Nate’s shoulder. “We will get your father out of here. The Council will accomplish this.”

“Will they? When they hear that you are in Nathaniel’s quarter, Emrys? Emrys hasn’t told you, Nathaniel, one crucial thing about himself or maybe he just hinted at it, which really isn’t fair!” the demon chided.

“I don’t care what you are going to say about Emrys. I won’t believe it,” Nate said stoutly.

The demon tipped his head back and laughed. “Won’t believe it? Hmmmm, Emrys you really have earned his loyalty so quickly. It makes sense to me now as I see it why your actions changed *his* future.”

“The Council will assist Nathaniel,” Emrys said, with a tight expression. “In spite of me and what I’ve done. They will know his value just as you do.”

The demon picked an invisible piece of lint off his suit. “Perhaps. But he’ll have to do things for them to accomplish this and you assured me of his *goodness*.”

“As if they could ask me to do something worse than giving humanity up to demons?” Nate scoffed.

“Could they ask for something worse, Emrys?” The demon waggled its eyebrows at the older man.

Emrys said nothing. Nate frowned. “I’ve given you my answer. I’m not going to help. These futures you think you see are lies. They aren’t going to happen.”

“What you are saying now is really immaterial, Nathaniel. All in due time. You see, that’s the beauty of the future: it isn’t here yet.” The demon turned and opened the car door to the large dark blue Mercedes.

“Where are you going?” Nate asked.

“I’ve said what I need to say. You must stew on it.” There were suddenly the faint sound of sirens. “Oh, and the police are coming. I don’t wish to be here when they arrive. I don’t think any of you wish to be either.”

“Dad,” Abbie said quietly. Her expression crumpled as the demon drove off, leaving them in a haze of exhaust.

Shane was the first to break the silence, “Emrys, take Nate and the rest of the children and get out of here.”

Emrys nodded. He looked strained and pale. He was also too quiet and had been since the demon had mentioned the incident with his parents. Nate grabbed his arm.

“Are you okay?” Nate asked.

Emrys trailed a hand down his face. “Of course. When am I not?”

“When you’re not?” Nate asked back.

Emrys chuckled. “Forget about me.” His gaze flickered over Nate’s shoulder. “Say goodbye to your father. For now.”

Nate's stomach clenched. He turned from Emrys to his friends and his father. Emrys started herding his friends towards the car, leaving Nate and Shane alone. Shane smiled at him gently.

"I don't want to leave you here. Come with us," Nate urged.

"You know I can't," Shane said.

"You shouldn't be in here!" Nate cried.

"I should, Nate. I did kill your mother. No matter what the reason. And now I am starting to think that killing her wasn't the only choice I had. That if I'd been more ... more skilled at magic that she might still be alive today." Shane cleared his throat and looked down.

"You didn't know. You did what you thought you had to do!" Nate suddenly threw himself against Shane and held him. His voice was hoarse as he said, "I love you, Dad. I love you. I'm sorry that I ever thought I didn't."

Shane stroked his head. "I love you, too, son. And there's nothing to apologize for."

“I’m going to get you out of here. Without the demon’s help. I promise that,” Nate said firmly.

“The only thing that matters to me is that you have a good life, Nate. That’s what I’ve always wanted,” Shane said.

The sirens were closer. Emrys expression through the windshield told Nate it was time to go. He pulled back.

“I know that you don’t believe I can save you. But I will. I’ll get you out of here and your name cleared,” Nate said with a fierceness that surprised even him.

Shane squeezed his shoulders. “I believe if anyone can do that, it is you. But go on now. I’d best get into the sanitarium. I’m a dangerous inmate, remember?”

“I remember.”

Nate hugged him one last time and then quickly broke away and went to the car. He didn’t look back. He didn’t want to see his father standing there forlornly. He definitely didn’t want to see Shane walking back into the prison. He slid into Emrys’ car and determined that he would do whatever he had to in order to save his father, his friends and Emrys no matter what it took.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: PLANS

“What are we going to do?” Abbie asked from the back seat.

“I know what I’m going to do. Sex and a shower and not necessarily in that order. Nathaniel, you good with that?” Emrys asked and drew his thumb along the back of Nate’s hand.

“Uhm, y-yeah, sounds good,” Nate mumbled as he turned red as a tomato. His grief over leaving his father subsided as his hormones took interest.

“That’s nice for the two of you, but what about the rest of us?” Abbie asked waspishly.

“I do like group sex—”

“So not happening, you pervert!” Her face went taut with emotion. “But seriously what are we going to do about my dad?”

Emrys let out a hiss of breath through his teeth. “The one thing we are not going to do is let you go back to your house with the demon. You may stay – very temporarily and with utmost neatness – at my place for now.”

Seeing the grimace that crossed Emrys’ face, Nate said, “They can stay with Grandma and me. I can already tell that you’re getting all finicky cat-like at the thought of kids in your space.”

“Ah, no. We are all staying together until this thing is finished. We’re not going to be like those stupid people in horror films that think it would be just grand and so much better to split up and get picked off one by one by the scary demon. I am no virgin. You soon won’t be. So neither of us would survive that scenario.” Emrys sniffed.

Nate let out a nervous, pleased laugh and flushed some more. He wasn’t going to be a virgin for much longer! He thought about a fist pump but decided against it. “Well, you do know we could *all* stay with Grandma.”

Emrys turned to him with a horrified look on his face. “You’re a teenaged boy that has just been told sex is going to happen at your older, urbane, awesome boyfriend’s rocking pad yet you’re suggesting your *grandmother’s* house as a better alternative? The house with your *grandmother* living in it?”

“He’s got you there, Nate,” Daniel chuckled.

“She’s hard of hearing!” Nate protested. When Turner laughed, he flushed harder. Abbie just muttered something about how hormones overcame common sense.

“Not *that* hard of hearing. I can tell you’re a screamer.” Emrys’ finger wagged in front of him.

“It wasn’t – I mean that’s not what I meant – it’s just you’re – ugh! Forget what I said,” Nate harrumphed. He wasn’t sure if being a screamer was a good or bad thing, but he was too flummoxed to think clearly.

“Besides I refuse to try to have sex in your little coffin bed or that closet you call a shower,” Emrys said. The grimace became more pronounced.

“Too much information,” Abbie said loudly.

Turner laughed quietly beside her and shook his head. “So are we going to the Frost Mansion then?”

Emrys’ hands clenched around the steering wheel. “No, I have a home on the ocean. I haven’t been in the old family manse since I left here.”

Since his parents hurt him. Jesus. Nate reached over and massaged Emrys’ shoulder.

“You’re welcome to provide me a full body massage later.” Emrys grinned. “Sans clothing and with body oil.”

“TMI!” Daniel wailed this time.

Emrys sobered slightly as he looked at Abbie in the rearview mirror. “Speaking of sex and other sexual objects, you need to get your stepmother away from the demon. Preferably out of town for the duration of this potentially world-ending event. As much as you dislike her, I’m certain you don’t want her tortured to death.”

Abbie shuddered. “No, not at all.”

“But how are you going to get her out of town? I don’t suppose she’ll believe that your dad is possessed by a demon,” Daniel pointed out.

“Send her on a trip,” Turner said. “To Arizona. That spa she was going on about last week.”

“Of course! Good idea, Turner. I’ll make it look like a gift from Dad,” Abbie said.

“Add in a shopping trip,” Daniel suggested. When Abbie turned to him with a disgusted curl of her lip, he added, “Women love shopping!”

“What you don’t know about what women *love* would fill the internet,” she said crossly.

“Come on, Abbs, you know that our stepmom would *love* a shopping trip added in,” Turner laughed.

She snorted. “I guess you’re right. But that doesn’t mean his stereotyping shouldn’t be called out!”

Daniel smiled at her sheepishly as she regarded him with suspicion as if he were about to bleat out some other sexist statement. When he didn’t, she pulled out her cell phone and wallet. She took out a black American Express card and flipped it over to call the number on the back.

“You have a credit card!” Daniel sputtered.

“And one with no limit and very special perks,” Emrys said.

“But she’s like twelve!” Daniel cried.

“I’m *fourteen* and I look older than that,” Abbie snapped. “But I actually have had this card since I was ten. Father thought it was a good idea in case I got into trouble.” She gripped the card tightly. Turner put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

She dialed the number and started talking to the American Express concierge about the trip.

Daniel slid down in his seat. He looked grim. “It’s so not fair! My folks won’t even let me have a debit card!”

“The rich really are different from you, Decoy,” Emrys said.

“Decoy?” Daniel narrowed his eyes. “The name’s Daniel! You might not have noticed but I wasn’t useless back there at the sanitarium.”

“You hid behind a car,” Emrys pointed out.

“So did everyone else! But I didn’t get in the way or – or killed.” Daniel crossed his arms over his chest.

“Don’t you understand, Fodder, that your usefulness would have come into play if you had taken the place of one of *us* getting killed? Hiding and stating the obvious are not useful traits,” Emrys said.

“You did good, Daniel. Don’t listen to him. He’s feeling testy because he hasn’t gotten a chance to clean himself today. Finicky cat,” Nate teased.

Emrys made a disgusted motion towards his hair, which looked good even without a shower. “I feel distinctly *skuzzy* and I smell of demon. It’s unpleasant.”

“So what is the plan after we get our stepmother out of the way?” Turner asked.

“We go to the Council,” Emrys said, his mirth dying as effectively as if it were a tap that was shut off.

“Will they help us take out the demon?” Nate asked.

“If not, our time on this Earth might be severely foreshortened,” Emrys said.

“What about Nate and his Demon Eating abilities?” Turner asked.

“Nate doesn’t have training and he might not learn fast enough to help us with the demon.” Abbie had finished her phone call. “I haven’t heard of anyone in a hundred years being able to eat demons. Who could teach him?”

“Those who did it over a hundred years ago,” Emrys said. “We’ll have to talk to one of them.”

“Wait, didn’t you just say there hasn’t been one around for a hundred years? They’re dead then, right?” Daniel asked. “So how are we going to talk to dead people?”

“It’s possible to talk to dead people, I take it?” Nate asked.

Emrys nodded.

“We don’t have to raise them from the dead to talk to them, do we?” Nate asked, thinking of his supposed abilities as a necromancer.

“That could be a plan, but no, it’s not necessary and besides necromancy goes along with Demon Eating. So there are none currently with us either,” Emrys said.

“You’re kidding, right?” Daniel’s eyes were getting big again.

“You just saw a demon tossing cars like child’s toys and you’re doubting it’s possible to talk to the dead?” Emrys boggled. “You hear about people doing that on television.”

“But I thought those people were con artists, you know?” Daniel squeaked.

“Most of them are,” Abbie responded. “But it’s more than possible to speak to those who have passed on. If they’re witches – evil witches – they are more likely to be hanging around.”

“Hanging around?” Nate asked.

“You see, Nathaniel,” Emrys began, “there is an afterlife. Not sure if it involves hellfire and brimstone for those of us who have been naughty in life, but some don’t wish to find out so they ...*stay*.”

“Like ghosts?” Nate asked.

Emrys nodded. “Few can see them, but there are those who can.” He gestured towards Turner. “He can see the evil ones like my parents.”

“So what are we going to do? Grab a Ouija board and head out to the cemetery?” Daniel asked.

“Sounds like a plan actually,” Emrys said. “I’m impressed Daniel that you would think of it.”

“No way!” Daniel shouted.

“Where are ghosts hanging about?” Nate asked.

“There’s a burial crypt beneath the Frost Mansion,” Emrys said. “There are some there.”

“Beneath … you mean through the cellar?” Nate asked quietly.

“Yes,” Emrys said. His voice was too even and his gaze stuck to the road. “Before Aunt Augusta’s eyes turned bright red and she went for my throat, she mentioned Excelsius Frost who had the foremost knowledge of demons as he was a Demon Eater and a necromancer who lived about three hundred years ago.”

“And this three-hundred year old ancestor of yours is hanging about and is going to teach me about demons and necromancy?” Nate stared hard at Emrys. “Why do I have a feeling he won’t do it out of the kindness of his heart?”

“Because he’s a Frost? But so are you through Daddy Shane.” Emrys ruffled Nate’s hair.

Nate smoothed down his tousled locks. “What if he asks for something we shouldn’t give him in return?”

“That is why we turn to the Council first,” Emrys said with a grin.

“What if the Council asks for something we shouldn’t give them in return?”

“That’s why we may need to go to Excelsius Frost.”

“I think that logic is circular,” Nate pointed out.

Emrys sighed. “You need to learn how to use your gifts no matter what we do.”

“Gifts? They seem a little like curses.” Nate shook his head.

“Surely there are books that Nate could read that could teach him about his powers,” Abbie pointed out.

“Yes, but the most critical elements were often left out of the books in order to keep them secret,” Emrys said. “And like you said, Nate doesn’t have

time to read books to figure out how to deal with your father.”

“If you have any of these manuscripts, I’d like to see them. I can assimilate great quantities of knowledge in a short time and can teach Nate what I find out,” Abbie said.

“That’s really dangerous knowledge, Abbs,” Turner warned. “Demon Eating and necromancy is not something to mess around with.”

“It’s necessary knowledge,” Abbie protested.

“Some things maybe shouldn’t be known by those that don’t need to know them,” Turner said.

“Knowledge is power, Turner!”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I agree with Abbie,” Emrys said.

“This ought to be good.” Daniel chuckled.

“Knowledge is necessary. It is always more dangerous to be without it than to know it,” Emrys said.

“You sound like you’ve experienced the bad end of that,” Nate said.

Emrys gave a rueful smile. “Oh, yes, most definitely.”

At that moment, they turned onto Ocean Drive and Nate sat up a little straighter. Besides the Hill, the mansions on the beach were the most exclusive. They were also often owned by the same people as occupied the Hill though they were only miles apart. Most of the buildings were terribly modern, seeming to be made more of glass so not to block the gorgeous view of the ocean. Nate found them beautiful. More like sculptures than homes. He had ridden his bike along this winding road countless times. The fact that Emrys owned one of them seemed incredible to him.

“Which one is yours?” Nate asked.

“That one. Up on the cliff.” Emrys pointed.

Nate followed his finger up a rise to the largest mansion around. It was also his favorite. “I can’t believe that’s yours.”

Daniel suddenly appeared between the two front seats. His mouth parted and eyes wide. “Holy shit. You’re loaded.”

“Good of you again to state the obvious, Daniel. I think we would all be lost without you,” Emrys responded.

The mansion reminded Nate of a Tetris game, but made out of clear blocks. He could see the staircase that spiraled from the bottom level to the fourth as it appeared the entire place was made of glass and the barest amount of metal and wood to hold it up. Emrys turned onto a cut stone driveway that led into a garage that could have held a fleet of cars and apparently did. Nate couldn’t help letting out a small gasp as he saw the line of shiny vehicles: sports cars, SUVs, two motorcycles, and a half dozen other luxury models in seemingly every color.

“You are drooling, Nathaniel,” Emrys said. “You, too, can have these things if you’re willing to claim your inheritance.”

“What? No way! Nate’s rich?” Daniel asked.

“Very rich. *Almost* Frost rich, not quite, but there’s not much of a difference at our levels to really matter. It’s not like either of us is capable of spending it all in one lifetime or a hundred lifetimes.” Emrys pulled into the one empty spot and turned the key off in the ignition. The engine ticked and Nate realized he could hear the shush and rush of the ocean even from the garage.

Nate blinked. He couldn’t imagine having the kind of money that could afford a place like this and all the accoutrements. It was an alien thought though hardly unwelcome.

“I can’t believe that Grandma didn’t tell me. I mean there have been times when we had to keep the heat off and use the old wood burning stove to keep warm,” Nate said with a furrowed brow.

“Yeah, and then there was that time that your jeans were so worn through that everyone could see your underwear,” Daniel said.

“Oh, yes, there was that. Thanks for reminding me,” Nate said.

“Think of your years in poverty and near nudity as a character building exercise,” Emrys said, but when he caught sight of Nate’s dangerous look he added cheerfully, “Or you can rake the old lady over the coals for keeping you from your rightful place as the wealthy scion of one of the most prominent families in Winter Haven. The choice is yours.”

“She has to have a good reason for all of it. I mean we were struggling for years. She’s had to keep working because of me.” Nate’s hands rose up and fell back down in his lap. “I just can’t think what that reason could be.”

“Maybe she was waiting to tell you about it until you were older,” Abbie said.

“I’m eighteen. How much older do I need to be?”

Abbie’s head lowered. “Some people are strange about money. Are you sure the money was left to Nate, Emrys? You shouldn’t raise his hopes up if you’re not certain.”

“Yes, Miss Muffet, I am absolutely, positively sure.” Emrys snorted. “Even if it wasn’t true though, I’m rich enough for both of us. Nate won’t miss out on anything any longer.”

“Wow,” Daniel said.

Nate looked back at his best friend with a questioning look in his eyes.

Daniel rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry. You guys just met last night and yet ... I don’t know ... you’re talking like you’re going to be together permanently.”

Nate flushed with both anger and pleasure. Daniel was right, but why did he have to say it with Emrys right there? He met Emrys’ mirthful gaze. The other man had already teased him about being in love. And he had basically admitted the fact to his father. It hadn’t even been 24 hours! He wasn’t sure

what to say to Daniel in response especially as Emrys was looking at him with rising amusement.

Abbie saved him by slapping Daniel's arm. "You are so insensitive sometimes! Honestly!"

"What? I'm just making an observation!"

"Don't worry about it, Daniel," Nate muttered.

Emrys sighed theatrically. "If you must know, Daniel, Nathaniel and I are fated for one another." He wrapped an arm around Nate's shoulders.

Nate pushed him off. "Stop joking around."

Emrys was smiling still, but there was a different expression in his eyes. Something longing and deep that had Nate's breath catching. "I'm not joking."

And then Emrys launched himself from the car before Nate could do anything.

"Holy shit," Daniel said.

"Why do you look so surprised, Nate?" Abbie asked. "You told your dad how you feel about Emrys. Did you think he didn't feel the same?"

"It's not even been a day since we met," Nate said awkwardly. "We shouldn't be feeling anything yet."

Abbie patted his shoulder. "He's a Frost. You're a Whitney – and I guess a Frost, too. It's inevitable that you'd be drawn to one another like moths to a light."

"Or a bug zapper," Daniel offered. Abbie hit him again. "Ow! I need this arm, you know!"

"Then stop opening your mouth," Abbie warned.

"Let's go. I think Emrys is getting anxious for that shower ... and stuff." Turned pointed to Emrys who was fiddling with a set of keys by a door and

glancing over at them impatiently.

“That or he has to go to the bathroom,” Abbie muttered.

Nate opened the car door and breathed in the pleasant scent of motor oil, gasoline and fine leather. There was a hint of salt in the air from the sea. Nate hurried over to Emrys’ side, giving himself only the barest glimpse at all the beautiful cars that glinted at him.

“Done gossiping?” Emrys asked lightly.

“We were talking about you. I’m surprised you’re not preening,” Nate said.

Emrys smiled and a surprising flush covered his cheeks. “I’m not a PDA kind of person.”

Nate snorted loudly. “You’re kidding, right?”

Emrys glanced over at the other three that were standing about a foot away, listening intently. He grimaced. “Not with emotions, Nathaniel. Everything else I’m an exhibitionist at, but not ...” He gestured between them with an uncomfortable smile. “*This.*”

“Oh,” Nate said quietly. He knew he was smiling like a loon at that moment. “Though I noticed you were happy to leave me hanging there with Daniel’s comment earlier.”

“I wanted to hear you profess your love for me again in front of others. I find it ... irresistible,” Emrys said.

“I haven’t confessed it *once* yet.” Nate tapped his chin. “But I’ll remember that.”

“We can discuss this further upstairs. Enough talk in front of our eager audience.” Emrys rustled with his keychain. Nate looked at the door and frowned. There was no place for a key to go. Instead, Emrys’ waved a fob at a sensor plate and there was the click of the door unlocking.

“Cool,” Nate said.

“I’ll have to get you one of these,” Emrys muttered. He pushed the door open and immediately went to a touch screen panel where he typed in a code. “Now the National Guard will not come. One time I was so drunk I typed the code wrong and it was like all hell broke loose. I think they brought a helicopter.”

“Guess you bought the ultimo security package,” Nate said.

“I have no idea. It came with the house,” Emrys said.

“When did you buy the house?”

“Oh, last week,” Emrys said and pushed open the door.

“Last week? Do you have any furniture?” Nate goggled.

“You’ll have to see, won’t you?” Emrys teased.

“I’m just saying that you were complaining about my little bed. But if you don’t even have a mattress, I’m going to be annoyed on behalf of my poor room,” Nate warned.

“You will be incredibly comfortable or … truthfully, you won’t care. You’ll be rather preoccupied,” Emrys said.

Nate made an inarticulate squeak. “Oh.”

“You’re so vocal, Nathaniel,” Emrys purred. “Let’s go.”

Nate expected to see a hallway beyond the door and maybe some stairs leading up to the first floor as the garage was below the rest of the house. The stairs were there, but so was an elevator. Emrys was pushing the button. The elevator’s doors whispered open. He dragged Nate inside, but blocked the way for the others.

Emrys pointed towards the stairs. “You three go up that way. Make yourselves comfortable – within reason. Order food and start calling the Council.” Emrys shoved his cell phone into Abbie’s hands. “Their names are highlighted in case you don’t know who they are already.”

“But she’s just a kid. Don’t you think you ought to call them?” Daniel asked.

Abbie tossed her head proudly. “I’m much more mature than you are by a long shot, Daniel. My question is whether they’ll take my call if it comes from your cell phone, Emrys.”

Emrys was about to make a quip, but then frowned. “Some might not. Just use the numbers and your own phone.”

“What do you want me to tell them?” Abbie asked.

“They’ll know that something has occurred. Nathaniel’s storm and the upset at the sanitarium. Just ask them to meet with us this evening,” Emrys said.

Abbie nodded smartly. “Done and done.”

“I knew you would be good for something, dear,” Emrys said.

She scowled, but a smile soon broke out on her lips. “Okay, boys, we have food to order and phone calls to make.”

She led the way up the stairs with Turner and Daniel following in her wake. Nate heard Daniel say something about how he better let his folks know he was not going to be back home that night before the elevator doors slid shut.

Emrys was suddenly spinning him around and pulling him into an embrace. A wolfish smile lit up his face. “Alone. Finally.”

Nate grinned. “So do you want a shower or sex first?”

Emry’s smile grew. “Who says they have to be separate?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Before Nate could comprehend the words ‘sex’ and ‘shower’ in the same sentence, Emrys had pushed him against the wall of the elevator. The older man’s hands thrust into Nate’s hair while his pelvis pinned the boy’s hips in place.

Emrys was kissing him like there was no need for air. His tongue and teeth invaded Nate's mouth and the boy couldn't figure out where he ended and Emrys' began. His cock pulsed and hardened to an almost painful degree. There was an answering hardness in Emrys' tailored pants. He ground forward against Emrys, desperate to seek some kind of friction to match the flare of heat in his groin.

There was a soft ding and the light in the elevator brightened as the doors silently slid opened. Nate had just a glimpse of a sun-drenched room with spacious maple wood floors, a large bed covered in a pure white coverlet and windows looking out at the ocean before his eyes shut again with another breath-stealing kiss.

Nate made a soft sound to indicate they should move towards that bed or at least towards the sunlight that would bathe their bodies and highlight the scars that Nate still wanted to see, touch and taste. He knew how they had been created with unnatural lust and hatred. But he felt somehow he could undo the harm that caused them by loving Emrys' flaws.

"What?" Emrys murmured after Nate whined again. He gave Nate another kiss and nip and rake of teeth over the boy's lower lip.

"Elevator doors are closing," Nate mumbled.

Emrys chuckled against his throat. "Good thing about a private elevator is that it's not going anywhere." The elevator doors shut, but like Emrys said the car remained stationary as there was no one else pushing the call button for it. "Though it would be funny if the children downstairs decided to call the elevator with us still in it."

"Wha? Oh, that's uhm ..." The thought of Daniel standing in the threshold of the elevator, mouth agape and cheeks turning an interesting puce color did not inspire Nate at all.

"Not an exhibitionist, Nathaniel? You wound me. The idea of putting on a show gets me hot."

The slow steady push of Emrys' hips had Nate's core heating up. He opened his legs and wrapped one around the back Emrys' calves. He groaned as his

cock finally got more friction this way. He hiked his body up and down frantically, but his movements were jerky and weren't giving him the solid slide he was so desperate for.

"This from the man who gets shy about talking about his feelings in front of others," Nate huffed out.

"That was different. Being naked and cum-drenched does not make one vulnerable. Just makes one envied." Emrys chuckled again into their kiss even as he pulled back.

Nate whined. "Where are you going?"

"You'll see."

Emrys slid his hands between their bodies. He framed Nate's sides all the way down until he reached the boy's slender waist and then he was lifting Nate's shirt up. Cool air whispered over the boy's bare skin. His nipples peaked. Emrys tossed the shirt unceremoniously into the elevator's corner.

"Hey! I like that shirt!"

"You'll get it back later. Washed, pressed and folded."

"Wait, is there like staff here?" The silence of the house belied the fact that he knew there were at least three other people in it.

Emrys frowned like Nate was asking him if the sky was blue. "Of course."

Nate struggled against Emrys' arms then. "Where are they? Are they like dusting in your room or something?"

"No, they are in the servant's quarters. They only come at set times unless I call them," Emrys explained drawing a hand down Nate's cheek.

"Hmm, so they won't interrupt us? Or try and find out what the ruckus is with the guys downstairs?"

"Not in the least. They know I value my privacy."

"Must be nice."

Emrys shrugged. “I suppose it has its advantages.”

“I’d love to have a maid for Grandma so she didn’t have to clean as much as she does. I try to help but I never do it right.”

“No one does for a grandmother’s taste, I would imagine.” Emrys shook his head. “How do we end up talking about your grandmother when we’re planning sex?”

Nate opened and shut his mouth. He had no idea. “I don’t want to talk about her now. Though I should call her later.”

Emrys lightly banged his head against the wall.

“I promise I’m done talking about her!”

Emrys rolled his eyes. “Are you certain? Because if you like you can call her right now. You’ll have to explain my heavy breathing, but—”

“No! No, I mean, I’m good. I can do it later. Let’s just keep doing this.”

“Yes. Let’s.” Emrys’ clever fingers went for the button of Nate’s pants.

“Holy shit,” was all Nate got out before Emrys’ popped the button open and unzipped him.

The sound of the zipper and his frantic breathing seemed to echo in the small space. Emrys pushed Nate’s pants and underwear down to mid-thigh. Nate’s cock sprang out eagerly like one of those Jack-in-the-Box toys. The head was wet and dripping despite the talk of his grandmother. Nate’s cheeks burned as Emrys stared at it with hooded eyes.

“Yum,” Emrys whispered and then was kissing down his chest.

“You’re – you’re – you’re going down!” Nate’s breathing hitched as Emrys’ lips, teeth and tongue slipped nipped, sucked and licked all the way down to the trail of hair around his cock. He stared at Emrys with wide eyes. He had expected maybe a hand job. Something to make him shake. But the thought of Emrys’ mouth on him was causing him to nearly hyperventilate.

“I’m going down on you. Hold onto my shoulders, Nathaniel. I’m going to take you for a ride.” Emrys grinned.

“You’re going to – oh, God, really? I mean your mouth and my cock and –”

“It does work that way, yes. We really need to take the edge off.”

“Edge?” Nate’s voice sounded high and tight.

Emrys grasped the root of Nate’s cock. “You’re so hard, Nathaniel. You’re going to cum before I even get undressed.”

Nate’s cock traitorously twitched and ached. “I – I – maybe!”

“Nothing to be ashamed of. You’re young. Inexperienced. And you’ll recover really fast. Now hold on,” Emrys said.

Nate gripped Emrys’ muscular shoulders. He flexed his fingers the moment he felt the older man’s breath ghost over the sensitive tip of his cock. Nate made a choking noise that almost sounded like pain, as Emrys licked the slit of his cock. He rose up on his toes as an intense tingling heat started at the tip of his cock and moved up his shaft.

“You taste so good. Fresh. I wonder if virgin has a taste,” Emrys hummed.

Nate let out a sharp breath. “You’re driving me nuts! You know that, right?”

Emrys grinned and then sucked the head of Nate’s cock into his mouth. The boy cried out. His grip on Emrys’ shoulders tightened until the older man grunted in pain. Nate released his grip minutely. Emrys’ lips opened and he swallowed drawing more and more of Nate’s cock into his mouth. Nate began to curl over Emrys’ back as the suction, heat and wet surrounded his cock, pulled his seed out of him, and made his body ignite.

Trembling, sweating and clawing at Emrys, he let out a moan as the older man pulled off until only the barest tip of Nate’s cock was in his mouth. Emrys’ tongue licked the slit again. Nate felt precum dribble out and clenched his buttocks as if that would stem the tide. He didn’t want to cum yet. Not yet. He wanted this to go on and on.

Emrys lapped up the precum. Nate watched as Emry's pink tongue slid over his lips where some of his precum had clotted like pearls. He groaned, as his balls seemed to get heavier and drew back up against his body. Heat was building up in his groin and streaking out to every part of him. His cock was like a hot molten bar. Everything tingled and sparked.

Emrys' mouth was back again. Nate's hips thrust forward. Emrys controlled his frantic movements, guiding Nate's cock again fully into his mouth and down into his throat until Emrys' lips touched Nate's balls. Nate had never thought of how it would feel to have someone else touching him like this. It was more than intimate. But then all thoughts were blown away as one of Emrys' hands slid between his thighs and rolled his balls between his fingers. Nate's toes curled even as his knees felt weak.

Emrys' other hand slid around to Nate's ass. The boy gasped and his ass cheeks clenched together uncontrollably as the older man stroked his crack. He teased Nate's ass until the boy couldn't help but release. Nate's breathing ratcheted up another notch. Emrys' shirt was ripped out of his pants by Nate's flailing hands. He raked his fingernails over Emrys' bare back. The ridges of the scars sent heated tingles up into his body. It was a connection to Emrys' magic. Then Emrys sucked hard on Nate's cock while his hand circled the tight pucker of Nate's anus and magic seemed like something minor and unremarkable.

Emrys pressed up lightly against Nate's opening and it was as if he had flipped a switch in the boy. Arousal, like a molten flood, burst from Nate. His orgasm just came. And he couldn't stop it. Emrys swallowed the first few gushes before pulling off and letting Nate's semen spray across his lips and chin. Nate's legs gave out entirely. Emrys helped him slide down onto the elevator's floor and joined him in a heap. Nate's harsh breathing filled the small space while Emrys contentedly licked off as much of the semen from his mouth and chin like a cat with a bowl full of cream.

"Are you alive? Or did your life force flow out with your semen?" Emrys chuckled in Nate's ear after a moment.

Nate made a sound that was halfway between a snarl and purr. His head rested on Emrys's shoulder and he couldn't quite lift it up yet.

"You did a number on my shirt as well. I don't think it will ever be the same," Emrys sighed. "I haven't gotten you to scream yet. But I will. I mean really let loose. So your vocal chords are raw the next day. Better not let you go near my clothes though if rending them useless is part of your sexual repertoire."

Nate managed to whap his shoulder ... lightly.

"Ah, you live though still no recognizable attempts at speech yet. I suppose I should be proud that I managed to suck your brains out." Emrys scrubbed his chin clean with his ruined shirt.

"Did you – you cum, too?" Nate asked. His one hand flopped uselessly into Emrys's lap. He felt and found Emrys still hard and relatively dry. "You didn't."

"I like to wait to cum outside of my pants. They're never quite the same when you go off in them and I like these pants."

"Your knees are dirty from kneeling," Nate said.

Emrys huffed. "The elevator – like everything in my home – is spotless. My knees are quite unmarked. Shall we go into the bedroom?"

"I don't know if I can get up. My pants are twisted around my knees," Nate said, plucking helplessly at his jeans.

"Let me help you. As you won't be needing these where we're going." Emrys pulled off Nate's shoes and pants. They slid into the elevator's corner with his shirt leaving Nate only in white socks and nothing else. When Nate tried to take them off, Emrys grabbed his wrists. "Don't. I find it sort of sexy. Young coed naked in my elevator."

Nate started to laugh and rolled against Emrys as his body still wanted to remain like a limp noodle. "Let's go into your room finally. We have to get you off."

Emrys wrapped his arms around the younger man. His lips trailed across Nate's brow. "I'd like to get off inside of you, Nathaniel, if that's all right with you."

Nate's breathing hitched. His mouth went dry. "Okay."

"Okay?" Emrys' eyes narrowed. "Okay doesn't sound like: yes, Emrys, take me!"

"Yes, Emrys take me!" Nate got out.

Emrys caressed his face. His smile became serious. "All joking aside, Nathaniel, we don't have to have sex today. It's all right. Really."

Nate let a slow smile cross his face. "I know. You would never – never force me to do anything."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far. I can be quite commanding when I put my mind to it. Wrap your innocence around my little finger and make you do as I command."

Nate grabbed one of Emrys' hands and laced their fingers together. Emrys was teasing, but there was that dark light in his eyes. Nate wanted to wipe it out. To make it so that it would never be there. "You would never force me."

Emrys looked down. "I wish I could say that you will always be safe with me. The last thing I ever want to do is to hurt you. All I can promise is if my heritage ever catches up with me that I will try to leave you before I do something unfortunate."

Nate's chest seized at the thought of Emrys leaving. His life would be drained of all color and purpose. That sounded melodramatic, but he knew it was true.

"You're worried about the Frost legacy in you, but you forget that I'm a Frost, too," Nate reminded him gently. He decided that a touch of humor was the way to go to get Emrys to come back fully into the light. "I'm safe

with you and I really, really want to have you take me hard and put me away wet.”

Emrys let out a soft laugh. “Well, that sounds definitive then.”

Nate cupped Emrys’ face and leaned against the older man. “I know my own mind. I know what I want to do. And its to be with you.” They kissed lightly with tongues only coming out after several almost chaste closed-mouth kisses. “You know, this is incredibly weird to be naked against you clothed.”

“One time I’m going to fuck you when we’re both clothed,” Emrys said. “And in public. Where anyone could come in on us. Like at the opera.”

Nate just shook his head. He had a feeling that Emrys could talk him into doing that and a lot more.

“Speaking of fucking, are we going to do this in the shower or bed?”

“Bed. You deserve a bed covered in sunlight. And then maybe being fucked again in the shower if your ass isn’t too sore,” Emrys added with a cheeky grin. “Besides I love to get sweaty and filthy during sex. It feels so much satisfying.”

“My finicky cat getting dirty? Oh no!”

“At times, it’s the best thing to do.”

“Then let’s do it.” Nate struggled to his feet. His legs were slightly wobbly, but he leaned down and tugged Emrys up beside him. He punched the open door button on the elevator.

Emrys ran a finger down his spine and dipped into the crack between Nate’s buttocks. The boy couldn’t help the appreciative shiver that ran through him. He knew he was blushing.

The doors opened to show Emrys’ bedroom. Nate blinked as the sunlight blinded him temporarily. The room slowly resolved. His impression of a flowing maple floor and simple, almost Spartan furnishings, were revealed. It was beautiful and airy. Nothing in the room distracted from the view.

Those floor to ceiling windows made it seem like there was nothing between the viewer and the sea.

Nate found himself walking over to the glass and staring out. The water glittered. There were foamy whitecaps that crashed on a beach about fifty feet below. Emrys stood beside him, staring out, too.

“It’s beautiful,” Nate said. “I used to ride on my bike past this house all the time and wonder what the view was like. Never really thought I would see it unless we were going to cater a party here and I was the help.”

“You wouldn’t have liked the prior owner … though he might have liked you. Old, crusty, his eyes forever on young men’s butts. He was even looking at mine. I paid extra just to get him to stop.” Emrys slid an arm around Nate’s bare shoulders.

Nate knocked his bare hip against Emrys’ clothed one. “Lucky then that the new owner is so much cooler.”

“Yes, cooler, handsomer, urbaner and awesomer over all.” Emrys turned his head and buried his face in Nate’s hair, breathing in deeply. “And he feels pretty damned lucky right now, too.”

Nate grinned. “That bed looks awfully … pristine. Are you sure you’re going to be all right massing it?”

He curled against Emrys as they faced back towards the bed. It was a simple, large mattress on a low, wooden frame. There was a spotless, white comforter with two pillows also covered in crisp white sheets.

“Muss? That’s why I have a maid. It’s amazing. I leave and it’s all messy and come back and it’s perfect.” Emrys shrugged.

“Good.” Nate broke off from Emrys and launched himself, white socks and all, onto the bed. The comforter rumpled and bunched up beneath him. Nate stretched his arms and legs wide and started making an angel in the comforter like he would have in snow. He heard Emrys whine slightly as his precious bed was mussed. He laughed hard into the pillow that smelled of Emrys’ expensive cologne.

“Damn you, Nathaniel. Now to avoid watching my beautiful bed being molested, I must molest you.”

Nate turned over onto his back and slid his arms beneath his head while watching Emrys through hooded eyes. Emrys was toeing off his shoes and taking off his shirt at the same time.

“Can you rub your tummy and pat your head at the same time, too?” Nate laughed.

“I am capable of many feats.”

Emrys’ ruined shirt flopped onto the floor. His shoes went flying. Nate grinned wider. Emrys was making a mess and it was fun. He licked his lips as Emrys slid off his pants. The sunlight limned him in a golden glow. Nate could just barely see the ridges of some of his scars. His hands twitched as he wanted to touch them again. He remembered the electric feel every time he did.

Pants were now gone and Emrys stood up. His pubic hair was as dark around his cock as it was on his head. His cock was long and thick. Nate shifted his hips. How was he going to get that monster inside of him? He was going to trust that it could happen. That Emrys had made it happen with others even though that thought caused a slight twisting sensation in his gut.

Emrys spread his hands to his sides. “Do you like what you see?”

“As if anyone couldn’t.”

Emrys gave a jaunty little grin. “I have good genes. Well, in the body perspective. Everything else is a little shakier.”

“What God giveth with one hand, he taketh away with the other,” Nate intoned.

“And I’m going to do some taketh-ing right now.”

Emrys prowled over to the bed. The muscles in his body moved fluidly under his skin. That was when Nate noticed that, unlike himself, Emrys had

no tan line. The other man seemed uniformly pale. But then Emrys was crawling up his body and tan lines weren't as fascinating any longer as Emrys' cock dragged along the interior of Nate's right leg, leaving a trail of precum in its wake.

Nate's breath caught and he remained terribly still as Emrys propped both hands on either side of his head and both legs on the outsides of his thighs. Emrys slowly leaned down and kissed Nate. His cock softly touching Nate's belly, leaving little dots of cum on his skin. Nate moaned into the kiss. His own cock was hardening again.

Nate's hands left the bed and wrapped around Emrys' neck, drawing the older man down flush on top of him. His and Emrys' cocks slide together between their bodies. A tingling started in Nate's belly again. The kisses were deep and long with Emrys only letting them take the briefest of breaks to grab air before diving back in again.

Nate's hands slowly left Emrys' neck and glided down his shoulders. The raised ridges teased his palms. Beyond that there was that slight vibration that ran up his arms and into his chest. Something inside him vibrated with it. His hands paused on Emrys' pectoral muscles.

Emrys drew back. His eyes were hooded and his mouth open and wet.
"Feels so good between us. The magic. Do you feel it, Nathaniel?"

Nate nodded. "It's like a pulse. A vibration."

Emrys' took his right hand and slid it over his body. The older man's eyes closed and his cock quivered as he drew Nate's fingers across his nipples where the scars circled as well. The dark nipples peaked and Nate squeezed them lightly. Emrys shivered. He brought Nate's hand up to his mouth and kissed and licked Nate's palm. Nate spread his fingers wide and pushed up against Emrys' mouth. Emrys' eyes opened so that slits of darkness looked down at Nate.

"I never let anyone touch my scars. Not even ..." Emrys' voice dropped off.

"There was someone else you cared about?"

Emrys' smile did not reach his eyes. "I thought he was my friend. I thought he had saved me from ... from the evils of witchcraft."

Nate blinked. "Who—"

"Not now, Nathaniel. Another time. I don't want to think of him here. Not with you." Emrys kissed his palm again and pressed it against his cheek.

Nate massaged Emrys' shoulders and arms. His hands skated again up and down Emrys' front. He hadn't touched Emrys' cock yet that day. The head was wide and flared. The slit was swollen and glistening with cum. Nate licked his lips.

"I want to taste this. You. Can I?" Nate asked. One finger poised over the top of Emrys' cock.

"As if anyone would say no?" Emrys chuckled.

Nate tenderly swiped a fingertip over Emrys' cock. The slit pulled slightly open as he dragged that fingertip through the precum. Emrys watched him with lustful anticipation. Nate tasted the cum. It was salty and musky. It was incredibly real. He opened his eyes. He hadn't realized he had shut them.

One of Emrys' hands was on suddenly Nate's shoulder, urging him to turn over. Seeing the questioning look in Emrys' eyes, he explained, "I want to prepare you. I feel that if I keep looking at your lovely face for much longer, I might be the one cumming too early."

Nate wanted to make a funny quip, but none came. Instead, he just nodded. Emrys' eyes were nearly all black from his pupils expanding with desire despite the gorgeous sunlight that splashed over them. Nate was shaking slightly. His body though did what he wanted as he turned himself onto his stomach, resting his chin on one pillow.

Emrys grabbed the other pillow, lifted Nate's hips up and slid it beneath him. Nate bit his lower lip as the sensuous slide of cool cotton had has his cock fully jerking to attention.

“I want to first use my mouth and then lube. You need to be as stretched and relaxed as you can be,” Emrys said. His voice sounded low and deep like a rushing stream.

He kept a hand on Nate’s lower back while he reached for the low night table that Nate hadn’t noticed that was beside the bed. He heard the sound of a drawer opening and Emrys fumbling with something inside. The older man gave out a slightly hysterical chuckle.

“What?” Nate asked.

“I’m shaking,” Emrys admitted, showing Nate his hand, which was trembling slightly.

“I’m making you that excited?” Nate asked.

“Always, Nathaniel, always.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: SEX MAGIC

“Wait, I want to face the windows.” Nate urged Emrys off of him.

They both moved around so that they were facing towards the floor to ceiling windows. The light was spectacular. Nate could see the creamy white caps of the waves against the dark blue of the water. There were only a few puffy clouds soaring high overhead. The sunlight had a crystalline quality.

“Is it just me or does this seem more beautiful than it was before?” Nate asked.

Emrys was quiet for a long moment. “I believe you may be correct, Nathaniel.”

Nate craned his head around to look at the older man. Emrys had paused in stroking Nate’s lower back. “You look rather serious all of the sudden.”

“I do believe that we are about to affect the weather.” Emrys grinned at him, but there was something in his eyes that showed surprise and a little worry.

“You can’t be serious!”

Emrys allowed a slow smile to cross his lips. “Surely you’ve guessed by now that anything is possible? If you could bring a storm, why not sunshine?”

Nate considered that for a moment. “I guess you’re right. Well, I want to see it happen.”

Emrys placed a kiss on his lower back just bought the swell of his buttocks. “I hope to distract you from the weather.”

Nate wiggled his butt. “Get on it then.”

“You do know that you shouldn’t challenge me, right?”

“The spice of life is living on the edge,” Nate teased.

Emrys let out a huff of amused laughter. “Hold on while I get some supplies.”

The older man crawled over to the top of the bed near the simple nightstand. Nate heard him growl as he fought with the nightstand’s drawer. “The thing doesn’t have a lock! Why won’t it open?”

Nate muffled his laughter against the comforter. “So romantic, Emrys. So smooth.”

Emrys slapped his butt with an open palm. “Quiet you. Ah! It was just off the track.”

There was a scrapping sound as Emrys opened the drawer and fished out a tube of lube. Nate grabbed it and looked at it.

“Sounds so ... hygienic,” Nate remarked after reading the instructions.

“What did you expect? Apply for multiple orgasms? Screaming orgasms?” Emrys began to massage Nate’s legs, which had the boy opening them and purring. “Hand that back to me.” Nate flipped the tube

over his shoulder. It nearly hit Emrys' nose. "Careful boy! You could have killed me there."

"Sorry about that. Wouldn't want to mar your pretty face." Nate grinned and slid his hands beneath his head. His gaze trailed over to the windows. The light was so gorgeous. It made him feel calm, happy and ready for whatever was coming.

Emrys kneeled between Nate's spread legs. He grabbed the pillow that Nate had left behind and urged the boy to lift up his hips. Nate arched himself up and the cool pillow snugged beneath him.

"Keep your legs spread. God, you've got a nice ass," Emrys muttered.

"What constitutes a nice ass?"

"Good you asked. I am a connoisseur after all." Emrys began to massage Nate's butt. The boy gasped and pushed up into the powerful grip. "Yours is pleasantly pert. A nice swell from the curve of your back to the ripe melon bottom." He smoothed one hand from the base of Nate's spine along Nate's ass to his legs, cupping the base of his butt. "Highly defined musculature in the buttocks is also pleasing." Nate squeezed his ass to show off that musculature more. Then Emrys fingers were sliding between his ass cheeks. "And, of course, that which is hidden between them is quite a turn on."

"Fuck," Nate breathed onto his arm. His ass clenched again, but this time not consciously.

Emrys chuckled. "You know what's coming. Or at least you think you do."

"I just can't believe you're going to put your mouth there," Nate said.

"I told you I like to get dirty during sex."

"I'm clean! I hope anyways," Nate mumbled the last.

"I guess we will find out." Emrys was laughing.

Nate drew in a deep breath when Emrys began to kiss him all away from the top of the crevice between his ass cheeks to the bottom. He bit lightly into Nate's right butt cheek. There was pain, but pleasure, too, as Emrys' tongue swabbed the hurt. He stilled when Emrys parted his ass. Cooler air circulated around his anus. Nate had never thought about that part of him very much or how sensitive it appeared to be.

"When are you going to put your tongue there?"

"Tetchy, tetchy, Nathaniel. It's the waiting that makes it better," Emrys teased. His breath ghosted over Nate's opening. "Your anus is so tight and pink. I cannot wait to get inside of you."

"Then stop stalling."

"Patience, young padawan."

"Listen, *master*, patience might be a virtue but not when you're waiting to be fucked for the first time."

Emrys was rocking and laughing. "Master? Ah, master. I like how that sounds."

"Emrys!"

"All right. All right. It's not as if I'm not eager, too."

"Glad we're on the same page."

Then Emrys' mouth descended on his ass. Nate let out a hiss of surprise that quickly turned into a moan. He was lifting his ass up even as Emrys spread his butt cheeks wider. The older man's tongue lapped against the tight opening then probed the center of his anus.

"You're clean and tasty, too. Nice," he said.

Emrys' thumbs framed the tight hole and pulled it apart. His tongue fluttered hard against that spot. Heat built up in Nate's stomach and his cock twitched against the pillow. He began to hump himself on it.

“You’re a squirmer. Got to keep you in control.”

Emrys firmly gripped Nate’s hips as he lightly gnawed on the boy’s opening. Nate let out a soft whine as Emrys’ tongue pushed inside of him like a miniature cock. There was a the click of the tube being opened and then the nozzle was pressed into his opening. The gel felt cold as it was squeezed inside, but the fact that he could feel something going *inside* of him had Nate clawing at the bed sheets.

“I know it’s cold but it will warm up soon enough,” Emrys assured him. He rubbed a circular pattern on Nate’s lower back.

One of Emrys’ fingers slid inside Nate with a slow and steady push. He’d experienced it in the elevator, but on his stomach with his ass presented in the air, the penetration felt so much more intimate. And his cock wasn’t in Emrys‘ mouth, which seemed to short-circuit his entire brain entirely. Emrys‘ finger went further in, up to his knuckle. A soft cry exited the boy’s lips.

Emrys froze. “Are you in pain?”

Nate shook his head. “No, no, keep going.”

“There might be some … discomfort. But it’ll go away. I swear you won’t mind after awhile.”

“I’m already so hard,” Nate admitted with a huff of laughter.

“Good. Me, too.”

Nate felt Emrys’ cock brush against his inner thighs and he groaned. The sunlight had migrated over to the edge of the bed. It warmed the back of Nate’s head. Emrys began to pump his finger in and out of Nate. The boy’s breath started to come in soft gasps. His hips moved with Emrys’ motions.

“I’m going to put another finger in,” Emrys said.

“G—good. I’m not going anywhere — holy shit!”

“Pain?” Again, Emrys freezing and sounding like he would stop.

“No, no, good. Please!” Nate’s hands fisted in the comforter. There was pain but there was extreme pleasure, too. He didn’t want it to stop. He’d have to somehow moderate what he said in the heat of the moment to not encourage Emrys to worry about hurting him. Emrys being worried was sort of sweet.

“This will make all the pain worthwhile. Nathaniel, meet your prostate. Prostate, meet Nathaniel.”

Emrys crooked his fingers and Nate nearly levitated off the bed. A streak of pleasure went from inside his ass and streaked to his balls. His cock jerked and a gush of precum wet the pillow beneath him.

“You like that. Good. I’m going to try and hit that spot every single time I slide into you,” Emrys promised.

There was a touch of strain in his voice. Nate looked over his shoulder and saw the normally mirthful Emrys looking rather serious and intent. There was even a few trails of sweat trickling down from his hairline. Nate reached back and stroked Emrys’ cheek even as his body had to accept Emrys’ hand going deeper inside of him.

“It’s okay. I’m okay. You’re not hurting me,” Nate said softly.

Emrys leaned down and kissed him tenderly. “I know what it’s like to be hurt during sex and not in the fun way. That will never happen between us.”

A million questions popped into Nate’s mind about who, how, when and where. And if the guy was still around Nate was going to go pound him. Maybe electrocute him in an unexpected thundershower. No one hurt Emrys and got away with it. But now was not the time to ask. He wasn’t sure when that time would be though. It was yet another hurt that his lover had suffered and he hated it.

But then Emrys was giving him an impish smile and speaking, “I’m going to stretch my fingers as I draw out and bring them together as I thrust them in. I promise to hit your prostate each time.”

Nate just nodded. Emrys then rubbed that spot inside of him that made liquid heat build in his balls and cock. The boy's hips pressed down onto the pillow as he tried to get friction on his cock. Emrys did what he described. Nate felt his back passage being pulled apart as Emrys' fingers drew out. Then there was the slow thrust inside and rub of his prostate. Nate was panting and his hips were rising and falling rapidly without conscious thought.

Emrys squirted more gel inside of the boy and Nate half wondered why until he felt a third finger push inside of him. His back arched and he thrust up to meet that downward push. Emrys was inside of him all the way up to the knuckles with three fingers. He stretched them wide and Nate moaned. Emrys kissed the base of Nate's spine as he continued to pump his hand up and down. The boy tipped his hips up higher.

"Please, harder, faster," Nate got out.

"Your wish is my command."

Emrys complied. Short strokes in with long scrapes of his fingertips over Nate's prostate than a slow drag out of his ass, stretching him until it ached. Nate had begun to make a low whine. His cock was so hard and wet and dripping. Emrys drew his fingers out for the last time. He kissed Nate's right butt cheek.

"I think you're ready," Emrys' voice sounded strained. Another squish of the lube and a frantic swishing of Emrys' hand over his cock, slicking it to enter Nate.

The boy turned on his back. Emrys tried to grab his hip to keep him where he was.

"I want us to face one another," Nate explained.

"It'll hurt more," Emrys warned. His gaze flickered over Nate's face.

Nate drew his knees to his chest and spread his thighs. "I know. But I want to see you."

It was Emrys' turn to make a tight whine. His cock twitched in his lubed hands. "Fuck, Nathaniel, I'm trying not to cum here."

"Does it turn you on to see me like this? Slicked up and spreading my legs for you?" Nate lowered his voice. He hoped it sounded sexy and not hoarse or worse ridiculous.

Emrys squeezed the base of his cock hard as he gave Nate a quirked smile. "Just looking at you, precious, turns me on. Now to make you stop talking in complete sentences."

"Can't wait." Nate grinned.

Emrys positioned his cock at the opening to Nate's body. The boy sucked in air. Emrys stroked his face.

"It's better if you're relaxed. Tightening up now will undo all the work we've done," Emrys said.

Nate held onto his thighs harder as he tried to drain the tension from his ass. Emrys shooed Nate's hands away and moved the boy's legs until they were wrapped around his waist. His cock pushed against Nate's opening. A million nerve endings lit up and Nate's mouth was opening as he began to pant.

"God, I want you inside of me," Nate murmured.

The sunlight seemed to get brighter. It landed on Emrys' upper chest. The scars looked delicate and almost beautiful. Swirls around his nipples. A starburst pattern on one shoulder. Concentric circles going around his throat and into his hair. Nate couldn't see his cock. He hoped that no knife had ever touched Emrys there. He moved his hands from the bed and covered Emrys' hands, which framed his hips. Emrys linked their fingers together and Nate felt a surge of power between them.

"Whoa! What was that?" Nate's eyes went wide. That was when he noticed that the scars on Emrys were softly glowing as if made of neon blue cord. "Emrys! Your scars!"

The older man was already staring down at his arms where the glow was strongest. At first, his brow was furrowed and there was a tightness around his jaw, but then he was smiling and a look of wonder appeared in his eyes. He let out surprised laughter. “It’s … beautiful.”

“Now you see yourself the way I do,” Nate whispered.

Emrys‘ eyes raised to his. “I try not to look at myself. I try to ignore the scars. But you force me to look and now … now you’ve made them beautiful.”

“Not me …”

“No, you’re right. *Us.* This is us. Look how the glow is strongest where we’re touching.” Emrys laughed delightedly again. “And I thought we were just going to make the day unbearably sunny. Let’s keep going and see what else we can do.”

Nate nodded. “Please. Please. Want you inside.”

Emrys pushed his hips forward. The head of his cock, broad and thick, sank in half an inch. Nate’s anus was still fighting to keep it out.

“Take a breath.” Emrys touched Nate’s chest and a bloom of blue light sank inside of him. “What was that?”

“Something good. Oh, God, it feels so good!”

Nate breathed and the head of Emrys’ cock pushed through the last of his resistance. Nate arched as the wide cockhead was inside of him. Sweat trailed down Emrys’ temples. His eyes were wide and he looked a little shell-shocked. The blue glow radiated strongest now in his belly, stretching up from where his cock was lodged in Nate’s backside.

“I’m inside of you. I can you everywhere,” Emrys whispered.

The alien, and yet *right*, feeling of being breached stole any words away. Nate pushed himself further onto Emrys’ cock. He wanted the man deeper inside. Emrys shook his head as if to clear it. He squeezed Nate’s hips and then began to solidly push forward. Nate’s tender tissues were breached.

He knew he would hurt later, but right now all he felt was the connection and the pleasure. He let out a huff of a cry as Emrys' cock brushed all the way along his prostate. His hips danced against the pillow and his cock bobbed eagerly between them. Dots of precum landed on his stomach.

"I'm all the way in. Nathaniel, I'm all the way in you," Emrys said.

Nate felt the press of Emrys' balls against his ass. The scratch of pubic hair felt more intimate than anything he'd experienced before. He could feel the pulse of the older man's cock deep inside of him. His anus was stretched to what felt like his breaking point. Emrys held himself still. His body bent over Nate. Nate feathered his hands through Emrys' hair and drew the man down for a kiss. He did not think that Emrys could go any further inside of him, but that slight shifting of their bodies allowed him to go deeper still.

Sunlight and the blue light from Emrys' scars seemed to mix and form a wondrous clarity. Nate could feel every living being in the house. Even those that he had not truly known of in the servant's quarters. He felt the fish below them, riding the current. And the birds that floated high on the air. He knew of the neighbors and if he concentrated on them he could know their thoughts.

Nate could see himself reflected in Emrys' eyes and knew that the older man was experiencing the same thing that he was. A connection. Emrys laced one of their hands together and pressed it against the bed while the other held onto Nate's hip. The connection to the whole world focused in on just the two of them.

Nate nodded as he caught the meaning in Emrys' eyes. The older man was going to move. It was time.

The first pull out was slow. Nate's chest shuddered as he felt every inch of that movement. His ass was hot and sensitive despite the copious amounts of lube and stretching. He knew that he would feel it later, but he was glad for that. He wanted to feel it. To remember every moment.

Emrys slid back in until his balls were once again pressed flush against Nate's ass. Nate lifted his hips wantonly with the second thrust in. Emrys'

tightened his hold on their joined hands. The pace increased until there was a steady slap of Emrys' balls against his ass and the bed frame was hitting the wall. The friction between them grew. So hot and hard. Nate's cock bounced off of his belly only to hit Emrys' and to be forced back down again.

Emrys ground his hips against Nate's ass as he went deep. Nate's prostate sent flowing waves of pleasure to his cock and balls. Nate was letting out a low whine without realizing it. Emrys' long strokes became short and frantic. Sweat now dripped freely. A few drops hung from the edge of his chin. Nate licked them off. Moving up like that drew Emrys' cock more firmly against his prostate.

"There! THERE!" Nate cried out.

Emrys melded their mouths together as he angled his thrusts towards that spot. There was nothing gentle at that moment about their lovemaking and Nate didn't want there to be. Hard, strong, jagged thrusts that hit his prostate with every stab of Emrys' cock inside of him.

The light seemed to grow impossibly bright as Emrys slammed inside of him one last time. All Nate could see was Emrys' eyes. He felt the older man's cock spasm inside of him and then the hot gush of semen filled him. Nate's cock drew tight against his body before he, too, came. It felt like his soul was rushing out between them.

At that moment, Nate thought he heard thunder in the distance and then the light expanded in a wave that hit the horizon. His spirit followed the light until it ended. And there, at the edge of everything, Nate thought he saw, for just a moment, a black gulf open up and *something* stare back at him. The light began to pour into the gulf, into this *something*. It devoured the light.

Nate's breath caught. He fled from the darkness, but he feared he would not get back in time before it swallowed him, too. But then Emrys curled around him. His lips on Nate's forehead brought the boy back to his body. Nate's eyelids flew open. The sun was shining brightly. Emrys was

stroking his sweat-dampened hair. There was love in the older man's eyes. The smile on Emrys' lips died slightly as he noticed Nate's expression.

"Nathaniel, what is it? Did I hurt you? Are you — what's wrong?" Emrys held his chin.

"It's not you. It's not what we did. That was ... that was earthshattering. I'm okay. I'm all right. I'm all right, because I'm back with you. Just hold me, Emrys. Please," Nate begged. He couldn't speak of the darkness just then. He wanted to feel only the warmth of Emrys' body beside him and not the terrible chill of the darkness dancing against his skin.

"Of course. I'm here. It's all right, Nathaniel. It's all right."

Emrys held him tightly, saying soothing words, and stroking his hair. Nate clung to him and the light, trying to forget what he saw.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: CAST A SPELL

"My ass hurts," Nate said as he pulled on one of Emrys' pale blue, button-down shirts. The older man had insisted he wear something 'clean' as opposed to the clothes they had shed like fall leaves in the elevator.

Emrys' arms wound around him. "Well, Nathaniel, I stuck my dick inside you again and again rather vigorously."

Nate snorted. "Thanks for the biology lesson."

Emrys patted his ass lightly. "Just trying to help."

Nate snorted again. "I'm bummed we couldn't do more in the shower."

"If you think your ass hurts now, what would it feel like after I pounded into you again? No, Nathaniel, moderation today is a good plan." Emrys kissed his temple and ran his face into Nate's hair, breathing in deeply.

"I know. It was nice to touch and kiss, too." Nate leaned back into Emrys' arms, purring contentedly.

“Yes, it was and is.” Emrys’ lips ran along his jaw. A nip of teeth and slick slide of tongue that had Nate arching and his heart pounding. “I would have let you take me in there, but I think we need to get a few practices in with you before then.”

Nate’s eyes widened. “You’re going to let me be inside you?”

Emrys stilled for a moment as if truly perplexed by Nate’s question. “Of course. We are able to switch-hit, Nathaniel, so why wouldn’t we? I like receiving as much as giving. I just want you to understand the mechanics better before you’re the one giving.”

“Oh,” Nate said with a pleased smile. “I’m going to be inside of you.”

“Yes, yes, you will.” The older man resumed kissing his throat but then Nate’s stomach rumbled loudly. Emrys laughed and placed a final kiss on Nate’s cheek. “I think your body is telling us that it needs food.”

The sun had fallen near the horizon. It was after five and Nate wondered how the others were doing downstairs. He turned in Emrys’ arms and stretched his arms to the side. “Do I look presentable?”

Emrys’ critical eye ran up and down his body. In addition to the shirt, Nate had on a pair of Emrys’ designer jeans that almost fit him. He was standing on the cuffs. The shirt, too, was large, but Nate just rolled up the sleeves.

Emrys shook his head and clucked. “You look like a little boy dressed up in your daddy’s clothes.”

Nate glanced down at his body. “You’re not that much bigger than me. I don’t get why the clothes are huge.”

“It’s all a question of proportions, Nathaniel. We have a similar build, but I’m several inches taller than you,” Emrys explained. “We must get you proper clothes.”

“I do have proper clothes back in my own closet,” Nate harrumphed as he stuck his feet in his sneakers and laced them up.

“You forget that I have seen the contents of your closet and know that your statement is not true.” Emrys flashed him a grin as he looked at himself in the mirror.

“Finicky cat looks good.” Nate drew up behind him, wrapping his arms around Emrys’ waist.

Emrys did look incredibly handsome. He was wearing a slate gray turtleneck and a pair of darker slacks. He had pushed the sleeves of the turtleneck up so that his muscled forearms were revealed. Nate caressed the scarred skin. Emrys liked the touch, but Nate sensed more than saw him move to pull the sleeves down. He grasped Emrys’ hand, stopping him.

“If you’re finished petting me, Nathaniel, I’d like to go downstairs.” Emrys addressed Nate’s reflection in the mirror.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed about those scars, you know. You’re beautiful. They don’t … detract from you,” Nate said.

Emrys gave him a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes as he tugged the sleeves down to his wrists. “It’s not really vanity,” seeing Nate’s incredulous look, he amended, “not *only* vanity that makes me hide them, Nathaniel.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t care for people who actually know what they represent to view them.” He turned around to face Nate, cupping his chin. “And those who don’t know – other than your esteemed self – I don’t care to have them gawked at.”

“I just hate that your parents’ actions even now make you feel like you have to cover up,” Nate explained. He turned his head and kissed the older man’s palms.

“You want to save me. That damned hero nature,” Emrys said softly. “But this harm happened long ago and it cannot be undone. Besides, I have benefited from what was done to me. I am much more powerful because of it.”

“Power isn’t everything.”

Emrys laughed. “Oh, Nathaniel, power is most definitely everything.”

“It had nothing to do with what happened here, between us. And I’m pretty sure you found that as awesome as I did,” Nate objected.

Emrys looked over at the still rumpled, dirty bed. The maids would come after they went downstairs. “I wish to repeat what we did as often as possible.”

“Exactly! And it’s not about power so—”

“Are you sure?” Emrys waggled his eyebrows at him. “Maybe instead of your body, I really want you for your magic.”

“Right. Sure. My power. That’s why you got that goofy expression on your face when you looked at me after we made love.” Nate walked over to the elevator. He got inside and gestured for Emrys to come to him. “Let’s go. I’m sure the others are wondering what’s happened to us.”

Emrys joined him in the elevator. “I assure you that the others know *exactly* what happened to us. You are a screamer after all.”

Nate playfully hit Emrys’ arm with one hand while punching the button for the first floor with the other. The elevator silently slid down the shaft. The elevator opened up in a short hallway that led into a living room overlooking the sea.

Daniel, Turner and Abbie were sprawled out on a white leather sofa. Two pizza boxes were on the glass and steel table. There were half a dozen empty cans of Diet Coke alongside the boxes that were dark with grease. The delicious smell of deep dish pizza wafted over to Nate from them. He was about to hurry over to grab a piece when Emrys made some strange sound between a squawk and a strangled cry.

At the sound, Daniel froze with a piece of pizza halfway to his mouth. Turner was busy digging another slice out of one of the boxes, but his head

flew up. Abbie's nose was deeply buried into an old book. She alone did not look over.

"Emrys, what's wrong?" Nate asked, touching his boyfriend's arm.

Emrys continued to make choked sounds as his hands gestured at the others and the meal debris. "Pizza. Pizza!"

"Uh, yeah, you told them to get food and there it is!" Nate said.

"Pizza in HERE!" Emrys screeched.

"What's wrong with it in here?" Nate blinked at the older man. What was the matter with the older man?

"Is he having a fit?" Turner asked.

"It is the sitting room NOT the eating room!" Emrys announced.

"Definitely having a fit," Daniel agreed sagely. "What the hell is an *eating* room?"

"This is NOT an eating room! Do you not see the white, pristine furniture that is now threatened with grease and tomato sauce? And Diet Coke stains on the rug?" Emrys' arms flung wide. "It will never recover."

"The room is fine. The furniture looks great. Besides—"

"Besides?" Emrys' voice rose.

"You're rich." Nate bumped his hip against Emrys'. "You can get something new."

"Yes, but I should not have to, Nathaniel. There is a dining room! There is a kitchen! There are many spaces to eat in this thirty-thousand square foot home, but – but – but they choose HERE! They chose to – to *contaminate* it!" The last was almost a wail.

"He's mental," Turner whispered.

"Is he going to like hex us or something?" Daniel asked.

Emrys' eyes narrowed. "Maybe I should!"

Daniel pointed to Abbie. "It was her idea!"

Abbie didn't even bother looking up from her book, clearly ignoring Emrys' finicky cat meltdown. Whatever she was reading was clearly fascinating to her.

Nate laughed behind his hand and shook his head. He took Emrys by the arm and dragged him over to the unoccupied couch that looked out at the ocean and sat him down. "This room has the best view and since it's already *contaminated* we might as well eat here, too. Let me get you a piece of pizza."

"But—but ... fine." Emrys' shoulder slumped as if he had lost a terrible battle. "You are right. It is ... ruined. So why not continue to sully it."

"Leather is really durable. I don't think anything's ruined." When a withering look came from Emrys, Daniel tried to hide against the sofa, snarfing his pizza quietly. Turner joined him in pretending to be a stone statue that ate lots of cheese.

Nate grabbed one of the thin, bone-white plates off the stack on the floor. Again Emrys made that whining sound as he stared at the plate in Nate's hand. "What's wrong now?"

"We're eating off the good china. *Pizza on the good china!*" the older man breathed.

"*This is your good china,*" Abbie murmured without looking up. "It hardly seemed better than paper plates in my opinion. But I guess taste is ... uhm, subjective."

"I'll have you know that these plates are handmade in Japan. You can see sunlight through them if you hold them up to the window yet they are incredibly strong." Emrys had this scalded look on his face.

"Then they won't be harmed by deep dish pizza." Nate bit his lower lip to stop from laughing again. He slipped a piece of pizza, dripping with cheese

and sauce onto a plate and placed it on Emrys' lap before he served himself. Nate didn't wait a second before digging into his piece.

"What are you reading, Abbie?" Nate asked after he had demolished half a slice.

"It is actually a history of the Families. It is Frost-centric, which in this case is a good thing," she explained. "As your unique powers seem to stem from that side as much as your Whitney heritage."

"The entire history of the Families is Frost-centric." Emrys sniffed.

Nate was glad to see him distracted from the alleged contamination of his sitting room to being annoyed on behalf of his lineage. It seemed safer.

"Only because the Frosts have had a flair for the dramatic and have thrust themselves into everything." Abbie flicked the page over. "Not to mention a penchant for dealing in the darker magics that always cause trouble."

"Anything about demons, Demon Eating, necromancy or stuff like that in there?" Nate asked.

"I haven't gotten very far and, unfortunately, this particular chronicler was more interested in the sordid side of things like affairs, marriages, illegitimate births, etcetera. I'll let you know if I find something though," Abbie said.

"Did you actually do what you were supposed to and call the members of the Council?" Emrys licked sauce off his lower lip.

Abbie's eyes rose from the pages and she pinned Emrys with a frosty stare. Emrys grinned at her, clearly hoping to see her react and stick him with one of her barbs.

Turner let out a laugh. "You are kidding, right? This is Abbie we're talking about here. It was the first thing she did!"

"Just checking. Girl Wonder here seems so absorbed in ancient history that I thought she was forgetting the present." Emrys took another bite of pizza with a relishing grin.

If looks could kill, Abbie's would have send Emrys' corpse through the window.

"He's trying to get under your skin, Abbie, because of the ... *pizza contamination*," Nate said the last with a 'whooo' sound.

Daniel kicked Nate's shin and hissed, "Don't remind him or he'll start moaning again!"

"I was not moaning! I was overcome with a sense of disbelief that anyone would think to bring pizza in this pristine setting and –"

Nate stuffed some of his crust in Emrys' mouth. The other man narrowed his eyes at him, but ate it all the same. Nate grabbed another piece for himself from the box. Sex had made him hungry. His ass twinged slightly and he moved to take pressure off it. But there was a thrill that he actually ached from having sex not all that long ago. And it was so good. Despite the discomfort, he wanted to do it again and again. He wanted to sleep beside Emrys all night, wake up with the morning light streaming in on them, gilding their bodies in a golden light, and kiss Emrys back to consciousness.

Daniel's fingers were suddenly in front of Nate's face, snapping. "Earth to Nate. Earth to Nate."

"What?" Nate colored. "What's wrong?"

"You went all ... googly-eyed," Turner said with a coughed laugh against the back of one hand.

"I was just thinking!" Nate's color flared hotter.

"I think we can guess what you were thinking about," Turner said.

"What – no, I – you're – this – I was thinking about the mission! The mission!" Nate babbled.

Emrys' arm went around his shoulders. "I'm afraid it's apparent to everyone, Nathaniel, that when you think of me and sex, your brain malfunctions."

“Please let’s not talk about you, Nate and sex!” Daniel moaned, throwing his head back against the cushions in mock despair.

“Don’t worry, Decoy, perhaps one day you, too, will lose your virginity,” Emrys said. “It won’t be someone as good looking, intelligent and rich as me. But perhaps they won’t have bad breath and body odor. Something to shoot for.”

It was Daniel’s turn to flush. “Who says I’m a virgin? You didn’t tell him that, did you, Nate?”

Nate’s mouth was full of pizza. A strand of cheese was stretched between his mouth and the slice when Daniel turned those wide eyes on him. He couldn’t speak, but he tried to shake his head. The cheese jiggled dangerously and he had to stop. Emrys thought saved him from his non-answer.

“While Nathaniel and I have few secrets from one another, I can assure you that talking about your sex life is not something we share. It was an educated, and quite clearly, accurate guess,” Emrys said.

Daniel’s arms crossed over his chest. “Just cause I haven’t had sex doesn’t mean that I haven’t had the opportunity to!”

“Yes, your imagination offers you many opportunities, I’m sure,” Emrys murmured.

“Maybe I’ve just been waiting for someone special! Have you thought of that?” Daniel asked triumphantly.

“Special means? Breathing? With a pulse?” Emrys flashed a wicked smile and Daniel was as red as a beet.

“You’ve gotten your revenge for the pizza now,” Nate said, slapping Emrys’ thigh. “Don’t tease him anymore.”

Emrys’ head tipped back against the cushions. “Ah, fine, Decoy, I’m sure you’ll find your Mrs. Decoy and have many little Decoys running about in no time.”

"I'm just eighteen! I don't want a serious relationship!" Daniel cried as if Emrys' words had the magical possibility of coming true and entrapping him in a relationship with 2.5 children in the next five minutes.

"I thought you were waiting for someone special," Abbie said, turning on Daniel a critical gaze. "Special meaning someone to spend your life with. Special meaning someone you'd want to have children with ... if you want children."

He shifted uncomfortably under her regard. "Well, yeah, but – but maybe someone a little – uhm, you know, uhm ... less special to start out with? Like someone that wants to go steady and uh, have sex, but doesn't want to settle down yet!"

Abbie rolled her eyes. Turner laughed quietly and shook his head. Nate grinned down at his plate.

"So what were the results of your calls, Abigail? Will the Council meet with us?" Emrys asked.

She nodded, put a book mark in her book and shut it, pushing it to the side, and pulling her plate of pizza towards her. She had a knife and fork that she used to cut her pizza into bite-sized pieces. "They are actually having meeting tonight and have invited us to attend."

"How very convenient," Emrys said with a slight frown.

"That's a good thing, right? I mean we don't want to wait with that demon on the loose doing who knows what," Nate said. In his mind, the sooner they could purge the demon from Mr. Blackwell, the better.

"It seemed to me that they were ... *unsurprised* by my call," Abbie said.

"Maybe they were just pretending to be *unsurprised*," Daniel said. "You know to seem all-knowing or something."

"Abbie's good at seeing through people's feigned knowledge," Turner said. "If she says they were *unsurprised* then they were."

“So what we’re thinking here is that they’ve been aware that a demon is running around in your dad’s body and they haven’t done anything about it?” Nate shook his head.

“It is a disturbing thought, isn’t it? I’m trying not to think it though.” Abbie’s one hand clenched around her fork. “Because if that is true then one of two other things must be true.”

“What things?” Daniel asked.

“First, they know he is possessed, but are *unable* to help him and that leaves us in the same position we are now with no one to assist us or teach Nate,” Abbie said.

“That is a possibility. It is a powerful demon that the Whitneys, masterful practitioners of witchcraft, could not even control,” Emrys said mildly. “Further, Demon Eating is an esoteric power. And besides, they wouldn’t know that Nate is a Demon Eater to begin with.”

“And what’s the other alternative?” Daniel asked.

“Second, they know he is possessed, but are *unwilling* to help him,” Abbie said. This possibility entailed a tighter squeeze on her fork.

“Why would they do that? The demon wants to kill everybody and bring about Armageddon or something!” Daniel’s gaze flickered between Abbie and Emrys.

“They may want Armageddon, Daniel. They might believe that in such a world they would have more power,” Emrys said.

“That’s crazy!” Daniel burst out. “That thing isn’t going to grant anybody power but itself!”

“That statement shows that you have a greater understanding of the demon in one encounter than most people do,” Abbie said.

“It offered Nate power if Nate helped it,” Turner said.

“Which I would never do,” Nate gritted out.

“No, of course not,” Turner said with an apologetic smile. “I just meant that it clearly wouldn’t be above offering the Council a deal even if it never intended to honor it.”

“I think we must go into this meeting under the assumption that at least one, if not more, or even *all* of the Council, have been compromised,” Emrys said.

“So we’re conceivably walking into a trap?” Nate stared hard at Emrys. The older man nodded. “But why bother having the Council trap us when the demon had its chance to take us out at the asylum?”

“Maybe it’s just doing it for fun. Seeing how far people will abase themselves to rule in Hell rather than serve in Heaven,” Turner said darkly.

“That is a possibility. Sewing destruction and pain seems up its alley,” Emrys agreed.

“It wants you to help it, Nate. Maybe *needs* you to.” Abbie chewed her lower lip, her eyes going unfocused as he thought. “I keep thinking about what it said to you back at the asylum. I really don’t think that it can accomplish its plan without you. But to make you help it will take more than just offering your dad’s freedom. It will take something more.”

“What more?” Nate felt a sliver of unease move through him.

“Desperation,” Abbie said suddenly. “If you are desperate, feel you have nowhere to turn, that we are beset by enemies on all sides ... maybe you’ll do the only thing you can to save yourself and those you care about.”

“The only thing I would do is try to take it out,” Nate said.

“Maybe that’s what it needs you to try to do,” Abbie said.

“That’s a cheery thought that what I try to do to save us will only create the Armageddon we’re trying to avoid,” Nate said faintly.

“Wow, dude, that’s a sucky thing if it’s true,” Daniel said with a glum face.

Emrys suddenly pushed off the couch and clapped his hands together. “And that’s why we must trust no one, but each other.” He frowned. “Perhaps not even each other.”

Nate grabbed his pant leg. “We *can* trust one another.”

Emrys saw Nate’s desperate look and finally he nodded. “Yes, the other way lies madness.”

“Right so what’s the plan? What time are we do at this Council meeting?” Nate asked.

“We need to be there in about two hours. The meeting’s taking play up on the Hill at the Durrants,” Abbie said.

“The Durrants live on Asher Place. Fifteen or ten minutes depending on how fast I drive. We have time to do what we need to do,” Emrys said with a bob of his head.

“And what do we need to do?” Nate asked.

Emrys grinned. “Cast a spell, of course.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: BLOOD MAGIC

“First thing we need are candles. And the second ...” Emrys was already rooting around in a low cabinet, his butt wagging in the air. Nate resisted mightily the urge to smack it.

“The second?” Nate rose slowly from the couch, eyes still focused on Emrys’ behind.

Emrys spun around with four, fat black candles pressed to his chest and something else as well. The something else was a wooden box. He shoved the candles into Daniel and Turner’s arms while he laid the rectangular, embossed box on the table. It looked old. The finish had darkened with age and the patina showed substantial handling around the simple brass latch. He undid the latch and flipped up the lid. “A knife.”

“A knife?” Nate stared down at what was revealed in the open box. A single dagger with an s-shaped glittering blade and a silver, wire-bound hilt was nestled in dark blue velvet. “What are we doing with a knife? I thought we were going to perform a spell.”

“We are, Nathaniel,” Emrys said with a Cheshire-like smile.

“You mean to use blood magic,” Abbie said slowly as she stood up and stared into the box as well. Her expression was hard to decipher until Nate realized it was a mixture of emotions: interest and horror. Interest from the analytical side of her brain that wanted to know everything about magic. Horror because blood magic didn’t sound very benign.

“It is the most powerful magic for protection.” Emrys nodded. His expression brightened further. “I just realized. This will be my first lesson to all of you! How exciting! I plan to actually *try* and be a good teacher. I guess that will be a *first* for me as well.”

“And as part of your ‘good teacher’ plan, you’ve chosen to instruct us in one of the darkest art forms first?” Abbie shook her head as if she couldn’t quite believe it.

“Any magic that is intrinsically powerful is thought dark, but blood magic isn’t, in and of itself, dark or light,” Emrys lectured.

“Name one witch who has used blood magic that wasn’t dark,” Abbie challenged.

“Well, you for one. You’re going to use it tonight. All of you will. We have to,” Emrys said the last quietly.

“You really do think that the Council is against us, don’t you? It’s the only reason you’d jump to blood magic so quickly.” Abbie’s gaze grew troubled.

“I think that I’m not willing to be naïve and find out I’m wrong. I have a very low opinion of human nature.” Emrys’ wry smile wasn’t lost on Nate. He knew all too well why the older man felt that way.

“I’ve never done anything dark.” Abbie’s hands clenched at her sides. “I swore I never would. I’ve seen what it can do to people. What it did to – to our Mom.”

“Abbs,” Turner whispered. “That’s not like this. It’s not the same thing at all.”

Abbie shook her head. “But it is! While I’m sure that there are tons of witches that are crazy and evil because they just *are*, there are plenty who *become* that way after dabbling in dark magic! They do it maybe for really good reasons, but in the end ...” She swallowed hard like she couldn’t get the words out.

“She was doing it ... for herself. The end was *good*. But it wasn’t to save lives like we are.” Turner was looking at his sister with sympathy, but then turned his attention over to the group. “It’s not well known, but our mother died from cancer.”

“I’m so sorry,” Nate said.

“What does cancer have to do with dark magic?” Daniel asked, voicing Nate’s confusion.

“Witches don’t get little things like cancer. The magic inside of us inures us to most diseases,” Emrys explained. “And before you ask me why you’ve gotten the flu or sniffles before, your magic wasn’t activated until recently. You grow out of those things as you become more powerful.”

“Seriously?” Nate couldn’t keep the shock out of his voice.

“There are many benefits of being a witch and that is one of them. But there is a caveat,” Emrys said.

“Yeah, a pretty damn big one. You see, dark magic corrupts our bodies and minds very quickly and can bring about a gruesome death from things that we would never normally suffer. Like cancer run amok in days rather than years. Dark magic is not like the neutral magic that runs through us that we can use without harm,” Abbie said.

“Well, that depends,” Emrys replied dryly.

“Depends on what?” Nate asked.

Emrys subconsciously touched the scars around his wrists. “There are some who thrive on dark magic. The magic in their veins is dark from the get go so they are not destroyed by using it. It is their natural state, if you will.”

“That’s a myth!” Abbie cried.

Emrys’ dark eyes seemed to glow for a moment. “I *know* it is not a myth. But it *is* off topic if your mother did die of a magic-driven cancer.”

Abbie’s head was thrown back and her small shoulders were rigid. “Turner, tell them what she did.”

“Abbs ...”

“Don’t Abbs me! She did it! It happened! They should understand why I don’t want us to do this! It’s not out of some – some nebulous idea of good and evil and not wanting to get my hands dirty,” Abbie said.

Turner’s mouth twisted slightly. He spoke as if the words left a bitter ash taste in his mouth. “She – she was desperate for children. After she had me, she couldn’t conceive any more. It happens in our old families. Not getting certain diseases doesn’t stop us from being infertile, I guess. She wanted a girl. She wanted ...”

“Me,” Abbie piped in. “She wanted *me* and she did something terrible to get me. Harmed a young mother. Took her child’s life to – to fuel mine.”

“Holy crap,” Daniel whispered. “Do you know who the kid was or –”

“No.” Abbie’s spine was so straight and stiff it looked like she might shatter at any moment. “I thought about finding out, but ... but what good would that do? I’m alive and she is dead. Nothing can change that.”

“And, understandably, you do not wish to change it,” Emrys added.

“I want to live. I think we all do. That’s not a bad thing,” Abbie replied with high spots of color on her cheeks.

“Yeah, we all do,” Nate agreed with a hard look at Emrys.

“And you believe your mother paid for what she did with her life?” Emrys asked.

“Yes, I do. I think using that much dark energy destroyed her,” Abbie said. She held her head high. “Using dark magic has a price.”

Emrys surprisingly nodded. “I fully agree.”

“So we should avoid it at all costs,” Abbie said.

“Should we?” Emrys asked. His dark eyes pinned her in place.

Abbie seemed suddenly less sure of herself. “Yes, because the ends do not justify the means.”

“But what ends are those, Abbie?” Emrys began to pace in front of them. “Saving your father’s life? And not just his life, but countless others. Potentially billions. Stopping this demon could mean stopping the end of the world. What are those things worth? What sacrifices are you willing to make?”

“I – I would – would give my life,” Abbie stammered out.

Emrys paused in his pacing. “You’re willing to die to save the world, but not use dark magic to save it? Because why? You’ll die like your mother? Are you only then willing to die in certain ways? But not others?”

“I think we don’t need to jump to dark magic right this moment!” Abbie protested. Her pale face was taut with emotion.

“Destroying this demon, saving your father, perhaps even saving the world is going to take a lot more than just blood magic, Abigail,” Emrys said, his voice cutting and cold. “The spells necessary to send a demon back to the Outer Dark are not those for the weak of heart or will. Not for those who would hold back something of themselves in the hopes of survival. Or

perhaps you hope that it is only Nathaniel who will suffer the fate of a dark witch? Perhaps you hope to watch him take all the risks as a Demon Eater?”

“I don’t think Abbie means that at all.” Nate raised his hands to get attention.

“Abbie is as brave as anyone here.” Turner stepped between them. “When she says she would lay down her life, she would!”

“I’m not questioning her bravery. I have no doubt she would die in some foolish manner, but I need her to be willing to do more than that,” Emrys said.

“So you’re saying that I better be ready to sacrifice my morals? My soul?” she whispered.

“I’m saying that what you’ve been told or read or simply have a gut feeling about is going to be tested. *You* are going to be tested,” Emrys said. “All of you are. And this is your first test, Abigail. Not taking part in this protection spell will make all of us vulnerable. Not just you. But all of *us*. You may be taken over or we’ll be too worried about keeping you safe that we risk ourselves.”

“Surely there are other protection spells we can use that don’t involve dark magic!” Turner cried.

“That will be effective against witches that are on the Council?” Emrys’ eyebrows rose into his hairline.

Turner slumped. “Is blood magic really always bad?”

“It’s not,” Emrys said emphatically.

Nate could see how Abbie was struggling with this and how Turner didn’t want to go against his sister. “Doesn’t *all* magic send us towards insanity and death in the end? I mean, I think I recall you saying something about that to me before, Emrys.”

“Dark magic speeds the process up a thousand fold.” Abbie bit her lower lip.

“I wish I could tell you that you could run away from this, but you can’t. Being a witch means having to face these sorts of dilemmas every day. And in this case, the demon will stop you from fleeing. But even if you managed to get away, you would regret it every moment of your life if you took that path,” Emrys said. “Even if the rest of that life is very short.”

“So the only way forward is either cowardice or darkness?” Abbie’s voice caught.

“Something like that,” Emrys said. He looked at that moment like a soldier that had gone through too many firefights, too much horror, and was asking a fourteen year old girl to do the same.

But only because we have no other choice. The demon will go after Abbie if she’s with us or not. We need the most protection we can get. Dark magic seems to be the only way.

“This sounds really ... fuck, I don’t know,” Daniel said. His gaze shifted among them. “I mean this is really serious, isn’t it? The demon ... that was freaky. But this ... you’re saying basically that facing the demon is just the first of a ton of shit coming their way?”

“It is. It probably isn’t even the worse. Still want to be a part of this, Decoy?”

Daniel nodded. “It’s going to affect me either way. I can’t un-know this stuff and I want to help. Better to be in on trying to stop the bad stuff that’s happening rather than hiding at home and trying to pretend it’s not.”

“More wisdom from you. It’s rather shocking. And I am beginning to suspect a pod person has taken you over.” Emrys narrowed his eyes at Daniel, but then he shook his head. “Are there any more objections? We’re losing precious time.”

Turner watched Abbie. She shook her head. “I’m willing to do what it takes, Emrys. But I just don’t want us to make the world worse by trying to

save it.”

“Each of us will always have to watch the other,” Emrys said. “Because as Nathaniel mentioned, we are walking a dark path at our own pace. Some of us at a crawl and others at a sprint.”

Nate’s shoulders twitched as Emrys said that. It wasn’t all that hard to believe that magic could lead to bad things when he considered how powerful and overwhelming his own experiences had been so far.

That kind of power is addictive.

“Come, we are going down to the beach! The elements will assist us,” Emrys said, breaking through Nate’s thoughts.

Emrys scooped up the box, shutting and re-latching the lid, before he tucked it under one arm. He put his other arm over Nate’s shoulders. Daniel and Turner scrambled after them. Abbie followed more slowly. She looked to be deep in thought. Nate understood her fear. He didn’t want to hasten his eventual decline.

But Emrys is right. We need to do something. What are five lives when the world is at stake anyways?

“Blood magic … is that what your folks used again you?” Nate whispered.

“Now *that* was dark blood magic at its finest,” Emrys murmured back. “Blood magic is used as a part of various spells. In our case, we will be using the strength of our blood to protect everyone whereas my parents were using my blood and pain as a method to draw power to themselves.”

Emrys slid open a sliding door that lead out onto a massive deck that overlooked the beach far below. Nate saw that there was a series of staircases that led down the cliff and emptied out onto the sand. Emrys directed them towards the first staircase. The wind picked up as they strode forward and blew Nate’s hair straight back from his forehead. The tang of salt and the slight grit of sand hit his face.

“Hey! Emrys, how are we going to light these candles? You have a lighter or matches or something?” Daniel hustled up behind them.

“Matches? We don’t need no stinking matches. Besides no match would be able to fight this wind.” Emrys snapped his fingers and the candles in Daniel’s burst into flame.

“Holy shit! Holy shit!” Daniel stared down at the lit wicks with disbelief.

“That’s amazing!” Nate’s eye opened in wonder.

“Says the man who can cause lightening to destroy buildings? Or save a boatload of people?” Emrys smirked.

“Okay, fair enough. But still.” Nate struggled to find the words. “Lighting shit on fire is *always* cool.”

“Yes, it is. But considering those candles aren’t child safe and Decoy is bound to set *himself* on fire, I think we’ll wait to keep them lit until we get down onto the beach.” Emrys snapped his fingers and the flames were snuffed out.

The sun had already nearly sunk below the horizon. It left a red and purple glow that made Nate’s heart ache with its beauty. The first set of stairs ended in a small deck with a table and two chairs. Nate imagined sitting down here with a drink and Emrys, watching the sun set.

“What are you thinking about, Nathaniel? You’re smiling like a loon.” Emrys brushed his fingers along the back of Nate’s neck. When Nate filled him in on his thoughts, he said, “That does sound nice. You’re engaging in some wealth porn between us.”

“Wealth porn?” Nate snickered.

“You’re realizing the pleasure that money can bring.”

“Yeah, well, I have to admit that I always dreamed of being in a house like yours. But I thought it would be as the help.” Nate shrugged.

“We have to deal with your inheritance, Nathaniel,” Emrys said. “It pains me to think of you living in such squalor.”

“I do not live in squalor!”

“So that bedroom that I inhabited last night is what exactly?”

“A normal teenager’s room!” Nate snorted. “You are such a finicky cat.”

Emrys sniffed. “I enjoy the finer things in life. You will as well. We must expose you to them.”

They reached the beach. Nate slipped out of his shoes and socks and let the grains sift between his toes. The sand was already cool. There was about fifty feet from the base of the stairs to the waves. He wandered towards the water, his hands stuffed in his pockets, while Emrys took his time to tuck his socks into his shoes and align them just so by the final step.

“This beach is great!” Daniel hooted as he raced down the last steps and jumped into the sand, spraying some on Emrys, who glared at him. “We are so going to have a beach party down here, Nate!”

“And who says I would agree to this party?” Emrys asked archly.

“Well, I’ve got tot get something out of this relationship!”

Nate hid a smile while Emrys squawked at him. Something about not wanting yet more unruly teenagers anywhere near his personal space and how Daniel was being blessed by being in Emrys’ presence. Turner played defense for Daniel, arguing that there was little harm that would be done to his precious beach by a party. Emrys began to innumerate exactly what he believed could happen in detail. Realizing that Emrys was going to be awhile, Nate went back to watching the waves.

“Are you really freaked out about the blood magic?” Nate asked Abbie, who joined him.

“You know I am. Are you?” Abbie’s eyes flickered up to his face.

He continued to watch the waves roll in. It was incredibly soothing and already his senses were stretching out all on their own to touch the water. “I don’t know enough about it to be freaked out. But I trust Emrys. If he says we need to do this then I figure we need to do it even if … even if there are consequences.”

“I trust him, too.” Abbie’s forehead furrowed. “Which is totally insane, you know.”

Nate grinned. “Yeah, it sort of is. Goes against all good sense.”

“Completely. I mean really, it’s *Emrys*.” Abbie chuckled. But her mirth died. “I’m just so scared that we’ll always have to take the dark path.”

Nate tried to make his voice light as he asked, “So you’re afraid of being Darth Abigail?”

She smiled. “It may very well be something like the Dark Side of the Force, Nate. You take one step down it and you can’t pull back, but every step forward becomes easier until you wouldn’t recognize yourself any longer.”

“Can neutral magic be used to get rid of the demon?” Nate asked, honestly curious.

Abbie let out sigh. She shook her head. “No. The trick is somehow for us not to become what we’re fighting against. I don’t know if that’s really possible.”

Nate squeezed her shoulder. “That’s why I’m glad we’re all together. We’ll watch each other. Correct each other. Hell, thank God for Daniel, really. He’ll see our corruption before we do.”

“He is quite … the master of the obvious, but we need that,” Abbie added the last quickly.

“Nathaniel, Abigail, get your butts over here!” Emrys called. “We’ve got a spell to cast.”

Nate and Abbie turned around. Emrys had shooed Daniel and Turner off to the side. He raised his hands. The wind rose and swirled in front of him. Nate's lips parted in amazement as the sand before Emrys compacted down in what almost looked like a crop-circle pattern: a large central circle with connecting smaller circles extending on all sides like the points of a compass. Emrys stationed himself in the center of the circle.

"Now each of you take a candle and arrange yourselves at the tips of the arms of our compass points," Emrys instructed. "Nathaniel, you should face away from the sea, towards me."

Nate took one of the candles from Daniel and went to where Emrys instructed. He was surprised by how calm yet energized the other man looked. The air snapped with energy and he thought he saw the faintest of blue lines limning Emrys' scars at the wrists of his shirt. Emrys has removed the knife from its case and held it loosely in one hand. With a snap of his fingers, the candles burst to life. Even though the wind was blowing harder than ever, the flames did not move, but burned steady and upright.

When each person had taken their places, Emrys continued, "Some of you might expect magic to involve fancy words that sound vaguely Latin-ish. But magic requires no such elaborate phrases. Magic is about *intent* and *will*. It requires no more than the *desire* and the *power* to do the task."

Everyone's expression was rapt as Emrys spoke. Daniel's mouth was slightly parted. Though Abbie was clutching her candle tightly, she had that intense listening look on her face as if she was trying to memorize every moment of this. Turner was the only one who seemed at ease. His shoulders were relaxed. There was almost a look of peace on his face. Nate was surprised at how excited he felt himself. His palms were sweaty. His heart was thudding madly in his chest. His mouth was dry.

The rush of the waves seemed to dim out as Emrys continued to speak, "Tonight we face forces that mean us harm. On our own, we would be vulnerable. But together ..." Emrys arms extended to the sides, encompassing all of them. There was a flash of lightening. The hairs on

Nate's arms stood up on end. The faintest rumble of thunder echoed. "Together we are more powerful than those that stand before us."

"Did you do that, Nate?" Daniel whispered.

"No talking, Decoy. We need to concentrate." Emrys gave Daniel a small smile that took the sting out of his words. Daniel's mouth snapped shut.

The thing was that Nate wasn't sure if he was doing it. The air was just jumping with a feeling of something coming. Night fell unnaturally swiftly. Electricity skated over his skin. He held his breath as Emrys approached Turner first. He extended one hand and Turner did the same. Emrys took Turner's hand and held it palm up. He spread out Turner's fingers so that the palm was fully exposed and placed the blade against the center of Turner's hand. His eyes locked with Turner's.

"Do you intend for those present here to be protected?" Emrys asked him.

Turner nodded even as he said out loud, "I do."

"Are you willing to give of your magic to accomplish this task?" Emrys asked.

"I am."

"Then so be it." Emrys drew the blade across Turner's palm. The boy hissed, but did not move. A line of crimson quickly welled up and blood began to pool. "Magic is in the blood. Give it freely to the circle."

Emrys stepped aside as Turner cast his blood into the center of the circle. The dark red drops scattered across the hard-packed sand. Another flash of lightening crackled across the sky. Nate's breathing sped up even as he felt strangely calm. The blood suddenly glowed an electric blue in the circle. Nate gasped, but Emrys was already turning to Daniel.

"You have no magic to add to this circle," Emrys said. "But you wish to be here ... to help."

Daniel nodded and swallowed hard. He was already wiping one palm on his pants. "I – I do."

“Fear is good, Daniel. It means you understand –*somewhat* – the sacrifice that is being asked of you,” Emrys murmured.

“I want to help,” Daniel repeated.

“Are you willing to give of your life force to accomplish this task?” Emrys asked.

“I am,” Daniel whispered as he extended his hand.

Emrys took it. “Then so be it.”

He never looked away from Daniel as he drew the blade across the boy’s palm. Daniel bit his lip so hard that Nathaniel feared he would bite through it. Emrys stepped aside again.

“Your life force is in the blood. Give it freely to the circle.”

Daniel mirrored Turner’s action. He let out a low sound of surprise and happiness as his blood also turned a brilliant electric blue as lightening streaked across the now dark sky. “I did it! My blood worked! Yay, non-magical people.”

Emrys let out a snort, but quickly covered it with a cough. His expression was completely neutral as he turned to Abbie. She was trembling slightly. But as soon as she realized that he was looking at her, she firmed her stance and straightened her spine. She met his gaze without blinking. She shoved her hand into Emrys.

“Are you willing to do what is necessary, even perform dark magic, to ensure the protection of these people?” Emrys asked her.

“I am,” her voice did not tremor.

“Then so be it.” Emrys’ voice and the knife whispered across her palm.

She, out of all of them, did not flinch as her skin was parted. Blood trickled between her fingers.

“Magic is in the blood. Give it freely to the circle,” Emrys said.

Abbie tossed her blood over her brother's and Daniel's. Lightening slammed into the sea and thunder seemed to shake the very ground. Her blood burned blue. The glow was so bright that it illuminated Emrys' legs.

Emrys finally turned to Nate. The boy went still. His heart rate slowed down as his gaze met Emrys.

This is right. This is how it is supposed to be.

Nate didn't know what he meant by those thoughts exactly, but he was certain that they were doing the right thing. Any fear he felt melted away and time seemed to slow as Emrys' stepped in front of him. He could feel the others, but they paled in insignificance to the roaring fire of power that was Emrys.

"Your intent and will above all is necessary for this task, Nathaniel. Yours is the power over darkness, but because of this ... you are in the greatest danger. Will you still contribute your power to this circle, weakening yourself temporarily?" Emrys asked.

"Of course. I'll give everything I have," Nate whispered.

Emrys gave him a sad smile. "I was afraid you'd say that."

"I wish to protect the circle," Nate said.

"And that means ... so must I."

Emrys took Nate's hand. The older man's palm was cool. Instead of holding Nate's hand, Emrys threaded their fingers together in such a way that both their palms were facing up.

"Then so be it for both of us." Emrys drew the blade so that it sliced first over Nate's palm and then his own. The pain of the cut didn't immediately register. There was a sharp burn just before blood began to flow. "Magic is in the blood. Give it freely to the circle."

Emrys pressed their palms together as blood dripped from their joined hands onto the sand. There was a burst of electricity between them and Nate wasn't surprised when he saw blue sparks arc off of their touching

skin and the blood flow blue before it even hit the ground. Strike after strike of lightening blinded them. A thunder blast nearly sent them toppling over. But they all just managed to keep their feet.

Emrys slowly disengaged his hand from Nathaniel's. He looked to be as shell-shocked as the rest of them at that moment. "Now that was a rush."

"Does that always happen?" Abbie asked. Her eyes were wide as saucers.

"No idea. I've never done this before," Emrys said as he stepped into the center of the circle again.

"Now he tells us," Daniel lamented.

But all were silent as Emrys raised his hands up to the sides once more. The blood glowed luridly at his feet. "By our will, because of our intents, and through our blood, we demand to be protected against our enemies this night. Make us unstoppable."

There was a concussion of light and sound with Emrys' last words. The wave hit Nate and he was thrown backwards. His candle flew end over end out of his hands and landed wick first into the sand. It was as if the world went blue-white and disappeared altogether. He felt and saw nothing for a long time. Only slowly did the world come back. He blinked as there seemed to be a floating blue-white rectangle obscuring his vision. He pushed himself up off of the sand. The storm was gone. The sky was dark, but not as black as before. The moon was already casting light on the beach.

"Guys? Are you okay?" Nate called. The rectangle receded and he realized that the rest of them were in similar positions on their backs.

"I'm good. I'm alive!" Daniel called as he shook his head free of sand.

Turner was rubbing the back of his head. "I'm good. Abbs?"

Abbie sat up. "That was quite an interesting experience actually. Not at all what I expected. I didn't feel any darkness in it. I guess Emrys was right."

"But the question is: did it work?" Turner asked.

Abbie looked down at the palm Emrys had cut. She showed it to her brother. There was no cut there. Only smooth, unmarked skin. “I think so.”

Nate looked at his hand. There wasn’t even a scar. “Emrys, that was amazing!” When the older man didn’t answer him, Nate’s voice rose, “Emrys, are you okay? Emrys, answer me!”

Nate scrambled over to the prone older man. He lay still in the center of the circle. Nate slapped his cheeks lightly. Emrys looked paler than normal. Panic slammed into the interior of Nate’s chest. But then the older man’s eyes fluttered open.

“Jesus! Emrys! You scared the crap out of me!” Nate buried his head against Emrys’ chest.

“I’m all right. More than all right actually.” He gave Nate a shaky smile. “I believe Daniel’s catchphrase is appropriate here.”

“What’s my catchphrase?” Daniel asked.

Emrys chuckled, “Holy shit.”

Abbie stared at her watch. “Holy shit is right. It’s time to go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: DARK WITCH

“Have you ever seen *Death Race 2000*?” Daniel said from the back seat of Emrys’ Mercedes. He was white-knuckling the seat belt in one hand and the handhold above his head with the other.

Abbie was sitting between him and Turner. She had her arms wound tightly across her chest and appeared to be praying under her breath. Turner was staring firmly down at the back seat’s floor mats so to avoid glancing outside at the blur of scenery.

“No, what’s it about?” Nate asked even as he tightened his seat belt while Emrys rocketed them through the staid streets of Winter Haven.

“Oh, I remember that movie!” Emrys gave a wild grin. “It’s this race where the drivers earn points by running over civilians. Oooh! Look, a baby in a pram. That’s twenty points!”

There was no baby, but the streets were flashing by at an alarming rate. Emrys was using that power he had the night before to make it so that they got all green lights and miraculously missed being creamed by various cars or gaining points by running over people.

“So what exactly should we expect from the Council?” Nate asked, desperate to think of anything else, but their imminent deaths from Emrys’ driving.

“There are four members on the Council,” Abbie said, breaking off from her prayers. “Leticia Waite, Samuel Thurlow, Sarah Hawthorne and Atticus Snow.”

“Good old New England names to represent all that inbreeding,” Emrys said.

“Keep your eyes and full attention on the road, Emrys,” Nate ordered as he braced himself against the dashboard.

“Yes, sir. Will do, sir.” Emrys made a mock salute.

“Are the Council members all old people?” Daniel asked.

“What would you consider old, Decoy? Twenty?” Emrys snorted.

“Road, Emrys,” Nate repeated. The road was winding and he wanted all of Emrys’ attention on the way forward.

“They are in their fifties and sixties except for Atticus. He’s seventy-seven,” Abbie said.

“So he’s a coot,” Daniel said.

“A coot?”

“A crazy, old coot,” Daniel explained. “Hey! Don’t look at me like that! They always are, aren’t they?”

“No idea if he’s a coot. I don’t know him, but I do know Leticia and Samuel. Leticia is a bit vinegary, but she’s fair and will hear us out. Samuel is a selfish bastard. If he doesn’t see how it works for him, he won’t help us. Sarah and Atticus I don’t know,” Abbie said.

“I’m surprised you know Leticia. Not exactly your age bracket,” Emrys remarked.

“She would come to our big Christmas party every year after the Frosts stopped having one,” she said. “Leticia always seemed to like me. She bought me books.”

Emrys’ shoulders tensed slightly at the mention of his parent’s party. He smiled at Nate, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Nate reached over and touched his leg, squeezing it lightly.

“Do you know Atticus or Sarah, Emrys?” Turner asked.

Before answering, Emrys sent them all flying as he took a turn at super speed. There were cries of ‘whoa’ and a ‘holy shit’ from Daniel. There was general gasping as he straightened out.

“Atticus is a dour sort that says little. Whether that’s to hide the fact that he knows little or simply is keeping things to himself, I don’t know. As to Sarah.” Emrys took another turn onto a terribly winding road and Nate found himself swallowing hard. “She’s my most likely suspect to be a dark witch.”

“Why do you think that?” Nate asked.

“Because of her fluffiness. She’s so vague and seemingly sweet. The type that would forget her head if it wasn’t attached,” he said.

“How could someone like that get on the Council?” Nate asked.

“My point exactly.” Emrys nodded sagely.

“So it’s an act?” Abbie guessed.

“If not, I sincerely doubt the wisdom of the witches in this town. But then again, *who* your family is has always played a bigger role than who *you* are,” Emrys said. “If she wasn’t a dark witch and just an idiot that, too, would explain how we’ve had a demon running around for eighteen years with no one doing anything about it.

“What about the other three? Any of them likely a dark witch?” Nate asked.

“Hard to say. Anyone can be anything in my opinion. It’s been years since I saw any of them. And, as we know, magic has a bad effect on everyone eventually,” Emrys said. “Turner’s abilities will be key here.”

“What abilities, Turner?” Daniel asked. He wasn’t there for the incident in the forest the night before.

“I see evil,” Turner said.

“Seriously? Uh, what does it look like?” Daniel asked, eyes all agog.

“Like lots of different things!” Turner smiled. “Problem is that I often can’t figure out what it means or if it’s dangerous for us.”

“What do you mean?” Daniel cocked his head to the side.

“Normally what I see is something personal to the person that I’m looking at. It’s not obvious that they are evil or if evil has touched them,” he said. “I can see by your blank looks I need to explain better.” Turner tented his fingers in front of his chin. “Okay, this will work, I think. I once saw this little girl who had this old man that followed her everywhere. I thought, at first, that he was like a guardian spirit. Maybe a grandparent or something. Just a sweet old man in a gray sweater.”

“But?” Daniel asked.

“But then he looked at me one time.” He looked a little gray. “I saw that his teeth were filed down to points. He had a forked tongue that slithered out of his mouth.”

“Holy shit,” Daniel said his catch phrase.

“But here’s the thing, I didn’t know how to interpret it. Did it mean that she was hurt by someone like this? Or was *she* someone like this?” Turner shook his head. “I never did find out. She was killed in a car accident. But I admit, I was ... *relieved*.”

Nate shivered slightly before remembering, “But you knew about Emrys’ parents and no one else knew that, but him and them.”

“His parents told me,” Turner said grimly.

“Oh, God,” Nate said. He fully imagined that Emrys’ dead parents would want to talk about what they had done to their only son, to relive that moment when they were within inches of great power, only to lose everything, including their lives.

“They would blab,” Emrys said with a twist of his lips.

Turner ran his hands up and down his arms as if suddenly cold. “Thankfully, not a lot of them speak. It’s more like the old man. But I now know what a red tinge to the air over someone’s left shoulder means.”

“What does it mean?”

“That they are possessed by a demon. I saw it with the orderly and with Dad as well,” he said.

“So other than yelling ‘demon’ or ‘dark witch’ how are you going to be able to tell us if you see something really bad behind these people?” Daniel asked.

“We should have some kind of code word or phrase,” Abbie said.

“Like the cock crowed at midnight?” Emrys teased.

Abbie snorted. “Maybe something just as implausible such as: Emrys is an excellent driver, isn’t he?”

“*I am* an excellent driver,” he muttered.

Nate patted his arm. “It’s got to be something that’s ... *normal* yet we’ll know it’s not. How about if you see anything you ... ask where the bathroom is?”

“Innocuous enough. It wouldn’t alert anyone,” Abbie mused.

“But what if he really has to go?” Daniel asked.

Abbie rolled her eyes. Emrys snorted loudly.

“I think I can hold it if I do,” Turner replied. “I don’t think any of us should be alone in there.”

“Agreed,” Emrys said. “Splitting us up is a definite no-no. Ah, looks like we’re here.”

The vehicle screeched to a halt. All of them were flung forward in their seats with their seat belts the only things stopping them from flying through the windshield. Emrys pulled the Mercedes over in front of a three-story stone house that reminded Nate of a French chateau. There was a massive wall around the house with a wrought-iron gate across the drive being the only way in. Emrys switched off the engine and they all piled out of the car.

The gate was open and Emrys led them up the curving driveway to the double front doors. He held onto Nate’s hand and the boy found himself grinning like a loon. They hadn’t had a chance to really experience the afterglow of sex, thrust right into the spell, but it felt impossibly good to have this little taste of a normal relationship. He laced his fingers through Emrys’. The older man stroked a thumb over the back of his hand.

They stopped in front of the double doors. Light shone through the arched windows in the top of the door.

“Shouldn’t we have parked on the drive?” Abbie asked.

“I wanted some air before we step inside,” Emrys said. “Besides there are certain places where I don’t want my car seen parked and here is definitely one of them.”

“Who owns this place?” Nate asked.

“Sarah Hawthorne,” Emrys responded. He pressed the front bell. The tinkling sound of chimes echoed somewhere deep inside the home.

“So they’re holding the meeting at the one lady’s house who you believe is a dark witch?” Daniel asked. “I hope our protection spell works.”

“Ah, Decoy, you astound me with your observations sometimes,” Emrys said. He straightened his jacket that was already perfectly straight.

“You look beautiful,” Nate murmured.

Emrys winked at him and gave Nate’s hand another stroke. “But do I look powerful and bad ass?”

“I suppose that’s in the eye of the beholder,” Nate chuckled.

The front doors were suddenly opened by a wide-eyed woman with hair that puffed from either side of her head in tight curls and was strangely flat in the center. Her blue, bewildered gaze turned on them all. She raised a fluttery hand to her chest. “Yes?”

Emrys gave her a tight smile. “Sarah Hawthorne, my name is Emrys Frost.”

Her eyes grew larger still and her hand fluttered wildly at her throat just over some long ropes of pearls. “Oh! Oh! I see!”

But she clearly didn’t as she didn’t ask them in. Emrys cocked his head at her. “May we come in? We’re here to see the Council.”

“Yes, yes, please come in.” She shuffled off to the side, holding the door open for them.

“Definitely something off about her, but a dark witch? Will she flutter us to death? I’m just not getting that vibe,” Daniel whispered to Nate as they stepped inside.

“I hear you,” Nate said back.

The interior continued the French country feel of the outside. The floors were made of warm, honey colored wood covered by area rugs with elaborate flower patterns in muted colors. There was a crystal chandelier above them casting a pleasant light down upon them. A set of stairs was directly in front of them leading up to the second floor while there were two doors leading out of the foyer on either side.

Sarah closed the front doors and joined them in the center of the foyer. Nate wasn’t sure what to make of this woman dressed in a soft gray blouse and ankle-length skirt with the charcoal scarf draped around her neck. He was reminded of women he’d see at parties who hung at the edges of groups, spilling canapés on their fronts and talking to the staff because no one else noticed them.

“For God’s sake, Sarah, is that them? Why are you dawdling out here?” A waspish female voice, filled with exasperation, came from the doorway to the right.

More fluttering of one of those hands by her throat and wide eyes as Sarah said, “Leticia! I – I — it’s just – I wasn’t expecting –”

“A Frost? Please, woman, you were told. We all were told. And he’s been here for a good month.” A whip-thin woman with black hair marred only by two white streaks on either side of her head appeared in the doorway.

“Now *she* looks like a witch,” Daniel whispered.

He was right. Leticia was dressed in all black: black high-necked shirt, an a-line black skirt and pointy black boots that came up to her knees.

“Why is she so freaked at seeing you?” Nate asked Emrys.

“I cause commotion wherever I go. Like a rock star,” the older man murmured back.

“He’s a Frost. He *is* the cause of the commotion,” Leticia said dryly, catching Nate’s murmured comments. Her eyes were as dark as her hair and they studied the group before her. Her gaze centered on Abbie first. “Ah, Abbie, there you are. How are you doing?”

Abbie stepped towards her, a surprisingly warm smile on her face. “Not very well, Leticia. That’s why we’re here.”

Leticia nodded. “We felt the disturbance earlier today. Why didn’t you contact us earlier?”

Turner was staring hard at each woman. He must not have seen any red aura or anything to overtly worry him as he wasn’t asking for the bathroom, yet he was the one who spoke then, “Because we needed to be sure before we brought anyone else official into it. Father wouldn’t have liked us exposing him like that if we were wrong.”

Leticia tapped her chin. “Wise. If it was anything less serious it would have been embarrassing.”

“Should we bring them to the others? I have refreshments,” Sarah offered tentatively.

Leticia pressed her lips together tightly as if she were afraid of what might fly out of them if she didn’t. “Yes, Sarah, that would be delightful.”

“Oh, good, I – I thought so. I’ll just go tell Henry to bring everything in, shall I? Oh, yes, I shall.” Sarah dithered out of the room.

Leticia closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head before opening them and saying, “Follow me. The others are in the dining room.”

She strode ahead of them with long, sure strides. They passed through a sitting room that was overcrowded with too many sofas upholstered in chintz. Porcelain figurines occupied every spare flat space. There was also

a profusion of embroidered pillows with images of cats playing with balls of yarn, sunning on their backs, and getting scratched behind the ears. Nate had a feeling that these were done all by Sarah. A sewing basket by one of the chairs confirmed his suspicion.

A dark witch who embroiders? I suppose it's possible. But I'm just not seeing Sarah as taking out time from cursing people to embroider cats on pillows.

“See anything, Turner?” Nate asked out of the corner of his mouth.

Turner nodded slowly. “Not sure what though. I don’t feel any antagonism towards us at least.”

“And no red tinge?”

“No red tinge,” he agreed.

They walked through an arched doorway into the dining room. The walls were paneled in the same honey-colored wood as the rest of the house. The room was long and rectangular with a matching large table. Two men were sitting at the closest end. The younger one of them, Samuel, was scowling at an embroidered napkin with two cats chasing butterflies on it. Both men looked up as the group arrived. Neither gave them a welcoming smile.

“Atticus, Samuel, this is Emrys Frost, Abbie and Turner Blackwell, and, I assume, that this is Nathaniel Whitney.” Leticia gestured towards him and then waved vaguely towards Daniel. “I don’t know who this other little person is or what he’s doing here.”

“I’m Daniel. Thanks for asking.” Daniel gave her a bored expression like meeting a group of witches and fighting demons was everyday business for him. Nate couldn’t blame him. Leticia acted as if he weren’t important.

Bet she knows he has not magic and that's why. Not worth knowing.

“Daniel’s not a witch, but he is one of us, Leticia,” Abbie said.

Daniel beamed at her. She smiled back.

“I see,” Leticia said with a purse of her lips as if she wasn’t quite sure what to make of Abbie’s statement, but respected the younger woman enough to accept it.

The oldest man at the table, Atticus, had a thick thatch of white hair over a rugged face. He had deep set gray eyes and a ruddy complexion. His gaze swung to Emrys for a moment and his lips tugged into a scowl. Nate moved nearer Emrys, feeling the urge to protect him from all the negativity he did not deserve. That drew Atticus’ attention towards him. Atticus’ expression went opaque for a moment, as if he were not seeing Nate at all, but something far beyond him. He suddenly sat up straight.

“He’s a Demon Eater.” Atticus’ finger pointed towards Nate’s chest.

Nate’s heart skipped a beat and then began to hammer. He remembered how people use to point and stare at him about his mother’s murder. The freak that had survived a father trying to kill him. But this was far more personal than that had been. He drew near Emrys’ side more.

One of Leticia’s hands went towards her throat. “He’s –”

“Yes, now let’s all sit down shall we?” Emrys slung a protective arm over Nate’s shoulders that had the boy’s heart calming down. “We’ll get to Nathaniel in all due time. But we want to discuss certain things first.”

“I think I need a drink. Where are Sarah and the refreshments?” Samuel muttered before sinking down in one of the high-backed chairs.

“She’s probably hovering over Henry’s shoulder as he makes them. I don’t know what she would do without him,” Leticia remarked as she primly sat down beside him.

Emrys kept Nate close as he chose them seats directly opposite the Council members. Turner, Abbie and Daniel all sat further down the table next to them. Emrys leaned back in his chair. One arm sprawled behind Nate. He stared at the four Council members silently, a half-smile on his lips. Nate wasn’t sure what he was trying to do at first until he noticed how Samuel squirmed under Emrys’ gaze. Leticia had been looking back when she, too,

lowered her gaze to the table. Atticus was breathing heavily and staring at Nate. All in all, it was uncomfortable for everyone.

“Should we start?” Samuel barked out.

“You haven’t gotten your drink yet,” Emrys murmured. “And don’t we need the fifth Council member present?”

Leticia let out a delicate sniff. “I’m sure she’ll be along in a moment. We can fill her in on anything she misses.”

In fact, the door to their right swung open and Sarah hustled in right then. Her cheeks were pinked and her arms were flapping at her sides as she rushed over to the table and sat down beside Atticus.

“So – so sorry, but I was helping Henry with the sandwiches and he finally shooed me out, reminding me of all of you!” she blathered.

Leticia did another round of deep breathing to keep her temper. Samuel rolled his eyes. Atticus didn’t even notice she’d joined them.

“Now,” Emrys began with a wide smile, “I’m sure that Abigail gave you a very cogent, detailed description of everything that has happened and why we are here. Do any of you need any more background before we discuss what we are going to do about the demon that’s loose in Winter Haven?”

“You believe that this is somehow tied to the incident with his parents?” Samuel jerked a shoulder towards Nate.

Nate tensed slightly. He was realizing that these people must have known what had gone on with his mother and father yet did nothing to save either of his parents. Emrys’ fingers slid soothingly over the back of his neck.

“Somehow tied? The Whitneys were on this Council. Are you saying that you had no idea what were up to? Bringing in demons from the Outer Dark doesn’t exactly go without notice especially when you’re actually successful,” Emrys responded dryly.

“Your parents were on this Council as well,” Atticus said gruffly. “We did not know what they intended with you. Why do you think we know what

the Whitneys were up to?"

It was Emrys' turn to stiffen. Nate felt the older man's urge to pull down his sleeves as the edge of his scars became visible. But Emrys wouldn't show that kind of weakness in front of these people. His smile grew wider.

"Ah, yes, my parents ... a whole other discussion ... that no one here will like to have. But while my parents' *activities* were limited to torturing me, the Whitneys did something that affected *everyone*. Their deaths. Their daughter's death. That should have given you some inkling of what they were up to," Emrys said.

"Especially after what my dad said about it! He went to an insane asylum over what he said!" Nate leaned forward in his chair. His voice caught as he said, "Y—you *knew* that he had to kill her! You knew it was a demon, but you did *nothing* to help him or her!"

Emrys stroked Nate's shoulders and drew the boy back against the chair. "That, too, is in some ways *history*, Nathaniel. As painful and unfair as that might be."

Nate swallowed hard and nodded. He thought of Shane's face as he left him at the insane asylum that afternoon. Some things weren't in the past. "Right. I guess this isn't the time."

The Council members sat quite still, not responding to Nate's accusation. He wondered if that meant they felt guilty or if they were just aggravated to be judged by him as wanting.

"While recriminations regarding your prior acts are not useful at this juncture, Nathaniel is quite right that you *failed* there to assist, but now you have a chance to do the right thing and handle things properly," Emrys said. "Rare for anyone to get a second or third chance as the case may be. We urge you not to spoil it."

"You can't ignore it anymore," Abbie said, her small hands balled on the table. "It was wrong to do so before, but now you *know* what's going on. You can't claim ignorance. Our father is possessed and many people have

been harmed already! This demon intends to bring more of its kind here and to destroy this world.”

“He’s a Demon Eater. Why don’t you just dispatch this demon yourself?” Samuel asked.

“He’s just come into his powers. So I’m guessing he doesn’t know how,” Leticia guessed.

“But he’s done it once,” Atticus said. His brown eyes pierced Nate where he sat. “I can feel it in him. He’s humming with power.”

“That was a lesser demon. Whatever is possessing Mr. Blackwell cannot be dispatched without Nathaniel having significantly more training,” Emrys explained. “But we don’t have time to train him. So we need to use other methods.”

“What methods are those?” Leticia asked.

“The same ones that my mother and her parents tried to use on their own,” Nate said.

“Don’t you remember what happen to your mother?” Samuel asked.

“That happened because they wanted to handle things in-house without interference. But we know that this demon is too powerful for half-measures. Which is why we are *here*. I feel I am repeating myself.” Emrys pinched the top of his nose. “It will take all of us and maybe more of the Families to go up against this demon and send it back to the Outer Dark.”

“And lock the door after it,” Nate muttered.

“You know that this has to be done,” Turner said as the Council continued to sit in silence. “You’re the most powerful witches out there and you’re on the Council because you are supposed to have the wisdom to use that power when necessary. We need both of those things now.”

Sarah, who had been so quiet that Nate had forgotten she was there, suddenly piped in, “Tell them, Leticia! Don’t let them think that we don’t want to help!”

“You do want to help?” Nate asked.

Sarah blinked like a person who has just woken as she realized she was being addressed. “Oh, well, yes!”

Leticia gave Sarah a warning look. “Sarah, let us handle this –”

“Let’s hear what the old lady has to say,” Daniel cut in. When several sets of eyes turned towards him, a few not all that friendly, he tipped his chin up and added, “She’s going to tell it like it is and I think we need that.”

“I, shockingly, second that,” Emrys murmured.

“Our silence is not an unwillingness to help as Sarah has indicated,” Leticia said. She took in a deep breath and passed one hand over her face.

“No, not at all. You see we *did* help or – or we thought we did. Too late for your – your parents, Nathaniel,” Sarah said, looking down at her hands splayed over the table.

Nate blinked. “But the demon is still here.”

“We tried to perform the same spell the Whitneys had,” Leticia said, her face looking rather gray. “The demon was too powerful, but more distressingly ...” She grimaced.

“There were waiting for us on the other side,” Atticus said with a grunt.

“Who?” Emrys asked.

“A whole army of demons,” Leticia said. “Whoever this demon is, it has minions. Thousands of them. If we had opened the door to send it through, the others would have spilled out into the world. All we could do was keep the door barred.”

“And let this demon loose here?” Nate asked.

“No, we imprisoned it,” she said.

“Uhm, it escaped,” Daniel pointed out.

“The demon said nothing about this,” Nate said. “Nothing about being imprisoned.”

“It lies, Nathaniel, or perhaps the Council is mistaken,” Emrys said.

“We *did* have it contained. At least, partially. But we were not aware until today that it had wormed its way out of the prison we prepared for it,” Leticia said.

“Where did you imprison it? How did you do it?” Emrys asked.

Sarah raised a hand like a child would in class. “Here. You see there’s an old room in the basement where – oh, Henry, there you are! Refreshments and food, everyone!”

A man dressed in an old-fashioned servant’s uniform came into the room carrying a heavy silver tray. But just as he set the tray on the table, Turner jumped up from his seat. His eyes were wide as saucers and there was a sheen of sweat on his upper lip.

“Turner?” Abbie asked.

Turner stared at Nate, white-faced, as he said, “I have to go to the bathroom!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: THE DEVIL’S FAVORITE

Turner’s outburst caused very different reactions from the two sides of the table. The Council members’ mouths fell open while Sarah froze in the midst of taking off a plate of sandwiches and cookies from the tray. Nate, Emrys, Daniel and Abbie tensed, unsure of what to do. Did they attempt to use magic? Did they leave as quickly as possible? Did they fake that everything was okay?

We didn’t plan this part. A little shortsighted of us.

Nate could feel Emrys’ magic kick in as his head swiveled towards Henry. The butler was an older man in his fifties, with thick silver hair, a high

forehead and a greyhound like appearance. He had slate black eyes that hardly blinked.

“Are you all right?” Leticia asked Turner who was still standing, staring bug-eyed at Henry.

“Sometimes when you gotta go, you gotta go,” Samuel muttered, staring at Turner with raised eyebrows.

“Well, dear, the bathroom is in the hall,” Sarah managed to get out waving vaguely behind her.

“Is – is your bathroom red? It’s *red*, isn’t it?” Turner asked, putting emphasis on red. His gaze flickered to Nate.

Nate’s mouth went dry. *Demon. Henry’s possessed by a demon. That’s what Turner’s trying to tell me.*

“No, well, it’s sort of red. More like pink,” she said, blinking.

“With cats and flowers, I’m guessing?” Abbie asked with a high-pitched laugh.

“Of course, dear! You can never have too many of those,” Sarah agreed happily.

Nate leaned over to Emrys’ ear. He whispered out of the side of his mouth, “Henry’s possessed.”

“How interesting,” Emrys murmured.

The legs of Emrys’ chair as he pushed squealed back from the table in one graceful move and was up on his feet, casting a spell at Henry. Twin streaks of light streaked from Emrys’ fingers and wrapped around Henry’s body like a gigantic python, pinning his arms to his sides and raising his feet from the floor.

There were shrieks of surprise from Sarah. Leticia let out a gasp and Henry a ‘what the hell’. Atticus sat rigidly. Daniel yelled ‘whoa’ and nearly fell out of his chair while Abbie stood protectively before Turner.

Nate jumped up and was immediately at Emry's side. The air leaped with electricity. The bitter smell of ozone filled the room.

"No lightening in the house, Nathaniel. That would make a very large mess," Emrys said.

"Oh, right, right." Nate swallowed hard and tried to release his hold on the electricity that threatened to come down on them through three stories of a house.

"What are you doing?" Leticia cried out as Emrys strengthened the bonds around Henry.

"Are you mad, man?" Samuel sputtered.

"Oh! Oh! Stop hurting Henry! Stop! Stop!" Sarah cried.

"I'm afraid I can't do that. He's possessed by a demon," Emrys said.

"Yes, of course, he is!" Sarah yelled.

"*Of course he is?*" Abbie parroted.

"Madam, do not upset yourself. I can explain if you don't feel up to it," Henry said. His voice was brisk and had a hint of a British accent. He looked unconcerned even as the light bonds around him snapped and hissed.

"But Henry, he's hurting you!" Sarah wailed.

"This is but a mild discomfort, Madam. He is not trying to harm me," Henry said with a slight grimace as one of the bonds spat at that instant.

"You know he's a demon?" Emrys questioned Sarah.

"Yes! Of course!" she cried. Her hands were doing little fluttery dances by her face.

"I have served the Hawthorne family for centuries, sir," Henry said.

"Wait a minute, are you saying that you're a demon, she knew about it, and you've been playing the role of butler for hundreds of years?" Daniel got

out.

Henry nodded curtly. “Yes, young master, that would be an accurate recitation of the facts.”

“But you’re a demon,” Abbie said.

“Yes,” he said.

“But you’re serving cookies and sandwiches,” Turner pointed out.

“Yes, I made them as well,” he said.

“The cookies look soft and warm.” Daniel licked his lips as he peered at the sugar cookies.

“They are homemade and quite good, if I do say so myself,” Henry said with a note of pride.

Abbie slapped Daniel’s hand as he reached for one. “A demon made those, idiot!”

“R—right. Sorry, they just look so good! I can smell them from here and I’m really hungry,” Daniel moaned.

“So not the time, Daniel,” Nate said.

“Why would a demon be a butler … out of choice or are you compelled to serve in some way?” Emrys asked.

“He’s not compelled! Henry has been a part of our family for centuries,” Sarah cried out.

“Thank you for saying so, Madam. It’s true, sir, I have willingly joined the Hawthorne family. I am content to serve them for the rest of eternity,” Henry said.

“But – but why?” Nate asked. He kept thinking back to the demon in Mr. Blackwell. There was nothing subservient about it. He couldn’t imagine it baking cookies and cutting the crusts off white bread for centuries.

“How else would I live?” Henry asked as if completely flummoxed by the question.

“You’re like a bad ass demon! You could like be raising hell and blowing up shit!” Daniel stared at him hard. “From the demons we’ve met, it doesn’t look like serving’s their game exactly.”

Henry sighed and nodded. “You’ve met two demons, correct?”

“Well … today. The demon in Mr. Blackwell and his minion in an orderly,” Emrys said with a grimace. “But I can assure everyone that Daniel’s observations are shockingly correct. None I’ve encountered had any desire to be a butler.”

“Then you should already know why I have chosen to live as I do,” Henry said. When they stared back at him blankly, he let out a put upon sigh and explained, “The demon in Mr. Blackwell is of the Greater variety while the demon in the orderly and myself are of the Lesser.”

“Meaning that you’d be the one taking all the damage while Mr. Hotshot Greater Demon hangs back?” Daniel guessed.

“Exactly,” Henry said. “I have no choice. I must serve. *Who* I serve is within my power, however. And I choose to serve the Hawthornes rather than a Greater demon. It is … far more pleasurable.”

“It sounds like a better deal,” Nate intuited.

Henry nodded. “Exactly. The work is hardly onerous and I am … appreciated.”

“Oh, you are, Henry! I don’t know what I would do without you!” Sarah clasped her hands together in front of her. “Let him go, Mr. Frost! He’s not a threat to you or anyone.”

Emrys stared at the other Council members. “Were you aware that Henry was a demon?”

“Yes.” Leticia grimaced. “We’ve kept it secret, because it might give others ideas.”

“Having a demon servant might become all the rage?” Emrys quipped.

“Exactly,” Atticus said dryly. “You, of all people, Mr. Frost, should know how the Families are about one-upping each other. The thought of demons running loose in Winter Haven unchecked—”

“There *are* demons running lose in Winter Haven unchecked, remember? That’s why we’re here,” Turner pointed out.

Atticus waved a hand. “Well, there would be more of them. So keeping this matter *private* seemed the best course.”

“He really is harmless,” Samuel said. He cast a quick look at Henry. “No offense, Henry.”

“None taken, sir. I really have no animosity towards anyone present,” Henry said. He glanced down at the hissing, snapping bonds. “I really would appreciate these being gone. I can’t serve the meal with them on.”

“One last point before I even think about doing that,” Emrys said. “You mentioned that you imprisoned the Greater demon here, in this house, but that it got out.”

“That’s right,” Sarah said. “Back in the day, the Hawthornes were adept demon summoners. But, of course, unlike Henry, the demons didn’t want to help us. Not willingly anyways. So we had to have a place where they could be kept until they did what we asked of them. There’s a crystal we keep in a vault where they were held.”

“And I’m guessing that Henry has a key to this vault?” Emrys asked.

“Of course,” Sarah said with a cock of her head.

“Because you would lose it?” Emrys pinched the top of his nose.

“Because he runs the house. He needs to be able to reach everywhere,” she said with a flounce.

“And the Greater demon mysteriously escaped from a room that a Lesser demon had access to. Color me surprised!” Emrys shook his head as if he

couldn't quite believe what they were saying. Nate was sure that he couldn't.

"Henry had nothing to do with the Greater demon escaping," Leticia said as she sat primly.

"How do you know that?" Abbie asked.

"Because if Henry had even gone near that crystal, he would have been sucked in like the Greater demon. All demons are affected this way by the crystal," Atticus said. "No, Henry had nothing to do with it. If the Greater demon had help, it would have had to been a witch."

"And only the four of you knew where the Greater demon was?" Emrys asked softly.

"We've had that same thought. But the crystal has been in the Hawthornes' control for centuries. Many knew about it. Many may have realized what had happened to the Whitneys as well and put two and two together," Leticia said.

"Distrusting each other leads to madness. There is nothing to be gained that way," Atticus said. "We have each been on this Council for twenty years. I am betting my life on the others' honesty."

"That's really not comforting," Emrys said.

"There's really nothing else we can do," Leticia said. "We're each too strong for any type of truth spell to work so we go on our history."

"What do we do, Emrys?" Nate asked.

"Turner, other than the fact that he's a demon, do you see anything for us to be worried about regarding Henry?" Emrys asked.

The younger man narrowed his eyes, staring at the demon without blinking, for several minutes. Finally, he shook his head. "No, there's nothing. I think ... he's telling the truth."

Emrys let out a laugh. “A demon servant who bakes cookies. Just when I think I’ve seen everything, there’s something even crazier out there.”

The bonds that surrounded Henry disappeared. He smoothed his hands down the front of his suit then went about taking the sandwiches off the tray as if he had never been bound in the first place. Emrys drew out Nate’s chair for him. The boy sat down while Emrys did the same beside him. The other three slowly sank into their seats as well.

“So if he’s okay then the cookies are okay?” Daniel asked hopefully.

After Emrys gave a nod, Henry placed two cookies on a plate for Daniel and set it in front of the boy. Daniel grabbed one and stuffed it in his mouth. He made a moaning sound while he chewed.

“You should taste his chocolate chip,” Sarah said. She sat down after Henry shooed her away from the tray as he served.

“You just ate enough pizza to sink a boat and you’re already hungry again?” Abbie asked.

“It’s sugar, butter and flour. Those are the three best things in the universe. You can never have too much,” Daniel said inbetween chews.

“The wheat they use these days is a Franken-wheat. It’s terrible for you really,” Abbie mused. “Highly addictive. It and sugar act like cocaine on your system.”

Daniel shoved another cookie in his mouth. Abbie tutted.

“Now that the excitement is over we’re back at step one, which is what do we do about the demon in Mr. Blackwell?” Emrys asked.

“We cannot send the demon back, because we dare not open the door,” Leticia said.

“What about the crystal? Can’t we imprison it again?” Nate asked.

“The crystal appears to be broken. Besides, we believe that it simply isn’t powerful enough to control this demon,” Samuel said.

“So it is fortuitous that we have a Demon Eater here,” Samuel said again pointing at Nate.

“But Nate can’t eat this demon. It’s too big without training,” Abbie pointed out. “Do any of you know enough about demon eating to train him?”

All four heads lowered. None said a word.

“Well, that answers that question,” Emrys said with a sigh.

“We are looking for a solution in the old books. But Nate’s gift is the closest thing we’ve seen so far to be honest,” Leticia said softly.

“So you’ve been fussing around in old books while this demon has been sashaying around town? I feel so relieved with you all in charge,” Emrys said.

“There aren’t many solutions to this problem,” Leticia said with a scowl.

“Forgive me. I hope I am not speaking out of turn,” Henry said as he placed the plate of sandwiches in the center of the table.

“Not at all, Henry. You have a solution for our problem?” Sarah asked with an owlish blink up at her butler.

“Just ... I am confused as to why Mr. Frost does not call on the Unnamed One again,” Henry said.

Emrys stiffened at Nate’s side. His voice sounded low, dangerous, “What are you talking about?”

Henry blinked at him slowly. “The Unnamed One. You called him here when your parents attacked you. He killed them for you. He is quite capable of eliminating a mere Greater demon. So why do you not call him again?”

Nate’s mind flashed back to what Emrys had told him about the night his parents died. How he had seen the thing people called the Devil in the

room with him. But Emrys hadn't said he had called him. He had just been there.

The Devil. The Unnamed One.

"The Unnamed One? Emrys called ... *him*? That's how the Frosts died?" Leticia looked rather gray and one of her hands shook slightly.

Atticus and Samuel actually pushed slightly away from Emrys. Even Turner and Abbie seemed to shrink back. Nate protectively drew nearer Emrys. He didn't care if this Unnamed One was at Emrys' beck and call. Emrys wasn't bad or scary or anything. He was Emrys.

"Yes, Madam. Emrys is the Unnamed One's *favorite*. Why do you think that your powers have been so much greater for the last decade? The Unnamed One is here. Among us," Henry said.

"Who is the Unnamed One?" Daniel asked.

Abbie was pale as milk, too. She was staring at Emrys with a different look than usual. It was tinged with fear. "He's the one that gave the Families their powers long ago. The Families made a pact with him that they haven't had to honor ... because he's never returned."

"He is here now. And I'm sure one request from you, Mr. Frost, could make all of this all right," Henry said. "The Greater demon would be sent packing. So again ... why will you not do it, Mr. Frost?"

"It's bull, that's why," Emrys spat out and slammed one hand flat against the table top. His lips trembled. He wasn't the smooth, suave Emrys. He was unnervered. "That wasn't – I didn't call *anything*! It was there because of what *they* did! Not me! And I'm not a favorite of – of ..." He shook his head. "You're lying!"

Nate slid a hand underneath the table and grabbed Emrys' free hand. The older man looked more disturbed than Nate had ever seen him. Emrys laced their fingers together tightly.

“Things are rather dire, sir. It is really not the time to play coy. Unless you believe that Mr. Whitney can take down a Greater demon without training,” Henry said.

“It’s not true,” Emrys enunciated every syllable.

“Perhaps you are afraid of what the Unnamed One might ask of you in return.” Henry arranged silverware in front of each of them. “I don’t think it would be too unpleasant. You might even enjoy it.”

Emrys’ nostrils flared and the hand on the table curled into a fist.

“What would it ask?” Abbie whispered.

“Perhaps a kiss. A single kiss. Would that be so terrible?” Henry asked.

Emrys jerked in his seat. Anger flared in Nate’s chest. Emrys was his! Not some demon’s! No one was kissing the other man but him!

“A kiss from the Unnamed One though isn’t like a kiss from a mortal. There is pleasure and pain that is beyond madness in it. You would not be the same as you were before,” Henry mused.

“Okay, if you’re right,” Nate began. Emrys’ head snapped around towards him with a betrayed look on his handsome face. Nate raised a hand to have Emrys give him some leeway. “If you’re right that Emrys is a favorite of this Unnamed One, shouldn’t the Greater demon be aware of this? I mean why press its luck pissing Emrys off?”

Henry nodded. “There is one thing you should know about most demons, Mr. Whitney, and that is that they are arrogant. They believe that the world should be theirs and theirs alone.”

“That could be said of many people, too,” Sarah said.

“Yes, and like people, even the Greater demons forget about the Unnamed One’s power at their peril,” Henry said.

“But you haven’t,” Nate said.

Henry just smiled and for one moment, Nate saw the red in its eyes.

“We should be in very black times indeed if we were to request a favor from the Unnamed One,” Leticia said.

“Things are rather black, my dear. If we could have his strength against the Great demon ...,” Samuel let the sentence hang.

“He doesn’t come like a dog when you call him!” Emrys shouted, half rising from his seat. “He only was there that night with me, because of what my parents were doing! The wrongness of what they were doing!”

Nate wrapped an arm around Emrys’ shoulders. He wanted to soothe the older man. He wanted to stop the pain in his voice. This was too close to the bone for Emrys.

“Perhaps you are right, Mr. Frost,” Henry said. “But when he saw you ... I suppose it was love at first sight.”

“Love?” Nate’s mouth opened in horror and anger.

Emrys let out an explosive, bitter laugh. “You are mistaken. This conversation is mad and it is over. None of you have anything to offer us in terms of a solution. So typical.” Emrys rose from the table. “Come on. Let’s leave here.”

Nate got up. Abbie and Turner were still sitting though. Daniel was between rising and sitting down, not sure why the Blackwells weren’t moving. “Guys? What’s the problem?”

“The Unnamed One ... you don’t see him, do you, Turner?” Abbie asked. “When you look at Emrys?”

Nate snapped, “How can you ask that? Emrys is Emrys! Why are you turning on him? You suddenly trust some demon butler over him?”

“It’s not a question of trust, but if the Unnamed One really has marked Emrys then it’s not safe for any of us to be around him,” Abbie said.

“Yeah, like it was safe before?” Daniel asked.

But Turner stayed staring forward, not looking at Emrys.

Nate was going to launch into another attack when Emrys spoke instead, “The Unnamed One has touched my life. I’m sure he’s probably still hanging around me. But not out of *love*. I wouldn’t want you to see him, Turner. I wouldn’t want any of you to see him. If you truly feel you are in danger from being near me, because of this ... I respect that. Remain here.” Emrys turned to Nate. He reached and touched Nate’s cheeks for a moment. “The same goes for you, Nathaniel.”

Nate grabbed his hands and held them against his chest. “Don’t be stupid. I’m with you. You need me.”

Emrys gave him a quirked smile, but there was a gratefulness underneath. “I had to give you the choice.”

“There’s no choice. Nothing has changed.” Nate looked over at the others. “I know you guys are scared, but really ... *nothing has changed*. You can be paralyzed by the thought of the Unnamed One or act against the demon we know is going to wreak havoc. It’s up to you.”

Nate took Emrys’ hand in his. He cast one last look over his shoulder at the Council and his friends. He felt strangely numb inside. He and Emrys walked out of the house. Cold air poured over them and the sky loomed high and black above their heads as the door shut behind them. The numbness retreated slightly as he realized that even Daniel wasn’t coming after them. But maybe that was best. He had no powers. This was too much to ask from him.

“Nathaniel, I am sorry about—”

“Don’t be sorry. For God’s sake, *you* have nothing to be sorry about,” he quickly cut Emrys off. “So ... what’s our plan?”

Just as Emrys was opening his mouth, the doors opened behind them. All three of their friends poured out. Abbie looked especially chastised. She stood in front of Emrys silently for a moment.

“I’m sorry about that,” she said.

“About not wanting to be with a man who’s the Devil’s favorite? Abigail, I’m shocked at your sense of self preservation,” Emrys remarked dryly.

Abbie tucked a stray strand of hair behind one ear. “Demon’s lie. Especially ones that bake cookies. But ... even if Henry is right, well, it doesn’t matter. We’re in this together.”

Nate felt something in his chest loosen. Daniel was by his side then.

“Sorry, man, I wasn’t sure what we were supposed to do. But I definitely wasn’t going to leave you in the lurch,” Daniel said.

“Thanks,” Nate said. “You’re the best.”

Nate looked at Turner. The Blackwell boy was staring at Emrys. Emrys stared back at him.

“You’re not evil, Emrys. Your parents are there, but only because they want to hurt you still ... even after death,” Turner said. “But nothing else. No one else.”

“Damn,” Emrys said with a snap of his fingers. “I was sort of hoping I had the ability to call on the most powerful being around.”

Nate leaned against Emrys’ side. “That sounds more like you.” Emrys’ arm slid around Nate’s shoulders. He could tell the older man was relieved that the others had joined them. “So ... back to my original question: what now?”

It was Abbie who spoke, “Emrys said there was a ghost relative of his who could help you learn to use your powers. So I guess Frost Manor is the next stop.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: HOMECOMING

“Are you all right with going there, Emrys?” Nate whispered as Emrys drove them to the Frost Manor.

Nate glanced back at their friends as he asked to see if any of them were listening. He didn’t want Emrys to have to reveal anything to the others if

he didn't wish to. Their friends though were talking between themselves in the backseat about the benefits and detriments of having a demon butler. Daniel believed that dark magic had to be involved in the cookie baking while Turner was betting the man's red glowing eyes would make an excellent night light.

"Needlework. Did you see all the freaking cat stuff? I bet the demon does that," Daniel said. "Demon knits and fleeces!"

"Really? Didn't you see Sarah? Totally crazy cat lady material," Turner objected.

"That would be too obvious. I bet the demon did it," Daniel argued.

"It would make it funnier," Turner agreed. "Do you suppose any of the cat pillows have magic powers then? I mean the one I saw playing with a ball of yarn could probably take someone's eye out with that paw."

"Killed by pillow! Righteous!" Daniel crowed.

Abbie sighed loudly and rolled her eyes. She started reading on her phone.

Nate turned back to Emrys, who had yet to answer his question. "Seriously, are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Emrys gave him a lopsided smile. "It'll be fun."

"Fun?" Nate's eyebrows rose up into his hairline and all but disappeared.

"Sure," Emrys said, as he white-knuckled the steering wheel. Nate just stared at him without blinking. "I can see you don't believe me."

"Ah, no. What gave it away?"

"You have a very expressive face. Especially when you are flummoxed."

"Yeah, Grandma's always said she can read my mind by looking at my eyebrows," Nate agreed. He sighed. "I know going back there is the last thing you want to do."

“And you feel responsible for me going back? Don’t, Nathaniel. It isn’t your fault. It was my suggestion and it’s what we need to do. So … I’m fine,” Emrys said.

“I guess there’s not much point in saying that you’re not fine, but we have to go anyways. Because it’s like the end of the world and we really don’t have any choice. No choice at all.” Nate reached across and squeezed Emrys’ shoulder.

“There is that futility,” Emrys said. “But, truthfully, I find living in a state of denial to have its advantages.”

“What about your disgust for the pretty lies?”

“My disgust, as you say, exists for the lies of others. I can lie to myself like a pro with great pleasure. Maybe I even believe some of it after awhile.” Emrys tipped his head down and kissed the top of Nate’s hand that rested on his shoulder. “So I’m fine. All of this is … perfectly fine.”

“It was a stupid question really. I know you’re not and it’s crappy that I’m forcing you to say you are.”

Emrys caressed his cheek. “Not in the least. Shows you care.”

“And does that make you feel better?”

Emrys grinned, but there was great fondness in it. “You know it does.”

“Maybe I’ll have to think of professing my love to you on bended knee when we get there,” Nate said.

“Now that really would get my mind off of things. You, on your knees, before me. Limpid eyes. Slightly parted pink lips. Nervous licking making them all wet and shiny. Tugging on my belt with one eager hand. Hmmmm, most definitely would distract me pleasantly.”

“TMI!” Daniel cried.

“You’ve got to learn about these things somehow, Decoy,” Emrys laughed. “How else will you become a man?”

“By never ever thinking of Nate on his knees, thank you!” Daniel squealed.

Even as they fell into companionable silence, Nate’s stomach churned nauseously. He didn’t want Emrys to have to go back into that house, through the cellar and down to some tomb so they could talk to a Frost ancestor. He didn’t want to go either. He’d rather all of them were going someplace, anywhere else.

But we really have no choice. Can’t sit this out. Or we could, but it would soon enough come to bite us in the ass.

Emrys turned the car off the main road and stopped before a black iron-wrought gaze. The gate formed an elaborate ‘F’ in the center where the two swinging doors met. There was a high stone fence and dense trees that obscured the view of most of the property beyond. There was no sign of any house. All that Nate could see beyond the gate was a winding drive. He found himself sitting up straighter in his seat though. The others went quiet as if just the sight of Frost property had strangled the laughter right out of them.

“The house is up at the top of the hill,” Emrys said quietly. With a pained smile, he added, “You can see almost all of Winter Haven from there. Only Alric Koenig has a better view. Primest real estate in town.” The smile flattened out. “Maybe I should have the whole place leveled.”

Nate squeezed him tighter, resisting the urge to draw him into a hug. Emrys was going to be walking an emotional tightrope that Nate wasn’t sure how to navigate with him. He just wanted to be there to stop him from falling off.

“Maybe you should,” Nate said. “Knock it down. Build condos. Everyone will hate you. It’ll be great.”

Emrys let out a chuckle. “The zoning meetings alone are more frightening to contemplate than just leaving it here to rot.”

“It’s yours though,” Abbie said suddenly. “No one and nothing should stop you from living in it. All that history, all that learning and magic that took place here should be yours to have.”

“But what about the bad memories, Abbs?” Turner pointed out. “He’d own those, too.”

Nate twisted around to look at them.

Abbie’s expression was hard to read as she said, “The Frost Manor has stood for hundreds of years. It’s Emrys’ birthright. No one should be allowed to take the joy of having it from him.”

“I don’t think it’s that easy, Abbie,” Nate said.

“Nothing important ever is,” she responded.

Emrys hadn’t said anything to any of this. He was staring at the road through the gate, but Nate had a feeling he wasn’t actually seeing it, but something else instead. Perhaps the interior of the house. Maybe the cellar. Maybe his parents kissing as they cut him open.

“The gates are padlocked. I take it that you have a key?” Abbie leaned between the two front seats. Her fingers dug into the leather until it squeaked. She wasn’t any more eager than they were to go to the manor.

“I do.” But Emrys didn’t move to get out of the car and unlock the massive padlock and chain that fastened the doors together.

Nate held out his hand. “I’ll do it.”

“Nathaniel, I am quite capable of –”

Nate’s head turned towards Emrys, his expression fierce with the love he felt. “I know. You’re capable of a whole damn lot. But I — I want to do it. Let me do it.”

Let me help you, Nate added silently.

Emrys studied his expression for a long moment. He seemed to hear Nate’s thoughts this time loud and clear. He dug into one pants pocket and handed Nate the key. He then clasped Nate’s hand in his.

“I want to tell you that this is a bad place. I want to scream it actually,” Emrys said. He was speaking to all of them, but his gaze locked on Nate. “But that really isn’t true. It’s no better or worse than anywhere else. Abbie’s right that its mine and I own it though the cost was very dear. But I did something here –”

“Something was done to *you* here,” Nate corrected.

Emrys gave him a small smile. “Yes, and I ... *retaliated*. Henry wasn’t completely off base with what he told you tonight.”

“What part wasn’t off base? The part about the Devil being your boyfriend or wanna-be boyfriend, I guess, since Nate here has the official honor or what?” Daniel asked.

“Daniel, not the time to joke,” Abbie said quietly.

“Sorry, didn’t mean it to come out like that. Seriously though, what happened here?” Daniel asked.

Nate’s nausea doubled. He remembered how undone Emrys had become describing what his parents had done to him. He didn’t want to have him repeat it. But Emrys’ tightened his hold on Nate’s hand to indicate it was fine.

Emrys pursed his lips. “My parents used me – or attempted to use me – in a spell to increase their powers. In the midst of the spell, the Unnamed One appeared in the corner of our cellar. I didn’t call him. He was just ... *there*.”

“He murdered your parents?” Abbie asked.

“He stopped them from hurting Emrys anymore.” Nate’s shoulders tensed and his face flushed with anger.

“It’s all right, Nathaniel.”

“No, it isn’t! They weren’t *murdered*, they were *stopped*. Stopped from doing something terrible. Murder makes it seem like they were victims, but they weren’t!” Nate realized he was breathing heavily with emotion and his hands were shaking.

So much for me being Emrys' anchor in this sea of emotion.

The older man unclicked both their seatbelts and drew Nate against him. “I wish I had never told you what happened.”

“Don’t say that! I’m glad you told me,” Nate’s voice was muffled against Emrys’ sweater. He clutched the other man, wanting to hold him and never let go.

Emrys kissed his temple. “Yes, yes. But now you’re as upset for me as you are at meeting a ghost. Somehow that seems wrong.”

“It’s not. Care more about you,” Nate got out.

“My Nathaniel.” Emrys kissed him again and stroking his back up and down. “The Unnamed One has been here and destroyed my parents. That left a mark on this place that already was marked a million times by my family before that. Maybe I need to own my scarred past.” Emrys allowed a mirthless smile to cross his lips. “Maybe I have to accept that this is mine. For better or worse.”

“You’re not responsible for the bad things done here. You don’t need to own any of this. After we get the information we need, you never have to come back here,” Nate objected. “You really could have it leveled. Be done with it.”

“The past is never dead,” Abbie said. “It’s not even past.”

“Faulkner.” Emrys quirked another sad smile. “I’ve had my opportunities to destroy this place. But I haven’t. And now I am glad that I didn’t. Because if I had, we wouldn’t have access to what we need right this minute.”

“The Frost history, what they learned, who they are, is important,” Abbie said. “I know it’s selfish to say this, but you shouldn’t destroy the house. It’s not all bad. They are things here that could help people no matter how or why that knowledge was gained in the first place.”

“Emrys has already paid enough. He doesn’t have to be some keeper of the secret flame,” Nate objected.

Emrys squeezed him. “I haven’t paid hardly enough for the things I’ve done. Trust me on this, Nathaniel. Reap what you sow.” Sensing that Nate was about to object, he added, “While I could stay here all night, just like this, I’m assuming the gearshift is jammed into your stomach, Nathaniel. So we best get this going.”

“It is. A little bit.”

“I bet. Luxury cars are not meant for cuddling in the front seat easily apparently,” Emrys snorted.

Nate slowly disengaged from Emrys, rubbing his aching stomach. “You didn’t deserve what happened to you. You really didn’t.”

Emrys cupped his cheek. “And that is why they say love is blind.”

Nate knew he was never going to win this argument. At least, not that night. Maybe after a lifetime of them, Emrys might half believe him.

If we’re going to have that lifetime, we’ve got to move.

He opened the door and stepped outside into the night air again. The sun had completely fallen below the horizon. The moon was rising. The atmosphere was different here than it had been outside of the Hawthorne’s. It was terribly quiet and the air felt heavy. Nate wasn’t sure if it was what Emrys had told him about the manor that made him so reluctant to approach the gate and fumble with thick-fingers to open the lock. But he found he had to force himself to move and was exhausted by the effort.

I think Emrys is wrong. This place is bad.

He unwove the heavy chain from around the bars and rehung it on one of the gate’s doors. With a heavy creaking sound, he pushed the one door open and then did the same for the other. The path was clear now. He hesitated for a minute with his hands on the rusting bars.

The snapping of a branch sounded almost like a gunshot after the weird, oppressive silence of the night. Nate froze. The sound had come from the woods that lined the drive. It was pitch black under the trees. Nate squinted. Was something moving out there? He suddenly had an urge to find out. To start moving between those ghostly trees, to peer into the darkness, his hands waving in front of him, until he found ...

Nate jerked back. Cold sweat coated his upper lip and forehead. *What the hell am I thinking? Get back into the car. Don't linger here like an idiot.*

Nate spun around and raced back towards the car. He slammed the door shut behind him and locked it. "Lock the doors, Emrys."

"Nathaniel, are you all right?" Emrys was staring at him hard

Nate gave a weak smile. "Fine. Just lock the doors."

The thunk of the doors locking was Emrys' response. He understood that Nate meant 'fine' in the same way that he had earlier.

"Who is like totally freaked out about now?" Daniel asked as Emrys started driving them up the road.

Abbie and Turner raised their hands. Nate let out a slightly hysterical giggle. Emrys joined in. Soon all of them were laughing. It lasted until the road emptied out from the trees and suddenly the house hove into view. Silence fell again like a thick blanket.

The Frost Manor reminded Nate of pictures he'd seen of the Winchester house where the owner had believed her family was cursed because of the weapons they'd sold. The only way to escape the curse was to keep building and building and building. The Frost Manor looked like someone held the same philosophy. It sprawled both upwards and outwards. There were seemingly dozens of turrets and what looked like a glass dome out back. It was seven stories tall with three wings that sprouted off from the main part of the building. Gargoyles leered at them as well as other carved satyrs, nymphs and a plethora of demons that were engraved into the building's stone facade.

“Holy shit,” Daniel whispered.

“It sucks in all the light around it,” Turner whispered.

Nate opened his mouth to ask if Turner saw anything when he looked at the house, but then quickly shut it. Did he want to know? He realized that Turner’s gift was to see evil in *people*, but it was clear that Frost Manor had a soul. A twisted, dark soul all its own.

“I’ve never see Frost Manor before,” Abbie said quietly. “There aren’t even pictures of it though our families came here many times over the centuries for weddings, parties, whatever. Yet not one picture exists of all those times here.”

“Cameras don’t work well here. Mysteriously, the pictures come up blank or ... show something completely different than what the person observed with their own eyes,” Emrys explained as he parked in front of the columned entrance. When he turned off the engine, the silence was more oppressive than ever. “Shall we?” No one moved. “Let’s pretend that this is the old days.”

“Really? That’s comforting exactly how?” Daniel asked as he peered up at the carved lintel over the front doors.

“The house would have been lit up. Bright. Almost cheery. There would be booze and food inside. Enough to please every palate. The finest of the fine,” Emrys’ voice dropped off.

“The Frosts knew how to throw a party. No one else’s compared. That’s what Dad said anyways,” Turner explained.

“I used to love it here,” Emrys said. His words hung in the air and Nate felt the terrible sadness in them. So did the others. Abbie blinked rapidly and Turner rubbed his hands together. Even Daniel gave a grimace. “Time to get this thing done.”

Emrys got out of the car. Everyone followed him out and up the front steps to the doors.

“Is the electricity still on?” Abbie asked.

“Should be. My lawyers pay the bills though so I don’t know for certain,” Emrys said.

He fished a bunch of keys on a large round key ring out of his pocket. He unerringly chose the right key and slipped it into the slot as if he did this every day instead of not being here for over a decade. He turned the key in the lock. There was a click as the lock disengaged. He pushed down on the handle and the door opened. Everyone leaned forward to look inside.

A yawning darkness was revealed beyond the first few feet of polished hardwood floor. The sour, dusty scent of a closed-up building wafted out to them. Emrys slid one hand inside and ran it along the wall. There was a snap of a switch and the foyer flooded with light. All of them blinked with the change from moonlight to artificial light.

Emrys stepped inside and gestured for them to join him. “Welcome to Frost Manor.”

“Also known as Spooky-ville Central,” Daniel muttered as he walked in.

“It’s … nice,” Nate said as he looked around the foyer.

“A lot of marble. Echoing,” Daniel said.

The foyer was huge. It was two stories tall with a massive crystal chandelier hanging down in the center. There was a large white marble fireplace on the wall opposite from the door with a molded steel grate of two dragons in front of it. The floor was polished black marble that reflected back at them.

“The maids have definitely been in. No dust,” Abbie remarked as she stared down at the marble.

There were three doorways that led further into the house. One going right, another left, and the final one going straight back. The arched doorways looked oversized and imposing as if to suggest that the spaces beyond the large entrance way were monster sized.

“It’s so big,” Nate said.

“The Frost were always larger than life in everything,” Emrys murmured.

“Well, their house certainly is!” Daniel exclaimed.

Turner was the only one that wasn’t looking at the furnishings. Instead, he was squinting towards the left archway. Nate touched his arm and the other boy nearly jumped two feet up into the air.

“Hey, what’s up? See something?” Nate asked.

“N—nothing. Not really. I mean.” He flushed and scrubbed the back of his neck when everyone stared at him disbelievingly. “I keep seeing things out of the corner of my eye.”

“You’re bound to see a lot of evil here, Turner,” Emrys said.

Emrys alone seemed calm. It was strange that at that moment when Nate expected him to a mess, he was at ease. There was even a slight smile on his lips.

“The house is welcoming you home,” Abbie said.

“What do you mean?” Nate asked. He crowded protectively against Emrys as though the house was physically doing something to him.

“If we were strangers here, we would be in danger,” Abbie said. “The house would … react, I think.”

“It would. There are spells here. Ancient ones that were woven into the very fabric of the wood and stone,” Emrys said, that smile growing larger.

“So since we are with you, we’re okay, right?” Daniel confirmed.

“Yes, you are fine. You are … welcome,” Emrys said.

Nate gripped his arm, shaking it lightly. Emrys glanced down at him.

“Emrys, snap out of it. You’re – you’re acting weird,” Nate said in answer to the older man’s furrowed brow.

“Weirder than normal,” Abbie confirmed.

Emrys squeezed the bridge of his nose. “This – this is odd. I didn’t expect it to feel this way. I kept expecting terror, but I feel ...”

“Like you want to host a party here like the old days, I’m guessing,” Nate said.

Emrys slowly nodded. “That makes no sense. But I can’t shake it. I feel almost ... languid.”

“That does not sound good,” Daniel said.

“Just hold onto me, Emrys,” Nate urged him. “I’m not letting anything happen to you. Which way to the crypt?”

Emrys shook his head as if to clear it. He gestured towards the archway directly in front of them. “The stairs down are this way.”

“Oh,” Turner said and froze.

“What?” Nate asked.

“Is it down the hall and around the corner?” Turner asked Emrys.

Emrys frowned. “Yes, how do you know that? You’ve never been here.”

Turner gave him a pained smile. “Your parents ... they’ve just gone that way.”

CHAPTER THIRTY - BLOOD AND WINE

“My parents?” Emrys smiled. “Let’s go see what they’re up to. This is *my* house now and I don’t want them mucking it up.”

“*Your* house?” Nate stared at Emrys open-mouthed. “When did this become your house and not the place you want to tear down and build condos?”

Emrys slid a hand around Nate’s shoulders. He was smiling broadly. “I made this into a house of horrors into my mind, because of what my parents did to me here. But I forgot,” his expression grew fond, “how much I love

this place. How I could make it ... *different*. Why should I let my parents' actions stop me from having what's *mine*?" He laughed slightly. "It's sort of a Frost family tradition in any case."

"What is?" Abbie asked.

"Many people have won this house by killing those who had it before them. So I earned my home in the true Frost way," Emrys explained.

"I think ... that's, uhm, great. That you could get past it so ... *quickly*," Nate said. Emrys' words seemed logical, but the timing did not.

And this place is giving me the creeps. I don't get what's making him feel so at home.

"This house will be *yours*, too, Nathaniel. I think Abbie was ... correct. As much as it pains me to say that. We mustn't abandon all this history, power and knowledge simply because of two unpleasant people," Emrys said reasonably. "So come, let us go to the cellar. Let's find out what my parents are so excited about and rain on their parade."

"Are you sure we should do that?" Nate stood his ground as Emrys tried to pull him towards the cellar stairs. "Any place that's making your parents eager can't be good for us to go. We should ... think. Regroup. Have a plan."

"I second what Nate is saying," Turner said. He looked rather pale and sweaty. His eyes kept flickering all around them like he was seeing unseen things flitting about. Abbie grasped his hand and squeezed it. He calmed down, but it was clear that he wanted out of that house.

The skin between Nate's shoulder blades twitched. The house was beautiful and terrible at the same time. Just the size of its echoing halls and sumptuous furnishings that reminded him somehow of the Masque of the Red Death. He kept expecting to see people in fine eveningwear glide past them. It wasn't just ghosts of Emrys' parents that were here. There were countless others. He might not be able to see them like Turner could, but he could feel them.

“Seriously, Emrys, let’s go,” Nate urged. “Maybe the books Abbie found can offer us some other way to defeat the Greater demon.”

Emrys rested his hands on Nate’s shoulders. His eyes were heavy lidded as if he’d been drinking or doing drugs. His pupils were blown wide and that disconcerting smile was on his face. “There is no other way. Besides the ghosts can’t hurt us, Nathaniel. Ghosts have no power.”

“You could’ve fooled me! What about when Turner went to a little — well, weird in the woods?” Nate gave an apologetic smile to Turner.

“Don’t worry about it, Nate. I did get a little weird. Everything went a little weird. But I’m normally not affected by what I see. Not like that,” Turner explained.

“I believe that was my fault,” Emrys said with another creepy, languid smile. “It’s not only the house that was marked by the Unnamed One. But I was as well. And my powers can go … wonky. I think that is what affected Turner.”

Daniel pushed forward to the center of them. “Wait a minute here! Weren’t you like all freaked out when Henry was accusing you of having some kind of relationship,” Daniel used his hands to form air quotes when he said ‘relationship’, “with the Unnamed One like less than an hour ago? And here you are now being all cool about it? Anyone else find this freaky?”

Abbie had been observing Emrys narrowly. “I really think we should get out of this house.”

“All those in favor say ‘aye’!” Daniel said with a wave of his hand in the air.

Emrys chuckled. “If the three of you wish to leave and hide in the car, fine. But Nathaniel and I have to speak to Excelsius Frost. We can’t leave the world’s fate to Abbie’s reading ability.” His gaze went to each of the three. “I realize that the magic is strong in this house and … disturbing to those unfamiliar with it. But do you want to turn back now just when we are on the brink of actually having a chance against the Greater demon? Or will

you leave your father and countless others to die because of a case of heebie jeebies?”

Abbie, Turner and Daniel looked at each other and shifted their feet uncomfortably. They all then hung their heads.

Nate spoke up, “Emrys, that’s not fair! It’s more than just a case of heebie jeebies. Something is really wrong with this house. And you’re not acting right!”

“There are many wrong things out there when it comes to the world of magic, Nathaniel. A scary house — if it truly is scary, which I don’t see — is the least of our worries.” Seeing that they were all quite unconvinced, Emrys leaned in and kissed Nate’s forehead. “Must I go in myself? I’ll speak to my forebear and you all can wait in the car. I don’t want you to be afraid. Though I assure you that there’s nothing to be afraid of in this house. Certainly not from my parents. Not anymore. We fought and I won.”

“You’re not going down there alone!” Nate grasped Emry’s hand and held it firmly.

“We’re not letting the two of you go alone,” Abbie said just as strongly.

Turner nodded. Daniel threw up his hands in the air and gave out a loud theatrical sigh.

“So we’re really going down into the creepy, dark cellar after the ghosts? If this were a horror movie, the audience would be screaming at us about how stupid we are, you do realize this, don’t you?” Daniel asked.

Emrys thumped Daniel’s back. “Just think, Decoy, in that case, at least you’d be getting some attention from some girls.”

“I’d tell you to be nice,” Nate said, “but I know it’s beyond you sometimes.”

Emrys pressed a kiss to his temple.

They walked two by two with Daniel picking up the rear down the hallway towards the cellar door. The door itself was seemingly ordinary, paneled in

a deep walnut that shone as if it had been recently polished. The whole house seemed lived in.

Emrys must have a cleaning crew come through here all the time. It doesn't look like it's been abandoned for over a decade.

Emrys opened the cellar door and a yawning blackness opened up before them. Cool, damp cellar air gushed out tinged with the vinegary smell of wine. Nate immediately flashed back to what the older man had told him about how his parents had lured him downstairs during the Christmas party. Emrys took a deep breath and his eyelids fluttered shut. He suddenly slapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously. He turned bright eyes on Nate.

"I totally forgot about the wine! Do you know how many fine vintages are down there just waiting to be cracked open? That alone should have been enough to lure me here long ago," Emrys crowed. "My mouth is watering just thinking about it. Do you drink, Nathaniel?"

Nate thought about the too-sweet wine coolers and cheap beer that he and Daniel had stolen from Daniel's parents. They'd never taken any from work, not even the untouched glasses, as that felt too much like stealing from their boss. Somehow that didn't sound like the type of drinking that Emrys meant or that the older man would accept as legit.

But Nate nodded in what he hoped was a sage, adult manner. "A little."

Emrys ruffled his hair and let out a disbelieving cluck. "You are a terrible liar, Nathaniel. But don't worry." The older man leaned in, breathing hotly against the side of his face, "I'll teach you to drink just like I'm teaching you about sex."

High color flooded Nate's face. Daniel made a squawking-gagging sound while Abbie rolled her eyes and Turner let out an uncomfortable laugh.

"Am I offending virgin ears all over here?" Emrys asked.

"It would be alcohol and sex that are your prime motivators," Abbie said primly.

But Nate was glad that alcohol and sex were the first things that the older man thought of and not his father's red face as he dragged Emrys down to a terrible fate.

Even though his behavior isn't normal, it's almost better than seeing him hamstrung by terror. I don't know what I would do if he were. Or how the others would act.

"Are there any lights down there that are working?" Turner asked as he peered over Emrys' shoulder.

"I've got my phone with a flashlight app on it, but I don't think that's going to be enough," Abbie said as she fished her iPhone out of her pocket and looked at it dubiously

"The lights work. Just give me a second. I'm looking for the switch." Emrys slid one hand along the wall. "There it is!"

There was the snap as Emrys flipped a light switch up and suddenly the stairs below them were illuminated under a bright, almost pleasant light. Nate leaned forward to get a better look at the cellar. He could see little, but it wasn't what he expected. The stairs weren't cold stone, but instead broad and spacious maple boards as nice as the floor they were currently on. At the bottom of the stairs, the maple continued.

"Now that doesn't look like Dracula's tomb down there. Yet I'm only feeling slightly better. Only slightly," Daniel said.

"Why only slightly?" Abbie asked.

"Because in the movies sometimes the scariest things happen when the lights are on or it's broad daylight. It makes it worse somehow," Daniel explained.

"You got something there, Daniel," Turner agreed.

"You're building this up to something far worse than it is." But Emrys was hesitating at the top of the stairs. There was the slightest quiver to his upper

lip. One hand went up and squeezed the bridge of his nose as if he felt a headache coming on. He'd done that when they first came in.

"Are you okay?" Nate murmured.

"Fine, Nathaniel. I just ..." Emrys swayed forward.

"Whoa!" Nate grabbed him before he tumbled down the stairs.

Emrys braced himself against the wall. The strange smile and languidness disappeared. He trembled for a second. He held onto Nate tightly.

"Emrys, Emrys, come here. Let's get you sitting down," Nate said, trying to draw him away from the stairs.

"No. No. Seriously, we've got to go down. I've got ... got to do this," Emrys said, his voice sounded strangled.

"You don't have to do this to prove anything. We all know that you're brave," Nate assured him.

"I'm ... not trying to prove anything." Emrys straightened and it was like he was filled with that strange calmness again. His free hand caressed the wall. "This place gives me strength. You give me strength. My parents ... are nothing to me."

Nate knew that wasn't true. But Emrys was walled off again behind this impenetrable barrier that the house wrapped him in. Nate hoped it was the house. Because the other options seemed far worse.

Getting this over with and him out of here is the main priority.

"Okay, all right. We'll go down. Are you well enough to do it?" Nate asked.

Emrys stood straight. He did a jumping jack. "Perfectly fine. Let's go."

The older man offered Nate his hand. Nate took it and threaded his fingers through Emrys'. Emrys drew his thumb along the back of Nate's hand.

Nate returned the gesture before he glanced over his shoulder at the others. They nodded that they were ready to go.

The mellow smell of alcohol wrapped around them as they walked down the stairs and stepped onto the cellar floor.

Daniel whistled. "That's a whole lot of wine!"

Nate looked up and had to agree with Daniel. Other than a small area they were in, there were rows upon rows of wine racks that spanned the breadth of the room. Nate couldn't see the length of it. The racks seemed to go on forever. Emrys sauntered up to one of the racks and pulled out a bottle of wine. He let out a low sigh.

"This is a bottle of Dom Romanee Conti, 1997." Emrys cradled the bottle of red wine to his chest.

"Is that a child or a bottle of aged grapes?" Abbie asked.

"Aged grapes? Aged grapes?!? I will have you know that this bottle of wine is produced form Pinot Noir grapes from la Romanee Conti vineyards! It's over a thousand dollars a bottle?"

"Who would pay that much for fermented grapes?" Daniel's eyebrows rose.

"Philistines. You wouldn't understand and that's why you won't be having any of this nectar of the gods," Emrys murmured. "This bottle better not be corked."

"You can get it on the way out." Nate grasped the bottle from Emrys hands as the other man cast around to stick it in one of the pockets of his coat.

"Ack! Fine!" Emrys released the bottle into Nate's custody.

Nate slid the bottle back in its cradle. He felt relieved by Emrys' seemingly normal reaction to the wine.

"So where's Excelsius Frost? Is he hanging about by the champagne?" Daniel asked.

“He’s not here. He’s in the crypt,” Emrys said.

“The crypt. Of course,” Daniel said. “So where’s that?”

“Down below,” Emrys said simply. “There are multiple levels beneath the cellar. They’re said to be rooms and tunnels riddling the hill. One of them supposedly leads to the graveyard. That was how the earliest Frosts got their corpses to reanimate or use in other unpleasant ways.”

“Are you trying to freak us out? Just when things seemed normal you had to say that!” Daniel cried.

“Keep yourself in hand, Daniel. Think of what’s to come! Going into the bowels of the hill! Into a stone crypt with countless ages of dead Frosts! You need to start off only slightly terrified so you can reach the requisite heights later,” Emrys counseled.

“Your boyfriend is crazy, Nate. Have I said that before? Because even if I have, I want to reiterate it and make sure it’s on the record,” Daniel said.

Nate tried to hide his smile. “So where is this crypt?”

“It’s at the back. We have to ...” Emrys’ voice trailed off as he looked down the row of wine towards something that none of them could see.

Nate touched his arm. “Do we have to go past — I mean where did they ...” His mouth went dry. He wanted to ask where Emrys was tortured by his parents, but at the same time he couldn’t imagine how to form the words.

“Up ahead,” Emrys said with a tight smile. “We have to pass by it to get to the crypt.”

“Pass by what?” Daniel asked. Abbie whapped his arm. He mouthed an ‘ow’ and rubbed it. “What? What?”

“Where my parents tried to kill me, Decoy,” Emrys said. “I assume the blood and pentagram have been cleaned off the floor. The lawyers were supposed to have that done. But the wall ...”

“The wall?” Nate asked.

Emrys pinched the bridge of his nose again. “There’s nothing that can remove that. I don’t think. No chemical or scrub brush in the world can work on it.”

“Work on what?” Nate asked again, squeezing Emrys’ arm.

“You’ll … you’ll see,” Emrys breathed.

Nate swallowed hard. He kept envisioning Emrys lying spread eagle on the ground with his parents, naked but for their cloaks, clustered around him with knives drawn. This wall was starting to sound far worse than anything his imagination had to offer.

“Come this way,” Emrys said.

He led them through two stacks of wine with practiced ease. His arms were stretched out to either side and he lightly brushed his fingertips along the bottoms of the wine bottles. “I cannot wait to open a few of these. A few? Who am I kidding? All of them. Well, maybe not *all* of them. That might be impossible. But I think that this cellar demands one of the famous Frost parties. It would be a good way to reintroduce the house people.”

From death to parties. His mood keeps on shifting so strangely. I would almost think he was on drugs if I hadn’t been with him all night and know he’s not.

Abbie tugged on the back of Nate’s shirt. He turned around. Her eyes were shadowed. She whispered, “I know that I was the one suggesting that Emrys reclaim his heritage with this house, but this is not normal. I’m really worried.”

Nate glanced further back at Turner and Daniel. Both of them had the same expressions on their faces. “I know. But there’s not much we can do. We’ll see this Excelsius Frost and get out of here. Hopefully, Emrys will snap out of it once we leave.”

“You know it’s not polite to talk behind people’s backs. Especially if its *literally* behind their backs,” Emrys called to them.

Nate grimaced. He jogged so that he was by Emrys’ side again. “We’re just worried about you. Your mood is like the tide tonight.”

“I do feel … strange. Not like I expected when I stepped inside here for the first time,” Emrys actually agreed. “But I’m not complaining about how I feel. It’s sort of like being on a high. Things are … numb yet heightened. I feel almost buoyant.” He looked down at Nate. “Isn’t that better than being afraid and sick?”

Nate winced. “It is. But what if what’s causing you to feel this way is to get you off your guard? Then maybe it isn’t better.”

Emrys wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “I’ve learned to trust my instincts, but perhaps … perhaps I am being misled this time. I’ll keep my eyes open. No matter what the rest of me is saying.”

“Good. I’m relieved.” Nate rested his head on Emrys’ shoulder as they continued on through the racks.

Nate’s back stiffened and the hair on his arms and back of his neck raised when they had nearly reached the end of the racks. His steps stuttered then stopped. He grabbed Emrys’ arm and yanked him back. His eyes picked out something on the floor in front of them.

“Is that …” Nate couldn’t say it. His tongue made a clicking sound as all the saliva fled his mouth.

The others nearly barreled into their backs.

“Whoa! Nate, what the hell? Log jam here. Move it,” Daniel called.

Nate opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn’t. The racks they were walking between abruptly ended as did the wood floor. In its place stone too over. A long, single sheet of gray stone. Clearly, this was a much earlier part of the cellar. But it wasn’t simply the end of the wine and wood that had Nate frozen in place.

Emrys made a slight sound. “I guess it was more than the wall that couldn’t be cleaned up.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Daniel pushed between them. “Holy shit! Is that — that blood?”

“What?” Abbie gasped.

“It’s black. How could it be blood?” Turner whispered.

“It’s over a decade old,” Emrys murmured. “When blood ages it goes black.

On the floor were four hooks that still had the remains of four chains attached to them. Those would have been chains attached to Emrys’ wrists and ankles to hold him down as his parents cut him. Then there was a circle with an elaborate rune carved into the floor itself where Emrys’ body would have been stretched over to aid in the spell. And then there were the black stains. In pools, streaks, dribbles and smears across the floor. Some of the stain followed the channels of the carved rune.

Emrys’ blood. Oh, God.

“I guess we didn’t pay the cleaning people enough to fix this,” Emrys said. “Can’t get good help these days.”

Nate looked up at the older man’s face. Emrys was pale. His lips trembled. He watched as Emrys firmed his jaw and walked out of the racks and stood a foot away from the edge of the circle. His gaze though swept from the circle, the chains, and the blood and moved to his right towards the wall that he spoke of earlier. Emrys suddenly fell to his knees, overcome by whatever he saw.

Nate jumped over to help him. “Emrys!”

He wrapped his arms around the man and tried to hold him upright. Emrys was gasping and clutching at Nate.

“I didn’t think — I thought I remembered it right, but — it really happened. *It really happened,*” Emrys babbled.

“What really happened?” Nate asked.

But before Emrys had a chance to answer, Nate glanced up at the wall that had overcome Emrys. He knew then that they should never have come here.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: THE MADNESS IT BRINGS

The wall looked to be made of old-fashioned plaster that had been smoothed over the stone wall. It reminded Nate of pictures he had seen of old Italian villas. But that was where the comparison to anything else he had seen stopped.

“Are those – those your parents?” Nate whispered.

“What’s left of them,” Emrys murmured.

There were two blackened, blistered silhouettes of figures burned into the plaster and scorching the stone beneath.

“Those must be the positions they were in when they were – were burned away? Vaporized? Uhm, whatever happened to them?” Abbie asked, her voice soft and hesitant.

Emrys nodded. “They were ... *destroyed*.”

The figure on the right was a woman. Nate could tell by the swell of the silhouette’s breasts and hips. One arm was flung over her head while the other was stretched to the side to ward off whatever was coming. Clearly, that hadn’t saved her.

The figure beside her was still on his knees. He had either fallen to them when whatever it was had approached them or didn’t have time to get up. His arms were thrown up in despair. Nate could almost feel their agony. He stepped nearer the wall, but almost immediately retreated. He thought he heard ... whispers. Cries. Pain. He shook his head to clear it.

“What happened to them?” Nate asked.

“The Unnamed One happened.” Emrys’ expression no longer bore the half-smile nor was his body languid and at ease. Whatever strange placidity had possessed him so far in this house was burned away by seeing these images. His nostrils flared and his hands were clenched at his sides. Nate moved close to him and took one of Emrys’ hands in his, smoothing the top of it until the fist released. Emrys laced their fingers together and he gripped Nate firmly as if the boy would try and get away.

“Did they know what was coming?” Turner asked. “Did they see the Unnamed One? Or were they just obliterated?”

Emrys cleared his throat and spoke slowly and deliberately. “The Unnamed One had been watching us for a while.”

“Did you know who it was?” Nate asked. How would one recognize the Devil? Emrys said the Unnamed One didn’t have a tail and horns, that it looked nothing like anyone imagined.

“I knew. I — I remember watching it right back. I – I didn’t feel any pain while I stared at it. The cuts didn’t hurt,” Emrys murmured.

“I hate them.” Nate slapped on fist against his open palm. “If your parents were still alive, I would kill them.”

“They suffered, Nathaniel. Beyond anyone’s imagining. Even mine.”

“But was it enough? When it didn’t happen before they hurt you? Why did the Unnamed One just stand there? Why didn’t it act?” Nate nearly yelled.

“The Unnamed One isn’t like a guardian angel.” Emrys tried to soothe him.

“No, but Henry said that you were – *are* – it’s favorite! But it left you to be tortured by them! Why couldn’t it have just stopped them in the beginning?”

Emrys didn’t answer him, but his expression was almost tender. “Eventually, it did. Stop them. Stopped them forever.”

“How?”

Emrys' grip tightened on Nate and yet he looked at the blackened remnants of his parents. "When the Unnamed One moved, my parents didn't notice. Not at first. Not until there was this *sound*. I can't quite explain it. Maybe like a deep resonant bell ringing. Or the thrum of some instrument. I don't know if there are words for what it sounded like. But my parents looked up when they heard it and – and they saw the Unnamed One."

Turner and Daniel clustered near Abbie as if taking comfort from physical closeness. The looks on their faces were drawn with horror.

Emrys pointed towards the opposite corner from the wall. "That's where the Unnamed One was. It stepped away from the wall. Mom shot up to her feet when she saw it. Dad actually sank down onto his knees. He had been standing before. Not sure why. He had the knife. Maybe he was moving nearer to a bit of unmarked skin on my body. You can see the knife there."

Sure enough, Nate could see a bit of the outline of the blade at the edge of the burned figure where it, too, had been vaporized and yet scarred into the wall as well.

"My mother made this high sound like a pig's squeal. Dad gasped, I think, and then was robbed of speech. Neither of them even tried to perform a spell to protect themselves. There was nothing to be done," Emrys' voice drifted off. His eyes took on a faraway cast. "I think they knew it. I often wondered if they regretted what they'd done to me at that moment."

"Holy shit. Why would – would anyone do this to their *kid*?" Daniel breathed. He looked distinctly like he wanted to crack open one of the bottles of wine and down it in one go.

"I'm not quite sure when they began to scream. Or what caused them to exactly. But they were so loud. So fucking loud. I couldn't bear it. I think I passed out just to get away from the noise." Emrys reached towards the figures. His fingertips were only an inch from the blackened plaster. He snatched his hand back like it had been burned. "When I woke up, my chains were undone. The blood was almost dry. Tacky. And my parents ... well, the stone was still bright cherry red and the plaster was smoking. I thought I was hallucinating. But it really happened as I remembered."

“Was – was the Unnamed One still – still there?” Nate whispered.

“Yeah. I think so. I remember feeling …” Emrys’ mouth opened and closed as if he couldn’t get the words to physically come out. Finally, he said, “I felt the Unnamed One caress my hair. Just once. Just the barest brush. But it touched me. Tender. Gentle. Nothing like how my parents had and that – that freaked me the fuck out the most. I ran out of here and never looked back.”

Nate suddenly wrapped the older man in a fierce hug. “Forget about it. Don’t talk about it anymore.”

Emrys’ breath was warm against the top of his head. He held Nate against him just as tightly. “You can ask me anything, Nathaniel. I’d tell you all of it.”

“I don’t want to know. Not if it hurts you. And this hurts you,” Nate mumbled against his chest.

“It doesn’t really hurt. I’ve spent so much time running for this … it’s almost a relief. Though I admit, I think I shall have nightmares for awhile so I’ll be hell to sleep with.” He gestured towards the burned figures. “My hatred for them has cooled because they truly got what they deserved. There can be no worse punishment than what happened. I think they still are suffering. The Unnamed One has them.”

Abbie began to pace the circle where Emrys had been bound. She was studying the symbols etched into the ground. Her forehead was furrowed and Nate could tell she was confused.

“What were they trying to do?” Abbie asked.

“Gain power through torturing me,” Emrys said.

“It’s a Sangen Circle spell, isn’t it? Or an attempt at one.”

Turner touched her arm. “Maybe now isn’t the time, Abbs.”

“It’s just that I wondered why the Unnamed One came in the first place,” she explained. “I thought perhaps they were using a spell that would have

drawn it, but I don't see anything here to explain the Unnamed One's presence."

"Well, that was just one thing that went wrong for Emrys' parents that night," Nate said.

"They gave you power, didn't they?" Abbie guessed. "A lot of power."

"For someone who loathes blood magic, you sure do know a lot about it," Emrys remarked.

"Know your enemy," Abbie explained. She kneeled down by the circle's edge. "There are symbols here that I've never seen before. Not in any of my mother's books and she was an expert in blood magic. Your parents couldn't have known what this would do."

"Clearly, considering how it turned out for them," Emrys said dryly.

"But there's one thing I am sure of," she said as she stood up and dusted off her knees. "And that is that this *isn't* a summoning spell. It didn't summon the Unnamed One here."

"So why did it come?" Nate asked.

"That's the 64 million dollar question, isn't it?" Abbie looked at Emrys. "Do you have any ideas?"

"They've always said when the end of the world comes, it will be because of a Frost and a Whitney. Maybe now is the time and Nathaniel and I are the catalysts," Emrys said. "Worried that you're consorting with the wrong sort?"

"I'm sure that you're the wrong sort, Emrys. But that's not what worries me," she responded.

"So what does?"

"Just this, since we don't know why the Unnamed One came to you in the first place, well ... it could come back just as unexpectedly." She rubbed her arms as if chilled. "I don't believe that this was some kind of

coincidence that it showed up. No way. No how. And while killing your parents was a definitely good thing, a worthy thing, I highly doubt that was the Unnamed One's only object. This — this just doesn't feel like it's done."

Everyone was silent at that for a moment. Nate felt the truth of her words. This didn't feel done though he hoped the Emrys found some closure coming here.

"What does the Unnamed One look like? I mean we've seen demons in people so far, but what do they really look like when they don't have on a human suit?" Daniel asked, wide-eyed and pale.

Emrys shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know."

"But you saw it!" Daniel protested.

"If Emrys sees demons like I do then I'm not surprised he doesn't remember," Turner said slowly.

"I don't get it," Daniel said.

"It is said that the human mind cannot remember a true demon's face and not be destroyed by it," Abbie explained. Her gaze flickered from the burned figures to the blood on the floor. What happened to the Frosts clearly bore out that knowledge.

"Speaking of the things you see, Turner, are my parents still here?" Emrys asked.

There was a long pause. Finally, Turner cleared his throat and said, "They're – uh, yeah, they're here."

"What are they doing?" Emrys asked.

"Uhm, well ...uhm." Turner sent Nate a pleading look. He didn't want to say and that made Nate's heart clench.

"It's something terrible from your silence. But I'd like to know all the same," Emrys said calmly.

Turner rubbed his hands on the fronts of his thighs as he glanced over to the symbols on the floor that were caked with black. “They’re trying to – uhm, lick your old blood off the floor.”

Abbie made a gasp of disgust and covered her eyes. Daniel turned slightly green. Nate shook with anger. He wanted to rip Emrys’ parents apart with his bare hands. He wanted to make them feel the terror, fear and pain that Emrys had. He wanted them to have it writ on their souls forever.

Emrys, though, smiled. “Good to know that death hasn’t changed them that much.” He took a deep breath and turned away from the burned figures on the wall. “Come, children, let us keep moving. We have things to do and there’s nothing more to learn here.”

Emrys pulled Nate after him as he briskly walked away from the place where he had been tortured and his parents had died. Emrys did not look back. Not once. The others followed after them quickly. Turner and Daniel each held one of Abbie’s hands. He could see that all of them were grateful to leave that place yet at the same time he doubted any of them would ever forget it.

Nate looked up at Emrys, but the other man’s expression was unreadable at that moment. There was so much he wanted to say to comfort Emrys, but now was not the time. He just held onto him tightly and prayed that his love for the older man was translated through the fierceness of his touch and that Emrys was not so lost as to miss his thoughts. Emrys kissed his cheek.

“Everything is fine, Nathaniel.”

“Really?”

Emrys chuckled softly. “Better. Seeing that it really happened … I feel just a tad less crazy than before.”

“Just a tad?”

“A touch.”

“A dab? A dollop?”

Emrys kissed him again.

Nate hoped that was true. Though knowing that the Unnamed One was still around did not make him happy. Was Henry right that Emrys was the Devil’s favorite? But his thoughts were derailed as Emrys stopped in front of a barred wooden door. A heavy duty padlock was slid through a thick, steel loop.

“I thought we were going into a crypt.” Daniel pointed to the lock.
“Worried about dead people breaking out of there?”

“Yes,” Emrys said simply.

Daniel’s mouth opened and closed. “Seriously?”

“Yes,” Emrys replied as he fished out a key ring.

“Don’t you remember what he told about the many levels of rooms and tunnels beneath the house?” Abbie asked.

“Yeah, so?” Daniel responded.

“People could get in there and then up into the house,” Abbie explained.

“You mean ...people from like the graveyard and stuff could get in?”
Daniel’s eyes went wide.

“And the dead in the crypt could come back to life and try to kill everyone. Don’t let’s forget that,” Emrys said. “Ah, that’s the one!”

The key he stuck into the padlock finally turned. He jerked the hasp out of the loop and stuffed the lock in his pocket. He then lifted the two-by-four that barred the door shut. Finally, he turned the door handle and popped the door open. Wind immediately whistled out of the open door and all of them leaned forward to peer down. There were stone steps heading downwards into darkness. Nate fancied he heard the drip of subterranean water somewhere ahead of them.

“Are there any lights?” Nate asked.

“No electricity down there. They tried, but it simply wouldn’t take. We’ll have to use fire.” Emrys took down a torch from a sconce on the interior wall of the stairwell. He whispered a word and the torch, blackened from many fires, burst into flame.

“Cool,” Nate said. “It was impressive when you did it with the candles, but this is better.”

Emrys grinned. “Bigger fire is always better. Walk this way.”

They followed after him single file. The torchlight caused the shadows of the stairs below them to lengthen unnaturally. Nate gripped the back of Emrys’ shirt. The stairs bottomed out into a long rectangular room. Emrys whispered the word again and two torches on brackets on the walls burst into flame.

“This is the antechamber to the first crypt,” Emrys explained. The walls, floor and ceiling were made of stone that had a whitish-blue cast. There was a marble sarcophagus in the center of the room with a reclining female statue on top of it, holding a stone book over her breast. Emrys ran his hand along the edge of the sarcophagus. “This is the representation of Amelia Frost. She lived for almost 120 years and ruled the Frost family for most of that time. Some say she was far older. Some say she never did die.”

“Do you have like any normal family members?” Daniel asked.

Emrys tapped his lip. “Well, there was Uncle Ernest – wait, no, he had that penchant with voodoo dolls. My Great Aunt Clara was almost – well, no, she was convinced there were rats in the walls trying to scratch their way out to eat her. When she disappeared without a trace, some said the rats were real and got to her finally. So I guess the answer to your question would be ‘no.’”

“Huh, comforting. Nate you do realize that this means your boyfriend is likely to be nuts, too? Just like the odds alone make it so,” Daniel pointed out.

Nate wrapped an arm around Emrys' waist. "I sort of like crazy."

"There's no accounting for taste," Abbie murmured as she looked down at Amelia's features. "She's definitely got the Frost look."

"She's sort of pretty," Nate said, cocking his head to the side to look at the marble countenance.

"The Frosts always are. You only see the crazy in our eyes," Emrys said.

"Ah, okay, good to know," Nate mumbled.

Emrys clapped his hands together, which had everyone jumping. "Now, Turner, do you see anyone down here?"

Turner spun in a slow circle before shaking his head. "No sign of Uncle Excelsius or anyone else."

"We'll all be able to see Excelsius, I think. At least from what I remember," Emrys said. "But interesting that this place is empty, although we have a ways to go. Excelsius' body is about three rooms in."

"Three rooms, huh? Okay, let's get this done," Nate said.

"You know that he won't be able to tell you everything in one go, Nate. You'll have to come back and see him a ton down here, most likely," Abbie said.

"Thank you, Abbie. That makes me feel so much better."

Nate took Emrys' hand again and they journeyed through another doorway into the second chamber, which was twice as large as the first. This room also had marble walls, but there were raised plaques, which had the carved name of different Frosts. The plaques marked slots where coffins were housed.

"These were family members that died this century and last. Some of these are oddly empty even though a name is carved on the front," Emrys said.

Nate's forehead furrowed. "Did they not get buried here?"

“That’s the odd part. They did,” Emrys said.

“Bodies don’t walk off on their own, you know!” Daniel called.

“After all you’ve seen, are you so sure? But they might not have. The use of corpses in various spells is commonplace. I’m sure that’s what happened to some of them,” Emrys said.

“And the others?” Nate asked.

“I don’t think they’re still here. We’d have been attacked long ago if they were,” Emrys said.

“That’s not really comforting, you know.” Nate shook his head.

“You’re a Necromancer. The dead should attract you,” Emrys said.

“Hell, no! Dead people freak me out. I don’t even like going to cemeteries!” Nate objected. “This place is scaring the snot out of me.”

Emrys squeezed him. “It’s like a rock climber being afraid of heights. We will have to wean you off of it by ample time in crypts and other dead places.”

“Uh, how about no? Definitely no.” Nate shook his head.

Emrys laughed.

“Guys, there’s some one in that room.” Turner pointed through the next doorway.

There was a slight bluish glow coming from the third room. Nate’s breath suddenly frosted the air. Goose flesh appeared on all his bare skin. The temperature dropped thirty degrees. He started to shake. The blue glow approached them. It filled the doorway like a cloying mist. It then flooded the room they were in and swirled around their ankles. Nate was so cold that his bones ached. He sagged against Emrys, feeling all the life drained out of him.

“What – what is this?” Nate managed to get out through chattering teeth.

The glow suddenly coalesced in front of Nate and Emrys. Without being told that this was Excelsius Frost, Nate knew it was. He had the Frost beauty.

And, of course, the Frost madness radiating in his unearthly, phantom eyes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: THE OFFER

Excelsius Frost looked younger than Nate had expected, but maybe that was because he'd assumed, undoubtedly wrongly, that Excelsius had died of natural causes at a ripe old age in his bed, surrounded by family. Knowing the Frosts, he might have been burned at the stake with eager family members looking on.

The man before him was likely in his late thirties when he died. The blue mist that comprised his form made it hard to determine the color of his eyes or hair, but he had a surprisingly modern look to him. His hair was cut short and was artistically mussed. His clothes were not the elaborate fashion of several hundred years ago, instead he was simply dressed in a pair of slacks and non-descript sweater. He did not look like a man from long ago nor did he look the least bit threatening.

This is a ghost? He's like Mr. Rogers only better looking. And there is that mad glint in his eye ...

Excelsius was the same build as Emrys, perhaps a little narrower in the shoulders and waist, but that was likely due to the nutrition at the time. He tilted his head to the side as Nate stared at him while the others, except Emrys, had scattered to the far corners of the room.

"Nathaniel, are you all right?" Emrys gripped his shoulders and Nate realized the older man was trying to remove him from Excelsius Frost's presence, but he had been resisting unconsciously. Or maybe the ghost was keeping him there. But his limbs would not obey his commands.

Nate dragged his gaze from Excelsius and leaned back against Emrys. "I-I'm o-o-okay. J-j-just cold. F-f-frozen."

He felt the depth of how cold he was. His legs were like two ice blocks attached to the floor. His fingers had no feeling in them and his arms hung uselessly by his sides like two giant icicles. It was hard to move his lips to articulate words and his face seemed frozen in a perpetually surprised expression. Why didn't anyone else seem so cold? Why was he the only one?

"This is my doing, I'm afraid. Appearing requires power and I'm drawing it from your young man, Emrys," Excelsius said. His voice was surprisingly mellow though it did have that peculiar lilt that indicated half-hidden amusement that Emrys had as well.

"You just had to appear all at once with the artistic mist everywhere, didn't you? You couldn't just have let Turner see you first! No, no, you have to nearly freeze Nathaniel solid to make an entrance," Emrys muttered as he rubbed Nate's limbs to warm them.

Nate was actually able to move a little with Emrys' help. Through chattering teeth, he got out, "H-he's a F-frost, a-are y-you s-surprised?"

Emrys did not reply as he was too busy wrapping his arms around Nate and using his body warmth to thaw the boy. Nate started shivering uncontrollably as the warmth of Emrys' form started to effect his own..

"Take power from all of us equally so you don't drain Nathaniel, Excelsius," Emrys snarled.

"Hey! I don't want to be drained!" Daniel cried. He was hiding behind Abbie and only half peeked over her shoulder to shout that.

"You're one of the gang, Decoy. Too late to back out now," Emrys said. "Welcome to the wonderful world of magic where at any moment your life force could be used to fuel a spell or make a ghost visible to the naked eye. Get used to it."

Excelsius smiled and trails of mist left his body and snaked out to touch each person in the room. Abbie made a soft, shocked sound as the tendril touched her. Turner looked rather gray as another wrapped around his ankle. Daniel squealed and danced around in a circle, which only managed

to make the tendril wrap around him tighter. He only stopped when Abbie slapped his arm and told him to get a grip.

“So what brings you here to see me, Emrys? It has been some years since you walked these halls. I recall the last time you were here, you ran from them.” Excelsius crossed his arms over his chest. “Not that I blame you. The Unnamed One’s caress is a dubious honor … though I am surprised it let you leave at all until it was done.”

Emrys stiffened slightly at the mention of the Unnamed One, but he put on a confident smile as he regarded Excelsius. “Nothing gets past you, does it? Were you watching in the corner as I was tortured by my parents?”

Nate attempted a scowl, but his still numb lips wouldn’t allow him to. How could anyone have stood back and watched what those people had done to Emrys and done nothing? He distrusted and disliked the ghost in front of him just for that alone.

The ghost shrugged his translucent shoulders, unaware, and perhaps uncaring, of the loss of any potential regard from Nate. “I have little else to do to amuse myself than watch our family. And wherever you are, Emrys, there are interesting things to see.”

“Y-you f-found it a-amusing when they t-tortured Emrys?” Nate managed to get out.

Excelsius’ eyebrows raised. “Amusing? No. Interesting? Yes, of course. It was a complicated spell that I wasn’t sure his parents were going to pull off – I was right on that score. And then the Unnamed One shows up to save the day. It was quite a moment in history. I was graced to see it.”

“You should have helped!” Nate cried. His jaw finally had unfrozen and he could speak freely again.

Another eyebrow raise. This time higher. “How? What could I have done? Misted them to death?”

“Drained them like you drained me!” Nate argued.

“They wouldn’t have let me do that and if I tried, I would likely have gotten banished to the tunnels.” Excelsius gave a shiver. “So unpleasant down there.”

“I can’t believe you—”

“It’s all right, Nathaniel. Excelsius truly could not have aided me. Even if he had been inclined to do so.” Emrys hugged Nate a little closer. “A ghost’s power is very limited especially against fully trained witches.”

Nate did scowl this time at the ghost. He still wasn’t convinced that Excelsius couldn’t have done something. The ghost regarded him with a half-smile as if Nate was a puppy jumping up and down behind glass, impotent to do anything to him.

“So ... now that I have been excoriated for my lack of saving you, what *more* can I endure from your presence?” Excelsius asked, spreading his arms wide.

“I have a feeling he already knows why we’re here,” Abbie spoke up suddenly. Her eyes were narrowed as she studied Excelsius.

“How are you sure?” Nate asked, looking at Excelsius himself to see if there was any physical indication of the knowledge, but he saw nothing.

Turner nodded. “Abbie’s right. I can see that he’s been following us. Wasn’t sure what that was that I was seeing, but now I’m sure it was him. He’s been spying.”

“Spying, Excelsius? How the mighty have fallen,” Emrys remarked.

“Not at all. I used to follow the family around all the time. Now I just follow you as ... well, you’re the rest of the family. Those outer cousins don’t count,” Excelsius said.

“At least if he has been spying, this will save time in explanations,” Nate remarked. He was less cold than he had been now that the others were sharing the burden of allowing Excelsius to be visible. His limbs though tingled painfully like they did when they woke up from being ‘asleep’.

“Are you sure that he’s a Demon Eater? I see none of the signs to indicate it,” Turner said as he gazed at Excelsius.

Excelsius looked from Turner then to Abbie. “A Blackwell! Ah, two Blackwells and ... what is *he*?” The ghost pointed to Daniel. “Bait? A tasty snack? A sidekick?”

“You know, I’m noticing that there is a lot of blatant discrimination against us non-witches.” Daniel shook the ankle that the tendril had wrapped around like it was an annoying house pet that could be kicked away. “It’s totally racist.”

“I don’t think that witches are a race, Daniel,” Nate pointed out.

“Well, it’s definitely prejudiced!” Daniel retorted.

“Prejudice implies that the belief is ill-founded. In truth, non-witches are simply lesser. It’s a fact. Nothing much to be done about it,” Excelsius said with a brush of his fingers over the tops of his shoulders as if there were ghostly lint adhering to his shoulders.

“De—Daniel showed more courage than many a witch has when faced with a Greater Demon,” Emrys surprisingly spoke up for Daniel.

“You are referring to how I died. How very gauche of you, Emrys!” Excelsius laughed though it sounded slightly forced.

“How did he die?” Nate asked Emrys.

Emrys leaned down and explained, “Let’s just say that he faced down a demon that not even he could devour. He ended up running away from it only to be killed in mid-flight.”

“And this is the guy who you want to train me in Demon Eating?” Nate’s eyebrows rose this time. The last thing he needed was some cowardly teacher who had failed at running away.

“You want a favor and you bring up my death! Really, Emrys, you are losing your touch,” Excelsius huffed, turning his head to the side as if put out.

“I think Emrys knows that whether we are polite or rude to you that it won’t matter in the end.” Abbie drew nearer to the translucent ghost. “He figured that you would demand the same price regardless. And besides as Nate pointed out, you haven’t exactly been Emrys’ greatest friend.”

Excelsius bowed low. “I beg forgiveness. I see that I am in a room of limitless courage. I am a lowly creature who does not have a soul of steel and a shell of platinum.”

Nate realized that this wasn’t going the way any of them had planned. They did need Excelsius’ help and it might assist matters if they were straight up with the guy and got to the point without insulting him more. He decided to wade on in.

“Look, we’re sorry if we insulted you, but things are pretty damned dire and it seems like everyone we turn to is more interested in staying out of the fray while others suffer, somehow thinking that they’ll escape that fate if they put their hands over their eyes and ears,” Nate explained. “We’re here because we need to get rid of a Greater Demon who has possessed Abbie and Turner’s dad. If we don’t succeed in it, the whole world is going to go to Hell probably quite literally.”

Excelsius rose up and his expression for the first time was not amused. Nate saw a wickedly cool intelligence in those eyes. “Yes, and the only way you’re going to get rid of a Greater Demon is through a Demon Eater.”

“That’s right,” Nate agreed. “I’m – I’m a, ah, a Demon Eater.”

Excelsius beamed at him. The ghost leaned nearer. Nate’s breath became a blizzard of frost between them. “Yes, yes, you are. And a Necromancer, too. And – and, oh, my, a Frost as well!”

“And a Whitney,” Nate stuck in his mother’s heritage.

Excelsius let out a charmed giggle. “Yes, yes, let’s bring that in, too! Oh, you glorious boy! You most remarkable boy! And let me guess one last thing: you don’t have the ability to store the amount of energy or let it out safely from devouring a Greater Demon, am I correct?”

“That would also be correct,” Emrys responded for Nate dryly. He was clearly not enjoying Excelsius’ pleasure at this news.

Excelsius nodded, tenting his hands together in front of him, before a gleeful smile crossed his lips and he did a little jig in front of them. “Yes, yes, yes, I *knew* it was time! I felt things just coming together and now they are! My long wait is over!”

“Uhm, is he doing a happy dance?” Daniel asked. “I thought he was like from the past? So why doesn’t he talk or act old-timey?”

“Because, you silly child, I have listened to the modern world for ages upon ages. That is all there is to do,” Excelsius explained. “Listen, plan, and listen some more! And in the meantime, hope to not go stark raving mad from it.”

“Too late,” Turner murmured.

The ghost stood up fully and addressed Nate. “You need my help to deal with this Greater Demon and I need your help to be resurrected. One connects to the other quite well.”

“How exactly are they connected?” Nate asked. “Any why am I dreading the answer to this question?”

“Because it’s always bad, Nate,” Daniel murmured. “Haven’t you figured that one out yet?”

“Power, dear boy! *Power.*” A wild light danced in Excelsius’ eyes for a moment. He clenched one fist in front of him. “To merely appear before you is taking the power of four witches and a – ah, *person.*” He tipped his head to Daniel. “But to return to life I need so much more.”

“The Greater Demon’s power?” Abbie guessed.

“Exactly!”

“So how exactly do we do this? Because I can’t take in the Greater Demon’s power. I’ll just explode or something. So you know a way to not do that?” Nate asked.

Abbie grasped Nate's arm. "Nate, do we really *want* to do this?"

"You mean do we really want to uhm, well, bring Excelsius back?" Nate glanced up at the Frost ancestor.

"Just a like a Blackwell to urge caution at the most inappropriate time," Excelsius said with a thin-lipped smile at her. "It is your father's life at stake and you are worried about whether I am worthy of being brought back?"

"Considering you are a Frost, that's a good consideration," Emrys cut in dryly.

"You wound me," Excelsius said with a laugh. "But fair enough. It takes one to know one."

"So your offer is basically, you'll teach me how to devour the Greater Demon and you get to use the power from it to resurrect yourself?" Nate asked.

"With your further assistance, I'll resurrect myself, yes, that's about right," Excelsius explained.

"It sounds like you're getting an awful lot out of this deal," Daniel pointed out.

"Beggars can't be choosers especially when the end of the world is at stake," Excelsius said.

"I imagine that even for ghosts stuck here that existence wouldn't be overly pleasant if the Greater Demon gets its way," Nate said.

"Probably not," Excelsius agreed.

"So you could help just to avoid that," Nate pointed out.

"I could." The ghost nodded. "But I won't. Because when things are this dire, help can be sold at a premium. And I want to *live*."

“We would need to know exactly how this would all work before we agreed to anything, you realize,” Emrys told him.

Excelsius smiled. “I could tell you some mumbo jumbo about not revealing my secrets, but the truth is that it is very simple. Do you see that tile in the center of the floor?”

Nate swung around to look at where the ghost was pointing. Unlike the other tiles that were smooth and unadorned, this one was carved and had a small smooth jewel in the center. The jewel was so dusty that Nate couldn’t tell its color. The carving reminded him unpleasantly of the symbols that Emrys had been surrounded with when his parents went after him.

“What about it?” Nate asked.

“That is a storage device for energy. Simply put, bring the demon down here, and I will assist you in devouring it and directing its energy into the tile instead of into the room to kill everyone and likely destroy the town,” Excelsius said.

“Ah, okay, so that easy, huh?” Nate didn’t buy that for a second.

“Easy? Well, I suppose,” Excelsius said with a nod. “But that is accepting that you actually get the Greater Demon to physically come here, stand on that spot, and you get a chance to start devouring it before it kills you.”

“Oh, yeah … *simple*.” Nate swallowed.

“How handy that this tile-thing is here,” Turner murmured.

“Yes, it was very handy for many, many years. This is where I stored many a demon’s energy to be accessed later,” Excelsius said.

“Including the demon that killed you?” Nate asked.

Excelsius pursed his lips. “Danger is the spice of life. Things went wrong. They often do. They could go wrong again. We’ll see if you can do any better.”

Abbie kneeled down beside the tile and studied it. “There’s a large crack in this tile. It’s also flaking away in parts. Are you sure that it even works anymore? Or that it’s safe?

“More or less,” Excelsius said.

“Obviously, the last time you tried to use it was when you died so I’m guessing you’re not really sure.” Nate ran a hand through his hair.

Emrys went over to the tile and poked at it. “This definitely needs some repair if we are going to use it.”

“If? *If?*” Excelsius’ eyebrows were crawling back up into his hairline again.

“Yes, *if*.” Emrys rose up. He had a confident air back about him, almost dismissive. “We’ll get back to you on this, Excelsius. Come, children, I am dying for a drink and some sex. Not necessarily in that order.”

“TMI!” Daniel cried, covering his ears with his hands.

Emrys grasped Nate’s hand again and began to draw the young man out of the crypt. The others followed quickly on their heels.

Excelsius called out after them, “You’ll be back! You have to come back! The only other choice is the Unnamed One! And you’ll never survive its kiss, Emrys!”

“Emrys, why are we taking off so quick?” Nate asked as they climbed the stairs up to the cellar.

“Because we heard all that was worth listening to. Better to make him a little desperate than assured,” Emrys said. “He’s much too cock-sure for my taste. Don’t you want to make him beg a little?”

“I guess. Just so long as he helps us if we decide to go this way,” Nate agreed.

“And we have to research that tile. I took a picture of it with my phone for a reference,” Abbie said rather breathlessly as her much smaller legs had to

go twice as fast to keep up with them. “We have no idea what such a spell could do to you, Nate. We need information. We can’t just be in the dark while Excelsius does whatever the heck he wants.”

“I swear that the Earth must have shifted on its axis as I am once again in agreement with Abbie,” Emrys said.

Without a glance at the place where he had been tortured, Emrys led them past it and then back through the aisles of wine bottles. The hand that was not holding Nate’s grabbed a few vintages as they walked past them. Emrys shoved several bottles at Nate. The boy had to juggle them under his one free arm.

“I take it that you aren’t still thinking of re-opening this place with a grand bash?” Nate asked, studying Emrys’ serious expression.

“I’m back to thinking condos, Nathaniel, though the land is probably so cursed that there would be too much litigation to actually sell it. Whatever came over me earlier has, thankfully, abated. I am sane once more,” Emrys said and Nate felt a wash of relief.

“So the plan is to research this tile thing and then figure out how to lure the demon down there?” Daniel asked as he hustled to keep up with Emrys and Nate.

“That’s all we have for now. But one never knows when another avenue is going to present itself, Decoy. We always have to be open to the unexpected pathway,” Emrys said.

They were now up the stairs and heading swiftly to the foyer and the front doors. Nate put in an extra burst of speed, actually leading Emrys as they caught sight of the front doors. He was dying to feel the cold, fresh air on his face and get away from the oppressive presence of the house.

The doors opened easily beneath his and Emrys’ palms. The night air enveloped all of them in a welcoming embrace. The five of them ran towards Emrys’ car. No one talked as Emrys jammed the key in the ignition and had them skidding away from the Frost Manor.

At a stop light about a mile from the house, Emrys leaned over to Nate and said, “Wine. Sex. Shower. Bed. How does that sound?”

Nate grinned. “Step on the gas.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE: FORBIDDEN FRUIT

The drive back to Emrys’ house was almost silent as all of them were drained of energy from the insane day. They trudged up into the house from the garage, dead on their feet. Only the thought of making love with Emrys kept Nate going. He wasn’t going to be too tired for that!

“Children, there are guest rooms made up on the second floor for you,” Emrys said with a languid wave at Abbie, Turner and Daniel. “I’m sure you can find your own way. And – though I would think this goes without saying – bedrooms are NOT eating rooms.”

“There he goes with the eating rooms again. What the Hell is an eating room?” Daniel muttered.

“Children eat in one of the two dining rooms or the kitchen. No where else.” Emrys pronounced each word clearly.

“You know that Nate is the same age as most of us in the group you call ‘children’,” Abbie pointed out. When Emrys stared at her blandly, she added, “It’s just it makes you sound ... well, perverted to call your own lover a *child*.” She tapped her chin. “But then again, considering I know you are perverted, that’s in character.”

“One man’s trash is another’s treasure. Or in this case, one man’s or *woman’s* perversion is another man’s beloved.” Emrys slung one arm across Nate’s shoulders.

Nate let out a soft laugh. Emrys stabbed the button for the elevator. The others took the stairs. Nate heard Daniel call dibs on whatever room was closest to the bathroom. Abbie replied tartly back that every bedroom in Emrys’ house had a bathroom.

“Score!” Daniel’s voice faded off.

Emrys and Nate stumbled into the open elevator. Nate blindly pushed the button for the top floor while he kissed Emrys softly on the lips. Emrys tried to pull Nate harder against him, but the bottles of wine that the older man had stuffed in his jacket got in the way and dug into Nate's stomach. Nate made an annoyed groan and broke the kiss. He then lifted one of the bottles from Emrys' overlarge pockets and held it up to read the label.

"We're going to drink that," Emrys said.

"I thought bedrooms were not eating rooms?" Nate's right eyebrow cocked up.

"This is drinking, Nathaniel, which is different from eating. I had hoped you would know that at your age." Emrys smirked. "Despite Abbie's intimation that I like you because you're a child."

"Between the two of us, I think I'm much more mature," Nate teased, tickling the old man's side. "I guess I thought you were concerned about mess and red wine would certainly qualify as a possible messy substance."

Emrys nodded. "Ah, but you see my bedroom happens to be an eating, drinking, having wild sex that stains everything area. Didn't you see the mini-fridge earlier?"

"Ah, no." Nate had been more interested in looking at Emrys' naked form than his furnishings. "We were occupied and your room is like the entire third floor. I think I missed some of the amenities."

"It has whipped cream and other condiments that are suitable for fun," Emrys said with a waggle of his eyebrows.

"So things conducive to good sex are allowed in non-eating rooms?" Nate grinned.

"Exactly. That is why they are not in the *children's* rooms. After all, I will not be accused of contributing to the delinquency of minors."

Nate stared at him hard. "Except for me?"

“You’re eighteen. No longer a minor.” Emrys kissed him on the tip of the nose.

“If I was seventeen, would that have stopped you?”

Emrys laughed. “We’ll never know now, will we? Let’s just be thankful I met you when you were of legal age.”

The elevator doors opened and they stepped into Emrys’ bedroom, which was already prepared for their return. The bed was remade with fresh linens and the covers were turned down. The modern lamps on the nightstands were on their lowest setting to make the whole space look cozy and inviting.

I could get used to living in a place where everything seems to magically clean itself and welcome you back. These servants are more like elves than people.

Emrys strode over to what looked like a dresser, but when he opened it, there was a fridge inside as well as liquor, glasses and other bar paraphernalia. The older man set all the bottles of wine gently in clear glass fronted wine refrigerator except for one.

“Uhm, unlike your other lovers, I have to call home and let my grandmother know I won’t be home tonight,” Nate said.

Emrys cast him an amused look. “It’s been awhile since I had to worry about anyone phoning home. Unless it was one of the ones who was married and they had to contact their spouses with some convenient lie for their absence. I always thought that ‘working late’ was the most see-thru lie, but it worked really well.”

Nate merely shook his head and tried not to imagine Emrys with some hot, older guy or a bunch of hot, older guys who were married. He fished his cell out of his jeans. The screen was shattered and when he pushed the power button absolutely nothing happened. “My cell phone is totally fried.”

“Probably from when you called down the heavens this afternoon. Here.” Emrys tossed him his phone. “Call her on this.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you going to discuss your inheritance? Daddy dearest? Demons? Necromancy? All of the above?” Emrys took down and began to polish two wine glasses.

“Ah, no, I was sort of going to stick with the old: I’m staying the night somewhere else. I figure that other stuff should maybe happen in person,” Nate said. “You know so there can be eye contact.”

Emrys clucked. “Avoidance, Nathaniel. Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Maybe a little. But how the Hell do I have a conversation with her about any of this? I mean I don’t know where to begin!”

“You are assuming she doesn’t know some of it already,” Emrys pointed out with a poke of the corkscrew in his direction.

“Dad said she knows some of it anyways.” Nate sat on the edge of the bed.

“No getting up there with shoes on,” Emrys said with a scowl at his dusty shoes.

Nate nearly jumped up from the bed. “I won’t.” He frowned at Emrys. “I can’t believe you have me jumping to attention! I’m not going to get your bed mess, finicky cat.”

“Good boy,” Emrys said with a smile.

Nate shucked off his shoes and aligned them neatly with the wall before sitting back down again. He turned on Emrys' phone. It took him a second to remember his own number as he was so used to using his address book. It rang only one time before his grandmother snatched it up.

“Nate?” She sounded breathless and worried. He felt a stab of guilt for not getting in touch with her earlier. “

“Hey, Grandma. Sorry for not phoning earlier.”

“I tried calling you over and over again, but all I ever got was your voicemail,” she said, her voice catching.

He gritted his teeth as he looked down at the shattered phone. “Yeah, my phone sort of bit the dust and I just realized it.”

“But you – you’re all right, aren’t you?” There seemed to be more in her question than just him spending the whole day away from home.

“I’m fine.” That wasn’t exactly true, but he was going to have sex with Emrys soon so he soon would be better than fine. “I’m going to be spending the night at a … uh …” Nate looked over at Emrys and realized it was impossible to classify the older man in any real way that wouldn’t send his grandmother into high alert. Nate decided to stick with vague and neutral. “A friend’s house.”

“Your father called me,” she rushed out, clearly either not hearing or not caring about what he had said.

“Oh, yeah?” Nate swallowed. They really were going to have part of this conversation on the phone. Right then and there. He glanced up at Emrys who gave him a sympathetic look and a shake of his head. But the older man was not going to give him a way out of this.

“So … so you know,” she said softly.

Know you’re a witch. Know you’re parents are, too. Know your father had to kill your mother. Because she was possessed. And, oh, by the way, I lied to you for eighteen years …

“You should have told me,” Nate said, his throat closing up slightly with emotion as he thought of his dad stuck in that awful place with only his mother to visit him. His own son pretending all that time that he wasn’t even alive!

“I wanted to. Oh, how I wanted to! But your father … he didn’t want that, Nate.” He imagined that she would be twisting the cord of the old phone like she did when she was anxious.

“Yet he kept my name on the visitor’s log and *you* told me to go!” Nate didn’t mean to sound so accusatory, but he was angry at all the time he and his father had lost. He was angry that the man was locked up for saving his life.

I’m going to fix that.

Emrys glanced over at him, concerned, but Nate waved him off. He couldn’t be comforted right now. He needed to concentrate on this.

“Yes, yes, I did. I knew you’d learn about this eventually. All of it. I just hoped … *hoped* you wouldn’t be touched by witchcraft again!” she said the word ‘witchcraft’ like it left a bad taste in her mouth.

“Did Dad tell you what I am?” Nate asked.

She was very quiet for a long moment. “He – he said some things that I don’t exactly understand. He said that you have a lot of responsibility resting on you and that I wasn’t to question you anymore than necessary or … or stand in the way.”

Nate’s eyes closed and he rubbed the bridge of his nose. His dad had just helped him immeasurably. He had to thank the man. Again and again and again.

First step is to get him out of the hospital.

“I know that standing back is probably hard for you,” Nate said. “You’ve been looking out for me my entire life.”

“And I don’t want to stop now,” her voice was tight.

“But you’ve got to. About this stuff, Grandma, I – I need you to do what Dad’s asked,” Nate said. His free hand gripped the top of his thigh.

“Can’t you tell me what’s going on? Shane wouldn’t. He just told me to try and be as supportive and as … *normal* for you as possible,” she answered.

Nate smiled. His dad really did get exactly what he needed. One safe haven in the storm would help. An anchor to normality. “There’s a lot going on. And as soon as I can tell you it, I will. But for now … try not to worry.”

After all, if we fail, you’ll be as dead as the rest of us. Shit.

“I don’t know if I can stop myself from worrying about you, Nate. You’re my grandson. My favorite.”

Nate grinned at that. “Your *only*.”

“Ah, even if I had a million grandchildren, you’d still be my favorite,” she said fiercely and he could feel the love flowing over the line from her.

At that moment, he felt Emrys wanting his attention. He looked up and the older man mouthed, *Inheritance*.

Nate mouthed back, *Now?*

Emrys nodded firmly. His look said, *Get it over with.*

Nate sighed. “Grandma, there’s one other thing I need to ask you.”

One other lie I think you told to protect me.

“What’s that, dear?”

He squirmed slightly on the bed, finally resting his elbows on his knees and holding his head in his free hand. “Do I – uh, is there – uhm, any inheritance from the Whitneys?”

She took in a sharp breath. “There – there is. It’s in a trust until you’re 21.”

Nate grimaced. He could feel Emrys’ knowing look at that moment. “It’s a lot of money, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said primly. “But it’s ...”

“What?”

“I loved your mother, Nate, but the Whitneys were always bad people,” she said. “And their money ... I didn’t want it. I didn’t want it *touching* you. A bunch of lawyers look after it for you and I get statements.” She sounded a little unnerved as she added, “It’s even more money now than when you inherited it.”

He thought of all they could have used that money for over the years. His grandmother wouldn’t still be working in her sixties. The house wouldn’t leak. They’d have a car that didn’t break down when the weather got too cold. How many times had he seen her fret about money? How many times had she cut corners to make sure he had new clothes for school? All that could have been alleviated by the Whitney money.

“Grandma, you should have used some of it,” he said softly.

“I couldn’t! Oh, Nate, I just – you haven’t wanted for too much, have you? I – I know you haven’t had things like the wealthy people, but – but there’s some good in that. You have a strong head on your shoulders. You know the value of money and hard work,” she rushed out.

He heard the guilt running through her voice, which made him feel if he raged about the loss of money over these years it would hurt her immeasurably. And it wasn’t worth it. “It’s okay, Grandma.”

“Is it?”

Nate swallowed the anger he felt over her lying to him. He understood why she had done it all, but she’d still done it. “Yes, but ...”

“But?” her voice was small and uncertain.

“But I want to talk to those lawyers.” Nate lifted his head to meet Emrys’ steady gaze. The older man said nothing, but his steady expression put steel into Nate’s spine. He straightened up further. “I want to start using that money—”

“Yes, I thought perhaps for college,” she eagerly agreed.

“No, not just for college,” Nate said firmly. “I’m ...” He licked his lips and stared directly into Emrys’ eyes as he said, “I’m going to Dunhaven for my senior year. I need to have that paid for.”

“Dunhaven?”

“Yeah.”

“Of – of course, if you really want to go.”

“I *need* to go. That’s where I’m going to be taught how to use my powers,” Nate said. *If we survive the demon invasion.*

“Your powers. Yes, I understand,” she sounded like she didn’t want to.

“And another thing,” Nate said, making his tone non-negotiable. “We’re using some of the money to fix up the house.”

“Oh, Nate, you don’t need to –”

“I don’t *need* to. I *want* to. Actually, the house needs us to. We’re doing it, Grandma. And if your sciatica worsens again, you’re not working anymore. You need to rest and relax for once,” Nate said.

She laughed softly. “I like to work, Nate. What would I do, if I didn’t? Garden? Winter’s coming.”

“Think about it.”

She sighed. “All right, I’ll consider it.”

He knew she wouldn’t.

“Just email me the info on the lawyers and I’ll get in touch with you when – when I can to meet up with them,” Nate said.

“So it’s not just tonight that you won’t be home?” she sounded afraid, her voice quavering slightly.

“I’m not sure what’s really going to happen. I’ll call you when I can. I swear.” He held Emrys’ phone tightly. “I – I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she breathed.

“Night.”

He quickly flicked off the call as emotion threatened to overwhelm him. He pushed himself off the bed and paced a bit without talking. The older man could have said, ‘I told you so’ a million times and been right. But Emrys said nothing at all. Just gave him space and quiet to process everything. Nate found himself walking over to the windows. A couch had been strategically placed so that they could look outside. He sank down onto it and drew his feet up beneath him, tossing the phone to the side. He stared out the windows. He could only see his reflection in the glass. He looked pissed. He looked tired. He looked like his world had been upended in 24 hours.

“Once I’ve got this wine poured, I’ll turn off the lights so we can look out,” Emrys said. “The ocean is always interesting. Especially at night. There’s enough moonlight for us to see, I think.”

“I’m surprised there isn’t a spell to see in the dark.”

“Oh, there is, but spells take concentration and energy. Takes away from the enjoyment of the moment.”

“And we shouldn’t probably be using magic for small stuff like turning off the lights, right?” Nate realized. “Why does this make me think of Star Wars and the Force?”

“Because you’re a geek?” Emrys uncorked one of the bottles and started pouring it into a decanter. The glugging sound made Nate thirsty.

Nate was about to debate that, but then realized it was true and something he liked that about himself. “It’s like when Anakin uses his powers to float Padme a pear—”

“Are you sure it was a pear?” Emrys interrupted with a cocked head.

“What?”

“A pear. Weren’t they on some exotic planet. Would there really be pears there?” Emrys asked.

“It looked like a pear to me!”

“Ah, but that doesn’t mean—”

“This is like a conversation with Daniel!”

Emrys went quiet. “Let’s not bring Daniel into the bedroom.”

“Yeah, let’s not. But just so you know, you just confirmed yourself as big a geek as me,” Nate pointed out.

Emrys shrugged. “What can I say? I have a thing for black, leather clad men and disturbed boys with pointy objects.”

Nate stifled a laugh. “Well, *anyways*, back to my story. Parable. Whatever. Remember, Anakin sends the – the *space fruit* – levitating over to Padme and he says he shouldn’t use the Force for mundane things like that, but does it anyway. Later, as we all know, he changes from whiny brat to badass.”

“And the moral of this story?”

“My point is that …do you think going evil is as simple as levitating a pear one time too many?”

“That is an … *interesting* way of putting it.” Emrys handed him a glass of wine. “We really should let this breathe, but … fuck it. It’s been a day.”

“I’m so with you on that.” Nate took a large swallow of wine. It tasted of earth and berries. He closed his eyes and savored the warmth of it running down his throat.

Emrys dropped down on the sofa beside him, one arm stretching over Nate’s shoulders while he held his drink with the other and toed off his shoes. “Damn, I was going to get the lights, wasn’t I?”

“I’ll get them.” Nate was about to heft himself up from the couch when Emrys dragged him back down.

“No, need. Consider this my pear levitation for you.”

The lights went out and the windows revealed a roiling sea. Nate sank back against the couch and Emrys’ reassuring arm. “Whoa, it’s amazing.”

“The sea is active in a way at night that’s different than the day. The colors are fascinating. Slate grays, blacks and foamy whites. I’ve occasionally had a wild urge to go swimming in storm surge at night. It always happens when I feel more alive than ever and strangely suicidal at the same time,” Emrys remarked with a squeeze of Nate’s shoulders..

“You were right. About everything. My dad. My mom. The money.” Nate laid his head against Emrys’ chest.

“Would it make you feel any better if I said I wished I wasn’t?” Emrys carded a hand through Nate’s hair.

Nate shook his head and just breathed in Emrys. “I should feel betrayed, but I more just feel tired. I mean I get why she did it. It’s so like her. Don’t take the money that would make things so much easier. Don’t tell Nate that his father only killed his mother because she was a demon. And for God’s sake, don’t mention witchcraft.”

“Knowing the truth would have made your life *different*, but not necessarily *better*,” Emrys said. “And I think you were pretty happy about a lot of things up to the point I met you and upended your little apple cart.”

“I let my dad rot in an asylum for eighteen years and never visited him. How is that better exactly?”

“You’ve known the truth of your father’s incarceration for less than twelve hours now and you’re being driven insane by it,” Emrys pointed out.

“I ... okay. Because it’s wrong! He’s innocent! It was self-defense and he did it to save me!”

“Yes, all that is true. Now imagine eighteen years of knowing that, but being unable to do anything about it,” Emrys offered. “Imagine eighteen years where you would have had to hear people’s lies about him and know that they were lies, but if you spoke up you would have been joining him in the loony bin.”

“But I could have gotten him out like I’m going to do now,” Nate said mulishly.

“Before you got your powers, you would have been like an ant trying to lift a truck,” Emrys said. “It would not have happened.”

“I would have had the Whitney money!” Nate protested.

“Not enough for a homicide like that to disappear,” Emrys said. “No, the only thing that you have that is powerful enough to get your father out of that prison is your magic. And not just spelling him out of prison either. That wouldn’t work in the long term. No, you need *favors* from every single Family out there.”

“Favors I would get by destroying that demon, right?”

Emrys nodded. “Then you stick it to them. Like a stake through the heart. And we get your father out.”

“Damn straight.” Nate stroked the top of Emrys’ thighs. “I’ve never met anyone like you, you know that? You’re like crazy and ... awesome. I can’t really separate the two, because one is the same as the other.”

Emrys kissed the top of his head as an answer. “You’re pretty crazy and awesome yourself, Nathaniel.”

Nate took another large swallow of wine. “What the fuck are we going to do? I mean, are we going to bring back Excelsius?”

“Ah, there’s no ‘we’ about this, Nathaniel. You’re the necromancer. None of us is capable of it even if we had a million years and all the power in the world to work with,” Emrys corrected.

“So it’s my decision?” Nate’s stomach clenched.

“You already know it is,” Emrys said softly.

“Because I pay the price for doing a spell like that? Like a million levitated pears all at once?” Nate asked.

“Yes,” Emrys answered simply. He held Nate tightly.

“Okay.” Nate drained his glass. He felt rather numb. He knew he wasn’t going to get his mind around this any time that night. He turned to Emrys. “You mentioned sex earlier this evening.”

“And a shower.” Emrys smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. Nate was going to change that.

“I’d like sex in the shower now.”

“Your wish is my command.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR: BLOOD SEX MAGIC

Nate downed the wine while Emrys did the same. He wanted alcohol’s dulling warmth to block out some of the sharpness of the information he had learned in only twenty-four hours. Emrys thrust his glass in front of Nate and the boy downed that one, too.

“When you were – were attacked by your parents, did you think you were going to make it?” Nate asked. Emrys was quiet for a moment. Nate looked over at him. “I’m sorry … I shouldn’t have brought that up.”

Emrys ran his fingers through Nate’s hair. “You can ask me anything. You know that. I was quiet only because I was trying to remember. I think … I think I did believe I would survive.”

“That’s – that’s good.”

“But then again, I was a teenager who couldn’t contemplate the thought of my own death. I was immortal,” Emrys amended.

“Oh.”

“Why are you asking?”

Nate picked at the seam of his pants. “Things seem so dark now. I don’t know. I guess I thought that if you knew things were going to be okay then that meant that you’d know whether they would be okay this time. You know? Like a premonition power.”

Emrys massaged the back of Nate’s neck. “I don’t have the power to see the future.”

“Do you believe that we’ll make it through this?”

“Yes.”

Nate’s head jerked up. “You didn’t hesitate with that answer!”

“I want it to be all right. I want it more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life.” Emrys’ eyes glowed with passion for a moment. “My life has been ...” He let out a soft bitter laugh. “My life has been *difficult* before now. As you know.”

“Seriously.” Nate ran a hand up and down Emrys’ arm.

Emrys’ expression went uncharacteristically serious. “I never thought I could feel this way. Twenty-four hours might as well be twenty-four years with you.”

“The Frost-Whitney fabled love, right?”

“It is, Nathaniel. I have no doubts about us and I always have doubts about everything. I normally hold back, but ... not with you.” Emrys shook his head.

“It’s the same for me. I never thought it was possible to feel like *this* no matter how long I knew someone.” Nate laced his fingers through Emrys’. “I just can’t imagine life without you. I wouldn’t want to.”

“And that’s why we need to ensure that our lives are as long as possible so we can enjoy this,” Emrys said firmly. “I refuse to let some bastard demon ruin our lives.”

Nate couldn't help but grin and let out a laugh. "Damn straight."

"Come on. No more maudlin, mushy talk." Emrys stood up first and offered Nate his hand. The boy took it and Emrys pulled him to his feet.

"I don't want to think anymore tonight," Nate said. God, he really didn't. There was simply too much to take in. He just wanted Emrys. Maybe for a few hours he could pretend that they had a normal relationship.

Normal? Nothing about Emrys is normal. And I don't think I'd want it to be. But it would be nice not to have to think of the end of the world or becoming like Darth Vader depending on what choices I make.

"I will do my best to ensure you are completely brainless, Nathaniel." Emrys smirked.

"You are pretty good at sucking out all rational thought." Nate flushed as he remembered Emrys sucking him off in the elevator.

Emrys led him towards the bathroom. Nate's heart skipped a beat. Emrys' bathroom was the awesome. It was the same size as Nate's whole bedroom and occupied just a corner of the third floor with one outside wall facing the sea and the other overlooking a walled garden, which was good since both walls were made of heavy duty glass. There were shades that could be drawn down between the two thick panes of glass that made up the walls to give privacy, but since there was no one to see inside, the view was unobstructed. The shower was in the tip of the corner. There wasn't a shower head like Nate had in his bathroom. Instead there was a metal sheet that lined the ceiling that had holes punched into it that allowed water to rain down onto them.

"I love your bathroom by the way," Nate said.

Emrys chuckled. "It's why I bought the house."

"I can understand that. But I keep thinking how hellish it would be to keep all the glass clean." Nate was responsible for his own bathroom's cleanliness. His grandmother refused to go in there and it was just as well

as sometimes it felt like he was running a science experiment gone awry with mold.

“Servants, Nathaniel. They’re better than magic.”

“Right. I keep forgetting about them since they seem to move on little cat feet around here.” Nate had lived around Winter Haven’s wealth all his life, but this was the first time he was close with someone who was so vastly wealthy. He’d been on the outside, but now he was on the inside. And more than just that.

I’m wealthy, too, which I really can’t believe. Me, rich? Then again, me a witch? Still the wealthy part seems harder to swallow.

Nate couldn’t help the little gasp as Emrys used magic to make the dozens of cream-colored pillar candles that lined the room burst into flickering life. Emrys turned to face Nate as soon as they were in the middle of the room. Nate curled his toes into the fluffy rug that covered some of the cool marble floor. Emrys cupped his chin then leaned in and lightly brushed his lips over Nate’s forehead down the slope of his nose over the divot above his upper lip and finally came to rest their mouths together. It was a light kiss that was so tender it made Nate’s heart hammer in his chest.

I don’t want to lose this. I’ve just found him. Why does everything have to be so insane when something good is finally happening?

Nate slid his hands beneath the bottom of Emrys’ shirt and gripped the older man’s trim waist. His fingers eagerly dug into the strong muscles in Emrys’ sides. He felt like he was holding on for dear life, as if the floor was about to drop out from under his feet, and he would never stop falling.

Emrys broke their kiss and rested their foreheads together. “You’re still thinking.”

“I – I can’t help it! I just … *this* is so good.” Nate gestured between them. “But it could be over in a second! That demon might be doing bad stuff even now to ruin *everything!*”

Emrys shrugged. “He probably is. I hardly think he would be sitting back while we seek a way to stop his grand plans.”

“Why isn’t he here attacking us here then?”

Emrys took in a deep breath. “Demons are naturally arrogant. He undoubtedly thinks we can’t do anything really against him.”

“Or he thinks that I’m going to help bring all demons here to Earth, remember?”

“Ah, your shoulders are so tense.” Emrys massaged Nate’s shoulders until the tightness eased slightly. “And we’re now *both* thinking. This is not going according to plan. I better recalibrate.”

“I can see the wheels in your head turning.” Nate tapped Emrys’ right temple.

Emrys’ eyes hooded. “Oh, yes, and the wheels are offering a lot of things. Needs. Wants. Fantasies. I think what we both need is for me to fuck you hard and fast against the wall.”

Nate’s mouth dropped open. His cock went almost immediately hard with Emrys’ words. Emrys pushed Nate’s chin up and his mouth shut with an audible click.

“I can see that you’re not thinking anymore. Good,” Emrys breathed.

“Wha—what?”

“Exactly.”

Nate had no idea what Emrys was talking about or what they had been saying before. It all sort of blew away in a wash of desire. They were going to have sex again! And it sounded dirty, hot and incredibly awesome.

Emrys’ hands were at the button to his pants. Like in the elevator earlier that day, Nate found himself utterly useless as Emrys began to take his clothes off. His pants were unbuttoned, unzipped and sliding down to his ankles. His underwear joined them. Emrys reached around him to a set of

inset shelves above the concrete sink. He pulled out a tube of lube. Nate's heart hammered.

"Turn around, Nathaniel, and spread your legs."

"Aren't you going to get undressed?"

"Not yet. I think I'm just going to undo my pants and fuck you that way. When we get into the shower then I'll undress."

Nate's heart rate kicked up a notch. "That sounds – uhm, *good*?"

"Is that a question, Nathaniel?"

Nate let out a soft laugh. "No. I know it's going to be good."

"Better than good, I hope. Mind blowing sounds about right."

Nate's mouth went dry. "L-let's start then."

The boy stepped out of his pants. He still had on his socks and shirt. It felt strange and a little kinky to have those on with his ass bare and his legs spread. He braced himself against the wall while his breath stuttered in his chest. The click of the tube of lubricant had Nate trembling. One of Emrys' hand stroked over Nate's bare ass. His fingers lingered at the base of the round globes. He cupped each of them, squeezing, and massaging.

"You have a great ass, Nathaniel. Firm. Perky. It's like pushing into a cloud when I fuck you," Emrys murmured.

"Damn, Emrys, I'm already hard and you haven't really touched me yet!"

Emrys pressed his mouth to Nate's left ear. "I could make you cum just with my voice alone."

Nate's cock quivered and a bead of precum dripped onto the marble floor.
"Fuck."

"Again, you understand exactly what's going to happen." The older man lightly rasped his teeth over the cusp of Nate's ear. A hot shiver went through the boy.

Emrys parted Nate's buttocks and his slid slick fingers between them. Nate rose up on his toes as Emrys' fingertips began to circle his pucker. Alternate trills of heat and cold run through him. That part of Nate that was rarely touched was ultra sensitive to the tender brushes and firm caresses.

"Your anus is literally pulsing. Its like your body wants to suck my fingers inside," Emrys said.

"I can't believe we're doing this. I can't believe you're going to fuck me." Nate rested his now damp forehead against his forearms and spread his legs wider.

"Believe it."

Emrys pressed a finger against Nate's opening. He pushed and there was the slightest resistance before it popped inside. Nate gasped. He bore down onto Emrys' finger, enjoying the feeling of Emrys' finger inside of him. The older man leaned against Nate's body. The rough brush of his clothes against Nate's bare ass and thigh add a heightened tint to everything.

Emrys worked his finger up to the knuckle inside of Nate. The boy mewed softly as he's breached. When Emrys' pulled out and thrust back in, Nate's hips were pushed forward and his cock touched the wall, painting a line of precum on the plaster.

"Can you handle another finger yet?" Emrys breathed into his ear as he pumped the one finger in and out, in and out. A steady push and pull that had Nate nearly scrabbling against the wall.

Nate couldn't speak. He just nodded.

Emrys' finger pulled out of his ass and Nate whined for its loss. "Don't worry, baby, just getting more lube. I want you well stretched and slick, because I am going to fuck you really hard."

Nate reached down and squeezed the base of his cock. Emrys' ability to make him cum from his voice alone was working even without the older man trying. His head swiveled over to watch as Emrys squeezed more of

the clear gel onto fingers. The pointer finger on Emrys' right hand was already wet-looking from the gel, but he slicked his ring finger then, too.

"I want to kiss," Nate got out.

Emrys didn't pause in getting his fingers wet before he leaned over and took Nate's mouth. His tongue expertly slid right inside Nate's parted lips and he fluttered it against the boy's palate. Nate's mouth opened wider in response and Emrys just seemed to crawl inside of him. Nate couldn't breathe, but he didn't care. Emrys sucked and licked and devoured him. When they broke apart from the kiss, black spots were dancing before Nate's eyes. Emrys was holding him up with one hand around the middle.

With a waggle of eyebrows, Emrys thrust two fingers inside of the boy without letting him catch his breath. Nate let out a startled, pleasured cry. The boy's back arched as Emrys plunged his digits inside of him. He spread his fingers wide every time he pulled them out. The burn had Nate clutching at Emrys' arms.

"A third finger, I think, and then ... then I'm *inside* of you."

Nate noted that Emrys' voice was gravelly and deeper than usual. Those were the only signs of arousal other than the large bulge in his pants. The older man was completely focused on him. Nate's pleasure was the only thing that mattered. Emrys' lips tenderly kissed his temple then, reading his thoughts and confirming them. Nate's eyes slid nearly shut. He shivered in pleasure. Emrys pushed in three fingers then and Nate's mouth popped open as he let out a whine of pleasured pain.

"I know it hurts a little. Relax, Nathaniel. Relax for me," Emrys murmured into Nate's hair.

"It – it doesn't matter. I just want you in me. Seriously. Fuck me."

Emrys stilled. His fingers were all the way up to his knuckles inside of Nate's ass and his cloth-covered cock was pressed firmly against Nate's hip.

"You nearly made me cum in my pants," Emrys said with a slightly shaky laugh.

“Cum ruins your pants,” Nate remembered.

“Yes, sadly. So we had best get my cock out of them, don’t you think?”

“You – ah, need help with that?” Nate looked up at Emrys through his lashes.

“Unzip me, Nathaniel,” Emrys breathed.

Nate shuddered. Emrys did not remove his fingers from Nate’s ass. Instead, he slowly spread his fingers open and closed. Nate’s hands shook as he fumbled with Emrys’ pants.

“You have the most impossible pants ever,” Nate snickered as he finally got the belt undone on the third try.

“Lost your fine motor control?” Emrys teased as he scrapped his fingertips over Nate’s prostate.

The boy’s hand smashed accidentally against the front of Emrys’ cock as the pleasure made him completely lose control.

“Are you trying to crush my balls?” the older man growled.

“Sorry, sorry, but that’s totally your fault!” Nate laughed, but he managed then to undo Emrys’ button and unzipped him. “You’re not wearing any underwear. I forgot that.”

Emrys let out a huffed laugh. “My poor bare cock was slammed against my zipper. I think you need to massage it to make it better.”

“I thought you were going to tell me to kiss it. I’d do that.”

Emrys shivered this time. “I don’t want to take my fingers out of your ass, Nathaniel, in order for you to do that. But I promise I’ll let you kiss my cock another time.” He dipped his head towards the sink where the lube was. “You need to get me all slick since I have my hands full.”

Another flex of the fingers of one of those hands had Nate’s cock dancing.

“I’m going to cum all over you,” Nate threatened through gritted teeth.

“Promises. Promises.”

Nate reached for the lube. Every movement he made had Emrys’ fingers shifting inside of his ass. The boy was gasping and sweating with every inch. With shaking hands he got the tube open and smear the gel between his palms. He then reached down to Emrys’ cock and cupped it in both of his hands. The older man let out a hiss of breath.

Emrys’ cock was hot and velvety between his palms. Nate’s fingers curled around the plum-colored shaft. He relished the firm flesh that he could feel Emrys’ heartbeat through. He ran his hands up and down the shaft. Emrys shuddered and his eyes shut as he clearly concentrated on not cumming. Nate loved the feeling of power he felt he had as he manipulated Emrys’ cock. He cupped Emrys’ fury balls and rolled them in his fingers. Emrys’ grunted and his fingers slid even further inside Nate’s body. The boy let out a sharp gasp and Emrys eyelids flew open.

“I’m going to fuck you now, Nathaniel.”

Nate reluctantly removed his hands from Emrys’ cock. The older man slowly slipped his fingers out of Nate’s ass. The boy did not like the feeling of being empty, but he didn’t have long to mourn the loss. Emrys lifted him up. Nate naturally wrapped his legs around Emrys’ waist. He felt the older man’s cock slide along his balls and press up against that sensitive skin between his cock and ass. Emrys rested Nate’s back against the wall while he balanced the boy on his hips. His fingers pried open Nate’s ass and the thick head of his cock ran up between the generous globes. Nate gripped Emrys’ shoulders as his body trembled with need.

Emrys’ plump cockhead found and pushed against Nate’s opening. There was a little pressure and then just like Emrys’ fingers, it popped through the protective ring of muscle. Nate moaned as pounded Emrys’ shoulders as the cock just kept going. Up and up and up inside of him. Pushing apart his tender tissues. Pushing all the way inside of him, until he felt the rough edge of Emrys’ zipper against his ass.

“Hold on, Nathaniel. Things are about to get a little rough,” Emrys growled.

His mouth was an inch over Nate's. They were breathing each other's breath. Nate wrapped his arms around Emrys' neck and kissed Emrys. Nips and licks and frantic sucks. His ass was open and ready for use. He wanted Emrys to use it. He wanted to just *feel* and not think at all.

Emrys responded in kind. Lips, teeth, tongue. All the while, he moved his hands so that he had a firm hold on Nate's hips. With surprising strength that later Nate would realize must have been supplemented by magic, Emrys moved Nate up and down on his swollen shaft like it was an amusement park ride. The boy nearly screamed into their kisses as Emrys managed to hit his prostate with every other inward twist and thrust.

He scrabbled at Emrys' shoulders, wrenching the older man's shirt completely out of shape, as his opening seemed stretch to the breaking point. He didn't care. He wanted Emrys' balls inside of him. He wanted them to be so close together that it would be impossible to determine where he ended and Emrys began and vice versa.

Emrys slammed Nate's hips firmly against the wall, holding them there with his own powerful frame while he ground his cock inside of Nate. The boy was mewling and raking his fingers through Emrys' hair. He needed Emrys deeper. He needed to have them fully connected. He frantically pushed himself down onto Emrys' cock, but even when he felt the older man's balls pressed against his opening, it still wasn't enough.

"It's all right, Nathaniel. I have you. I'll give you what you need."

Emrys suddenly was drawing back and Nate was crying for him not to go, to please not go. He needed Emrys' body fully against his. But then there was a glint of silver out of the corner of Nate's eye. He turned his head. In Emrys' hand was the dagger that they had used in the protective spell.

"What – what is that for?"

"Sex magic. Blood sex magic," Emrys murmured.

He pushed up hard against Nate's opening. The boy cried out and Nate's cock trembled between them like a volcano that wanted to explode at any

moment. Emrys placed the knife in Nate's hand and brought it so that the blade was against one of he scars on his upper shoulder.

"Cut me, Nathaniel."

"No!"

Emrys' black eyes glowed. "Yes. Please! I want you to. Magic is in the blood, Nathaniel. And I want to share mine with you."

Nate trembled. "I won't hurt you!"

"That emptiness you feel inside of you that can't be filled, that I can't fuck hard enough, it will be fulfilled with this. For both of us," Emrys said, looking rather wild.

Nate looked at the delicate blade against Emrys' beautiful skin. The scars were still so lovely to him. He licked his lips. He frighteningly wanted to do this. But he didn't want Emrys to be the only one to have a new scar. "All right. But on one condition."

"What?"

"You need to cut me, too. I want to share with you as well." Nate stared deeply into Emrys' eyes.

"Yes, thank you, Nathaniel." Emrys still held Nate's hand, guiding it to the edge of one spiral. "Cut lightly here. Form a new branch on this scar."

Nate kissed Emrys deeply, trying to put all he felt into that press of lips. Then he was watching as the knife sliced through Emrys' skin in a curving line about an inch long. Blood so red it almost hurt to look at welled up from the center of the cut.

Emrys' dark eyes met his. "I give this freely to you, my Nathaniel. Let it protect you and please you."

An electric blue spark jumped from Emrys' blood and curled up the blade and into Nate's body. The boy gasped and nearly dropped the knife as he felt electrified. Emrys' cock seemed to sink further inside of him even

though it wasn't physically possible. His own cock was so hot, he was surprised that it wasn't smoking.

Emrys took the blade. He lightly drew the tip around Nate's nipples. They peaked and Nate shook. "Where? Where can I cut?"

"Anywhere. Everywhere. Please! I give it to you! I give all of myself to you!"

The taunting tip of the blade pressed in harder just over Nate's right nipple. There was a burning sensation more than pain as Emrys cut a circular line extending out from Nate's areola. Nate's breathing stuttered hard. Emrys' head dipped down and he licked the blood up. Electricity sparked again.

It was as if a current was finally fully connected. Their bodies felt like one. He was himself and Emrys. He was being fucked and fucking. There was a dizzying confusion of sensations as he felt his cock being seized in the vice of his own ass while it was also being strongly stroked by Emrys' free hand. The dagger clattered onto the floor.

"Fuck me, fuck me, oh, Emrys, please!"

Emrys didn't say anything. He just did. Bruising grip on Nate's hips and a pistonning motion of his own. Nate tipped his head back and just let out a long, loud, unrelenting cry as his body jerked up and down with the power of Emrys taking him. Nate's orgasm happened first. His balls drew tight against his body before cum spurted between them, ruining Emrys' clothes. But Emrys was past caring at that point.

Sweat coated his face. His pupils were blown so wide that there was only the barest hint of iris visible around the pupils. As Nate let go, his motions became less regular. His hips rolled upwards and his cock spasmed inside of Nate. His mouth parted in an involuntary gasp before he captured Nate's for a kiss. And then Emrys was cumming. His hips jerked up again and again as his cock coated Nate's insides with semen.

Both of them were wrecked by it. Nate's limbs were useless. Emrys was trembling like a leaf and only barely was able to lower them both to the ground, keeping Nate on his lap so that his cock didn't dislodge from inside

the boy. Nate flopped against Emrys. Their breathing was the only sounds for a long time.

“You know,” Nate got out. His voice was hoarse from screaming. “You know that we *still* haven’t had sex in the shower.”

Emrys was silent for a minute before he finally started laughing. “Tomorrow, Nathaniel. Tomorrow.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE: INHERITANCE

Nate jerked awake when Abbie’s voice boomed through the bedroom, “I HAVE IT!”

Then there was a startled shriek from Emrys and various curse words followed by, “Abigail, do you happen to know what lies between a man’s legs at his groin? His cock, dearest. And you just slammed a book onto mine!”

“I *do* know where a man’s genitals are,” Abbie sniffed.

“So what were you doing? Aiming for mine?” Emrys yelled.

Another sniff. “I *tried* calling your name. I even *shook* your shoulder. But you and Nate just slept on like dead things. So I had to do *something*.”

“Nathaniel, you should be outraged by this! Yet you sit there blinking sleepily! She damaged the organ by which you receive much love and pleasure,” Emrys said.

Nate’s vision was still bleary from sleep and he wasn’t sure where he was even with Emrys and Abbie talking in his ears. Cool morning light was just beginning to leak through the floor to ceiling windows. The sky had lightened to a blue-gray and there was a golden slash of light right at the horizon as the sun was beginning to rise. It was early, very, very early. His head pounded and his ass ached from last night’s adventures with wine, sex, blood and a tantalizing half-remembered dream about floating in darkness and a voice that was and wasn’t his own speaking to him. Telling him secrets.

“Abbie wouldn’t wake us unless it was important.” Nate lifted the sheet and checked out Emrys’ bare body. “And your cock looks fine from here.”

“It *stings*,” Emrys groused. The older man was sitting up, alternating between glaring at Abbie and making pained faces as he urged the book off his sensitive cock. His hair was sticking up in all directions making him look like a mussed cat woken from a nap.

Abbie was standing triumphantly beside the bed, clearly pleased at having successfully plopped the large biography of the Frosts onto Emrys’ lap. Nate’s head continued to pound as the light grew in the room.

“Please tell us it’s important, Abbie. Because its way too early to be up otherwise,” Nate said with a groan and thumped his head back down onto the pillows. He resisted the urge to draw the sheets up over his head to block the sunlight.

“It *is* important. Unlike you two, I’ve been acting like the world is going to end in two days time,” Abbie said.

“Two days?” Emrys asked. “Where did you pull that number out of?”

“It’s one of the things I discovered last night or this morning or … well, sometime before now,” she said with a prim flick of her hands over her very rumpled clothes. “You see, I wondered why the Greater Demon has waited to do anything to us and the world. I mean what’s he holding back for? Why is he allowing us time to figure out how to defeat him? It makes no sense!”

“Demons are arrogance personified,” Emrys murmured. He laid back against the pillows, too. One of his hands slipped underneath the sheets and started to tease Nate’s hip. The boy caught that tempting hand and squeezed it warningly. Emrys just gave him a catlike smile and yawned contentedly.

“But this is more than arrogance. It’s stupidity!” Abbie shook her head violently.

“Power does not make intelligence. And vice versa,” Emrys pointed out.

Abbie launched herself off the bed and began to pace. “No, you’re right. But I’ve had this sinking feeling that the Greater Demon was simply biding his time. Waiting for something that would give him the power to open the floodgates and let the other demons in.”

“Isn’t he waiting for me to ah ‘come to my senses’ and assist him in ending the world?” Nate asked. He shifted uncomfortably under the covers. The dream he couldn’t quite grasp skittered across his consciousness. He had been dreaming of the Greater Demon.

“Well, we know that’s not going to happen. But even if he thought it would, he should be keeping you *near* him not allowing you to run all over the place!” Abbie paused in her pacing and threw her hands up in the air. “Even if he thought that we wouldn’t be able to stop his plans, what if something stopped you?”

“Like?”

“Like a car crash! Or one of us kills you! Or you get knocked on the head by a falling planter! I wouldn’t leave my ability to take over the world in the hands of fate. I’d keep you locked up,” Abbie said with a nod.

“Uh, yeah. Let’s not give him any ideas.” Nate looked around like he feared the Greater Demon had heard her.

“Or he thinks that Nate has no other fate than to assist him,” Emrys pointed out.

“Let’s definitely not let that be the case,” Nate urged.

“Okay, maybe the fate thing is possible.” Abbie nodded, which had Nate feeling rather ill. He wanted her to say that was impossible. His fate couldn’t be to help the Greater Demon. That just was wrong. “But the Greater Demon said himself that there are *multiple* futures. Things change. What will happen one second won’t the next because a butterfly flaps its wings in South America.”

Emrys tapped his chin thoughtfully. “True.”

“So I think that if he’s not keeping Nate with him, he doesn’t *need* Nate.” Abbie spun around with her hands clenched together in front of her. “No matter what he said before. I think maybe that was a red-herring. And I believe I discovered *why* he doesn’t need Nate. See, in two days, there will be a celestial alignment—”

“Dark Day,” Emrys interrupted. He looked grim. “It’s this year, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Abbie said.

“What is Dark Day exactly?” Nate’s eyes widened. The name of it didn’t exactly inspire confidence.

“It’s when all the planets align perfectly,” Abbie explained. “It happens only once like every five thousand years.”

“Fuck.” Emrys pulled at the front of his hair. His bangs stood up like a rooster’s comb.

“This is bad?” Nate guessed, his gaze flickering from Emrys to Abbie and back again.

“Very bad.” Abbie sank down on the bed again. “On Dark Day, the flux of power between light and dark tilts that for a small moment in time, dark magic is supreme. The rest of the year, they are equal. But Dark Day changes things. A Greater Demon could harness that power in that moment and well ... what couldn’t he do.”

“Okay, this is sounding worse and worse.” Nate sank deeper into the pillows. He glanced over at Abbie. There were dark circles under their eyes. They looked to be practically painted on they were so black. “Have you been up all night, Abbie?”

She nodded. “I tried to sleep, but I kept thinking about Dad and everything and I had to get up. I figure I’ll sleep enough after this ... well, this is over.”

Nate felt a stab of guilt. While Abbie was up researching how to save everyone, he and Emrys were making love, drinking wine and blood and then passing out like puppies on top of one another. “I’m sorry, Abbie. I

can only imagine how hard this is on you and Turner. We should have been up helping you.”

“You’ve lost more than anyone, Nate. You both deserved a break. For some people, taking time out helps them recharge. For me? I just can’t do that now.” She gave them a wan smile.

“We were celebrating life, Nathaniel. Though I admire Abbie’s dedication, neither of us could do much last night that was ... *productive*,” Emrys said.

Nate looked unconvinced. He couldn’t regret what they had done, but he felt like some kind of world-saving slacker.

Abbie sighed. “I keep thinking that if I don’t try my very best every single second that I’ll miss my chance to save my dad. Even if we succeed in stopping the Greater Demon, my dad might not survive. I mean how long can a soul be displaced from their body before they can’t come back? Is having the demon inside his body, funneling all that dark energy, destroying his body anyways? I don’t want him to go through what my mom did. All that cancer and pain.”

Nate sat up in bed. There was absolutely no chance he was lolling about in bed any more. Not until they saved Abbie’s dad and the world.

“You can’t think like that, Abigail. It merely causes you to obsess. Concentrate on the moment,” Emrys said.

She shook her head as if to clear it. “You’re right. I’ve been trying to do just that. And I think I found the answer. Or *an* answer anyways.”

“You mean about Dark Day?” Emrys asked.

“No, that was the second thing I figured out. The first was *this*.” She reached towards the book on his lap.

Emrys pulled away from her, protectively shielding his groin from her questing hands. “You and my cock are not friends. Just tell me what to look for in this book. I’ll handle the rest.”

“Such a baby. I put a bookmark in it. The first one there.” She pointed to the first of several slips of paper that were sticking out of the top of the book.

Emrys opened to that spot. Nate glanced down at the pages.

“That looks like Excelsius,” Nate said. He tapped an old woodcut illustration on the left-hand page. It showed a man that looked eerily like Excelsius Frost. The smug grin on his face paired with the rather weak chin gave him away. In the illustration, Excelsius was standing before a bookcase stuffed with books and scrolls. His expression said that he knew something that the reader did not and never would.

“It *is* Excelsius. This whole chapter is about him even if the arrogant smarminess just reaching up at you from this image wasn’t obvious. This section deals with a lot of his discoveries in regards to Demon Eating, necromancy and the capturing of energy,” she said.

“Does it give us spells?” Nate perked up hopefully.

“No, it doesn’t. Not even half-insights into them. But when Excelsius had this woodcut made of himself, he left some clues about his power. See? Look at what is behind him,” Abbie said.

“There’s a bookcase behind him.” Nate scrubbed a hand through his mussed hair. He wasn’t seeing what a bookcase had to do with anything. The black and white lines were not revealing much to him.

“You really are tired, Nate,” she teased.

Emrys snuck his hand over to Nate under the covers and squeezed his bare thigh again. “And hung over on alcohol and sex. Nathaniel got his brains —”

“TMI!” Abbie covered her ears. When it was apparent that Emrys wasn’t going to finish that statement, she lowered her hands. “I felt a bit like Daniel doing that. Really, Emrys, you’re incorrigible.”

“When you join the adult world, Abigail, you, too, will understand the joys of sex.” Emrys’ hand drifted between Nate’s thighs.

Nate caught that teasing hand again even as his cock stirred pleasurable. They were not doing this in front of Abbie. They needed to be focused to save the world. He sent those thoughts to the older man. He knew that Emrys had heard him when the older man’s hand drifted to the safe outer thigh area.

“Now, are we focused again?” Abbie’s gaze studied both of their faces. He and Emrys nodded. Satisfied that she had their attention, she said, “Look at the *cover* of this book. Does it remind you of anything?” Abbie helpfully shifted her finger over to one book that was facing not spine-out, but front-out on the shelf nearest Excelsius’ hip.

“That’s the same design as the tile in the catacombs,” Nate realized. How had he missed that?

“EXACTLY!” Abbie exclaimed. “Excelsius was so proud of his energy storage device that I wasn’t surprised he had it put in this woodcut. He probably thought he was being clever having his secret device right out there where it could be seen, but no one would put two and two together.”

“Except you,” Nate said proudly.

She smiled and flushed. “He was forced to show it to us last night, because he needs your help, Nate, to come back to life. I’m sure he kept quiet about it before so no one else would have recognized its significance. But Excelsius could grin all day long as he looked at this woodcut. His secret was right there. Front and center. But no one would ever guess.”

Nate frowned. “But since we already know about the tile and this book doesn’t have any of the spells needed to use it … how is this an answer for us?”

“I don’t think that Excelsius figured out the tile himself. I think he found it in another book. *This* book.” Abbie flipped to the next bookmark. It was a photograph, black and white, of a book standing up on its bottom end, the pages slightly feathered open so that some of the interior pages could be

seen. On one of those interior pages was the edge of a design. It was the same tile. “I think that this book has the spells and information we need in order to use the tile without Excelsius’ help.”

Emrys jerked up in bed and grabbed the book from her. “That clever bastard.”

“You recognize the book?” Abbie’s eyes shone with hope. “It’s probably back at Frost Manor, right? I mean I don’t want to go back there so soon, but—”

“It’s not at Frost Manor,” Emrys interrupted.

Nate’s stomach that had begun to twist into knots at the thought of returning to that house felt a trace of relief until Emrys turned to look at him. There was a strange expression on his face. It was half-teasing, half-fearful.

“Where is this book at?” Nate asked, feeling as if he were stepping into a trap merely by asking.

“This book was given as a present to a Whitney,” he said slowly.

“A book of this importance was just given away?” Abbie looked scandalized.

“You’re assuming that anyone after Excelsius knew this book had any importance at all.” Emrys trailed a finger over the photograph. “But, even if they did, they might have given it away in any case.” He grinned at Nate. “I’m not the only Frost that was bewitched by a Whitney’s pretty face.”

Abbie rolled her eyes while Nate blushed.

“So where is the book?” Nate asked.

“The most obvious place. It’s in your grandparent’s house. Or I should say *your* house as the last surviving Whitney and heir,” Emrys said. Nate’s stomach twisted then and seemed to fall into his feet though he was lying down. “It looks like we have to claim your inheritance sooner than planned.”

“Are you sure that it’s still at the Whitneys? I mean no one has lived in there since Nate’s grandparents died,” Abbie said. “But it could have been sold off or given away before then.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Emrys said. He reached across Nate to the nightstand. He grabbed his cell phone and tossed it to the boy. “You need to call your grandmother and ask her exactly who the lawyers are for the estate. I can guess, but I want to be sure.”

“Now?” Nate saw from the phone’s clock that it was only now five-thirty. His grandmother would have gotten up about fifteen minutes before. She probably wouldn’t even have her hearing aid in as she liked to sit at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and watch the birds in the backyard before she got herself together to go to work. He could picture her doing that this morning as the sun painted the grass inch by inch.

“No time better than the present,” Emrys said gently.

Nate’s mouth went rather dry. He looked down at his legs beneath the sheets. “Can’t we just like break into the Whitney house and look for the book? I mean do we really need to go through all the lawyer stuff?”

“I would think you’d want to go through all the legal formalities, Nate,” Abbie said. “Don’t you want your inheritance?”

“Uhm, yeah. But you know we don’t really have time to go through all that really, do we?”

“Even if we were inclined to skip the lawyers, that wouldn’t be wise. The Whitney Manor is undoubtedly protected. Breaking into a witch’s house isn’t like doing so to a normal person’s,” Emrys explained. “If I’m right, the Whitney estate is being handled by Hobart and Smithson.”

“Oh!” Abbie breathed, her eyes going wide.

“You know these guys?” Nate asked.

“Hobart and Smithson are *the* lawyers for witches,” Abbie said. “They’re said to be able to protect their clients through their own magic. Especially

estates.”

“Exactly. The Whitney Manor will have many protective spells some of which will require that Hobart and Smithson approve you to get through. Otherwise, we might spend the next hundred years unsuccessfully trying to get inside the house,” Emrys said.

Nate’s shoulders slumped. “So we really need to know if these lawyers are the Whitney lawyers and, if they are, we need to go there and have me accept the Whitney inheritance?”

“That about covers it,” Emrys said.

The cell phone felt heavy in his hand. Nate knew that there was no time for further delay yet he still didn’t want to make this call. He had this sinking feeling that once he opened the door to his Whitney past that he wasn’t going to like what he found. Whitney Manor was the place where his mother had been drawn in by her parents to bring the Greater Demon into this world in the first place. It was where she had become possessed and all the bad stuff that had happened since then began. But it was more than just the place. It was the concept of joining a family that would do that to their daughter.

Emrys stroked his arm, reading his thoughts on this. “The past can only hurt us, Nathaniel, if we ignore it.”

Nate nodded. He tapped in his grandmother’s number. He was surprised when she answered on the first ring again just like the night before. He wondered if, like Abbie, she had been up all night. Another stab of guilt went through him.

“Nate?”

“Sorry for calling so early, Grandma.”

“You don’t have to apologize. Is everything all right?” There was another burst of frenzied breathing.

His hand tightened on the phone. “Yeah, everything’s fine.” His shoulders hunched and he drew his knees against his chest. Emrys stroked his back. “We might have a – uhm, a *solution* to the current stuff going on. But I need to get a hold of the lawyers for the estate. Are they by any chance Hobart and Smithson?”

She let out a sharp exhale. “How did you know that?”

“Oh, lucky guess.” Nate’s stomach curdled. There was no choice. They had to claim his inheritance that very morning.

“Charles Hobart is the lawyer who is directly handling it. Are you going to – to go see him today? Do you want me to go with you?”

He tried to picture his grandmother beside him as he asked Charles Hobart to lift the spells off the Whitney Manor so they could go looking for a book to defeat a Greater Demon. He squeezed the bridge of his nose.

“No, that’s okay. Emrys and my friends will be with me,” Nate said. There was a hurt silence and Nate winced. He hadn’t meant to make her seem superfluous or not important enough to come. “I do want you there, but … but its not safe right now.”

“Oh, Nate.” She let out a pained sound. “I don’t want you mixed up in all of this.”

“I know. But … but its just how it is. I’ll call you later, okay? I’ve got to go.”

“I love you,” she said.

“You, too, Grandma. I’ll talk to you later.” He clicked off and stared out the windows at the ocean. The water was choppy and waves were high.

Abbie looked at him with wide, worried eyes. She wasn’t sure what he was thinking or what to do to help. She was someone that faced trouble head on. Nate had thought he was like that, too. But right now, all he wanted to do was to curl under the covers with Emrys and try to avoid all of this.

Totally selfish. Abbie's dad is in danger. The world is in danger. And I'm freaked out about gaining a fortune? Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

"I've got Charles Hobart's number on speed dial. He's my attorney, too." Emrys disengaged the phone from Nate's limp hand.

Emrys pulled up the attorney's number and clicked on it, putting the phone on speaker. After one ring, the phone was answered. It was a man's voice, strong yet elderly, who said without them saying a word, "Emrys Frost and Nathaniel Whitney, I've been expecting your call. Come to the office in thirty minutes. We've got a lot to discuss."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX: FAR SIGHT

"Charles is really old, but don't let that fool you," Emrys said as he drove them to Hobart & Smithson.

"Fool me? As in underestimate him? The man knew it was *us* calling *before* you said anything," Nate pointed out. "Believe me, the last thing I'm going to do is think he's some kindly grandfather that prattles on about when he was a kid and how many miles he had to walk to school. In the snow. In the cold. Anyways, I won't underestimate him."

"Caller ID, Nathaniel. That's how he knew. It's not magic. Well, not exactly." Emrys shot him a grin.

"Okay, so the would explain how he knew it was *you*, but *me*? I don't think so." Nate tugged on the Mercedes' seatbelt that felt a tad too tight or maybe that was because he was straining against it.

Emrys followed the curving, graceful road away from the sea towards the center of the city. The law firm was in the heart of Winter Haven's downtown where people didn't "work", they had gracious "careers" where they used their intellect and fortunes to create further fortunes for others. Though lawyers were seem to be partially in the "service" industry of Winter Haven, serving the uber-wealthy, their own net worth made his grandmother's whole working life's salary look like one year's bonus. His grandmother was a secretary for one of the lower tier firms, but even they

had salaries that blew Nate's mind. Winter Haven existed on a scale that simply didn't exist elsewhere.

"You're right, Nate. Charles Hobart is from a minor Family," Abbie explained from the back seat. She was stuffed between Turner and Daniel. Both boys were still half-asleep beside her. Daniel's head kept falling on her shoulder and she kept pushing him off, but like a metronome, he came right back. "He has some little magic of his own. But a spell was put upon him that made him into a Fiduciary of the greater Families. This makes him very powerful though that power is limited into what he can do with it."

"What is a Fiduciary?" Nate asked.

"It's what it sounds like. He is entrusted with the Families' greatest secrets and growing their wealth. He must always act in the Families' best interests. And in order to that, he has been granted the gift of Far Sight," Abbie said.

"And Far Sight is?" Nate's head was spinning again with all this new knowledge and terminology.

"Being able to see a few months ahead. Now the future is always shifting as you know. But a Fiduciary will *know* which future will come to pass just before it does," Abbie said.

"Useful for the stock market," Emrys said.

"I can see that. But why does he continue to work for the Families? If he can see which way the market's going, why not take advantage and become filthy rich?" Nate asked.

"Far Sight only works so long as he is acting in a greater Family's interest. It's not something that works for him individually," Abbie said. "That is the limit on his power."

"That sort of sucks," Nate said.

"On the contrary, the firm is paid exorbitant amounts of money for their service and they have a prestigious place in Winter Haven society," Emrys

said. “Charles is doing very well for himself.”

“I guess. But I don’t think I would like to be *spelled*. Seems too much like being an indentured servant or something.” Nate crossed his arms over his chest.

“People will agree to lots of things for money and power, Nathaniel,” Emrys remarked dryly.

“I can’t believe that all of this, witches and spells and seeing into the future, has been going on all this time in Winter Haven and I didn’t know. And it’s not just me!” Nate cried.

“People see what they *wish* to see,” Abbie said with a purse of her lips. “What they *expect* to see.”

“What about kids? Aren’t kids always supposed to be more perceptive of this stuff than adults? Innocent minds and all that?” Nate asked.

Emrys sniffed. “Children are solipsistic little creatures. They are too busy thinking of themselves to notice anything outside of their heads.”

“What kind of kids did you know growing up?” Nate asked.

“The ones that pull the wings off of flies.” Emrys laughed.

“It’s just that everything is so out in the open. It’s not like in Harry Potter where there’s this alternate world. You – I mean *we*, I guess – live *here*. In this world. With money and lawyers and cars and, well, everything! And no one notices?” Nate pushed.

“If someone were to notice, we would spell them, Nathaniel,” Emrys said. “Witches, remember?”

“Oh, right. Makes sense.”

“There are currently spells set up in Winter Haven to hide what we don’t want to be seen. The demon’s carnage yesterday at the asylum won’t be reported to any newspaper or television station. No one will ever report on

any of it. Even without magic, wealth allows for a whole set of other rules in any case,” Emrys said with a smirk.

“No one sees. No one reports. No one knows who shouldn’t. Got it.”

Emrys turned into the business district. The business district was picturesque with a mixture of old stone buildings that looked to have grown from the ground to ultra modern, glass and steel structures that seemed to be float on air. The shops here were genteel, containing exclusive goods, the finest leather, top electronics, sumptuous furs, rarest perfumes, and finest wines, to name just a few of the items available for purchase. And if you couldn’t find it in stock, it would be ordered and delivered effortlessly.

Nate and Daniel had gone in a few of the shops one summer just for fun and to see what they were like. It wasn’t as if their folks had any reason to bring them in there before. The cool eyes of superior clerks had them quietly backtracking. While anyone in Winter Haven could be rich, even if they wore worn clothes and busted sandals, but Nate had felt like the clerks had scented the lack of money on him.

But they were wrong. I’m almost as wealthy as a Frost. I’m a Whitney. The last of the Whitneys. A witch of the greater Families and everything that Emrys and Abbie have told me about this secret Witch World applies to me now. He smiled at that, but his smile quickly died and nervousness descended again. More than nervous actually. He felt the crazed urge to unbuckle his seat belt and throw himself out of the car. *I’m a witch. I’m a Whitney witch and everything I’ve ever thought has been wrong. Some of that is fine. Some of that is great like about Dad. But some of it ... not so great. And I have to accept the whole of it.*

The morning light streamed through the windshield, blinding him at that moment. Anxious to do something to distract himself, Nate began to root through the dash for a pair of extra sunglasses. When he found one, he nearly dropped them as his hands were shaking.

Emrys reached over with one gloved hand and squeezed Nate’s closest knee. “You’re like a cat on a hot tin roof. What’s going on in that pretty head of yours?”

Nate let a sharp breath between his teeth. He shoved the sunglasses on his face and tried to stop the fluttering in his stomach. What was wrong? He tried to put it in words though they felt insufficient, “The Whitneys were bad people. Not my mom, but her folks. They *caused* everything that’s going on. This is *their* money and *their* house and even *their* lawyers that we’re going to.”

“Actually it is *your* money, *your* house, and *your* lawyers,” Emrys corrected softly. “It has been yours since your grandparents died. You just didn’t know about any of it.”

“Yeah. Perception is everything, right? What you know. What you don’t know. My dad’s a murderer then he’s a hero. My grandma and I are poor, but we’re really not. I’m a normal person who has an affinity for animals. Except that’s not true either. I’m a witch and that wolf that liked me? Ah, he’s a witch, too, who is now my boyfriend.” Nate let out a slightly hysterical laugh. He bit his lower lip. “It’s like the ground is shifting under my feet all the time. And what’s even weirder, is that the magic and you and the demons – I was good with all that. But somehow the *money* is freaking me out. Even though it shouldn’t. It’s not that big a deal, right?”

“Money is the same between the world as you knew it and the world that you now know really exists. You can feel the difference between being poor and being rich. There’s nothing to compare being attacked by a demon to. That’s *new*. But money … that’s something you know,” Emrys said. “That’s why it feels odd.”

Nate laced his fingers through Emrys’. “I’m worried that I’ll *like* the Whitney money and want to be like my grandparents. Stupid, huh? Considering, I’ll likely turn evil anyways with the dark magic use. Might as well be rich while I’m at it.”

Emrys squeezed his hand. “I’ll love you even when you are Darth Nathaniel.”

“Thanks. And I’ll love you when you go crazy like all the other Frosts … oh, wait.”

“Yes, I already am and you do still love me.” Emrys grinned gleefully.

“I think you were born this way,” Nate said. He shook his head and tried to focus his thoughts on why he was so anxious about accepting his full inheritance. “I just don’t know if I’ll be *me* anymore with the money.”

“You’ve always defined yourself by being poor?” Abbie asked.

She leaned forward between the two front seats. Turner and Daniel sagged towards the middle of the back seat without her there to keep them upright. They whimpered like puppies as they partially woke up.

“It’s so bright!” Daniel whined. “It’s early. Too, too early. Why are we up? Why did I have to come?”

“Want to sleep. Don’t talk so loud,” Turner responded. He threw an arm over his face. “Want quiet. Darkness.”

Abbie rolled her eyes. Nate let out a soft laugh.

“I am going to hex both of you if you don’t stop aggravating me,” Emrys threatened. All of them were tired. Emrys hadn’t had his coffee yet and his hair hadn’t style correctly even with magic. He groused it was because he was distracted with this “end of the world business” that was throwing him off his game. Nate found it unendingly adorable, which irritated his finicky cat even more.

The boys went back to silence with their heads tipped back against the leather seats in a stupor. Whether they were quiet because of Emrys’ threat or that they simply passed out again was unclear.

Nate thought about Abbie’s earlier question. “Being poor? I guess. Grandma always made it seem like we were better, more moral or something, because we had to work hard for our money. Nothing came easy. We were just getting by. But that’s a load of crap. She said it because it made it suck less that we had to keep the heat so low in winter that our hands hurt, because the gas bill would be more than we could handle.”

Abbie cocked her head to the side thoughtfully. “There was a study done that showed wealth made people less empathetic, less able to put themselves in another’s shoes. So your fears may be justified..”

Nate’s shoulders slumped. “Great.”

“But studies are only what is generally true. While your perspective might change, Nate, you’ve had both experiences. You’ll never forget the one because of the other,” Abbie said. “You’ll still be you. And I bet you’ll appreciate the money even more because you know what its like to have gone without.”

“I hope so.”

“You’re going to have enough to worry about, Nathaniel, without needing to wonder how you’re going to pay for your heat,” Emrys said. “Even if we get past this little world-ending issue, there will be another right on its heels.”

“Seriously?” Nate goggled at him.

Emrys let out a soft laugh. “Oh, yes. Whitneys and Frosts have always been in the thick of things.”

“And Blackwells have always been there to clean up the mess.” Abbie nodded.

“Let’s just hope that the next world-ending event gives us a little time to rest up after this one,” Nate said, feeling even more tired than before. “I guess it will be good then not to have to worry about making some cash in the meantime.”

“Money is a great responsibility,” Abbie said.

Emrys let out a laugh. “Yes, but it is also a lot of fun.” He pulled the car into a parking space before a three-story stone building. “We’re here.”

The law firm was housed in a Greek revival style building. The doors into the building were overly large, flanked by impressive ionic columns. The doors had imposing black hinges and a dark patina. Nate swallowed.

Unlike earlier when he wanted to throw himself from the car, now he wanted to hide inside of it. But everyone was getting out. Even Daniel and Turner hefted themselves onto the sidewalk, though they were both whining again. Emrys' threats were muffled by the closed doors of the car. Nate reluctantly unbuckled his seat belt and slid out of the car.

The morning air smelled sweet. The downtown was still quiet as it wasn't yet seven o'clock. Nate never saw this time of day in the summer unless he'd stayed up all night. Daniel tried to rest his head on Nate's shoulder.

"Don't even think about it." Nate placed his fingers on Daniel's forehead as if he was about to flick the other boy away.

With a sigh and sleepy smack of his lips, Daniel lifted his head. "Are we here? I guess so. This looks like a lawyer's office ... or a mortuary. Either one."

"Thanks, Daniel. That makes me feel so much better talking about mortuaries," Nate said.

Daniel clapped his shoulder. "No problem, man. Anything for a friend."

"Let's get inside. All this fresh air and sunshine is making me itch." Emrys came around the front of the car, his black coat fluttering behind him dramatically. He put an arm around Nate's shoulders and led him inside of the law firm's office.

Just inside the doors, was an impressive foyer that matched the exterior. Nate had an impression of dark wood, marble and flowers filling delicate Chinese-style vases in profusion. Beneath the smell of flowers was the dusty scent of old books and brandy. The receptionist desk was flanked by two of the impressive flower arrangements, almost hidden by them. She was a woman with a severe black bob. She smiled widely at them, but no warmth filled her dark brown eyes. She clearly saw four scruffy teenagers and a man dressed all in black though it was summer. She reminded him of those shop clerks that suspected they didn't belong here. This time Nate would have been happy to squeak back out the door, but Emrys held him tight.

“Good morning!” Emrys said with a flash of his shark’s grin at her.
“Charles is expecting us.”

An answering smile from her, this time tighter as she tapped on her keyboard and checked her computer screen. “Let me just see.”

She would be telling *them* if they were expected or not.

“She’s a wannabe,” Turner said out of the corner of his mouth.

“What?” Nate asked.

“Doesn’t have powers. Well, maybe tiny ones. But nothing worth writing home about. She doesn’t even sense a Frost and a Whitney in the room let alone two Blackwells,” Turner explained.

“I don’t see anyone here on Mr. Hobart’s calendar. Let me take your name and schedule you for sometimes in two months, Mr. ah?”

Emrys was suddenly leaning on the front desk, that shark-like grin wider.
“Dearest, we’re expected. Name’s Emrys Frost.”

Her hands froze over the keyboard. Her eyes flickered up to his. All the superciliousness had left them. “Oh! Oh!”

“We’ll just go on up. Ta ta.” Emrys spun around and offered a hand to Nate. “Come, my lovely, let’s go beard the dragon in his den!”

“Really, not a good image there, Emrys. I’m nervous enough already.” But Nate took his hand and allowed him to go over to a discrete elevator that silently opened.

All of them piled into the sleek car.

“His office is on the third floor,” Emrys explained.

It seemed that they had hardly gotten in the elevator before it was opening for them. More rich wood and oriental carpets that glowed softly in the light streaming in from bowed windows. Emrys led them down a short hall to a half open corner office. Emrys rapped his knuckles against the wood.

Nate was surprised that Emrys didn't just burst in. He was being almost respectful.

"Come," that now familiar elderly yet firm voice called.

Emrys pushed the door open. Nate had been in tons of attorneys' offices when he visited his grandmother at work, this one was nothing like those. This one reminded him of a lawyer of another era. A rich, opulent eighteenth century era with its polished wooden desk large enough to sleep on, a deep red carpet the color of the darkest wine and brass fixtures.

Charles Hobart sat behind the desk in a overly large leather, high-backed chair. He was slender man with a shock of thick, white hair that looked very much like Fred Astaire. He was writing something with a Mont Blanc pen on a creamy sheet of thick stationary. He didn't look up until he had finished what he was writing. The five of them stood just inside the door, waiting for him to be done.

"I see that you brought the Blackwells with you and a young man whom I do not know," Mr. Hobart said as he capped his pen.

"Uh, I'm Daniel," Daniel said when he realized that he was the one that Mr. Hobart was talking about.

"Not one of the Families, I see," Mr. Hobart said.

"I'm not a witch if that's what you're asking." Daniel stood up straighter.

"But you are trustworthy, yes?" Mr. Hobart's steely blue eyes fixed Daniel with a look.

Daniel took in a deep breath and nodded. His shoulders slumped in relief when Mr. Hobart nodded and moved that penetrating gaze off of him.

"It's been a long time, Charles," Emrys said. He pulled Nate over to the two elegant chairs that faced Mr. Hobart.

"You're looking well, Emrys. I'm ... *glad* about that." Mr. Hobart gestured for them to sit down.

Emrys pulled out the one chair for Nate. The boy sat down awkwardly, feeling as if he could break the spindly legs of the chair. Emrys sat down beside him. The three others flanked them. Daniel let out a low whistle as he took in the rich furnishings.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again as well, Mr. Hobart. I came here once with my father,” Abbie said softly. She looked a little overwhelmed herself. Turner drew near her to give her comfort.

“Yes, Abigail. I remember you well. I told your father how much I looked forward to working with you. Smart as a whip. A powerful witch who would change the world” Those blue eyes went sad. “I just could not tell him how soon our relationship would start.”

Turner put an arm around Abbie’s shoulders. “Then you know why we’re here. Nate needs to get inside the Whitney mansion.”

“Yes, I know.” Mr. Hobart’s head lowered.

Nate felt a trill of unease. “You know about Mr. Blackwell being possessed?”

Mr. Hobart nodded. “And I know of your need for a certain tome that resides in the Whitney mansion to defeat him.”

“But that’s not why you wanted to talk to us today? There’s something else you need to say?” Nate guessed. His stomach clenched.

Mr. Hobart let out a soft chuckle. “Yes, young man, you are quite right.”

“So out with it, Mr. Hobart,” Emrys said. He had a smile on his face but it was rather strained.

“While you all are welcome, I will need to speak to Nathaniel alone in order to preserve attorney-client privilege on this matter,” Mr. Hobart said.

Nate grabbed Emrys’ hand. “I want Emrys to stay no matter what.”

Those blue eyes were now on him and Nate struggled not to look away. “There is more to this than just legal procedure, Nathaniel. There is magic.

Only members of the same Family can hear Family business. And you might wish this to stay secret”

Nate linked their fingers together. “Emrys *is* family.

“He’s a Frost as well as a Whitney,” Emrys said. There was the slightest hint of color to Emrys’ cheeks from Nate’s words. “And it seems like I’m a Whitney, too.”

Mr. Hobart folded his hands on the desk. “I am happy for you both. But it makes what I see that much more difficult to impart.”

Nate turned around in his seat to face the other three. “Guys, why don’t you wait outside for a minute.”

“Are you sure? You look white as a ghost,” Daniel said.

Nate knew now that the unease he’d felt all morning had nothing to do with the money. Not really. It was whatever Mr. Hobart was going to tell him right here and now.

“I’m good. Seriously. We’ll call you back in in a minute,” Nate assured him.

The three filed out of the room. The last thing Nate saw before they closed the door was Abbie’s frightened face. Once the door had shut, Nate turned back towards Mr. Hobart. He then realized he had been gripping Emrys’ hand so hard that the other man probably had lost circulation in his fingers. But Emrys did not complain.

“What’s this all about, Charles?” Emrys’ black eyes focused in on the older man.

“I’m here to tell you that you will defeat the demon that currently resides in Mr. Blackwell’s body.” Mr. Hobart pulled out a legal file from his desk drawer that was filled with about six inches of paper.

“That’s great! You see this with the Far Sight?” Nate asked, feeling a trickle of hope.

Mr. Hobart did not smile. His nod was jerky. “Yes, I do. But I also see that your success will only come at a great cost.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN: THE DEVIL’S OWN

“Well, Charles, that’s a showstopper of an opening line,” Emrys said with an uncertain laugh.

“Occasionally, there simply isn’t time to beat around the bush, Emrys. And now is one of times.” The lawyer gently pushed the thick file towards Nate. He tapped the top of it with his long fingers. Nate could see that there were pages upon pages of material with densely typed and handwritten notes. “In here, Nathaniel, you will find information that is crucial to your legacy and our future.”

Nate stared at the thick six inches of paper dubiously. He didn’t want to touch it. All the feelings that had plagued him since he learned he needed to accept his Whitney heritage were back in full force and then some. “Can you give me the Cliff Note’s version?”

Mr. Hobart smiled at him gently. “I don’t expect you to read it here and now. Let alone understand it. This is a copy for you to have and take away with you.”

“Oh, well … I guess that’s good.” Nate would have rather placed the whole thing in a paper shredder and walked out the door. “If I let someone else read it that’s not a Whitney or a Frost, is that okay?”

“You can share it with whomever you like. I sense you mean to have Abigail Blackwell peruse it for you, yes?” Mr. Hobart’s lined face lit up with slight amusement. “If you are planning that, I approve of the choice.”

“Definitely Abbie. She’ll whip through it and explain it all to me.” Nate let out a relieved sigh that he could hand this over to Abbie and he wouldn’t have to wade through it. Or think about it. And maybe they’d have so much else to do that she wouldn’t have a chance to read it at all. Then he could just forget all about it.

“That’s all well and good, Charles, but can you explain what the Hell you meant that we get rid of the demon at great cost thing? *That* is sort of in the forefront of my mind right now,” Emrys said.

Nate stroked the older man’s hand. There was a slight quiver in Emrys’ fingers. Emrys glanced over at him and his dark eyes looked haunted for a moment. Emrys tightened his hold on Nate.

Worried that something or someone is going to part us. I’m not going anywhere, Emrys. You’re stuck with me. Nate squeezed Emrys’ hand back.

“What I have to say will be confirmed by those pages, but I can give you a brief synopsis. Because the past and the present are inextricably intertwined in this unfortunate circumstance.” Mr. Hobart tented his fingers in front of his chin. Those striking blue eyes went half closed as if he were seeing the past in his head like a movie. “The Greater Demon that is currently inhabiting the body of Mr. Blackwell and terrorizing the world came here ... by accident.”

There was a beat of silence as Nate and Emrys took that in.

“Accident?” Nate squawked.

“You mean the Whitneys weren’t trying to summon a demon to do their bidding?” Emrys’ eyebrows crawled up into his hairline.

“That’s not what my mom told my dad!” Nate added in for good measure.

Mr. Hobart’s head turned slightly towards Nate. “Then I’m afraid that she lied to him. Or that he lied to you to shield you from the truth. Or perhaps there were mutual misunderstandings. Your mother though was ... very smart, Nathaniel. But she was also greatly in denial over certain things after she met your father.”

What things? Do I want to know? From the way that Mr. Hobart was looking at him, he had a feeling they were the kind of nasty things found when one overturned a rock.

Nate licked his suddenly dry lips. “So there was some kind of lying going on all over the place then? I’m sort of used to that. My whole life has sort of been a lie.” Nate gave out a slightly hysterical laugh. Emrys drew his thumb over the back of Nate’s hand. “Though I really don’t know what could be worse than summoning a Greater Demon that is now threatening to take over the world.”

Nate was sure that his father hadn’t been lying to him. He had been telling Nate the truth as he knew it. Which just left his mother. The very smart woman in denial of something that he knew nothing about. He admitted to himself then that he had painted her as a warm, maternal and gentle being, totally in love with his father and living a life of domestic bliss until her parents came in with a giant wrecking ball of their spell. But what if that wasn’t how it had been? She was there daughter. She’d grown up with people who thought summoning demons was a good idea. Maybe some of that had rubbed off ...

Mr. Hobart looked at Nate without blinking. “The Whitneys were not attempting to bring over the demon that did come. They were trying to reach quite a different entity altogether and the Greater Demon slipped through.”

Emrys shifted forward in his seat. His black eyes were focused exclusively on the lawyer. It was as if he were trying to see inside the man. “What *entity* exactly?”

Mr. Hobart smiled sadly at Emrys. “You already know. You, of all people, are the only one that has actually seen the Unnamed One and survived.”

Nate gasped. “They were trying to summon the Unnamed One? Why?”

“Madness,” Emrys spat. “Complete and utter madness.”

Mr. Hobart nodded slowly. “The Whitneys – and the Frosts before their deaths – were each convinced that it was their destiny to bring the Unnamed One back to this world.”

“They told you this? And you didn’t say anything to anyone?” Nate goggled.

“They did and I could not. I am bound by my oath not just as an attorney, but a magical oath, not to do so,” Mr. Hobart explained. “Their deaths wouldn’t have released me of that promise. I can only speak to you, because you are of those Families and have a part to play in what is to come. Have *the* part to play actually.”

“I don’t understand. Even though they were planning to bring back the Unnamed One and destroy the world, you couldn’t say a word? Nothing to warn anyone? Or even save yourself?” Nate’s mouth hung open.

Mr. Hobart sighed. “If you knew of how many plots to take over the world that I hear about in a normal work day – well, you would probably fall out of that chair like you look to be doing now.”

Nate scooted back in the seat. He had almost landed on his butt on the carpet. “So this is *normal* for you?”

Mr. Hobart shrugged. “The Families are rich, powerful people. Yet each wants *more*. Although, I grant you it *was* the Frosts and the Whitneys saying it, which meant I gave them better than average odds.” He turned his attention to Emrys. “Did you ever wonder *why* the Unnamed One was there when your parents attacked you that night?”

Emrys stiffened slightly and then shrugged. “Nothing good to watch on TV?”

Nate squeezed his hand.

“I told both your parents that they were fools. I told them that the Unnamed One cannot be conjured or summoned, but that he can be here at any time that he chooses. He turn his gaze upon us at any moment. They wanted to up the odds of him noticing them,” the last was added with a weary wave of his hand.

Nate wondered how much the lawyer had heard over the decades that made him seem more sad than worried about a Greater Demon running lose and the Families attempting to bring the Unnamed One to the world.

He touched the file again. “The spells that each family performed over the years were the equivalent of waving their arms in the air, jumping up and down and shouting for the Unnamed One’s attention. They received it in the end, of course. But not in the way they wanted to.”

“And that should have an ‘of course’ added to the end of it as well.” Emrys sat up rigidly. There was an angry light in his eyes not towards the lawyer, but to his dead parents. His rage at them smoldered hotly even now. Nate couldn’t blame him.

“Yes, quite right. It ended badly for them. As expected, but still.” Mr. Hobart leaned forward in his chair. “They did succeed in getting the Unnamed One’s attention. That was why he was there when you were attacked and ... *acted* in your defense, Emrys. I’m sure they were quite shocked by how that turned out.”

“But what does that have to do with the Greater Demon and the Whitneys’ deaths?” Nate asked.

“Oh, because he showed up there as well,” Mr. Hobart answered.

Everyone fell silent. Nate could hear the tick of the bronze and wood grandfather clock in the corner of the room as it sliced off the seconds of the day.

“And you were there, Nathaniel,” the lawyer added.

“What?” Nate wasn’t sure if he or Emrys said that.

But then the lawyer was going on, “I’ll never know why she brought you there. She never did say. Perhaps it was because she *had* to bring you. Couldn’t leave a newborn alone and no time to find a sitter with her parents screaming in her ear about the apocalypse. Perhaps she was compelled by the years that she had followed her family’s wishes. She was quite a devoted daughter until she met your father. *The Whitneys* wanted you there all along, you see. It was necessary for the spell to work.”

Nate shook his head. “What spell to work? The one to bring the Unnamed One to them? I was necessary for that?”

“Yes, of course.” The clock ticked a while longer unimpeded by their talking. “As far as I’m aware only Emrys – and yourself — has survived *seeing* the Unnamed One in his own form. They needed a – ah, well, *vessel* for him to take on so that they didn’t all die horribly.”

Emrys lunged forward in his chair. “Are you saying that they were going to use Nathaniel as – as—”

“Yes, *exactly*.” Mr. Hobart nodded. “And now you see why Nathaniel cannot go back into the Whitney Manor.”

“See? *See what?* I don’t see anything!” Nate stared at each man in turn.

“They didn’t *finish* the spell,” Mr. Hobart said. “The Greater Demon had appeared and made a wreck of things, but when your mother got there, they got things under control once more. But then … well, as I said, I don’t know why she brought you there in the first place, but I do know that she decided you weren’t going to be a vessel for the Unnamed One in the end. She fled and left her parents to their fate.”

“Are you saying that if Nathaniel goes back into the Whitney Manor that he could be possessed by the Unnamed One?” Emrys asked.

“The Unnamed One could undoubtedly possess any of us at any minute. But yes, this spell would open Nathaniel up. Unzip him as it were.” Mr. Hobart sat there quietly.

“Okay, so I’m not going into the Whitney Manor anytime soon,” Nate said.

“Absolutely not,” Emrys agreed.

“But what about the book? We need that book,” Nate said. “Can someone else go in there and get it without being affected by the spell?”

“I imagine so,” Mr. Hobart said. “But the problem is that only a Whitney can get inside the manor since it was shut down after your grandparents’ deaths.”

Nate pinched the top of his nose. “Why can nothing ever be easy? I mean seriously? SERIOUSLY?”

“We *can* get into the house, Nathaniel. It’ll just be a bit dicey and, well, all of us could die. But it can be done,” Emrys said.

Nate looked over at the older man with a ‘are-you-kidding-me’ expression on his face. “Uhm, no, Emrys. We do something else. We help Excelsius out —”

“You’re thinking of bringing Excelsius Frost back from the dead?” Mr. Hobart interrupted. His blue eyes were opened wide and his mouth was slightly parted.

“Uhm, maybe. Why?” Nate asked.

“That would be very bad, very bad indeed,” Mr. Hobart said.

“So far our options are bad, very bad and me getting taken over by the Unnamed One. I’m not sure where to rank bringing Excelsius back from the dead on this scale,” Nate said. “What I’m trying to tell you is that there are no good options and I don’t need Far Sight to figure that out.”

“Can we get into the house, Charles?” Emrys asked, fixing the other man with a dead stare.

He nodded slowly. “Potentially, but you know I cannot say more, Emrys. Every word I speak makes the future shift ever so subtly. But, in the end, there will be a *cost* to what you will do to rid the world of the Greater Demon.”

Emrys stood up and Nate quickly joined him. “There’s always a cost, Charles. But I would rather destroy this world than give Nathaniel over to the Unnamed One. Just so we are clear.”

“Yes, crystal clear, Emrys. And like I said, I *am* sorry. You haven’t had an easy time of it despite being one of our best and brightest.” Mr. Hobart rose up and extended his hand. “You must know that I’m rooting for you. Always have been.”

Emrys shook his hand firmly and then Nate did the same. Both of them turned to leave without the folder in hand.

“Nathaniel,” Mr. Hobart called. Nate turned around. “You forgot this and the keys to the house, too.”

“Oh, yeah, the plot to make me into the Devil. Thanks. I’m sure that’ll be a bit of light nighttime reading.” Nate took the folder from his hands. The keys, too, felt cold and old. Were they touched by part of a spell?

“Your mother said that every person determines their own fate in the end.” Those hard blue eyes bored into Nate’s. “She believed that no matter what others want for us, in the end, only we can make the decision to accept it or not.”

“Her parents’ actions though ended up killing her. We can only control so much, Mr. Hobart.” Nate turned and he and Emrys walked out of the office, closing the door behind them.

As they walked down the hall to the elevator that would take them down to the lobby, Emrys slung his arm around Nate’s shoulders. “Don’t let what Charles said concern you too much.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Nate sent the older man a jaundiced look.

“They’ve been saying that I’m going to be responsible for destroying the world for ages and look! We’re still here. The Earth still spins on its axis. California has not dropped off into the sea. Japan has not sunk beneath the waves. Chimpanzees are not talking and using machine guns.” Emrys flailed one arm before them as if the “wonders” he was talking about were there to see.

“Okay, well, you’re not dead yet so there’s still time for the world to end by your actions. In fact, considering all we’re up against, its more likely than not that the world will end because of something you do.”

“True. But it hasn’t happened *yet*. And it won’t happen *this* time. And you’re not going to become the Unnamed One. So you mustn’t worry.” Emrys pushed the button for the elevator to the lobby.

“Do you think its true though? That there really is a spell like that around the house?” Nate asked. His skin crawled just thinking about it.

Emrys shrugged as the elevator doors closed behind them. “There is no way in Hell you’re going anywhere near the Whitney Manor so we won’t likely find out. Your curiosity will have to be left unsatisfied.”

“I think I’m okay with the not knowing.” The file lay heavy in Nate’s hands though. “But you didn’t seem so sanguine about everything in Charles’ office. You seemed downright worried.”

“The Far Sight has always freaked me out, but then I remembered something that has always gotten me through.” Emrys paused while the elevator doors whispered open and they exited the elevator car.

“And that is?”

“That absolutely *nothing* goes according to plan. That includes the bad stuff just as much as the good. So seeing the future as it’s certain to occur is ... well, it’s a crapshoot. And I like our odds.”

Abbie, Turner and Daniel were waiting for them in the law firm’s lobby. Daniel was oohing and ahing over the fancy water that the receptionist had brought him. Abbie looked fretful and she immediately jumped up as soon as she caught sight of them.

“What happened? What did he say? Can you tell us?” she asked in rapid-fire succession.

Nate handed the folder over to her. “This contains lots of bad stuff about my family and me. I need you to read it and tell me what it says and what’s important.”

She took the folder from his hands with a look of almost reverence. “This is the official legal file on your Family, Nate. Are you sure you want *me* to read it before you? Maybe you should look through it and pull out anything that you don’t want me to see.”

Nate shook his head and smiled. “I trust you, Abbie. I trust you more than I trust me. Besides, I really don’t think I’ll read it myself. And it needs to be read.”

She hugged the file to her chest. Her expression was solemn and steady. “I promise to live up to your trust, Nate. The Blackwells and the Whitneys haven’t always stood side by side, but from now on we will.”

Nate was actually touched by her almost old-fashioned vow. “I’ll be happy just to have your and Turner’s friendships, Abbie. I don’t care what the rest of our families have done. We’re the ones that are here now and we decide how things go forward.”

She nodded and her whole face brightened. “So what’s the plan? To the Whitney Manor?”

“Some of us will. Though it will probably be a lost cause, Nathaniel, give me the keys,” Emrys said.

Nate eagerly handed them over. Without the keys or folder in his hands, he felt immeasurably lighter. “I assume the ‘some of us’ doesn’t include me?”

“Damn straight.” Emrys nodded.

“But how can we get into the Whitney Manor without Nate?” Turner asked.

“With great difficulty,” Emrys said.

“But you have the keys. Can’t you just put one into the lock and turn?” Daniel asked.

Emrys patted Daniel’s head. “Ah, Decoy, what would we do without you to make stupid and foolish statements? I just don’t know *how* I’ve lived without your wit and wisdom for so long.”

“The house is magically locked, Daniel. It is attuned to a Whitney’s magical signature and Nate’s the only Whitney alive in town,” Abbie explained.

“And why can’t Nate come with us then?” Daniel asked.

“Long story, but I’ll become the Devil if I do,” Nate answered.

“Oh, well, shit, yeah, I guess you can’t come,” Daniel said with a sage nod while the other two had their mouths hanging open.

Nate tapped the folder in Abbie's hands. "There's *a lot* that you need to catch up on in there, Abbie."

Immediately, she opened the folder and stuck her nose inside as she began to read.

"All right, to the car, people. We will drop Nathaniel off at his house before we head to the Whitney Manor." Emrys extended his hands to his sides and flapped them, indicating for everyone to leave the building.

The receptionist twittered something at them about having a nice day and how pleased she was to meet all of them. No one responded with other than a cursory wave. Abbie didn't even do that as she was still engrossed in reading.

The car ride to Nate's house seemed to take only a few minutes. As Emrys pulled up and put the car into park, he looked meaningfully at Nate.

"Everything is going to be fine, right?" Nate asked.

Emrys tipped down his sunglasses and smiled slowly. "You know how I feel about the pretty lies, don't you, Nathaniel?"

Nate nodded. His hands clenched together in his lap. His knuckles were white from the strain. "Yeah, I know. It's a heck of a lot harder to see you going off into danger than being their with you. I really ... really wish I could be there."

Emrys put a finger beneath Nate's chin and tipped the boy's head up. "I do not."

The older man than leaned in and kissed Nate passionately yet tenderly. Even though Daniel made gagging noises from the back seat, Nate didn't think he had ever experienced a better kiss.

"Come back quick. We have to take that shower together," Nate got out after they had drawn apart. "And call me. As much as you can during the breaking and entering."

“Texting, talking and spell casting don’t really go together. But we will try, Nathaniel,” Emrys assured him.

“All I ask for.”

Emrys squeezed the back of his neck. Nate unclipped his seatbelt and got out of the car quickly. He couldn’t bear to linger. It felt too much like a goodbye rather than a see you soon. He watched them drive off and waved just before they were out of sight. With a heavy heart, he trudged over to the front door. The pot of flowers was still blooming massively. He had to actually use his shoe to lightly push the flowers out of the way of the door so they wouldn’t be crushed when he opened it.

The interior of the house was cool and quiet. His grandmother was undoubtedly at work though he wondered if she was worried and distracted still about him. He knew that she hadn’t slept all night. He guessed that she would undoubtedly be exhausted and when tired she tended to fret. He made his way to the kitchen to get a snack. He needed to focus on anything other than Emrys and the guys going into danger.

They’re going to be fine. Everything is going to be fine.

Nate stepped into the kitchen and froze.

Mr. Blackwell smiled at him. He was eating a sandwich and drinking a glass of milk that he’d found in the refrigerator. “I’m so glad to see you, Nate. I thought it was time to have our little chat. Alone.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT: CAN’T RUN FAR OR FAST ENOUGH

Nate considered running. Screaming and running. Screaming and running until his shoes smoked. But that wasn’t a good plan. Running would save him from whatever the Greater Demon had in mind. Screaming definitely wouldn’t.

Magic ... magic ... what kind of magic can I use to protect myself? Oh, right, I don’t know any. I’m screwed. If I get out of this, I’m going to have

Emrys and Abbie start teaching me. Like yesterday. God, I wish it was yesterday ...

“Are you just going to stand there gawking and looking pale? How boring,” the Greater Demon said, crunching on a piece of lettuce. A smear of mayo was on his chin.

“Ah ...”

“Cat got your tongue?” The Greater Demon plucked up a few of the salty, oily chips that his grandmother made.

“Uhm ...”

“Are you really *that* surprised I’m here? I did *tell* you that I was going to talk to you again.” The Greater Demon smiled and there were bits of bread and meat stuck between his teeth. Nate’s gorge rose. He swallowed it down. The last thing he needed was to add nausea to his fear. His stomach was already flip-flopping.

“I didn’t really expect you to be here *now* when I am uhm ...”

“Alone? Helpless? Hopeless?” The Greater Demon rocked back and forth laughing. The amusement was in bizarre juxtaposition to the sober, dark suit he was wearing. The diamond-studded cufflinks winked at Nate as the demon rocked.

A spark of anger lit in Nate. “You know that’s my grandmother’s food and you didn’t ask if you could have any.”

“I thought I would just help myself. There looks to be plenty and with your newfound wealth, you can’t be so *stingy*.”

The Greater Demon spread his arms towards the mess that he had left on the kitchen island. There were breadcrumbs littering the once clean countertop. Mayonnaise, mustard and pickle jars were all open with their tops scattered like fall leaves. A tomato was bleeding its juices everywhere as the demon had evidently never heard of a cutting board. Not to mention the lettuce, which had escaped and tottered on the edge of the countertop. Nate was

going to be sure to throw out everything in the refrigerator if he survived this encounter.

“You seem to know a lot about me.”

“I know *everything*.”

“Really? What I do this morning?” Nate wondered if the demon could break through whatever magic kept the attorney-client privilege that he had with Mr. Hobart.

The demon’s red eyes narrowed. “I know you saw the lawyer.”

“And what did we talk about?”

“What is this? Twenty-questions?”

“So you don’t know what was said!” Nate felt a trace of happiness at that.

The demon lunged forward and Nate jerked back, teeth clacking together as he snapped at Nate. He laughed. “Ah, even if I don’t know what you talked about with the old man, it really doesn’t matter. I know everything that matters.”

Does he know that Emrys can read my mind? Speaking of that ... Hey, Emrys! SOS! SOS! But Nate knew he was alone in his head. *He’s probably concentrating on getting into the Whitney Manor. Damn. Just when his eavesdropping would have been useful.* Nate stuffed down the desire to laugh hysterically. He had a feeling looking into the piggy eyes of the demon that it would be a bad idea. Nate casually reached into his pocket where his cell phone was. If he couldn’t contact Emrys mentally then he’d do it the old-fashioned way. But how to do it out of the demon’s sight?

“Right, those pesky details don’t matter at all.” Nate walked forward and leaned against the kitchen island so that everything below his belly was hidden from the Greater Demon. He pulled out the cellphone surreptitiously, preparing to dial Emrys’ number.

“That won’t work, you know,” the Greater Demon said amicably. Nate found he couldn’t even think about calling him Mr. Blackwell anymore, as

it was very clear that Abbie and Turner's father wasn't there.

I just hope we can bring him back. Or they can if I don't make it ...

"What won't work?" Nate asked the question even as he scrolled through to Emrys' number with his thumb with hardly a glance downwards.

"Your phone. Won't work. Nor will shouting. No one's in the house and ... well, no one will hear you anyways." The Greater Demon smiled again with that dirty-teeth grin.

Nate hit the number for Emrys anyways, not believing the demon. But the call died immediately. He tried five more times. Same results. He tried texting. Nothing. The demon hadn't been lying about that. A shiver of fear worked its way down his spine. This was bad. Really, really bad. The desire to run screaming from the house was back.

He wasn't sure how he stayed in one spot and said calmly, "So you've got me all alone then. What for?"

The Greater Demon chuckled even as he took another bite of sandwich and drank some milk. "To renew my offer, you silly witch."

"The world in exchange for a few witchcraft lessons? Yeah, I don't think so."

"Don't be so hasty, Nathaniel. Your life may depend upon it." The Greater Demon winked at him, which had Nate pressing his lips together to keep them from trembling. "With all your running around yesterday and today, haven't you figured it out yet?"

"Figured out how to kill you? Working on that. Well on my way actually," Nate lied. No tremor in his voice, which was good. Amazing but good.

The Greater Demon gave a hoarse chuckle. "Nathaniel, you're nowhere near learning how to deal with me."

"We've got plans. Big plans."

“Like Excelsius Frost? Yes, I know you met with him. Don’t look so *shocked*. You were hoping that since I couldn’t tell you *exactly* what you said with the old guy that I don’t know the important parts?” The Greater Demon shook his head and tutted. “By the way, I wouldn’t even bother with that old bastard. Excelsius talks a good game, but I can assure you that he was *never* able to use his little spells to capture a demon as powerful as me.”

Nate’s stomach tumbled into his feet. They weren’t having Excelsius help them – well, *maybe*, they weren’t — but his method was the way they were using if they could get that book. What if it simply couldn’t work against a demon like this one? “I happen to agree with you about Excelsius Frost. He seems more the type to cut and run when things look bad. Can’t be counted on.”

The Greater Demon nodded and giggled. “You should have seen the bastard just before he died. He was actually weeping with fear as he ran! Oh, it was exquisite to see him blown apart or so I’m told.”

“Tons of fun, I’m sure,” Nate said faintly.

How the hell am I going to get out of this? Can I run? Can I use the storm against him? No, that will just kill Mr. Blackwell. Damn. What am I going to do?

The demon continued, “Another point is that you don’t have *time* to learn to deal with me. Dark Day is tomorrow. Less than twelve hours away.”

“So you do need Dark Day?”

The demon giggled again. “I *know* you figured that out, too. Or rather Abigail Blackwell did.”

Nate tried to put on a cocky grin on his face, but he knew it came across as forced. “If you’re so sure that there’s nothing I can do to stop you – and evidently, you think you don’t need me to help you as Dark Day will be enough to open the door to your brethren – why are you still pursuing me?”

The Greater Demon spread mayonnaise on another slice of his grandmother’s homemade bread. “Your grandmother is really a wonderful

cook. I never understood the love of eating you humans have, but I'm beginning to. It's quite interesting to eat. All the textures and flavors. Really fascinating."

"Sounds like you could be a gourmet. Maybe you should give up this ruling the world thing and just pig out all the time. Better career choice."

"Ah, but I would need a body to do that and you don't want me to keep Mr. Blackwell's, now do you? Or are you more mercenary than that? Emrys is so convinced of your goodness, but I wonder if you wouldn't trade Mr. Blackwell's life for the world's?" The Greater Demon's red eyes sparked with interest.

"People are only important because individuals are," Nate said quietly, but with force. "Mr. Blackwell is important. Each and every human is important. And they aren't to be thrown away so casually to demons like you."

"So noble. And yet, you are willing to die yourself."

"It's my choice. No one is making it for me."

Unless it was my mother ... or her parents ... or ...

"Choice and fate. They don't exactly go together, do they?"

"I don't believe in fate," Nate said flatly. "I don't believe that anything is *certain* to happen. I don't think you can see the future."

The Greater Demon smacked his lips together as he slapped stone-ground mustard on top of the mayo. "Maybe you just don't wish to believe it. Unless it's in your favor, of course."

"When has fate been in my favor recently? I just walked in on you eating in my kitchen. Sounds like things aren't really looking up." Nate thought that this was an understatement though he was feeling less afraid than aggravated at the Greater Demon for poking at him.

"Emrys. You accept that you could be fated to be with Emrys, but you don't want to be fated to bring demon kind into the world."

Nate crossed his arms over his chest. “I’ve *chosen* Emrys. We’re suited for one another. But if we weren’t, I wouldn’t be *compelled* to be with him. If fate does exist, I don’t think it makes you do things against your nature.”

The Greater Demon rolled his eyes. “You think it’s against your nature to deal with demons? You who are a Demon Eater and Necromancer? Bah! You don’t know what your nature is!” He took a large bite of sandwich and started chewing with gusto.

Nate stared at him, but he was thinking about what had happened at the lawyer’s office.

What if it’s not my nature that brings the demons here, but the Unnamed One’s? What if the Greater Demon is seeing the Unnamed One bring demon kind here and not me? Just using me like a Nate-suit just like he’s using Mr. Blackwell. But wouldn’t the Greater Demon know that? Don’t demons talk to one another?

Nate felt ill again.

“You’re all thoughtful! Considering my offer?” the Greater Demon asked with his mouth full of turkey and cheese.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. It’s rude,” Nate murmured. The Greater Demon let out a bark of laughter. “You still haven’t answered me. What are you pursuing me for if everything’s going your way?”

The demon chewed.

Nate suddenly had an idea. A simple, but persuasive idea. “You *still* see things not going your way, don’t you? *If* I help you then things are assured, right? But if I *don’t* … well, you might end being sent back home.”

The demon slurped up the milk.

“I’m right. I know I’m right.”

“I could kill you right here and now. Very painfully. Very slowly.” The demon continued to chew.

Nate swallowed. But then he shook his head cheerfully again. “No, no, you would have done that already if it wouldn’t adversely affect your plans. I’m sure of that, too.”

The demon wiped his mouth with the back of one large, meaty hand. “Maybe you’re right, Nathaniel. There’s nothing I see that tells me I can’t hurt you though and still have the future I want.”

Nate went pale. But then he heard the sound and so did the Greater Demon. Nate recognized the sound as coming from the attic door. It made a distinctive click-snap-thump sound when it opened and the ladder slid down. Nothing else sounded like it. His eyes darted up to the ceiling. Was it Emrys? Did the older man suddenly realize his plight and come back to help him?

But through the attic? For a sneak attack?

Nate didn’t think it was Emrys. The house was hushed. The Greater Demon stirred uneasily.

Okay, he seems a little unnerved. What could freak out a Greater Demon?

“What – what do you see exactly in the future when you see me helping demon kind?” Nate asked. He wondered if something the demon told him would reveal whether it was him or the Unnamed One acting.

The Greater Demon’s gaze snapped back from the ceiling to Nate. “Why do you ask? Do you want me to tell you of the glory you will have if you come around to my side?”

“No, definitely not. But I’m trying to imagine myself handing the world over to you and I just can’t.”

There was another creak. It was the fifth floorboard from the top of the first set of stairs. It always creaked just like that when his grandmother passed over it.

She’s not here. She’s at work.

Both Nate and the Greater Demon's heads snapped up so that they both were staring at the part of the kitchen's ceiling right under that board.

"Who is upstairs?" the Greater Demon demanded to know.

"It's probably just the wind," Nate said, though he didn't believe that for one minute. The wind never made those sounds. "Wait a minute, wouldn't you know if someone was up there?"

The demon gritted his teeth. "There's no one."

"Okay ... well, then ... uhm, if we don't need to worry about the noises and you can answer my question." The hair on the back of Nate's neck was standing on end. Who was upstairs?

The Greater Demon smiled, his teeth looking long and sharp. "Why don't I show you?"

Nate opened his mouth to object when the room suddenly swirled with dark clouds. The cabinets disappeared first then the counters and then the floor. The Greater Demon's red eyes were the last to vanish like the Cheshire Cat's. Nate was surrounded by thick, storm clouds. Then the lightening appeared. It sliced through the air directly in front of him. His hair stood up on end as electricity shivered through the mist. The clouds parted beneath him and he realized he was floating over the ocean, half a mile up.

Nate's stomach dropped into his feet as fear of falling crashed over him. He slid down onto his haunches and hugged his knees to his chest as if that would somehow save him from a fall from this great height. But he didn't fall. He remained floating in the air. He took in a few shuddering breaths. The air was cool and moist being tinged with rain. The waves below him were all tipped with white as the water was tossed by violent storm winds, but up where he was, it was strangely still and quiet.

His gaze slipped towards the horizon and like that half-remembered dream after making love with Emrys for the first time, he found himself speeding towards it. There was a velvety line of black right at the horizon. Suddenly, that line became everything. He was surrounded by blackness. He could hear the rushing of water though. He blinked and slowly he could see

distinctions in the darkness. The sound of water came from the ocean tumbling off what looked like an endless sheer cliff into the nothingness below. The darkness was pinpricked by stars. Alien constellations spun around him in a dizzying array. This wasn't Earth. This was *elsewhere*. Something glinted below him where he thought nothingness reigned.

It's not nothingness. Something is down there.

Nate leaned over to get a closer look. And then he was falling. His screams were ripped away by the velocity he was traveling at. He only heard a thin squeal as he fell. The *something* he thought he glimpsed became more distinct. It shone like an oil slick caught on fire. It writhed with hideous life. It split apart and came back together amoeba-like. A large, cavernous maw opened and Nate thought he saw a circle of great, sharp teeth.

But then he heard a voice. He couldn't tell if it was old or young. Male or female. All he knew was that it wasn't human. *No, not you. You must remain separate. Apart. Not of the whole. So we can have what we want. What we want. Yes, want. Want. Stay separate. Stay separate.*

Nate was then rocketing back up the sheer wall of water, away from the thing that squirmed and lived outside of the world.

This is the Outer Dark. That's where I am.

The wind against his back as he was sent flying upwards. He felt as if his clothes were going to be ripped off. His eyes dried out and he had to close them tightly. As soon as his eyelids dropped down, the sensation of moving stopped. He opened his eyes one at a time. He was back in the kitchen. He tottered and nearly fell over as his equilibrium was shot.

"Isn't your glory amazing, Nathaniel?" the Greater Demon chortled. "The parades of slaves! The fawning admirers! Your mother and father by your side! Wasn't it wonderful?"

Nate put a hand up on the counter to straighten up. His legs still felt weak beneath him. "What are you talking about?"

“The vision!” The demon’s red eyes blazed and his teeth were showing through the overly large grin.

“I think you made a mistake. I didn’t see any of that.” Nate pinched the top of his nose. He felt a headache coming on.

The demon’s smile dimmed. “You’re *lying*. Why do you bother *lying* to me, Nathaniel? Now I really am annoyed at you.”

“I’m telling you that I didn’t see any of that! I saw the ocean and the cliff and the … the *thing*.” Nate gestured in front of him as he was completely unable to describe the creature he had seen. “You sent me to the Outer Dark.”

The demon went very still. “What *thing*? ”

“At the bottom of the pit. Where the ocean was flowing. It was there. Monstrous.”

“You have to be lying. It’s not possible that you saw that,” the Greater Demon murmured.

“I’m not lying. I wouldn’t lie about that. Believe me, I wish I’d never seen it!”

And I wish to God, it hadn’t spoken to me. I can still hear its voice in my head.

“You –”

The demon was cut off as there was another sound: footsteps. Slow, steady and light. But definite. Nate’s back stiffened.

“Who is upstairs?” Nate was the one to ask this time.

“No one,” the Greater Demon answered as he had.

“But those are footsteps. Someone is *here*.”

The sounds had stopped again. Nate estimated that the person was standing on the landing on the first floor just at the top of the stairs. Sweat broke out

on his upper lip.

“I sense *no one*,” the Greater Demon gritted out.

“So we’re hallucinating this? Both of us? Because I’ve lived in this house for 18 years and I *know* all the sounds in it. Those are footsteps. Someone is upstairs.”

“We are *alone*.” But he licked his lips and his eyes darted towards the back door.

“If you want to leave, please, be my guest. I can clean up in here.” Nate gestured towards the back door. His voice was steady, but the hair on the back of his neck was standing on end again. He sensed whoever it was at the top of the stairs was *listening* to them.

“Leave? We’re not done talking.” The steps started again. One step down. Two. Three. “All right! ALL RIGHT! I’M GOING!”

The steps stopped.

The person listened to him. It’s reacting to what’s going on here! Is it ... protecting me?

“Are you afraid?” Nate asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

“But you’re sweating and ... uhm, *flushed*.”

The Greater Demon’s face went an ugly puce color, its red eyes popped slightly out of its head. “Whoever is there – *whatever* is there – is here for *you*. Anyone else would be a fool to stay.”

The demon abruptly strode to the back door, wrenched it open and disappeared as if he had never been. Nate stood there staring at the open door that moved lightly in the wind. He slowly swung around to face the hallway. He could just see the bottom edge of the stairs from where he was standing. He wiped his hands on his jeans.

I should get out of here. But this unknown person had saved him from the Greater Demon. Had made the Greater Demon nearly pee himself. So this person might be well worth knowing. Maybe it was another witch. But Nate threw that out of hand. It wasn't a witch, he was sure of that.

But why am I sure?

"Uhm, hello?" he called.

Was there an intake of breath? Some slight sound?

"Hey, I know that you're still there. You're still on the stairs, right? I'm coming."

This is a crazy idea. Why am I doing this?

Even with his flesh prickled by gooseflesh and with that sick taste of anxiety in his mouth, Nate was moving forward. He passed through the kitchen's door into the short hallway. He turned his head so that he could see through the banister the stairs. One step, two steps, three steps ... he was at the bottom of the stairs. They were empty. Sunlight drifted lazily down them. He let out a breath and began to laugh. They must have hallucinated the noises!

But then his breath frosted in front of him. Great icy gusts that painted the air ... and something else. Something was standing just a few inches away. Nate backed up, slamming into the hall closet hard enough to hurt his head, but he didn't feel it. His eyes were wide as he watched the tendrils of his breath ghost around an invisible form that was the exact same size as he was.

Something touched his shoulder.

Freezing breath brushed against his ear.

A voice, the voice from the vision, spoke once more, *We are separate. But we are together. Emrys ... Emrys is in danger. Go to him.*

Nate wrenched away from whatever it was and flew towards the front door. Just as he envisioned doing with the Greater Demon, he ran and ran and ran

until he couldn't anymore. With lungs burning and legs aching, Nate sank to the ground by the side of the road. Even with the summer heat wrapping around him, he could still feel a chill in the air. He realized once more that running he couldn't run far enough or fast enough to get away from the Unnamed One.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE: FOR LOVE?

Emrys' jacket was smoking when Nate found him face down on the carpet in the Whitney Manor's foyer. The smell of cooking leather reminded Nate eerily of barbeques in summer except for the slight chemical scent that rose off of the jacket.

Nate touched Emrys' shoulder and the man jumped, more like levitated a few inches off the ground in shock, and jerked his head to the side to face Nate. He was then rolling over and grabbing Nate's shoulders all in one move. Normally Emrys moved with liquid graceful, but not even Nate, with his rose-colored glasses of love, could claim Emrys was not just flopping about like a fish on a hook this time. The spells had zapped every muscle in his body until they were practically tap-dancing on their own.

"Nathaniel!" Emrys said Nate's name like it was a question and a prayer. His eyes went wide then and his hair, the ends of which had been crisped, seemed to stand on end. "Nathaniel!"

"That's my name, Emrys. Don't wear it out," Nate said with a small smile. He worried his lower lip as he saw that there were burnt patches on Emrys' pants the size of quarters. He worried what he'd find underneath, but he didn't have the chance to look.

Emrys gripped his shoulders more tightly and this time shook him. "Nathaniel! *What* are you doing here? *How* are you here? *Why* are you here? You've just completed the spell by coming into the house! The Unnamed One –"

"Don't worry. Shhhh. Seriously, it's all right. I'm all right. Now we need to make sure that you are all right," Nate interrupted him as Emrys was

beginning to spasm again as he tried to get up and drag Nate out of the house, but his limbs weren't working yet.

The Unnamed One promised that it would be all right if I came here and it is. I'm me ...

"Nathaniel, get out of here! Before it's too late!" Emrys wailed and pushed ineffectually against Nate's chest with jitter-bugging hands.

"Turner, tell Emrys what you see when you look at me. Any demon energy? Am I the Unnamed One?" Nate asked without turning to the boy who was standing behind him.

"There's no red, Emrys. Nate's still Nate," Turner confirmed.

Turner crouched down by Emrys' right side while Abbie did the same on the left. Her pinched face was red with tears, which didn't surprise Nate in the least as he knew she was a big softie even when Emrys was concerned. Maybe especially when he was involved. Who else would she spar with if not Nate's finicky cat?

In order to stop the house from killing Emrys all Nate had had to do was walk inside. The spells ceased as soon as he had crossed over the threshold as if they had never been. Abbie, Turner and Daniel had been able to follow after him safely. At first, Abbie had begged him not to go in, but then they had heard Emrys screaming from inside the house and she'd just buried her face in her hands and not objected anymore.

"But the spell! Did that blasted attorney get it wrong or – maybe the Unnamed One just hasn't gotten here yet! Nathaniel, you need to flee—"

"Flee? Where would I go that the Unnamed One couldn't find me?" Nate now knew that fact rather well. "Emrys, no one is coming to take over my body or anything like that."

Because I'm protecting you, which both of us want.

Nate shoved that thought away. He'd had a car ride, a bus ride and the mile he'd run full out to hear the fact that Emrys really was the Devil's favorite.

It had spoken in his own voice in his own head like it had always been there. He'd wondered if it was all an elaborate plot by the Unnamed One to go to Whitney Manor and be possessed, but when that thought had floated through his mind as the Unnamed One talked, there was a pause.

And the Devil had said, *You think I wish to possess you?*

Yes, Nate had admitted.

You truly don't know. Interesting. I wonder ... well, perhaps it is for the best. For now. You'll figure it out.

Figure what out? The hair on the back of Nate's neck had risen up.

That you are in absolutely no danger of being possessed.

Regardless of whether he fully believed the Unnamed One or understood its riddles, Nate had gone into the house. Then again, hearing Emrys screaming like that would have made him walk into Hell itself, no matter the consequences.

"I don't understand. How can this be? How could Charles get it so wrong? Or ... Nathaniel, how do you know this?" Emrys again spasmed and looked to be spelling out the letters 'YMCA' with his body all on his own at the same time.

"That – now *that* is a story," Nate said with a fragile laugh.

Everyone stared at him.

"A story that I will tell when the time is right," Nate added.

"It's a good time now, Nate," Abbie said.

When Emrys continued to look at him with disbelief in his eyes, Nate said, "I'm ... *your* Nate. I'm myself. Me, myself and I! Stop staring at me like you expect my head to spin around!"

"You still look, sound and act like Nate. I figure you'd be spitting pea soup and stuff if you'd really become the Devil," Daniel said from his place

hawking over Emrys' head. "Seriously, like aren't those the signs?"

"Your observations, Decoy, are once against *invaluable*," Emrys snarked, which was good, because it meant he was more himself.

"They are true! I mean even Mr. Blackwell looked a little ... *off*. Red eyes. Cars flying around. Menacing laugh. Cold like you've stuck your ah – well, yourself in an icy bath," Daniel argued. "Nate's got none of that. And the house – I figured if the Devil were here then there would be some – some –" Daniel threw his arms up, "*something* going on here. But there isn't. It's actually ... *pleasant*. You have nice digs, Nate."

"Thanks, I guess." Nate wasn't sure how much of a compliment it was when Daniel was comparing the current house to the Amityville horror.

"Daniel does have a point," Turner said. "I mean Frost Manor was setting off all sorts of alarm bells when we went there. I think it would be apparent if the Unnamed One was here."

Nate swallowed. The Unnamed One didn't feel like the Greater Demon. There was no cold, no draining, and no nothing. Unless it wanted there to be and then Nate imagined it would be terrible.

Abbie, who was still clutching the file from Mr. Hobart against her chest, didn't look as satisfied with either Turner or Daniel's examples. "Nate, I don't think Mr. Hobart would say all these things and be completely wrong –"

"He doesn't know everything," Nate said, again interrupting. "Maybe the Unnamed One has better things to do than possess little old me! Maybe its having its hair done. Who knows? I don't. I just know that there was no way I wasn't going to let Emrys die in here. No matter what the costs."

"That is *exactly* the wrong attitude to have, Nathaniel." Emrys scowled at him though the effect was ruined by Emrys' head jittering around.

"Forgive me, but I don't care. I'd have done it for the three of them, too. So don't feel too responsible," Nate said with a mulish purse of his lips.

Emrys' head thumped back onto the carpet runner. He hissed and rubbed the back of his skull. When he drew his hand away there was soot from his burned hair. "Oh, God, I'm a mess. And *this* is a mess, Nathaniel. How did you get here? Why did you know to come?"

"The how was a car ride with an old man that kept putting his hand on my knee, a bus ride where the bus driver thought I was on crack, and a full out sprint down the shady lanes until I got here. Why did I come? Because ..." *... the Unnamed One told me that you needed help. Yeah, so not telling that. Not yet. I don't think it will go over well.* "Because I just knew. I mean you practically told me that this was a long shot so ... I came. Oh, and the Greater Demon was waiting for me in the kitchen of my house so I wasn't going to hang around there."

"WHAT?" That was said in unison by everyone. Their shocked, open-mouthed faces were all pointed in his direction, which had Nate letting out another uncomfortable laugh.

"Yeah, long story. Anyways, let's get Emrys laying down on a couch or something. I bet there's one in the library, which probably will have that book we're looking for," Nate suggested and urged Emrys to his feet.

"How did you know that the house had a library, Nathaniel?" Emrys asked as he slung one arm around Nate's neck and the other around Turner's. Both young men practically lifted him unassisted by Emrys' own strength. The older man's leg muscles really weren't working.

"Uh, a house like this *has* to have a library and where else would a book be?" Nate responded. "Are you worried that the Unnamed One is giving me super-secret information on the rooms in the Manor?"

Emrys narrowed his eyes at him even as he clung to Nate like a limpet.
"Maybe."

"Well, if it is then it's doing a piss poor job of it, because I don't know where the library actually is," Nate said.

"It's here!" Abbie called. She had wandered down the hall a bit and opened one of the heavy wood doors. She stepped inside and let out an exclamation

of delight. “It has *two* stories! My goodness, is that the *Vermis Myterious* text by Flabler? And there, that’s Arnurses’ *Practices of the Occult and Other Oddities!* I have to read them all!”

“I think that Abbie’s in heaven.” Turner smiled at Nate over Emrys’ bowed head.

“No doubt.” Nate grinned back.

Feeble afternoon sunlight streamed through large stained glass windows. One window showed a woman reading with roses in her hair while the other had a scholar perusing ancient scrolls at a desk. There were overly large sofas and chairs positioned around the room in the most comfortable places for reading by the window or by the delicately-scrolled fireplace. And as Abbie had said, there was a second story that could be reached by a wrought iron spiral staircase. She was, in fact, climbing it eagerly to check out the tomes on the second floor. Her face was alight with happiness and almost sexual pleasure as she took in all the books.

“Let’s put Emrys on that couch by the fireplace. Maybe we can get a blaze going,” Nate suggested.

He and Turner carried Emrys over to the sofa. The tips of Emrys’ shoes were no longer dragging uselessly on the ground, but his attempts at walking were almost comical as his feet kept flapping. The two young men lowered him onto the leather sofa. Nate brought Emrys’ feet up onto the couch so he could lay down. He grabbed a surprisingly non-dusty blanket and draped it over him. For his part, Emrys still stared at Nate with a mixture of love, longing and suspicion. It was an odd juxtaposition that somehow made Emrys just look adorable in Nate’s eyes.

“This place is nice.” Daniel was standing by the fireplace, poking at the cord of wood that was stacked in the brass holder. There was even a set of long matches, kindling and paper ready to start a fire. “I mean, I could totally see myself here. Sitting back. Having a drink. Eating something good. Oh, eating ... I’m so hungry.”

“Maybe we can order some food,” Nate suggested. “Maybe sandwiches or Chinese since we had pizza last night.”

“Oh, Chinese from Yu Wen’s! General Tsao’s Chicken and Seven Flavor Beef! Shrimp fried rice! Egg rolls and pot stickers and hot and sour soup!” Daniel enthused, rubbing his tummy.

“Is that just for you or can the rest of us have some?” Turner laughed.

"Hey, you're rich people, all of you. You can get that for me and something nice for yourself," Daniel said with a sage nod.

Nate hid a laugh behind one hand. "All right, Daniel, why don't you call that order in."

"And have them come *here*?" Emrys asked quietly. His topaz eyes searched Nate's face. "Besides the restaurant wondering if it's a prank to come to the haunted Whitney Manor, do you want to spend that much time here?"

Nate looked around at the beautiful brass railings, the faded spines of old books and the delicate leaded glass lampshades. "Yeah, it's nice here, don't you think?"

Emrys' lips pursed. "Now that I'm not being fried to death I can see the allure of French Country style with the honey-colored woods and the chintz."

"Not to mention that we have to find that book!" Abbie called from the second story. Even now her arms were loaded with tomes though none had the particular design that they were looking for.

"Those aren't candidates for the book, are they, Abbie?" Turner asked with a tilt of his head.

Abbie blushed. "Oh, no ... they're just ah ... well, reading material."

"Abbie, you have my word that you can read everything in here. The books aren't going anywhere, I promise," Nate told her.

She looked down at the volumes in her hands. She'd even set aside the thick folder that Mr. Hobart had given her on one of the small reading tables so she could collect more volumes. She let out a sigh. "Yes, of course, you're right. I'll – I'll put these back."

Emrys chuckled as he said, "The end of the world is upon us and Abbie wishes to stick her nose in a book rather than in a—"

Nate quickly squeezed his ankles to stop him from saying something naughty. "Not all of us has their mind in the gutter twenty-four seven three-

sixty-five.”

Emrys snorted. “No, only the *smart* people do.”

“Daniel, why don’t you call Yu Wen’s. You know what I like, but I figure it’ll be good if you get a little bit of everything. Then you guys can help Abbie search for the book while I take care of the fire and Emrys for a while,” Nate offered.

Both boys nodded.

“I want at least two eggrolls for myself,” Turner was saying to Daniel as both boys walked upstairs to join Abbie.

Nate’s smile died as he turned from them and look at how much effort it was taking Emrys to even sit up and talk with him. He didn’t know what spells had been thrown at the other man, but the screaming he’d heard had told him enough. He never wanted to hear it again.

“I should never have let you come on your own. Not even if I was afraid of the Unnamed One.”

“Nathaniel, I thought we agreed that this was the only way. Yet here you are with tales to tell. I can see how much prevaricating you’ve been doing in those pretty eyes.” Emrys’ expression was grim.

“But do you agree that they are *my* pretty eyes?” Nate asked.

Emrys grasped his chin and stared into them deeply. “You appear to be yourself. But that makes no sense at all. I’ve never known Charles to be so wholly wrong before.”

Nate looked down. More prevaricating was to come unless he had the courage to say what he’d been told and what he’d intuited. *I don’t know if I’m that brave.*

“I want *you* to know up front that everything is going to be all right, Emrys,” Nate said. “You’ll see that it’s all going to be just fine.”

“I sincerely hope so, Nathaniel. But the cost of such assurance is what worries me,” Emrys said.

“Yes, well.” Nate didn’t say more than that. Instead he moved from Emrys’ side to the fireplace. He pulled down on one of the brass pull-cords to open the metal curtain. “I can’t wait to be a fire starter!”

“Considering I was nearly set ablaze, Nathaniel, that’s hardly a remark in good taste,” Emrys said dryly.

“Do you not want a fire then?” Nate asked innocently. He had a feeling that his finicky cat wouldn’t be able to resist a blazing fire even if he was still slightly smoking.

“I am a little *chilly* though they have set the temperature at a moderately acceptable level. Though with these large houses, it’s hard to keep them truly warm or cool,” Emrys said.

Nate grinned. He started stacking wood, kindling and paper in a teepee formation as he’d been taught by his grandmother. There was the slightest scent of sulfur as he struck one of the long matches and let the paper. The kindling immediately caught fire and there was a merry blaze going in a few moments.

“No request to learn fire spells, Nate?” Emrys asked.

“I think we’ve had enough magic for one day, don’t you?” Nate stuck the match into the blaze and watched as it was

Nate got up and grabbed a pillow off the nearby chair and was about to slid it under Emrys’ head when he looked at the design. He let out a laugh as he showed them what it had on it: an embroidered cat. “I think we can guess who this came from.”

“She gives those as gifts to *everyone*. I think that I even have some somewhere.” Emrys waved one had lazily through the air.

“I think we should ask for a joint one. Maybe two cats curled around each other, their tails forming a heart or something.” Nate caught that hand as he

crouched beside the couch. He linked their fingers together. Emrys drew his thumb up and down in a caress.

“What happened since I last saw you, Nathaniel?”

Nate looked into Emrys’ heavy-lidded eyes. The man appeared like he could fall asleep at any second. “Maybe you should just rest and I’ll tell you after –”

Emrys squeezed his hand. “You will tell me now while the others are occupied. I sense that some of your reticence comes from them hearing what you have to say.”

Nate looked up at the balcony. Daniel was on the phone with the Chinese place with Turner standing beside him, making sure he got the order right. Abbie was shaking her head at the silliness of both of them. A wave of affection swamped him then for all of them. He hadn’t known Abbie and Turner for that long, but he couldn’t imagine them not being his friends. His gaze slid down to Emrys. That went doubly so for the older man. Nate kissed the back of Emrys’ hand.

“You’re right. Reading my mind again?” Nate asked lightly though there was a frission of unease at that.

Though if he just knew then I wouldn’t have to spell it out.

“No, not exactly.” Emrys moved a stray bang off of Nate’s forehead. “It’s just me knowing you. My powers are pretty well shot right now so I’ll have to use normal sixth sense.”

“Makes sense. The Greater Demon was there in the house. Making a sandwich and snarky remarks,” Nate said. He cracked a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“And what did he say and how did you get away from him unharmed?” Emrys’ topaz eyes searched his face.

“He said the usual except he admitted that without me on his side there was a chance that his plan to take over the world on Dark Day won’t happen,”

Nate said.

Emrys' eyebrows lifted. "Well, that's good news!"

Nate scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Oh, yeah, definitely."

"But what's the not so good news that had you looking away from me again?" Emrys grasped both of Nate's hands in his. His skin was warm and soft. Nate loved the feeling of the glide of their fingers against one another.

"Do demons love?" Nate asked.

"No," Emrys said, definitive, no room for doubt.

"Do you think that they could ever do anything out of ... I don't know, a *good* feeling for someone?" Nate pressed.

Emrys shook his head. "If they do something for you, Nathaniel, it's only because they are planning something much worse in the future."

"Oh."

"Why are you asking this? Did the Greater Demon ask you something or do something for you?"

Nate shook his head. "Oh, no! Not at all. Believe me."

Nate opened his mouth to tell Emrys what happened, that the Unnamed One had sent him here for Emrys, when he heard a sharp cry of surprise from upstairs.

"Children, play quietly!" Emrys snarled. "The adults are talking here!"

Abbie came to the railing. "I think the *adults* will want to be interrupted for this."

"For what?" Nate asked.

Daniel's voice rose up, bright and excited, "For a secret room!"

CHAPTER FORTY - THE FIRST OF MANY SURPRISES

“A secret room?” Nate repeated, wondering if he heard Daniel wrong. “Seriously?”

But before Daniel answered him, Nate already knew it was true, because he could see the opening to it. One of the bookcases on the second floor had slid into a pocket in the wall and a doorway was revealed. The secret room was dark though, but Nate didn’t get any chills seeing that darkness. It felt normal and benign.

“Yeah, seriously! I think there’s even a light switch here. Hold on,” Daniel said. Nate heard the heavy flick of the switch and light flooded the room beyond. “Whoa, cool!”

“Guys, stay where you are! Let me be the one to go in first and check it out.” Nate rose up from the couch, but Emrys pulled him back down.

“I shall be the one to go first,” Emys said.

“My house, remember? Whitney blood may be needed,” Nate said. It wasn’t just that he felt his Whitney heritage would save him, he felt oddly as if the Unnamed One would not let him be harmed when Emrys still clearly needed assistance. Nate frowned then as he realized counting on the Devil to help one was probably the world’s worst idea. But more importantly, Emrys wasn’t going anywhere.

“No more blood spilling today, Nathaniel. I just don’t think I can bear it.” Emrys tried to leverage himself upright on still shaking arms, but he kept sinking back without getting halfway up.

Nate gently pushed Emrys fully back onto the couch. “You can’t even sit up. You’re never going to make it up those stairs. So you are going to stay *here* and *I* am going to go check this out.”

A sheen of sweat from Emrys’ efforts coated the man’s forehead. “You could levitate me.”

Nate let out a laugh. “You really think *levitating* you is a good idea?” He gently stroked the older man’s head. “I think that your brain must have been smoking just like your jacket.”

Emrys frowned at him. “I’m a very good teacher. I could teach you the spell in moments and—”

“We don’t know if *I’m* a very good student. Besides even the best student is going to have a few accidents and you really can’t survive being dropped on your head anymore.” Nate firmly patted Emrys chest. The young man stood up after lightly kissing Emrys’ nose.

“I am not a pet,” Emrys grumbled. “I would like a kiss on the *lips* ... please.”

Nate obliged, but just as he was about to get up, he whispered in Emrys’ ear, “I would like to cuddle with you in your wolf form though. All soft and furry!”

Emrys chuckled. “You want to walk on the wild side, Nathaniel?”

Nate colored at the implication of somehow having sex with a wolf. “No, I just used to sleep with stuffed animals. I figured it would be awesome to sleep with a living one. All warm and fluffy. Do your legs move when you dream of running and chasing balls?”

Emrys groaned. “You *do* want me to be your *pet*.”

Nate placed another quick kiss on his lips and straightened up. He could feel the others’ impatience. He fully expected Daniel to scream something about everyone being in danger of becoming diabetic from the “sweetness” of them together. He pushed himself up from the couch.

“Nathaniel, wait.” Emrys caught his arm once more and fished Nate’s cell phone out of the boy’s front pocket and stuffed it in Nate’s hand. “Video me what you find up there.” He looked hopelessly down at his limp body. “As I won’t be going up there for a time myself. I’d like to see what you see.”

“Of course.”

Nate took the stairs two at a time up to the second floor. The iron railing felt smooth and *right* beneath his palm as if it was just made to have his hand to

glide over it. The whole library had that feel and Nate wondered if the rest of the house would.

And what about this secret room? Will it feel as welcoming?

Nate found Daniel literally bouncing on the balls of his feet. Abbie had a hold of the back of his shirt to stop him from racing into the secret room.

“Are you that eager to go inside after what you saw happen to Emrys?”
Abbie asked him.

Daniel’s deep brown eyes opened wider. “Oh, but it’s all right now. Don’t you feel it? It feels like Nate now.”

Abbie blinked. “A house can’t feel like a person.”

“Actually, I think it does, too,” Turner said.

Nate’s lips curled into a smile. “Yeah, it sort of does. Weird. Okay, let me go in first and, if its clear, I’ll call you guys in.”

“Record, Nathaniel!” Emrys called from the couch.

“Oh, right.” Nate fumbled with the cell phone and got the video feature working. He held it out in front of him, watching the image wobbling as his hand shook imperceptibly. “You know you’re going to get motion-sickness just watching this, Emrys!”

“Don’t make me come up there, Nathaniel!” Emrys yelled.

Daniel smirked. “Is he going to drag himself up here? I mean what kind of threat is that? We’d just have to step over him and—”

Turner put a hand over his mouth. “Let Nate go in. I can’t bear the suspense any more.”

Abbie just shook her head and rolled her eyes.

Nate turned back to the secret room. There was a short, dark wood-paneled hallway that opened up into what looked like an office with no windows. The light switch that Daniel had flipped up had turned on a green-shaded

brass banker's lamp that sat on the corner of a massive mahogany desk. The desk itself looked neat with just one book lying open as if someone had been sitting in the leather office chair and had just pushed away to get a drink.

Nate slowly walked forward on the creaky wooden boards. The room smelled close as it had not been opened for almost twenty years. Mr. Hobart had undoubtedly maintained the rest of the house through a cleaning service or maybe even magic, but while this secret room was clean, Nate sensed that it had not been touched. It was just a feeling rather than anything definite he could point to.

Nate stepped behind the hallway into the room itself. It was small about ten feet by ten feet. The desk filled up almost all of the space. But Nate's eyes were immediately drawn to the walls. On the wall behind the desk there were more books, but it was the other walls that had his eyes bugging out. He scanned the phone from left to right across them. The walls were covered with photographs, newspaper clippings, incomprehensible symbols on paper so ancient it looked like it was ready to crumble and copious handwritten notes in the margins. Connecting the papers were individual red strings that were fixed on each one with pushpins.

"Whoa! It's alike a – a spider's web!" Daniel's voice came from over Nate's right shoulder.

Nate nearly dropped the phone. He turned around to see that Daniel, Abbie and Turner were all crowding the hallway behind him. "Guys, what happened to let me go in first and check it out didn't you understand?"

"We heard the 'let-you-go-in-first' part," Daniel said. "Must have missed the other part."

Abbie was suddenly pushing forward. She squeezed around the side of the desk to the bookshelf. Her fingers began moving swiftly along the spines and she was mouthing the titles to the moldy tomes. Whatever language she was speaking did not sound like English.

“Figures that in a room that looks like a conspiracy theory is being tracked by a madman, my sister heads for the books,” Turner said with a gentle poke of his elbow in Nate’s side. There was hardly enough room for the three boys to stand abreast.

“Actually, Turner, these books might explain what Daniel’s spider web is,” Abbie said.

“Is there something special about the books?” Nate asked.

“They are definitely old. Definitely rare. And, at least from what little I’m able to discern, they look to be about one subject. Though what that is I can’t say yet.” There was a frown on Abbie’s lips as she paged through the book.

Nate pulled down one of the books, but when he opened it, the text was in a language he didn’t understand at first, but then his eyesight blurred for a moment and he thought he heard whispers coming up from the pages. He shut the book with a snap. Abbie seemed to not be having any similar problems as she was already reading one of the books. Just one glance at the text had Nate’s head swimming and he quickly looked away.

He was about to put the book back on the shelf when he noticed that the cover felt strange in his hands. He ran his hands over it. The leather was thicker and the pores he saw in it just didn’t look right. Abbie glanced over at him.

“The binding is a bit … odd,” Nate explained her unasked question.

“That’s because the books are likely bound with human flesh,” Abbie said unaffectedly.

“What?” Nate dropped the book as if it were on fire. It thumped onto the desk.

“Be careful, Nate, these are incredibly rare tomes. Perhaps one of a kind,” Abbie said with a frown.

“But they’re uh bound with human flesh!” Nate looked at Turner who looked similarly grossed out. So it was only one member of the Blackwell family who was unperturbed that that fact.

Abbie nodded. “These are clearly dark magic books. Definitely very obscure though. They seem to be … well, talking about a calendar.”

“A calendar?” Nate picked up the book he’d dropped with two fingers, not wanting to touch the soft flesh that covered the pages. He thrust it back in its place on the bookshelf and then quickly wiped his hands on his pants.

Abbie shelved the book she had and took out another. Her eyes scanned over the text. Nate wondered why she wasn’t vomiting like he had nearly done. “They look to be all tracking events both in the world and in the sky. I mean there’s more to it than that, but … they are looking for patterns. Did a certain event correspond to certain celestial events.”

“What were they trying to figure out? If certain star locations meant something specific was going to happen?” Turner guessed.

Abbie nodded. “Yes, but more than that. Certain spells, ones requesting certain types of assistance, appeared to have worked best with certain star locations. These books recognize axial precession.” When both boys stared at her in incomprehension, she added, “The Earth wobbles on its axis and that takes approximately 26,000 years.”

“There are 26,000 years of records here?” Nate asked.

“I’ve only looked at two books. I can hardly say much of anything yet,” Abbie said. She sank down onto the desk chair. “I need to *read*.”

“Which is our clue to leave you alone,” Turner said, but she didn’t even look up at him.

Nate wandered over to the right wall where Daniel was standing while Turner started checking out the books with Abbie. Daniel was following one of the strings with his fingers. The string started with a picture of a symbol. It was a circle cut into quadrants. Small, intricate words were inscribed into each of the quadrants. None of it was comprehensible though

Nate had a strange feeling that if he stared long enough meaning would leap out at him.

“Did you call for food?” Nate asked.

Daniel nodded. “First thing I did. Secret passages are cool, but you can’t enjoy them properly on an empty stomach.”

“Right on.” Nate grinned. His smile became softer as he looked at Daniel. He bumped his shoulder into the other boy’s. “Hey, how are you doing?”

Daniel looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that it’s not just me who had their entire existence upended yesterday,” Nate said. He cleared his throat. He had Emrys to hold onto. Daniel just had Nate though he clearly had made friends with Abbie and Turner quickly. But Nate and him were the closest, but he hadn’t exactly been there for Daniel through all this. “I just want to see how you’re doing.”

Daniel’s uncertain smile turned to open chuckles. “Nate, we’re trying to stop the end of the world by demons.”

“Yeah, I know. Exactly why I’m asking if you’re okay.”

Daniel guffawed. “Okay? I’m going to be part of *saving the world*. Tell me that it won’t get me some chicks?”

Nate laughed so hard that his chest hurt and Abbie shushed them.

“I feel like we’re in a library,” Daniel whined.

“You *are* in a library,” she said.

“Oh, well, no, I meant—”

“Hush now, seriously. This stuff is important,” Abbie said.

Daniel’s fingers went back to following the strings. “I’m okay, Nate. Like I said before, when the world’s going to end I’d rather be a part of trying to stop it than standing by unknowing. How are you doing?”

“I’m … I’m doing okay. It’s weird. I feel like I’m finally awake after being asleep for eighteen years. But for all the bad stuff, there’s my dad back in my life.” Nate smiled. “There’s … there’s Emrys.” Nate couldn’t help but smile even larger then. Daniel chuckled. “And there’s … *magic*.”

“I know. Isn’t that fucking awesome? I mean its like the world is so *cool*.” Daniel grinned. “It isn’t *flat* and *gray* and *lame*. It’s like wicked!”

“I wish you could do magic, too,” Nate said.

“I don’t.”

Nate gave him a curious look. Daniel always wanted to be in the thick of things. Nate had been a little worried that Daniel would feel left out by not having powers himself.

“Seriously?”

“Nate, from what I can tell magic is like this double-edge sword with the point aimed at your own throat,” Daniel explained. “It can change you into something bad if you aren’t strong enough to resist it and …” He gave out a soft chuckle that wasn’t filled with happiness, but more discomfort. “I’m just not strong enough.”

“You’re plenty strong, Daniel.” Nate gripped his shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

Daniel gnawed on his lower lip. “No, I’m really not. I …” He shot Nate a guilty look. “I don’t know if you noticed, but I’ve been sort of – I mean before now and all this – I’ve been sort of a … uhm, well, a jerk for awhile.”

“You’ve always been a jerk. Even now,” Nate teased.

Daniel grasped Nate’s arm and his look was as serious as he’d ever been. “No, really. I wasn’t just being *thoughtless me*. I was being mean on *purpose*.”

“To me?” Nate’s words feigned surprise even as he remembered Daniel’s passive-aggressiveness with him all summer, how his best friend had snuck in sometimes cruel barbs in their teasing of one another that hadn’t been

there before. It was what his grandmother had been worried about. But Nate had hoped that Daniel would get over what was bothering him and come around. And Daniel had proven how good a friend he was in spades in the last forty-eight hours.

“Yeah, I know you just ... well, allowed most of it to just fall off you, but I shouldn’t have been like that. I was ... *jealous and worried*.” Daniel shifted uncomfortably.

“You *were* jealous of my old humdrum life, but now you’re *not* when I have super powers and am super rich?” Nate tried to joke.

“Oh, see here’s the thing, the money you’ll totally share, right?” Daniel fixed him with a look.

“You couldn’t stop me from sharing it with you.”

“So I get the benefits of that,” Daniel explained. “And your powers make you a – well, a *freak*. In the best of ways, I mean. I’m a freak, too. We’ve always been freaks together, but suddenly ... *you weren’t any more*.” Daniel shrugged his shoulders. “I just thought that with how you’d changed – you know, your *looks* – that you’d move on from me. You wouldn’t have to be a freak anymore.”

“Daniel,” Nate said softly.

“I know it’s stupid. And the only reason I can admit this to you now is because tomorrow might come, but the day after might *not*,” Daniel said. He blinked. “And I wanted to make sure that – uh, well, we were *good*. That I apologized, you know? And to tell you that I figured out what’s important.” Daniel cleared his throat noisily and continued to stare straight ahead at the wall instead of at Nate as he finished speaking.

“Daniel, you’re my best friend,” Nate said. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way. Not ever.”

Daniel smiled. “Because I’m awesome, right?”

“You’re better than awesome. You’re like the best there ever was,” Nate agreed.

“You’re a man of discernment, Nathaniel,” Daniel said.

“Of course.”

The whole time that they had been talking, Daniel had been following the strings absently with his fingers.

“Hey, it looks like all of the strings lead to one place,” Daniel said suddenly.

“Where?” Nate asked, locating Daniel’s fingers on the wall.

All the lines converged on the picture of a young boy about ten in a photograph. Nate squinted at him. He looked familiar, but the picture was grainy and whoever he was would be twenty years older at least than the photograph showed. But familiarity tugged at Nate’s mind.

“You better video that for Emrys. I’m surprised he isn’t squawking out orders right now,” Daniel said.

“God, you’re right.”

Nate was careful not to disturb the elaborate web by touching the paper. Instead he allowed the camera’s lens to capture it all. Abbie let out a loud sigh then that had Nate and Daniel turning around.

“It could take *decades* to understand all of this.” She ran one hand through her hair in frustration as she stared down at the book in her lap. “But already I can feel that this is *important*.”

“More important than the book we’re actually looking for?” Nate reminded her gently.

She bit her lower lip. “I – I honestly don’t know.”

“That’s disturbing,” Turner said as he slid another of the flesh-covered books back into the bookshelf.

“We’ve got to deal with one world-ending event at a time, Abbie,” Nate said.

“I second that!” Daniel called.

Abbie regarded Nate with almost pity. “I just feel like the more I dig, Nate, the more … well, the more stuff I’m going to find.”

“Yeah, Abbie, we know that my *family* was into a lot of fucked up stuff. The file you need to read outside will tell you that,” Nate said softly. “I imagine that there’s a lot of messed up things in this house and this room is probably one of them. But it’s not what we need to solve right now. We need the book that’s going to tell us about how to use that tile against the Greater Demon.”

Abbie reluctantly nodded. As she was standing up to shelve the one book, she frowned at the one that had been left open on the desk itself. She stuck her finger in the place where it was open and then flipped the book closed so they could see the cover. They all let out a collective gasp.

“That’s the book we’re looking for, isn’t it?” Daniel asked.

Abbie flipped the book back over and bent down to read the pages it had been open to for over almost two decades. Her long hair brushed the page as she read. When she looked up, her eyes were shining. “Not only is it the book we’re looking for, it’s turned to the exact section we *need*.”

Daniel let out a nervous laugh. “Okay, who didn’t have a chill go down their spine at that?”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE: DEAD PEOPLE

“The doorbell is RINGING!” Emrys called up from the first floor of the library. “It is ringing LOUDLY! I believe that is the signal for ONE OF YOU to go get it. As I am indisposed. I really can’t move, children!”

“Chinese food!” Daniel did a little dance before racing out of the secret passage, clattering down the stairs and then to the front door.

“Go, Decoy, go! Get our sustenance!” Emrys called after him.

“I put it on *your* credit card, Emrys!” Daniel called back. “And I’m going to add a BIG tip!”

Nate looked over at Turner who just shook his head and said, “He does realize that Emrys is uber-wealthy, right, Nate?”

“We’re still in shock mode. For us, eating fifty bucks of Chinese food was a big deal in the past,” Nate explained. “I’m sure we’ll get used to it. If we get a chance that is and aren’t all killed in a day or so.”

Turner nodded though Nate could see the idea of fifty-bucks being a lot of money was just completely alien to him. That was all right. Nate wouldn’t wish being poor on anyone. Not that he and Daniel had been really poor in all honesty. But when compared to the massive amounts of wealth that Turner, Abbie and Emrys had known, it felt like they had lived on different planets.

“You need servants, Nathaniel!” Emrys yelled. “Remind me after we save the world that this servant-less existence must be remedied!” Emrys called. “Daniel talks too much and is disrespectful. Give me that carton of beef with broccoli!”

From down below, Nate heard Daniel cooing over the sticky-sweet orange chicken, the fried rice with extra egg and peapods, and he said something about the steamed pot stickers that sounded almost obscene. Emrys, of course, commented on that, which earned a snicker from Daniel.

“Sounds like it’s time for us to get down there,” Turner said.

“Or otherwise Daniel is going to eat all of the food. And I’m not kidding about that. The kid’s like a bottomless pit when it comes to Chinese food or pizza or … okay, every kind of food,” Nate said.

“Come on, Abbs, time to eat,” Turner said.

Abbie was still engrossed in the book and lost to the world.

“Abbie? Abbie?” Nate waved a hand between her face and the book. “Earth to Abbie.”

Her head snapped up and she blinked owlishly at them. She clearly hadn’t heard a word of their conversation and he wondered if she noticed that Daniel had left. “What?”

“Food. You’ll need your strength to analyze the spells,” Nate said.

“Right. It’s just so engrossing that I … I lost myself,” she said.

“Happens a lot.” Turner smiled fondly at his sister.

She gathered up the book in her arms and followed Nate and her brother from the secret room. The door slid shut behind them. All three jumped even though the movement was almost silent except for the soft thump.

“Don’t worry,” Abbie said. “I know which book it is to open the door back up again.”

“Whose room was that? My grandfather’s? My grandmother’s?” Nate asked.

“Perhaps with a bit more inquiry, we might be able to tell,” Abbie said. “There wouldn’t exactly be a name on the flyleaf of any of the books, but there are undoubtedly some clues to the room’s owner in there.”

“There are too many clues with that spider web or whatever that was,” Turner said.

Nate checked the phone to make sure that the video he had taken of the wall was watchable. He paused on the picture of the boy. The tug of familiarity at those features came back again. Maybe Emrys would recognize him. Nate’s eyes narrowed. Was that Emrys? It could almost be. But twenty years was a long time.

“It was eerie how everything is so neat and clean and perfect in the secret room. Not even a speck of dust,” Turner said. “The right book opened to the right page and sitting right out in the open for us to find. What are the odds of that?”

“It would make some sense actually,” Abbie said. She glanced over at Nate and he realized she was holding back saying why.

“Abbie, go on. I don’t know these Whitneys. They might as well be strangers to me. I didn’t even know my mom. So don’t worry about upsetting me with something bad about them. It won’t happen,” Nate said. He had a hard time picturing his mother at all now. His childhood dreams of a warm, uncomplicated mother who perpetually had an old-fashioned hairdo and laughed in sunlight didn’t seem to fit the more complicated picture of the woman he was learning about.

Abbie nodded. “Right, well, since your grandparents were the ones that brought the Greater Demon into this world in the first place, I would imagine that they would be looking for a way to send him back. Especially since it was clear that they couldn’t control him. And this is a way to send him back.”

“They brought my mom over to perform a spell. But they didn’t try and use the tile. Otherwise they would have been at Emrys’ house,” Nate said, his brow furrowing. He felt a slight shiver of unease at the thought that such a powerful spell was performed somewhere in this house, but he wasn’t sure where. Would there be some trace of it? Some ghostly remnants? He decided to ask Turner to walk around the house with him later to see if there was any evil to be removed.

“They couldn’t use the spell for two obvious reasons,” Abbie said.

“Don’t you hate when she says ‘obvious’ and you have no idea what’s obvious?” Turner chuckled.

Nate grinned, but then said, “Okay, I’m going to take a stab at one of the reasons. The Whitneys, being Whitneys, couldn’t get into Frost Manor to use the tile.”

“They could have asked the Frosts for help,” Turner argued. “There were still Frosts living in Frost Manor at that time.”

“And give away the power?” Abbie looked at both young men with eyebrows raised. “The tile absorbs the demon’s power. That power could

then be used to do any number of spells. Remember Excelsius' plan to revive himself from the dead with it and your help, Nate?"

"Oh, right, so they didn't want to share in the power with the Frosts so they decided to risk the world instead. Brilliant plan," Nate said dryly, but then he grimaced. "Though thinking of what they did to Emrys, maybe it was good that the Whitneys didn't share power with them."

"Do you know that this is probably the first time that Frosts, Whitneys and Blackwells have ever worked together?" Abbie asked, her eye bright with excitement. "The older generation thought it made more sense to keep things to themselves. They wanted to hoard knowledge and power and not share it."

"They didn't understand the power of crowd-sourcing," Turner said. "And they didn't trust one another. Probably with good reason. But you really do get a better result when you spread around the information."

"Seriously, Emrys and I couldn't do this without you guys," Nate said.

"Same here. And the trust you've shown us by sharing all of this is ... well, it's inspiring." Abbie picked up the book and the folder of Whitney family secrets tenderly.

"Abbie, I am pretty sure that I am getting the better part of this deal," Nate assured her. Just the thought of trying to plow through the thick tomes, let alone to make sense of them, was making Nate's head hurt. He was much happier to send it Abbie's way. She seemed to draw strength from reading.

"So what's the second reason?" Turner asked after a beat of comfortable silence.

Abbie pointed at Nate. "They didn't have a Demon Eater. So this spell, which was out of reach for them, is perfectly suited for us."

"Are you guys coming? I really want to eat this egg roll," Daniel moaned from downstairs.

“You better not be threatening to eat my egg roll, Daniel!” Turned cried and took off down the stairs.

Nate and Abbie followed after him more slowly. Nate glanced back into the room before switching off the light. “It felt like someone had just stepped away from the desk in there. I kept thinking that they would be back at any moment.”

“The fifth companion,” Abbie intoned with a smile.

“We’re the other four? Now we have a fifth invisible friend?” Nate laughed, but it felt forced. Whoever’s room that was would technically be the *sixth* companion. The Unnamed One probably had the number five spot already. Not that he was really inclined to say that out loud.

Nate and Abbie made their way down the spiral staircase to the first floor of the library. Emrys was still lying down on the couch, sprawled out, head resting on the arm of sofa. His eyes were closed and his breathing even. The firelight played a light and shadow game on his fine features. Nate felt his heart clench a little at that beautiful face. He wondered if Emrys was asleep, but unerringly the man’s right arm shot out and he grabbed the back of Nate’s pants, indicating that he was to sit down near Emrys.

Daniel and Turner were sitting on the floor. They had dragged over a long, low table before the couch. They’d spread out all the food on the glass top. Nate’s mouth began to water as he saw chopsticks stuck in a box full of Mongolian Beef and another with Mu Shu Pork. The thin wheat pancakes and plum sauce were sitting beside it ready to go. There were three containers of pot stickers, another four of egg rolls, and containers of egg drop and hot and sour soup. And that wasn’t all of it. To Nate it looked like Daniel had ordered one of everything.

“Maybe Daniel did make a dent in your wallet, Emrys.” Nate sank down to the ground so that he was between the couch and the table near Emrys’ head. “We’ve got a feast for thousands here.”

The older man let out a grunt. “I think Daniel is worrying that this might be his last meal. Actually, it might be. If we’re going to do this spell, we have

to do it soon.”

“Starting tonight, I think from what I’ve read.” Abbie had the book open on her lap. She was sitting cross-legged while dunking pot stickers into the vinegary soy sauce.

“Tonight?” Daniel’s eyes grew big then he stuffed an egg roll into his mouth and seemed to calm down.

“We only have twenty-four hours before Dark Day,” Turner reminded Daniel.

“So this really could be our last meal,” Emrys said, his topaz eyes opening.
“Nathaniel, feed me.”

“What do you want?” Nate asked, hovering over the table and its multitude of packages.

“A little of everything,” Emrys said.

“He isn’t a baby, Nate. You should make him feed himself,” Abbie sighed.

Emrys stuck his tongue out at her.

“Emrys, you’re going to be pissed when Nate drops food on your front. He sucks with chopsticks.” Daniel clicked his together to demonstrate how he did *not* suck with chopsticks unlike his best friend.

“There are plastic forks.” Turner tossed one over to Nate.

“Ach! Plastic cutlery is the devil,” Emrys sneered.

“And wooden chopsticks with splinters are what exactly?” Nate laughed though he did warily glance around to see if the Devil actually showed up.

“Slightly better than plastic. Only slightly. But I don’t want to wait for Nate to find some real chopsticks in the kitchen,” Emrys huffed. “I’m hungry.”

“It’s your funeral, Emrys,” Daniel said and dove back into a carton of deliciously greasy noodles with shrimp, garlic and peapods.

“I’ll do my best to keep my finicky cat clean,” Nate said softly.

But Daniel made a choking sound to indicate he had heard the whispered pet endearment. Emrys shot him a narrowed look that had Daniel laughing harder. Nate filled up a single plate for himself and Emrys. It was heaping with orange chicken, sticky rice, wrinkled green beans with flecks of twice-cooked pork, delicate steamed pot stickers stuffed with shrimp and vegetables, and a half dozen other things that smelled of hot chili oil, sweet soy and garlic. He was breaking apart a pair of chopsticks when Emrys began to question Abbie about the spell.

“What have you found so far?” Emrys asked.

“Well, I believe that you are going to love this spell,” she said dryly.

“What’s to love about a spell to trap a demon?” Nate nearly dropped a piece of orange chicken onto Emrys’ sweater. He caught it at the last minute with a quick crush of the chopsticks. He offered the mangled piece to Emrys.

Emrys gave the chicken the stink eye. “I think that one is *yours*, Nathaniel. Once you break the crisp outer coating, it is not as delectable.”

“You will probably never eat then. Daniel *is* right. I do suck at chopsticks,” Nate sighed and stuck the chicken in his own mouth and chewed.

“It’s all right to *suck* at some things,” Emrys teased with his eyes full of laughter.

“Are you two done? Or does Nate need to kiss your nose again?” Daniel asked.

There was another stare of doom from Emrys which had Daniel hiding his face in the steaming hot and sour soup.

“You will probably love what the spell requires, too, Nate,” Abbie said, her cheeks reddening.

“Uhm, why?” Nate asked.

Abbie straightened up. With her face growing increasing flushed, she said, “Sex.”

“What?” Turner mumbled around one a mu shu pancake. The filling squished out of the back of it in his haste to put it down.

“The spell requires sex,” she said louder as if they all hadn’t heard her the first time.

Emrys let out a rumble laugh. “Of course, it does!”

Nate turned around to face Emrys fully. “Of – *of course* it does? You expected this?”

“Sex or blood is necessary to fulfill the energy requirement of most powerful spells. Sex *and* blood is even better,” Emrys explained. He had taken pity on Nate, sat up higher and grabbed a pair of chopsticks, which he expertly cracked open and began using with ease to feed them both.

“Oh … so you and I have to have sex?” Nate asked as he jealously watched Emrys pick up even rice with his chopsticks and not get a grain on his sweater.

Abbie and Emrys nodded in unison, but Abbie was the one to say, “The only part you probably won’t like is that you have to have sex *on the tile*.”

“In the creepy crypt with his dead uncle looking on?” Turner looked like he’d eaten something that tasted sour.

“It’ll be cold,” Nate murmured. “And uncomfortable.”

“Grit will definitely go places you do not want it to go,” Turner agreed sagely.

Nate winced. Just the thought of it was horrible. How would they ever get in the mood? But then again just looking at Emrys’ socked feet had a burst of heat going through him. Maybe it would be possible after all.

“And this sex, will it take place in front of the rest of us?” Daniel’s eyes nearly bugged out of his face. There was sauce on his chin that his tongue

snaked out and lapped it up.

“I’m more interested in how Emrys and I are supposed to have sex in front of the Greater Demon. Like how is that going to work?” Nate asked. “We ask him to just hold on blasting us while Emrys uhm – well, is *in* me?”

Emrys giggled as he bit into a shrimp. “No, Nathaniel. We will have to have sex on top of the tile to prime it.”

“So before the Greater Demon gets there we have sex?” Nate asked.

Abbie was the one to answer. “Yes. There’s an elaborate ritual we have to perform and then you two have to *perform*.” She didn’t raise her eyes from the book as she said that. “Then the tile will be ready to absorb the Greater Demon. We just have to get him on top of the tile, I think. Physical contact is necessary.”

“Oh, that sounds like it’s going to be a piece of cake. How are we going to do that?” Daniel asked.

Everyone went silent, chewing their food, and looking glumly at the floor.

“Well, something will come up,” Emrys suddenly said.

“*Something* will come up?” Abbie stared at him open-mouthed. “It’s potential end of the world and you think something will come up?”

Emrys shrugged. “It always does. Amazing how it works like that. It’s almost like sometimes things look out for us.”

“You mean like angels?” Daniel looked unimpressed.

“No, *not* like angels. Probably like other demons that don’t want their piece of the pie taken. Earth is a pretty good pie one might expect even in a vast universe,” Emrys said.

“Where do the demons come from?” Daniel asked. “I mean are they aliens? Are they from another dimension? Or what?”

Nate thought of his vision of the sea that ended in a cascading waterfall with the creature at the bottom. There had been a bright swath of stars overhead. Galaxies spinning around him like crystal spheres. It felt like a place outside of the universe, but an integral part of it at the same time. They were facing something from there. Something so other and powerful that it defied comprehension. How could *they* do this? How could they do it and survive?

“We only know that the demons come from somewhere called the Outer Dark,” Turner said. “What that is – *where* it is – is not really clear. When we call demons here, we could be as likely bringing them from another galaxy as from another dimension. No one has ever gone to the Outer Dark and come back.”

“Well, not come back sane anyways.” Emrys fed Nate a perfectly crisp piece of orange chicken.

Nate chewed it, not enjoying the sweet orange flavor as much as he was earlier. “This seems so impossible. I mean us against this Greater Demon. We have a spell none of us has ever seen performed and might not even work. And we’re supposed to lure a Greater Demon onto a one-foot by one-foot tile in the middle of a crypt. Like he won’t be suspicious!”

“Demons are suspicious by nature,” Emrys said. “But they are also arrogant. And he will be curious what we are up to, Nathaniel.”

“So he’ll come and check it out? Maybe.” Nate drew a spoon through his egg drop soup. “This is such a big thing though. Bigger than us.”

“I know that it seems impossible right now, Nathaniel,” Emrys began softly.

“Not just now. *Always*. It will *always* seem impossible. Because the odds are so against us,” Nate said.

“We’re the only ones who can do this, Nate,” Abbie said. “Actually, *you and Emrys* are the only ones. You, because you’re a Demon Eater and Emrys, because this spell requires a Frost who you are connected with. In some ways, we have the best chance of undoing what the Whitneys have done.”

“Maybe we should ask for help again,” Nate said.

“From the Crazy Cat Lady Council? Uhm, no. Even I get that it’s a waste of time going up that tree. They’ll only suggest that Emrys ask the Unnamed One to get rid of it,” Daniel said.

Nate stirred slight at that. One of Emrys’ hands was on his shoulder then.
“Nathaniel, what is it?”

“The Unnamed One sent me here,” Nate said. “It appeared at my house – well, not exactly *appeared* – it was invisible. But it scared the Greater Demon away and ... and it told me you were in trouble. It sent me to save you, Emrys.”

There was silence in the room. Nate now understood what the phrase ‘you could cut it with a knife meant’. He glanced up through his bangs at everyone. They were all sort of frozen in place.

“I think we *could* ask the Unnamed One to help,” Nate added finally.

“NO!” Emrys voice was arctic. “It is trying to mislead you and us! You ask, it gives and what does it want in return?” He grabbed Nate by the arms and turned him around. His eyes were blazing with anger and fear. “You must *never* listen to it, Nathaniel. You must never ask anything of it! Promise me! Promise me!”

But before Nate could answer there was a sound from outside the library. Everyone froze.

“Not this again,” Nate whispered. There were soft footfalls. Was the Unnamed One coming to talk to them again? But then there was a moan. It was long and drawn out.

Daniel let out a bark of laughter and quickly slammed one hand over his lips. “Sorry, it just sounded like a zombie in Resident Evil. They moan before they attack. Just like that actually.”

Nate slowly stood up. He gently disengaged himself from Emrys. He stared at the door to the library. “Emrys, does the Whitney mansion access the

catacombs, too?"

"Uh, yes, it actually has its own crypt just like the Frost Manor does," Emrys answered him.

"Oh, and are there people buried down there?" Nate asked.

Turner had gotten up and he crept towards the door. There was another moan and a wet sound like the smacking of lips and it wasn't coming from Daniel.

"Yes, I believe all your relations on the Whitney side were interred here. Except for your mother," Emrys said.

"Yeah, she's in Winter Haven cemetery," Nate answered faintly.

Turner grasped the door handle. He leaned his head against the wall so that he could peek out of the door the second it was wide enough to see.

"Be careful, Turner." Abbie clutched the book and file to her chest.

Turner cracked the door open and slammed it immediately, scrambling for a lock on it that wasn't there.

"What? What? What's out there?" Daniel jumped to his feet.

"Dead people." Turner's eyes looked wild.

"Very funny." Daniel laughed. "Now really, what's out there?"

"I'm not kidding!" Turner's eyes looked wild as he looked at them and said, "The dead! They are animated corpses out there."

Turner put all of his weight against the door as a thunderous pounding began on the other side.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO: GLAMOUR

"So the Greater Demon decided to raise the dead, did he? Brilliant." Emrys squeezed the top of his nose as if he felt a headache coming on.

Nate raced over to help brace the door with Turner. The lack of lock would be dealt with after he had settled into the house. Not that it helped them any now.

And that is assuming we live through this and the Greater Demon for me to take possession of this house. Nate paused a moment.

Was it so dire? Couldn't the Unnamed One help them? Or, at least, help Emrys and help them and the world by default? Would the Unnamed One allow the Greater Demon to run amok on Earth when it affected Emrys so badly? Should they be risking everything on a spell when they might have an absolutely foolproof way to survive this simply by asking for a little help? Instead of spending the rest of the next two days in mortal terror, they could be hanging out here in comfort with plenty of food and warmth and friendship. Not with zombies banging on the door. One of the zombies must have kicked the bottom panel as it shuddered and Nate heard an ominous cracking sound.

Nate met Emrys' gaze at that moment and he knew that Emrys had read his mind again. Or perhaps his thoughts weren't all that hidden. Emrys' narrowed gaze at him, stern and loving all at the same time, told Nate exactly what the older man thought of that plan before he even offered it. Nate pressed his lips together and said nothing.

But what if Emrys is wrong about the Unnamed One being absolutely evil and stuff? Maybe it would be okay to ask just this once for a little help.

But that thought was shaken out of his mind as there were several deep bellowing moans near the door jam. The door shook and both he and Turner had to dig their feet into the carpet to gain more purchase to keep it shut. The rattling of the door handle was nearly deafening now. Nate imagined half a dozen skeletal hands desperately trying to turn it at once.

"How many of them are there out there, Turner?" Nate asked. "It feels like we're holding back an army."

"At least a dozen. I really didn't count, but they filled the entire hallway and I saw a bunch more lurching into view from the foyer," Turner said.

“A dozen of my relatives trying to kill us? Great.” Nate let out a laugh. No one would blame the hint of hysteria in it.

“Zombies?” Daniel asked and stuffed a Crab Rangoon into his mouth even as the door shuddered and groaned behind Nate and Turner’s backs.

“How can you *eat* at a time like this?” Abbie asked him. She had grabbed one of the empty bags of Chinese food and stuffed both the file on the Whitneys and the book inside of it. Then she slid her arms through the bag’s handles creating a makeshift backpack.

“I eat when I’m about to be eaten so sue me! This is all very *stressful!*” And another piece of cream cheese and faux crab pastry popped into Daniel’s mouth. He chewed with bright, glassy eyes.

Emrys rose on unsteady legs. He looked ready to keel over and had to hold himself upright on the arm of the couch.

Not good. So not good. If Emrys can hardly stand then there's no way he can use magic against the zombies.

“What do we do, Emrys?” Nate asked. “Can we get out of the window?”

Emrys glanced over at the leaded glass and shook his head. “Can’t you feel that it’s blocked?” Now that Emrys had pointed it out, Nate could see that the sunlight was muted as if there was a thin film coating the glass and blocking the light partially. A shield of some sort, Nate guessed. “The blasted demon has locked us in with the undead. Wonder why he didn’t come himself? This seems all rather James Bond villain-nesque as a plan to kill us. There’s a million ways to escape.”

“Except none of us can think of any.” Daniel slurped down noodles.

“It’s because of the Unnamed One.” The door jumped behind Nate and his words came out in a staccato burst. “The Greater Demon is scared of the Unnamed One. Won’t come near us, I think. So he sent dead people instead.”

Emrys looked like he was chewing on glass as Nate explained his theory. He pointed a finger at Nate's rattling body and said, "We are not done with the conversation about the Unnamed One, Nathaniel."

"Can it wait until *after* we're eaten by the zombies?" Daniel managed to whine between bites of Mongolian Beef.

"Emrys, how shot are your powers right now?" Abbie asked Emrys.

"I'm ... I'm fine," Emrys said and convinced no one. "I could manage a few spells. Especially if they were simple. Fire is usually the best defense against the undead."

"We're not setting fire to my house!" Nate was surprised by the firmness of his tone. Already, he felt an affinity for this house. He could already imagine them hanging out in this library. He could picture his grandmother curled under a blanket by the fire with a good book in her hands, too. Not to mention his father, laughing in the hall. No, he wasn't losing this house to the Greater Demon. Not when he'd just found it. No way. Now how.

"But, Nathaniel, I don't think ... I don't know that I can do much more than a fire spell before that door fails. And you and the children don't have the skills yet to face the undead." Emrys grimaced.

"I know, but there's too much of value here. That room alone with all the books and the spider web – we're going to need that in the future. I'm sure of it," Nate said, certainty filling him.

"Besides, even if you set the zombies on fire, they'd just run towards us like flaming ... well, flaming dead people. And they'd likely set us on fire or the house on fire and then we'd die of burns or smoke inhalation instead of them munching on our brains."

"True. My spells right now wouldn't have the strength to incinerate them where they stood." Emrys ran a shaking hand over his head. That and Emrys' admission of weakness showed Nate just how unrecovered the other man was.

"What about the lightning, Nate?" Daniel asked.

“Not in the house!” Nate and Emrys cried at once.

“Right, right, forget I said it,” Daniel said.

“Could there be another secret passage out of here?” Nate asked.

“We don’t have time to look. That door is giving way.” Emrys limped over to the fire place and grabbed the heavy, metal poker. It made a whistling noise and he slashed it through the air.

“We need a gun. Not a poker. We’ve got to shoot them in the head!” Daniel cried. He was now into the hot and sour soup.

“Turner, what did the dead people look like?” Abbie asked abruptly.

“I don’t know, Abbs! Dead?” Turner shook his head.

“Like *Night of the Living Dead* dead? Or *World War Z* dead? You know, are they wet or dry?” Abbie asked. “Or a combination?”

“Ah, more dry. I think,” Turner added as the door groaned behind them.
“Bony.”

“Whatever you’re thinking, Abigail, spit it out,” Emrys said tartly, but there was a faint hopeful light in his eyes.

“We’re going to become zombies. Everybody, hold hands.” Abbie walked over to Nate and Turner. She sandwiched herself between them and grasped both their hands in hers.

“What are we doing here exactly?” Daniel stared at the three of them as the door groaned, creaked and then let out an alarming snap as the wood gave into clawed bony hands. The moaning increased outside in intensity. It sounded awfully hungry.

“Abigail, you’ve only ever put the glamour on yourself in the past. It will be quite different holding the spell for all of us,” Emrys cautioned.

“Yeah, but I have a lot of motivation to get it right. And you know me, Emrys. I have to be perfect the first time.”

Emrys gave her a grin. But then the three of them were nearly tossed to the ground as the zombies must have bodily thrown themselves against the door. They quickly pushed it shut just before a swiping zombie hand got in.

Emrys jogged over, gripped Nate's hand in one of his while he still carried the fireplace poker in the other. Nate leaned his head against Emrys' shoulder, relishing the warmth and comfort of physical contact with him.

"Come on, Daniel! You're the last one, buddy!" Turner called. "This door can't take much more of this."

"Decoy, wipe your hands on your pants. You're all greasy and no one wants to touch you," Emrys ordered. "And Abbie will need to make sure that we're all in contact with her the entire time."

"You're going to make us into zombies?" Daniel scrubbed his hands over the fronts of his jeans, leaving a few smears of grease and wonton flakes behind, before he took Turner's hand.

"I'm going to make us *look* like zombies," she clarified.

"You know that we're going to be the only zombies *holding hands*, right?" Daniel asked. "Like that won't stick out."

"You know a lot of zombie etiquette?" Emrys asked. "For all you know, zombies hold hands as a *rule*."

Nate bit down on inappropriate laughter. "Will they really think we're like them, Abbie?"

"I don't know. I've not exactly done this before. But I'm hoping it fools them for a few minutes for us to get past them and out into the hall," Abbie said. "I'm assuming we can't just walk out the front door like we can't get out the windows, correct, Emrys?"

"That's correct. You're thinking of using the catacombs where the zombies came from?" Emrys asked her.

She nodded. "I figure that it's good if we use them to get to Frost Manor anyways. It might hide our survival from the Greater Demon for awhile."

“Wait a minute! We’re going to go *down* into the creepy underground tunnels where the zombies came from? Where you said there were monsters, Emrys, right?” Daniel asked. He looked longingly at the abandoned boxes of Chinese food.

“That’s the idea, Decoy.” Emrys kissed the top of Nate’s head. Nate had stiffened a little, too, at the idea.

“Oh, boy. This sounds like a really bad plan.” Daniel let his head fall back and he let out a sigh. “And it’s been a week of bad plans already.”

“Everyone quiet so I can concentrate. When I tell you, step away from the door and … and let the zombies in,” Abbie said.

While all of them went quiet, the dead people outside did not get the memo. The scrape of dead fingernails across the wood was like a keening wail. In fact, there was some keening wailing coming out of desiccated vocal chords. Nate wondered how they could make any sound at all, but he figured it was magic. After all, how could piles of bone walk on their own in the first place?

Abbie’s eyes closed tightly. He saw her lips moving though no sounds came out. Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead and upper lip. Nate could almost feel the magic building up inside of her. And then he saw the effects of it.

Nate had to suppress a gasp as Abbie’s skin turned a blackish green. Her jaw seemed to unhinge on one side and fall down with an audible click. Her eyes sunk into her head, leaving black pits where white things squirmed. Her long hair remained mostly, but it lost its glossiness and shine and was appropriately matted with dead things. Her limbs withered until they appeared to be little more than bones stretched over by dry leathery skin. Her clothing, too, appeared to age like it had long been buried.

“Holy crow!” Daniel whispered.

“Yeah. She’s got to do us now,” Turner said out of the corner of his mouth.

If she can change us. But Nate kept that thought to himself.

Then he saw the blackness spreading from Abbie's hand onto his own. He watched as he, too, was turned into a corpse. He was glad that he couldn't look at himself in the mirror. He glanced over at Emrys to see if the other man was changing yet and what his reaction to Nate's deadness was. But when he saw Emrys as a hollowed out, rotting shell, Nate felt something in him cry out. He nearly wrenched his hand from Abbie's. The feeling was so powerful, the sense of Emrys being a corpse so wrong, that he almost lost himself to it.

"It is all right, Nathaniel," Emrys' normally rich voice came out as a rusty creak. He pressed his lip-less mouth against Nate's slumping forehead. But the feeling of soft lips was there though he could not see them.

Just a glamour. Not real. A spell. Nate repeated those words to himself until the urge to leap away from the others and confirm Emrys wasn't dead left him.

"All right," Abbie's voice was a husky growl that would have been attractive in a Demi Moore sort of way except for the fact that it came out of a blackened, toothless mouth. "Step away from the door. Let them in."

The five of them took several steps away from the door and turned to face it. Nate's tongue clicked and stuck to the roof of his mouth as all the saliva seemed to evaporate when the door burst inwards and the threshold was filled with rotting husks. They were dry as Turner had described them. Nate would always remember the smell of them: dry rot, stale perfume of dead flowers and a hint of sickly sweet decay.

They shambled inside, squeezing past one another, through the doorway and spreading out into the room. They ignored the five "zombies" standing terribly still in the refuse of the Chinese food.

They don't know we're alive! They believe we're dead like them! Nate performed an internal cheer.

Emrys almost immediately began leading them towards the door once it was finally free of the undead. The zombies careened around the room,

crawling up to the second floor's balcony, searching for the living that they had been promised. Nate felt a flare of anger as the zombies touched the books and furniture and things that were no longer theirs. They were *his* and they were leaving zombie stench all over them.

I'm so having this place cleaned top to bottom after this.

Nate forced himself not to meet any of the undead in the eyes. Not that many of them had eyes. In fact, none of them appeared to. But he didn't want to recognize himself in any of their rotted faces.

Emrys' pace was frustratingly slow, but he was perfectly imitating a zombie shuffle. In a single line, hands locked together, they moved towards the door. A female zombie, breasts shriveled, dressing rotting and falling off her shoulders suddenly appeared before Emrys in the doorway. She sniffed the air, her head blindly swinging around to find the illusive scent of live flesh. Emrys froze, but then began to edge around her, trying to jostle her out of the way, but though she was small, she filled the entire space. Nate's teeth ground together as she continued to sniff. Suddenly, all the zombies were sniffing. Their moans and wails had died away and all that could be heard was the whistle of air through collapsed nostrils and dried lungs. Her head slowly swung towards Emrys.

Time to go.

Whether Emrys heard his mental command or not, the older man suddenly rammed into the female zombie. She toppled over and her forearms snapped like dried sticks. The sound was terribly loud. The moans and wails were back. Suddenly, the zombies seemed to see them.

“Let's go, children!” Emrys shouted and sprinted down the hall, dragging Nate and the others after him like they were all on a kite string.

“Do you know where you're going?” Nate asked.

“This way!”

Emrys vaulted them over a zombie whose legs had given out on him, but still crawled towards the library valiantly. Then they were heading down

another hallway and there was an open door at the end. Heavy, cold, rotting air flowed out of it. Nate could see the beginning of some stairs leading down, but the rest was blackness. Emrys raised the pace of their running. Nate chanced to look over his shoulder and he was nearly sprinting past Emrys as he saw how close the zombies were to Daniel, the last person in line. Daniel's eyes were huge and his face white.

Then they were all falling down the stairs, tripping over steps and each other, but allowing gravity more than sight to lead them down into the Whitney family crypt and then below that into the catacombs that ran like Swiss cheese throughout Winter Haven. But Emrys stopped them at the bottom of the stairs. The door at the top of the steps slammed shut and all the light was cut off as were the zombies though Nate heard them thudding against the door like birds hitting a glass window.

Emrys let out a whispered spell and Nate saw the older man's free hand glow green before a green rune appeared on the door. "That will keep them out for a little while."

Everyone was gasping for breath and shaking with fatigue and terror.

"Remind me to – to start working out," Daniel wheezed.

A flickering flame appeared in the darkness. Emrys had conjured it. "Adrenaline," he explained as Nate was shocked, but happy with the return of some of his powers.

"Right." Nate leaned down and put his head between his knees as he felt rather nauseas from running.

Emrys sent the dancing flame around the crypt. Nate was relieved to see that as the flame passed each one of his friends that all of them had lost their undead glamour and looked completely themselves again. The flame also revealed three stone sarcophagi, all white and pale as shrouds, in the center of the room. The lids had been dislodged and the occupants were gone. The stink of them lingered heavily. And the faint thumps from up above reminded Nate that they now wanted back in here.

The walls were covered with plaques where the other dead had been buried when the family had run out of floor space. Or there had been plaques, but all of them were gone. They had been pushed out by the eager undead then shattered into hundreds of pieces as they had fallen onto the hard concrete floor. Some had been ground to powder under zombie feet.

“There’s another door.” Nate pointed at the far end of the room.

“Good. I don’t see any obvious way into the crypts from this room. Hopefully, it will be through there and not hidden behind a casket or something,” Emrys muttered.

The older man led the way forward. He kept the fire place poker at the ready as they followed the flickering flame into the second room. Like the Frost family crypt, there was another set of three sarcophagi and wall crypts yet all of these looked to be intact.

“Odd, he didn’t send all the undead after us,” Emrys’ voice echoed sepulchrally.

Nate drew closer to him. He didn’t like the echoing feel of this place. He didn’t like the blank stares of the white resting places.

“Perhaps not so odd as sloppy,” Abbie whispered from behind them. “Aren’t demons arrogant? Perhaps the Greater Demon thought half of the crypt’s occupants could take us out.”

“Perhaps,” Emrys said noncommittally. Nate noticed that he gripped the poker tighter.

“Look, there’s a door!” Daniel cried and pointed ahead of them.

They had all been whispering, but Daniel’s startled outburst sounded like a fog horn in comparison. And perhaps it was a horn of sorts, as there was a grinding noise as the stone sarcophagi began to move.

“Looks like he was saving a few just in case! Run, children!”

Emrys grasped Nate’s wrist and yanked the young man forward. Nate still had a hold of Abbie and evidently the others hadn’t let go of one another

either so they were all running in a single chain again towards the arched doorway at the end. But suddenly the marble plaques were falling from both walls, making it impossible to get through without risking life and limb from dropping marble slabs. The undead squirmed out of their stone cocoons and reached gnarled hands towards them.

One female zombie grabbed Nate around the neck and began to lift him into her coffin. He gave out a shocked, strangled cry that had Emrys turning to help him only to be overwhelmed by three zombies himself. Abbie's hair was caught by two zombies. Her head was wrenched back painfully. Another undead had Daniel by the waist. He was trying to drag Daniel into the sarcophagus while Turner frantically tugged back. Suddenly, there was a burst of blinding white light. The undead froze in place. Then they turned to a white powder that harmlessly drifted down to the floor. Nate blinked and someone coughed as they inhaled the zombie dust.

"Playing with the undead and you didn't invite me?" The rich, sardonic voice sounded familiar, but Nate didn't recognize who it belonged to until he looked up and saw Excelsius Frost's ghostly presence standing in the doorway to the catacombs.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE: THE CATACOMBS

"Excelsius! I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm overjoyed to see you," Emrys cried then hacked up zombie dust and spat on the floor. "Oh, that was – gah, that is *disgusting*. Damn undead."

Nate patted his back. "I'm with Emrys. Thanks a ton, Excelsius" He leaned over so that he could see Emrys' flushed face. "Are you okay?"

Emrys nodded, but then made a disgusted cat noise as he realized his sweater was covered in zombie dust. "You can never get this *dust* out of your clothes. My clothes are *ruined*. I lose more sweaters this way."

"In zombie attacks? They happen often?"

"Zombie attacks. Witch hunters. Demons. Demigods. You name it, they are all Hell on clothes," Emrys muttered.

Nate found himself grinning. After all the terror, his finicky cat was more concerned with being dirty. Emrys was fine. Nate turned to look at his friends. “How about the rest of you? Is everyone okay?”

Other than being lightly dusted with zombie remnants, hair sticking up from where bony fists had pulled it nearly out by the roots, and clothes ripped by sharpened fingers, they all looked good.

“We’re alive. The undead didn’t get us.” Daniel coughed and then crossed his hands over his stomach. “Oh, man, I feel sick though.”

“That’s what happens when you run for your life on a full stomach. Consider that next time you stress eat,” Abbie lectured.

“I couldn’t help myself! I’ll know not to eat so much when the next zombie attack occurs,” Daniel said, and his stomach gurgled.

“You joke, but it could happen again. Sooner than we think. We are going into the Catacombs.” Turner brushed zombie dust off his shirt.

“There are worse things than the dead in the Catacombs from what I’ve read,” Abbie said.

“Reading and reality are very different,” Excelsius retorted.

“We’ll, we’re all okay for now, anyways. Better than I thought.” Nate took in a deep breath of relief and nearly hacked up a lung as he inhaled dust himself.

Emrys was now the one to thump his back. He tipped Nate’s chin up after the young man could breathe again, and his topaz gaze looked over Nate minutely. He turned Nate’s head to the right and left, clucking softly at what he saw.

“Just a few cuts and bruises. But you’re all right. Still pretty,” Emrys said after a long moment.

“Just pretty, huh?” Nate pouted.

“Oh, there are more things I *could* say, but not in mixed company.” He then kissed Nate on the forehead. That made everything better.

“Are you done inventorying your limbs and organs to see if they are all there?” Excelsius asked tartly.

“We need our limbs and organs, Excelsius,” Nate reminded him. “Not like ghosts.”

“Well, I suppose I should start worrying about those things as I’ll have a body soon.” The Frost ancestor nodded though he still seemed annoyed.

Nate met Emrys’ eyes and the older man shook his head, indicating that Nate shouldn’t mention anything about the book yet. Maybe they would still need Excelsius’ help. But raising him from the dead?

“I think Excelsius just wants us to get back to praising him for his last minute rescue,” Turner laughed.

Excelsius stood regally before them and said, “Well … yes.”

Nate burst out laughing as did the others. Excelsius sniffed.

“In all seriousness, how did you know we were in trouble? Or is that a stupid question?” Nate asked. He was wondering if there was some kind of zombie distress signal that Emrys had sent up or something. The world of witches was so very complicated and he knew so little of it.

Excelsius arched one eyebrow in the exact same way that Emrys did before he preened so Nate already knew the ghost was going to have fun patting himself on the back. He didn’t disappoint as he said, “There is *little* that goes on in this world that I do not know.”

“Especially when it has to do with us, because you’re frantically following our every move as we’re the only ones that can bring you back to life,” Abbie said with a roll of her eyes.

“Young lady, a zombie just about took off your head, give credit where credit is due,” Excelsius sniffed again.

“Well, I for one am happy with our new ghostly overlord,” Daniel said, rubbing his throat where a bony hand had clutched him.

“Finally, *someone* who shows some true respect!” Excelsius lifted his chin up.

“We’re all grateful for your help,” Turner said. His eye roll was a little more subtle than Abbie’s.

“How did you perform that spell though? I thought that ghosts couldn’t perform magic.” Nate cast a nervous glance at Emrys. The spell had to have been a pretty powerful one to destroy the zombies so completely. This seemed to run afoul to what Emrys had said about ghosts being harmless. He kicked at a pile of zombie dust and nearly had another coughing fit. He made a mental note never to do that again.

“Let’s talk and walk, shall we?” Excelsius waved them to follow him through a doorway and down a set of winding stairs that led into darkness.

“Or you’ll glide and we’ll walk, but it works,” Daniel said.

Emrys, who had been looking suspiciously at some of the floor tiles, grasped Nate’s hand and followed after the ghost. Excelsius let out a ghostly glow so it wasn’t necessary for Emrys to conjure even a wisp of light to guide their way.

“Now you asked how I destroyed the ghosts,” Excelsius began to pontificate. His hands were laced behind his lower back as if giving a lecture as he glided ahead of them. “It was quite a feat. I had to keep my head. A cool head is always necessary in a crisis.”

“As opposed to screaming and running away? Isn’t that what you did before that caused you to die?” Daniel asked. He was walking beside Abbie while Turner brought up the rear. “Guess, at least you learned one lesson in life.”

There was a very loud sniff from Excelsius. Nate noticed that Emrys bit down on a smile. But the older man was being strangely quiet as if waiting to hear something from his ancestor.

“I think you’re off his favorite acolytes list,” Turner chuckled.

“So when I sensed my kin – and yourselves, I suppose — in danger, I immediately materialized in the doorway, knowing I was needed.” Excelsius seemed to float higher in the air then as if his great deeds fueled his altitude. “Then with a great deal of concentration, I girded myself for what was to come. I allowed all my power to pool within me. I offered up all of my strength to –”

Emrys’ uncontrolled laughter cut him off. Excelsius glared over his shoulder at his kin, which had Emrys laughing louder.

“Are you okay, Emrys?” Nate asked.

“I’m sorry! I can’t! I thought I could wait to hear how he would describe his great rescue, but I just can’t!” Emrys got out between giggles. “He managed to flip a switch. All that concentration and great strength, to flip a switch!” Again, Emrys was reeling with laughter. “The – the crypt was wired for just such an eventuality. The undead rising! I should have thought of it, but … ah, well, you did exceptionally well, Excelsius.”

“I did not see you flipping any switches, Emrys! I saw you being choked!” Excelsius harrumphed loudly. “In comparison, my actions were *great!*”

“Or at least, the result was. We’re alive,” Nate agreed though he couldn’t help but shake his head at Excelsius’ windup.

“True. Very true.” Emrys bit down on more laughter though a few chuckles. “And we are forever grateful to your quick thinking and utter concentration it took to flip that switch, Excelsius.”

Excelsius narrowed his eyes at Emrys, certain he was being mocked, but at the same time there was a genuine compliment in there somewhere. Silence seemed to work as a response in either case.

“How far do these stairs go down?” Daniel asked. “We’ve been walking like *forever*.”

“If you ask, are we there yet, I shall have to hurt you, Daniel,” Abbie replied dryly.

The truth was that they had been walking down the narrow stairwell for quite a while. The walls were wide enough for Nate to walk next to Emrys, but the heavy white stone that made up the walls, floor and ceiling was beginning to be oppressive.

“We have to get below Winter Haven’s sewer and electrical lines,” Turner explained.

“Hasn’t the City ever discovered the Catacombs?” Nate asked.

“Why do you think the underground rail system was scrapped?” Emrys asked rhetorically. “There are people at every level of City government who know not to disturb certain things. And certainly they know not to tell anyone but the Council if they do find something.”

“So it’s all like a big conspiracy?” Daniel’s eyes got large.

“Just because you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean they aren’t out to get you,” Turner said dryly.

“It’s just so crazy! I mean all of this *stuff* is just going on all around us, the whole time! And we didn’t know. We just didn’t know, Nate. And you thought your communing with animals was weird.” Daniel did a little jig down the steps.

“It is totally wild, that’s for sure,” Nate agreed softly. “If the world weren’t potentially about to end, I think I could enjoy this more.”

Emrys rubbed the back of Nate’s neck.

“Well, you might enjoy this all the same. Welcome to Winter Haven’s Catacombs.” Excelsius spread his arms as the wall on Nate’s right disappeared and a vast dark cavern opened up before them. Cold air whistled around Nate, nearly taking his breath away, and seeming to lure him to the edge. “Make some light, Emrys. Show them the splendor.”

“For a moment only. Light draws unwelcome things in the Catacombs.” Emrys clapped his hands together and dozens of wisps suddenly raced out from between his fingers and floated out into the cavern.

“Oh, my God,” Nate whispered as he saw what was before them.

“It’s beautiful,” Abbie said, her dark eyes widening.

Turner shook his head and said, “Hot damn. I had no idea it was like this.”

“It looks like that dwarven city in *The Lord of the Rings* — you know, Nate, the one where Gandalf … ah, the one where he *dies*,” Daniel said and fell silent.

And it did look like Moria.

Ruined Moria.

The staircase they were currently on hugged a gigantic pillar of stone that vanished into the darkness below them. Dozens of other staircases extended down from the cavern’s ceiling around pillars of their own. Nate wondered if they all went to witches’ houses or if some unsuspecting rich person had an unknown entrance to this wondrous place. He saw that there were thin pathways that connected the stairwells to each other and to other openings in the walls. Some of these openings had elaborate masonry around them.

“Those are Runes,” Abbie exclaimed, pointing to the nearest archway into the sheer wall that was about one hundred feet away.

“I can’t believe that this has always been down here and I’ve never known. That *most* people will never know,” Nate breathed. “Were these made by witches?”

“The Catacombs weren’t built by us,” Emrys said. “We just discovered them. Added on a bit, too. But it is believed that they are but a small part of some vast … dark earth world. But the people who made them abandoned this section of them long ago.”

“Why would they abandon them?” Nate asked.

Emrys closed his hands into fists and the wisps died out. “Unfortunately, like the dwarves of fabled, fictional Moria, they found something here that they didn’t like.”

“What didn’t they like?” Daniel asked.

“There is an opening at the bottom of this cavern.” Emrys gestured over the edge.

Nate had been clutching Emrys’ hand and hanging back against the pillar, but suddenly found himself leaning out of the edge of the stairs to stare into the dark below to try and see the opening that Emrys mentioned.

“Way down there. You can’t see it from here. You can’t see much of anything from here,” Emrys’ voice murmured in his ear.

“Where does this opening lead?” Nate’s voice was whipped back up to him.

Emrys’ expression became opaque. “They say that the opening is where the Outer Dark and this world connect at all times.”

“Wouldn’t that mean that demons could just pour into our world?” Nate peered into the darkness. He thought he saw something move down there, but it could have been a trick of the eyes.

“No,” Emrys’ voice was soft. “It is said that *this* is where the Unnamed One entered our world and now blocks any others from coming after it.”

Nate remembered then his vision of the endless sea pouring endlessly off a cliff. He had seen constellations above him so it couldn’t have been here he saw and yet ... Nate looked up at the ceiling far above him. More blackness. He thought he saw small flashes of light near where some of the doors were. But no galaxies were spinning, no wash of millions of stars, no bone white moon, nothing. Nate thought though that he heard water coming from somewhere far below.

“So the Unnamed One keeps us safe from the other demons?” Nate asked.

Emrys made a displeased sound. “No, Nathaniel, the Unnamed One wishes to keep us all for itself. It’s not altruistic. Simply put: demons don’t share.”

When Nate pulled back from the edge, he caught Emrys looking at him. The older man had a strange expression on his face, a mixture of love, worry and a touch of fear.

“What?” Nate asked. “What’s wrong?” He suddenly knew what Emrys was worrying about. “I’m not possessed, if that’s what you’re thinking!” He looked over at Turner. “Tell him, I’m not possessed!”

The other three, and even Excelsius, were trying to look casual, like they were watching a bizarre fight. Turner glanced over at him and shook his head.

“Nate’s not possess,” he confirmed. “Not red aura. Nothing. Just like normal. Nate’s … just like he’s always been.”

“See? You can stop worrying now.” Nate put his hands on his hips.

Emrys drew his knuckles down Nate’s cheek. “You just worry me when you say things about the Unnamed One. You must trust me when I say that the Unnamed One is not to be trusted. Is not to be trifled with. Is not to be thought of if you can help it.”

Nate grasped Emrys’ hand in his. “I do trust you. *But –*” Emrys closed his eyes as he put the ‘but’ in there. He squeezed Emrys’ hand. “We can’t be sure of anything about the Unnamed One. I mean, how can anyone know what the Unnamed One’s motives are? Maybe everything you’ve been told is *wrong*.”

“Spoken like a true Whitney!” Excelsius crowed.

Nate’s head jerked over towards the ghost at that. “What do you mean?”

“Whitneys go where angels fear to tread,” Excelsius answered with a small smile. “Where a Frost will jump from any high point, a Whitney will stand back and watch. He will see how far and fast the fall is. Then he will plan. And finally, he will act. Only he won’t just jump from the same spot the Frost did. Oh, no, he’s *run* for the edge and *fly* off of it.”

“You mean that Whitneys push boundaries,” Nate guessed.

“Whitneys have *no* boundaries. Only points that are unknown that they will later cross after gathering as much information as they can,” Excelsius answered.

“We aren’t personifications of our families, you know,” Nate pointed out. “I wasn’t raised by any Whitneys. I don’t even know any Whitneys.”

“And yet you are just like your uncle,” Excelsius said with a purse of his lips.

“My uncle? I don’t have an uncle. My mother was an only child,” Nate said.
“Right, guys?”

Everyone nodded.

“I haven’t heard of your mother having a brother,” Abbie agreed. “I’ve done the genealogy for many of the Families.”

“Ah, well, then I must be mistaken since a child thinks otherwise.” Excelsius drifted down the stairs.

Nate stared after the back of the retreating ghost. He raised his hands helplessly and looked at the others. “My mom’s got a brother? I’ve got an uncle?”

“He could be wrong,” Turner said.

“Not likely. He doesn’t have a lot to do but watch people. So I have some hidden uncle. When is he going to pop up?” Nate asked.

“Let’s hope no time soon,” Turner said.

“What’s if the room’s his?” Abbie said. “Maybe our impressions of it just having been left by someone were true.”

“Great. If he was back in the house, let’s hope he wasn’t eaten by the zombies,” Daniel sighed.

“That’s so uplifting, Decoy, thank you for that edifying thought.” Emrys wrapped an arm around Nate’s shoulders. “We should keep up with

Excelsius.”

“Don’t you know the way to Frost Manor from down here?” Nate asked.

“I do … well, I remember making it once … I was drunk and high and …” Emrys scrubbed a hand through his hair. “We’d better follow Excelsius.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a plan to me.” Nate leaned up and kissed Emrys’ cheek. The older man accepted it eagerly.

Excelsius had only traveled a short distance away. He was clearly not trying to lose them. Just to make them a little desperate.

“Are you seriously saying I have an uncle that no one knows anything about, Excelsius?” Nate called.

“You’ve mocked me enough for one day,” Excelsius sniffed and continued to drift down the winding stairs.

“Look, I’m sorry about all teasing!” Nate cried.

“He’s not the one that’s been teasing you, Excelsius,” Emrys said. “You shouldn’t shut Nathaniel out because of what we’ve done.”

Excelsius had led them to a small platform just outside of a curved archway. A burst of air came out of it that had a strange oily scent. Excelsius spun around to face them, looking like a regal Frost in the beginnings of a hissy fit.

“I will have you know that not only have I saved your lives here and *now*, but I’m going to be saving them again and the world’s for that matter! I am going to teach you what you need to know to use the tile against the Greater Demon,” Excelsius said tartly.

“We don’t need you to teach us about that,” Abbie said.

Excelsius blinked in surprise. “What? No one knows how to use the tile, but *me*. I –”

Abbie pulled the plastic bag containing the file and the book of spells off of her back to adjust it. She showed him the book of spells. “Really? Or maybe we can just learn it from the same book that you did.”

Excelsius’ mouth opened and closed like a goldfish’s. “You – You – You –”
“Hey, she just got it out of the Whitney library. It was sitting open. Right to the page we needed,” Nate said. “But we really want you to help us.”

“You brought the Book of Lire *here*? Into the Catacombs?” Excelsius’ voice had risen up almost into a register that only a canine’s could hear.

“How else were we going to get it to Frost Manor with the barrier around the Whitney place?” Nate asked, his forehead furrowing.

“But don’t you understand what you’ve *done*?” Excelsius was backing away from them down the stairs. One of his ghostly hands was raised up to his mouth. His eyes darted around as if awaiting a blow at any second.

“We’re not buying your little act there, Excelsius,” Emrys said mildly.
“Nate is not saying he won’t help you. Not yet anyways. You might be able to earn your wings – or I should say, *body* after all.”

But Excelsius was still backing away. His form was becoming more misty and indistinct. “They’ll come for it. Don’t you understand? They’ll *come*.”

“Oh, he’s totally acting like bringing the book here is going to bring down the Wrath of God or something! Looking all scared and ... and freaked out and shit. And ... he’s really taking this hard. He’s running away,” Daniel stared after Excelsius’ retreating back. “Holy crap, he’s running away.”

“Why is he running away?” Abbie was frowning.

“That’s not exactly what we need right now.” Nate ran a hand over his face. He turned to look at the others. That’s when he saw Turner’s face. “Turner, what’s the matter? Is something the matter?”

Turner was facing the tunnel entrance where the foul scent was coming from. In some ways it wasn’t a surprise to Nate when he saw the dozens of pairs of soft glowing silver eyes. Then the hissing began.

And above that was Emrys' voice, screaming at them, "RUN, EVERYONE, RUN!"

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR: A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

What would make a ghost run away? What could possible be so dangerous to a spirit? And what does that mean about what it could do to us?

Those were the thoughts running through Nate's mind as the light from Excelsius' form was extinguished and everything went black except for the dozens of silver eyes that were rapidly approaching them from the tunnel ahead.

"RUN, CHILDREN!" Emrys' voice rose up once more.

Nate was still frozen as he couldn't see where to go. It was Abbie to point that out to the older man.

"We can't see! Where's the edge?" Abbie cried.

She meant the edge of the path. Nate felt the world begin to spin as he imagined the long drop to whatever was below. One false step and his foot might slid over the edge, he'd lose his balance and tumble into the nothingness.

The opening is below. Where the Unnamed One came through. Where part of it might still be. Will it really let Emrys be harmed when it's so close?

Emrys slammed his hands together and there was a flare of light. Suddenly, wisps streaked out from between his fingers and raced down the path, lighting their way forward. Emrys sent another flare of light, this one so hot it was burned blue, into the tunnel mouth. It hit something inside. Nate shielded his eyes as he tried to see what it was. But the light was too bright.

There were screams, horrible nails-on-chalkboard type cries that emanated from the tunnel. Nate covered his ears with his hands. He curled forward, trying to protect himself from the sound, but it seemed to sink into his bones. He was paralyzed by the roars of rage.

But then Emrys was grabbing his arm and pulling him forward, down the path, away from the creature. “We have to GO, Nathaniel!”

Already, Turner, Daniel and Abbie were running down the slick stone steps. Emrys yanked on his arm and Nate stumbled after him down the path. Nate heard a chittering behind them and the clicking of many feet. Hundreds of feet.

What the hell is in that tunnel? What's coming after us?

“Don't look back!” Emrys yelled, sensing what Nate was thinking.

Nate felt like a bit like Lot's wife as he found himself turning his head to look over his shoulder while they flew down the steps. He wished he hadn't even though he didn't turn into a pillar of salt.

The creature had a long sinuous main body. It was as long as a semi-trailer and as wide as the path itself. From the noises it had made, Nate had thought it was many creatures chasing them, but it was just one. He knew why though as he took in the monster's front half. There were hundreds of malformed heads protruding out of its bulk. They had razor-sharp, gnashing teeth. Some headers had only an upper jaw while others were nose and eyes. They all had silver eyes. There hands, mal-shaped and black tipped that swiped blindingly ahead of the thing. It looked to Nate like hundreds of bodies had been melded, perhaps even melted, together to make this squirming whole.

Is that what it does? Does it merge with its prey? Make what it catches part of it?

It moved forward on thousands of curved claws that made a ticking sound against the stone. It scuttled forward more quickly than something that big had any right to. And the ground shook as it came. Nate kept expecting to see the path crumble from being shaken so much. Shards of stone broke off of the edge and fell into the pit. Even if Nate could have heard anything over the ticking of the creature's claws, he knew that he wouldn't hear the shards hit the bottom of the pit. It was too far below.

“It’s a Slaughter. Goddamn it, why did it have to be a Slaughter?” Emrys muttered. His hold increased on Nate and he made them both run faster.

“A Slaughter? It’s called a *Slaughter*?” Nate’s voice went high.

“Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? Slaughters everything in its path.” Emrys gave him a mad smile. “Makes its prey into part of it. Even ghosts. All gobbled up and used to feed it.”

“That’s why Excelsius ran.” Nate looked back again. The Slaughter was only thirty feet behind them and gaining fast. “Emrys, it’s on our ass!”

“Right!”

Emrys spun around and sent a few blasts of fire behind them. They hit the Slaughter’s body, but bounced harmlessly off its bulk and broke apart when they struck the walls. The Slaughter’s terrible mouths opened in screams of anger as each fireball hit even though Nate didn’t see a one of them hurting it in the least.

The screams were deafening again and Nate fully expected blood to pour out of his ears and down his neck as his eardrums shattered. Instead, Emrys snatched his arm again and had them running faster than ever.

“Not enough!” Emrys’ voice sounded like he was talking over a damaged loudspeaker as Nate’s ears still had recovered from the Slaughter’s screams.

Nate shook his head to stop the ringing. “What about another spell? Don’t you have something that will work?”

“Lightning, Nate, can’t you kill it with lightning?” Daniel panted.

“Inside, remember, Daniel? There’s no sky here!” Nate got out. “So no lightning. Shit, my special magic gift sucks!”

“Turning into a wolf isn’t really helping us right now either.” Emrys flashed him a wild grin.

They careened around another curve in the path. The ground shook so violently beneath their feet that Nate felt more like he was bouncing over

the ground rather than running over it. More of the path crumbled as the Slaughter galloped after them.

The path ahead of them suddenly branched into two smaller paths. One curved to the right and curled along the outside of the pit while the one went to the left and sloped upwards towards what looked to be a set of stairs. There was a single torch at the top that was lit. It was a door to the outside. It was a way out of the Catacombs.

“Left! Go left! Get up those stairs!” Emrys shouted. “The Slaughter can’t leave the Catacombs!”

Daniel, Abbie and Turner took the left fork. Their feet pattered up the steps. But all of them were fighting exhaustion now and they simply were moving fast enough. Nate and Emrys were still about ten feet behind them, they hadn’t yet made the stairs. The ground was shaking worse now. Nate knew that the Slaughter was too close for comfort.

Emrys looked over his shoulder and his eyes widened. “Got to give them more time! More time!”

Emrys flung Nate forward, sending the young man skidding ahead of him while he turned to face the Slaughter alone.

“Emrys! No!” Nate screamed as his feet flew out underneath him and he crashed to the ground, nearly sliding over the path’s edge. His heart clenched in his chest as he felt nothing beneath his right foot.

Abbie, Daniel and Turner were already almost up to the door. They slowed and turned to see why Nate was screaming. But all of them were too far away to do anything to help Emrys.

Time seemed to slow as Nate scrambled around to face his lover. Emrys was standing on the path, a small figure in comparison to the massive Slaughter that reared up in front of him. The malformed heads all opened their mouths as one. Saliva dripped from thousands of teeth. The dozens and dozens of black-tipped claws sliced through the air as they reached for Emrys.

The glow of plasma balls lit up the Catacombs like fireworks. They slammed into the Slaughter's underside. There was a shuddering roar from the Slaughter as some of those plasma balls struck home. Burns appeared in circle-like shapes. The gray skin blackened and crisped. The Slaughter curled in on itself but more of the painful, burning plasma kept coming.

"GET UP THOSE STAIRS! GET OUT OF HERE!" Emrys screamed without looking at them.

"Get up there, you guys!" Nate frantically waved his hand at the others. He wasn't leaving Emrys, but if they got out then he and Emrys could retreat.

Turner grabbed Abbie and Daniel's arms and pulled them up the stairs. He looked like someone knifed him in the gut as he was doing it, but he did it all the same. Abbie tried to pull away at first, but then Daniel helped Turner move her up the stairs.

"Come on, Nate!" Daniel called.

But Nate shook his head and scrambled to his feet. He would never leave Emrys. Never, never, never. Besides, without him, there was no way that the Greater Demon could be captured and the world would end anyways. In that case, he wanted to die at Emrys' side.

The plasma balls were getting weaker. Emrys let out a final stream of them before he sank to one knee, panting and white-faced. The Slaughter let out a rapturous roar as the balls of pain stopped. Its glittering silver eyes all winked as one as they realized that their opponent was helpless against them.

Nate began to run towards Emrys. One of his hands was stretched out in front of him. He was screaming something. He wasn't sure what he was saying.

The Slaughter actually leaped up into the air. Its hundreds of mouths slavering and open. Its sliver eyes narrowed, ready for the kill. It was going to crush Emrys beneath it and then rip him apart. Something happened then.

The air *rippled* as if it were water and a stone had been dropped into it. That ripple moved over Emrys' head and slammed into the Slaughter like a giant fist to the gut.

I did that. I DID that. I did THAT!

The Slaughter's eyes went hilariously large like something in a cartoon. Its mouths opened in a gasp of shocked pain. And then it was falling to the ground. Its massive body smashed down onto the fork in the path where the path was thinnest.

There was a sharp cracking sound.

The path suddenly slumped beneath the Slaughter's weight. Its hundreds of sharp claws scrabbled to hold onto the slick surface. Its mouths opened this time in a fearful hooting. Another crack. Another and another and another.

Nate watched as the path crumbled beneath the Slaughter's massive body and then broke apart. The Slaughter let out another last ear-piercing wail as it tumbled off into the pit. Its body was soon lost from view. Nate thought he heard a low rumble when the Slaughter's body finally hit something at the bottom and smashed apart.

There was silence.

Nate realized he had stopped moving after he had sent that wave of whatever it was against the Slaughter. His hand was still outstretched. He slowly lowered it to his side. His palm tingled. He felt so odd. But then he heard Emrys' voice, calling his name inbetween heavy gasps.

Emrys had his hands on his knees. His limbs were shaking.

“EMRYS!” Nate raced over to the older man, his strange paralysis gone, and threw his arms around him. “Are you insane? The Slaughter wasn’t going to stop! It was going to – it was going to – oh, God, you could have been killed!”

But I didn't let it happen.

Emrys held him tightly and Nate closed his eyes. “Had to give the children more time to get up the stairs. My powers were too weak to do much of anything against it really. Luckily, the path gave out.”

He didn’t see. He doesn’t know that I did this. Nate opened his mouth to tell him, but then he closed it. He wasn’t sure why he didn’t tell him right then and there. He could have boasted that he’d saved Emrys for once. But something in him twisted in worry. He didn’t want Emrys to look at him in that way he had before when Nate talked about the Unnamed One. And Nate had a feeling that Emrys would if Nate told him about what he’d just done.

“You’ve got to teach us some magic so that you’re not the only one that can foolishly risk his or her life.” Nate’s words were muffled against Emrys’ shirt. His cheeks were red with the half-lie.

This is wrong. I should tell him. He won’t be scared of me. He won’t be worried even when he realizes that what I did was just because I was freaked out for him. Stress brings out magic, doesn’t it? Just like he showed me with the storm.

Nate opened his mouth again to confess.

But then the older man was stroking one hand up and down his back. Nate could hear the smile in his voice as Emrys said, “Yeah, but risking my life gets me all the kudos and victory sex I want.”

Nate let out a shaky laugh. He hit Emrys arm. “You asshole. You know I’d give you sex for nothing.”

“Ah, ah, ah, Nathaniel, don’t get me ideas. I am a naturally lazy person. If I think I have to do nothing at all then … well, you don’t want that.” Emrys nuzzled Nate’s neck.

“Lazy, finicky cat,” Nate chuckled into Emrys’ ear. He hugged the other man fiercely to him.

“Is everyone okay down there?” Daniel asked. He had already come halfway down the stairs. He must have started moving even before the

Slaughter had fallen to its death.

“We’re fine!” Nate called, waving one arm, but not willing to break apart from Emrys just yet.

“Thank goodness! I really thought that – well, that things were bad,” Daniel let out a sigh of relief.

“You and me both, Decoy,” Emrys said. “I only wish you had actually lived up to your name. We could have used you here.”

Daniel squawked something. But Turner’s laughter drowned it out. That the laughter sounded a bit hysterical wasn’t unexpected.

“Since everyone is okay, I think I’ve got some more good news! I think this is it!” Abbie’s voice called down to them.

“What is what?” Nate turned around to look up at her. He thought he heard the slightest crack of stone as he did so. His heart thudded in his chest, but before he could say anything Emrys was talking and taking a step forward.

“Is it Frost Manor? This does look awfully familiar. Even though I was a bit wasted and high last time I was here, I can remember these steps. I think I’d been up for about forty-eight hours straight, too, so I wasn’t sure if I was hallucinating things from lack of sleep, chemicals or what” Emrys mused, tapping his chin, thoughtfully.

There was another frightful crack and then a groan.

“EMRYS! THE PATH!” Nate cried.

But Emrys didn’t even have a chance to look down before another chunk of path, the chunk that they were standing on, gave way and they were plunging into the darkness of the pit.

His hold on Emrys was wrenched apart. Nate was screaming as he fell. The torchlight where Abbie, Daniel and Turner still stood in stunned silence, reaching towards them, became smaller and smaller as he dropped farther and farther into the depths. Suddenly, Emrys’ body was wrapping around his. The older man had moved like a skydiver might to get to him.

“We have to slow the fall, Nathaniel! We have to slow it! You need to concentrate with me!” Emrys cried into his ear.

The sound of the air rushing up all around them was almost deafening, but Nate focused in on the older man’s voice like it was a lifeline.

“Tell me what to do!” Nate called back.

“Close your eyes and picture a balloon in your chest. A balloon!” Emrys called.

Nate closed his eyes, but all he saw was their dead bodies, broken, mangled, burst open on top of some sharp rocks. His eyelids popped open. He started to hyperventilate. How far were they from the bottom now?

“CONCENTRATE!” Emrys screamed. “Imagine yourself light! Lighter than air! Imagine the air thick! Like a down comforter! Imagine you can grab the air and slow our descent!”

Nate closed his eyes and tried to picture those things. He tried to imagine them flying through the air with ease.

“That’s it! Nathaniel, that’s it!” Emrys cried. “You’ve slowed us down! Oh – oh shit! Take a deep breath!”

Nate’s eyes opened involuntarily and his head twisted around to look where they were falling. He saw water silvered by white light similar to moonlight twenty feet below them. Then they were splashing into it.

The impact jolted them apart and the pain was like a hundred belly flops. Unconsciousness threatened to take him under, but the agony kept him on this side of consciousness.

He saw Emrys’ body floating above him. Emrys’ arms were stretched out to his sides. His hair waved in the water. He was facing down. He wasn’t moving.

He’s unconscious. He can’t breathe water. I have to get to him.

The pain that Nate felt seemed to fall away as he formed his arms and legs to move and swam towards Emrys. He grabbed the older man around the waist and pumped his legs until they both broke the surface.

Nate took in a harsh breath before he pulled Emrys' head out of the water and cradled the back of his skull against his chest.

"Emrys! Emrys, can you hear me?" Nate's voice was high and tight.

Emrys' head lolled to the side. He didn't even moan.

I have to get him out of the water. Maybe give him mouth to mouth!

Nate looked around them. The moonlight-like glow came from large clear crystals that studded the walls and gave out a pretty, silvery light. They gave off enough illumination that he could see a small island nearby. It was little more than a large rock that had broken the surface of the water. But it would be large enough for him to perform CPR on Emrys.

"It's going to be all right, Emrys! Hang in there! Everything is going to be all right!" Nate said fiercely.

He hooked one arm underneath Emrys' armpits and used his other to paddle through the water. It felt like it took ages to get to the stone outcropping. Nate's muscles burned from the unaccustomed weight of carrying another while swimming.

Daniel's right. We really need to work out so that we can survive this stuff.
Nate let out a soft laugh.

With one last burst of strength, he hoisted Emrys up onto the rock onto his back and then clambered up beside him. Nate immediately put his ear to Emrys' chest. There was a heartbeat. He felt his own skip a beat in happiness. He put his fingers by Emrys' open mouth and nose. He was breathing.

Just passed out from the impact. He'll be okay. He really will. Soon as he wakes up, we'll –

Nate froze. He thought he heard something behind him. He spun around to face whatever was coming. Only no one was there. All he could see was his reflection in the dark water.

I did hear someone. Maybe they're invisible. Oh, that's not good. That's really not good.

Nate shook Emrys' arm gently. "Emrys, you have to get up. You've got to get up, finicky cat."

But Emrys was still unconscious. The hair on the back of Nate's head stood up. He turned again and raised a hand menacingly.

"Look, I know you're there! And if you come near us, I'll do to you what I did to the Slaughter!" Nate threatened.

The only response was the lap of the waves against the rock. Nate looked into the water again. His own reflection kept freaking him out whenever he saw it move, he kept thinking it was another person.

He looked at his own face. His hair was plastered over his forehead. His eyes were bright. There was a cut on his right cheek that had started to ooze blood. His clothes looked like they were painted on. His reflection smiled back at him.

Only that couldn't be right.

That really, really, really couldn't be right. Because Nate wasn't smiling.

Then the reflection laughed and said, "I promised not to interfere, but look at me! Doing it a second time in one Earth day. I truly thought I would be better at this human business than I am."

"Who – who are you?" Nate asked.

The reflection cocked his head to the side. "You really don't know, do you? I thought I would have figured it out by now—"

"What do you mean *you* thought *you* would have figured it out by now?" Nate demanded.

“I’m you, Nathaniel,” the reflection said softly. “And you’re me. Well, you’re a *part* of me.”

The skin between Nate’s shoulder blades twitched. He repeated, “And who are you *exactly*? ”

The reflection’s smile grew larger. “You know who I am. Just say it, Nathaniel. You know.”

Nate shook his head. “I know who you are, but you can’t be me! I can’t be you! It’s just not possible!”

“Who am I? ” the refection asked.

Nate let out a soft sob. “You’re ... you’re the Unnamed One.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE: THE DEVIL

“The question you have to ask yourself is: are you the Devil? ” The Unnamed One smiled up at Nate from the water using Nate’s lips and Nate’s eyes and even Nate’s dimples.

Nate jerked back from the edge. His breath froze in his chest and he held himself very still. It was like when he was a kid and would hide underneath the covers and monitor his breathing. If he was very, very quiet then the terror would move on.

But it didn’t work this time.

“Nathaniel, don’t you want to be me? ”

“Be you? ” The words burst out of Nate’s lips. It was an impossible concept.

Me? The Devil? That’s so crazy I can’t even get my mind around it!

“Who wouldn’t want to be a being with impossible amounts of power? Who can save – or *destroy* – whomever you want? ” the Unnamed One continued on.

Nate did want that. Who wouldn't want that? *If I was the Devil, I could destroy the Greater Demon with a thought. My father would be freed. We would all be in the Whitney mansion now, in the library, hanging out. No zombies anywhere. Safe. Happy. So I can't be the Devil. Because Emrys and me are here. And things are such a mess.*

"Yes, Nathaniel, you can do exactly that! But don't be so eager to leave excitement behind. It makes those moments you are thinking of all the more precious. You don't want to become bored. You want to be enervated," the Unnamed One urged, his voice going deep with excitement.

"I would never be bored with those things. With peace. Not with Emrys beside me, not with my friends there and my family," Nate stopped. Revealing his feelings to the Unnamed One was a very bad idea.

"But I already know them. You are revealing *nothing*."

Slowly, Nate leaned over so he could see his reflection once more except the reflection was waiting for him. Even as he emerged over the water, the image of him was reflected back as if he were already perched on the edge of the rock, head cocked to the side, amused smile on his lips and softly glowing yellow eyes.

"Why – why are you doing this?" Nate whispered.

"Telling you the truth?"

"No, no, not telling me the truth! This isn't the truth! Because it would be crazy and *impossible* and you're putting me on!" Nate bit back the rush of objections that wanted to overwhelm him. He realized it might not be wise to piss the Devil off.

"But you feel I'm telling you the truth."

"I'm wrong! If I feel that at all!"

"You feel it. You *know* it, I dare say."

"It's impossible. I'm not the Devil! That's ... that's absurd."

The Unnamed One smiled more broadly. “Do you fear you’re evil? Is that why you don’t want to be me?”

“I’m not evil!”

“What do you think evil is?”

“If you have to ask—”

“No, no, not so quick and easy, Nathaniel.”

“Are you denying that you’re evil?” Nate asked back.

It was so odd to see himself with those yellow eyes and slightly cruel smile. The eons of understanding in his expression was disturbing, too. “Is it evil to destroy those who would destroy you? To take care of those that matter to you? To claim a world as yours? Think on that for a moment. None of those things are *evil*.”

“Not in and of themselves, no! But – but you destroy the innocent!”

“Do I?”

“Are you saying you don’t?”

“Who have you known me to destroy?”

“I – I don’t want to be evil,” Nate said instead of answering the question.

“What is evil?” The Unnamed One pushed harder.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone!”

“Now that is an interesting statement. Because we know it’s not true. It’s one thing we can agree on,” the Unnamed One said, sounding almost reasonable. “You wished you could have destroyed Emrys’ parents, didn’t you? When you heard what they did to him?”

“You deserve credit for doing that. I – I want to thank you for doing that,” Nate whispered. They weren’t innocents. They deserved what they had coming to them.

“It was my pleasure.”

Pleasure? I would have taken pleasure in turning them into soot-shadows against the wall. I would have relished to see the terror on their disgusting faces! It would have been a good day to see that!

Silence fell between them then. It was almost comfortable.

Nate swallowed. “Why are lying about this? Why bother trying to make me think I’m you? What’s the point?”

Those yellow eyes narrowed and the lips writhed back from his teeth in a feral smile. “Why would I lie?”

“Yes.”

“No. *Why* would I lie? I *wouldn’t*. Do you think I like it when people claim to be me? When they think they can come to one of the worlds I’ve claimed for my own and mess about?” That smile became a scowl. “No, Nathaniel, I do not *like* it when people do that at all.”

“You mean like the Greater Demon?” Nate breathed.

“Oh, exactly like that.” The Unnamed One’s smile changed like quicksilver and became friendly, almost warm, again.

“So you’re telling me that I’m —”

“Me.”

“And you’re—”

“The Devil. And that makes you the Devil.”

“I’m not the Devil! No pitchfork, horns, tail, offering people favors for their soul going on here. I’m ... I’m boring! Before all this I was a nerd! The Devil is *not* a nerd!” Nate insisted.

“The Devil is one name I’ve had. But there have been many others. That one though obviously has too many – ah, *connotations*, for you.”

“Yeah, just a little!”

“So you can just call me ... *Nathaniel*, Nathaniel Whitney, if you like. Because that is one of my names now, too,” the Unnamed one said.

“That’s my name,” Nate whispered.

“Yes, and it is, therefore, *mine*.”

Nate shook his head. “I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t *want* to believe me. That’s all the difference.” The Unnamed One looked at him almost fondly.

“Why are you *here*? ”

“Emrys has hit his head. You need to heal him. Both of you should be at your best for what’s coming next.”

Nate’s eyes snapped over to the Emrys. He was immediately cradling Emrys’ head in his hands. Like the Unnamed One has said there was a nasty gash just above the older man’s right temple. Blood was oozing from the wound. Nate let out a little cry and was dabbing at the cut with his wet sleeve. Emrys was still unconscious and his head was moving restlessly against the stone as if he was having bad dreams. Nate smoothed a shaking hand over Emrys’ brow and rocked him. His teeth were chattering and unexpected tears squeezed out of the corners of his eyes. If Emrys were hurt, he didn’t know what he was going to do.

“You mustn’t panic, Nathaniel.”

“Emrys is hurt!” Nate yelled. Panic was clenching his chest, squeezing his heart, and making breathing hard.

“You can help him,” the Unnamed One explained patiently. “You can make everything all right. Better than that.”

“But I can’t! I don’t know how! Emrys hasn’t had a chance to teach me yet!” Nate wailed. Again, he clenched his jaw to stop the words from spilling out.

“I can show you how. Or really, I’ll just help you remember,” the Unnamed One offered. “I don’t want our Emrys to have another scar.”

“He’s NOT our Emrys! He’s MY Emrys!” Nate found himself shouting. He clutched the older man to his possessively as his words echoed around them. And then it went very quiet.

Not a good idea to yell at the Devil. Really not.

“I can’t get angry with you, Nathaniel. It would be rather pointless to be angry at myself, now wouldn’t it?” But the Unnamed One’s eyes glowed a deeper yellow, which seemed to belie his words.

Nate squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated on breathing. Finally, when his emotions felt more in control, he opened them again and said, more calmly, “You care for Emrys. I know you do despite what Emrys says about demons being incapable of love.”

“You know I do, because *you* do. So the Devil is capable of love,” the Unnamed One clucked softly. “The Devil is very capable of it.

Nate bit back the denial. They could keep arguing in circles about whether he was or was not the Devil or he could get the Unnamed One to help them. He glanced around them. They were on a rocky island that jutted out of the deep lake. It was hardly big enough to hold them both. The walls around them were sheer cliffs. They went straight up. There were no outcroppings, let alone a path, leading to the torches that marked the doorways into Winter Haven high above their heads.

Those torches look so far away. They’re more like stars in a black sky.

Nate shivered. The air was cool and his clothes were wet and clung to his bare skin. Emrys though was warm in his arms. He curled protectively over the older man.

“You love Emrys,” Nate said. “And I – I love Emrys. Help me to help him.”

“Yes, of course,” the Unnamed One said.

Nate's head lifted. He felt a wave of relief and something else, too. "If I'm you ... how come I ... well, I don't know it? That I don't have all your powers?"

The Unnamed One tipped his head back and laughed. It sounded like the ringing of chimes and eerily echoed throughout the cavern where the only other sound was the lapping of water against stone. "I should not laugh. It is a valid question, but so ... *basic*."

Nate's spine straightened. The words stung. "I didn't even know that *magic* existed until the other day. If I was the Devil, why would I be so – so *stupid*?"

"Not stupid. Never stupid. You see I wanted you to be – wanted myself to be – untainted by knowledge," the Unnamed One. "But perhaps I went too far."

"I don't understand."

"You are not the whole of me, Nathaniel. You are just a *part* of me. That is why you do not know what I know. Why you *cannot* do what I do. But you can do plenty. You have great power. I did not send myself down to Earth defenseless," the Unnamed One replied. "You just have to be reminded how to use it."

"I don't want to be the Devil," Nate said stolidly. "Emrys wouldn't – wouldn't ..." Nate swallowed again. The words stuck in his throat. "Emrys wouldn't like it."

"No, I suppose he wouldn't." The Unnamed One looked away from him then.

"Is he the reason you ..." Nate snapped his mouth shut. He didn't believe he was the Unnamed One. He wasn't made by the Unnamed one. He heard Emrys' voice in his head telling him the Unnamed One lied. It always lied. For fun. For profit. For the Hell of it.

"Is Emrys the reason I made you?" The Unnamed One nodded. "I wanted to be with him. Strange to want that. So strange."

“But he hates you,” Nate whispered.

“He doesn’t hate me! He loves you so he loves me! He is merely *afraid!* That can change. That *will* change.” The Unnamed One looked fierce slamming one clenched fist into an open palm.

Nate jerked with every slam. Rocks suddenly cracked off the walls and tumbled into the lake. The water frothed around them. Waves slap loudly against the small island. “Hey! Hey! Calm down! You’re bringing the walls down!”

The Unnamed One glowered in the water. His chest was rising and falling rapidly. Those yellow eyes were sulfurous. “We should heal, Emrys.”

Realizing that the Unnamed One was still agitated and that it was best to change subjects, Nate nodded eagerly. “Yes, yes, let’s do that.”

“You’ll need this.”

“What?”

Nate leaned over towards the reflection and realized that the Unnamed One held a curved dagger. He spun it in one hand, pressing the point against one finger. Blood beaded where the tip sliced through the finger pad. Nate remembered the night before when he and Emrys had cut each other and drank blood.

Blood magic. Of course, it would be.

“I don’t have a knife,” Nate said stupidly.

“That’s why you are going to take this one.” The Unnamed One offered the dagger up to Nate.

“But that’s just a reflection.” Nate licked suddenly dry lips. The thought of the Unnamed One floating just beneath the water’s surface suddenly seemed far worse than if the Devil was merely a reflection in the water, an illusion.

“Are you so sure?” The Unnamed One held up the dagger seeming higher though the surface of the water was the same distance away.

Nate found himself reaching down towards the extended dagger. His fingers glided through the water before he felt the hilt of the dagger against his palm. He pulled it from the water. The dagger was gone from the reflection’s hands and was in his. The Unnamed One lowered his arms to his sides.

“What do I do with this?” Nate touched the blade and quickly jerked his hand away. He had cut his finger. The same finger that the Unnamed One had cut.

“There is one thing you must know about what you call ‘magic’. It is all about expending energy. Whether that means taking it in from an outside source or using your own internal energy, you must take energy from one place and give it to another,” the Unnamed One said.

“Right. Okay, expending energy.” Nate nodded dumbly, not sure what the Unnamed One meant and hoping that understanding wasn’t necessary to help Emrys.

The Unnamed One tutted. “I did not think you would be such an uninterested student! Don’t you see what you learn now will let you do so much more later?”

“Why don’t you heal Emrys? Why don’t you destroy the Greater Demon? Why have us do it? There’s no guarantee that we’ll succeed!” Nate objected. “Why make me do it?”

The Unnamed One stared at Nate long and hard. It was as if he had never considered such a thing. “Don’t you enjoy the uncertainty of what is going to happen? The struggle? The camaraderie that it creates? Think how things will be between you and Emrys after this! You will have faced death, destruction, and a world-ending evil *together*. You will be *inseparable* after this. And so much more is to come!”

Nate’s eyes widened. “It’s easy when you think that this is just a – a game!”

“But it *is*.”

“So there’s nothing at stake? Not my friends’ lives? Not others’ lives? So my father’s loss of twenty years is *nothing*? My grandmother working herself to the bone is just *unimportant*? My mother – mother’s *death* is just – just the loss of a piece on the board?” Nate was sounding shrill again. “Those things *matter!*”

“I see you feel they do.”

“I’m *you!* So *you* must think they matter!” Nate snapped. “If you really care about Emrys, you’ll stop all this. You’ll destroy the Greater Demon and get us out of here!”

Silence fell again. Then the Unnamed One smiled. “Remember, exchange of energy, Nathaniel.”

Nate swallowed down his rage. He would concentrate on what he could do: heal Emrys and get them the Hell out of there. But still his anger simmered. “Show me how to heal him.”

“Energy exists all around you, but accessing it is what is difficult. Accessing your own energy is slightly easier. It is more potent because of your control of it,” the Unnamed One said. “So place the dagger against your palm and close your eyes.”

Nate suddenly did not want to close his eyes. He had this horrible suspicion that once he did, the Unnamed One would crawl up onto the rock with himself and Emrys. He’d sit there on his haunches, dripping and grinning. He’d extend a wet hand that would caress Emrys’ face.

“Why close my eyes?” Nate asked tightly.

“Because I thought it would help you concentrate. The blackness contains peace. But do as you wish.”

Nate looked down at the dagger. Its blade did not shine. It was a dull metal. It reminded him of the mercury in a thermometer he’d once broken open. He placed it against his palm and held that palm over Emrys’ chest.

“Good. Very good. You are feeling it now. The memory is on the tip of your mind. Tell me what you should do next,” the Unnamed One murmured.

Nate’s mouth opened. If he knew this, it would mean something. If he knew this, then the Unnamed One’s words might be true.

Does it matter? Emrys is hurt. You are running out of time to save the world. You have to do something. DO SOMETHING!

Nate felt the warmth of Emrys’ head in his lap. He felt the rise and fall of Emrys’ chest. He found his own breath matching the older man’s. And in the darkness he heard Emrys’ heart. His heart joined Emrys’ and they beat as one. And he knew what to do.

“Energy, Nathaniel. It’s all about energy. Tell me what you should do next. You know. You’ve *always* known,” the Unnamed One pressed.

Nate felt the weight of the dagger against his palm. He imagined that it wasn’t a blade to cut flesh and draw blood but to pierce the wrapper of his soul and draw out energy. He would give his energy to Emrys without thought, without qualm. He imagined that energy would be a golden yellow. Bright as sunshine. Pure as gold. He could do this. He knew how to do this. He could move his energy into Emrys.

“You are a natural, Nathaniel, because you are me. You are me. You are me. You are me,” the sibilant whisper of the Unnamed One’s voice slid into his head and lingered there.

Nate imagined Emrys absorbing that energy. Of them becoming one.

“There’s magic in the blood,” Nate said with a smile that didn’t feel like his own.

He drew the blade across his palm, but immediately closed his hand tightly. He felt the blood flowing out of the wound, squeezing through his fingers and dripping down onto Emrys’ chest, staining the older man’s wet shirt, but Nate then transformed his interior vision of it. No longer was it crimson, but gold. Golden energy instead of thick, red blood. He imagined it as energy passing from him to Emrys. He pictured Emrys’ wound closing,

knitting itself together easily. And deeper, the wound in Emrys' head, the concussion was healed as well. He felt the older man relax against him.

"Congratulations," the Unnamed One said.

"I'm not done yet," Nate said.

"No?"

"No." Nate kept his eyes closed. He wanted to find that peace in darkness. He wanted to rewrite what would be there when he opened his eyes.

Nate kept the blood flowing. He lowered his hand to Emrys' chest and opened it. He turned it so it was face down. He imagined that they were back on the stairs. That the torchlight was playing across both their faces. He could almost feel the heat of the torches against his skin. He pressed his palm directly down on Emrys' chest.

"Oh, my God, it's Nate and Emrys!" Daniel's voice rose up in shock and wonder.

"That's impossible – how could they be behind us? We all saw them *fall!*" Abbie cried.

"But they're here. Nate's bleeding! Nate! Emrys! Are you okay?" Turner called.

Nate heard their feet pound up the steps. He could smell their sweat and fear and love. He knew that they were staring at him and Emrys with open-mouths. He knew exactly how they would each look. He opened his eyes.

They were on the steps just a few feet below the door to Frost Manor. Fifteen feet below them, there was the jagged, ruined path that was no more. Emrys stirred in Nate's lap. He would wake soon. Nate felt it.

"Nate, are you all right?" Abbie crouched on the stairs below them.

Nate didn't know how he looked, but he saw the concern and shock in Abbie's face. They were mirrored in Turner and Daniel's faces. He felt strangely numb. He had healed Emrys. He had brought them exactly where

they needed to be. It had been *easy*. Nate would have felt sick. Would have been afraid. But he felt simply frozen.

“There’s magic in the blood,” Nate said.

“What?” Abbie breathed.

“We have to end this. We’re nearly at the end,” Nate said, instead of repeating what he had said.

He knew the exact moment when Emrys opened his eyes.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX: APPEARANCES CAN BE DECEIVING

“Nate, what happened?”

“Nate, how did you and Emrys get back up here?”

“Nate, where did you get that dagger?”

“Nate, why aren’t the two of you *dead*?” The last of the peppered questions from the group was from Daniel, which earned him a slap on the arm by Abbie.

“Magic, Decoy, magic,” Emrys said as he sprinted ahead of them to the door of Frost Manor though he did cast a curious look at Nate once before as he passed by as if his explanation of magic wasn’t quite enough.

Daniel pressed on, “Yeah, but Nate isn’t that good at magic yet and—”

“Let’s save the game of twenty questions for when the world is *not* ending, shall we? I’m sure Nathaniel will have quite a few stories to tell us then,” Emrys said.

He’s back to his old self. He looks chipper and energetic. It worked!

Nate didn’t feel at all chipper and energetic. He was still wrapped in the cocoon of numbness. The fact that he had managed to heal Emrys and somehow transport them a mile up was not proof that he was the Devil. Perhaps any witch could do that. He was sure that Abbie could if given the

right materials. It wasn't special that he had done this. It hasn't freakish either. It was just dumb blind luck and stress.

If I asked Abbie or Emrys or Turner about it all right now they would agree with me. I'm not the Devil.

But he kept silent about everything that had happened down below. He slid the knife down the back of his pants so that only the twisted hilt showed. The blade radiated cold. It didn't warm against his skin yet Nate left it there. The realness of the blade was almost an anchor to what had happened with the Unnamed One. It was real and solid while he felt strange and insubstantial like he could be blown apart by a strong gust of wind.

Nate stopped beside Emrys who was bent over looking into the keyhole. His pert butt was skyward and Nate had the inappropriate urge to smack it especially when he waggled it as he moved around.

“What are you looking for?” Daniel asked.

“Do you think that witches would leave a back way into their homes unguarded?” Emrys asked without turning around.

“Probably not.”

“Ergo, Decoy, getting through this door is not exactly an easy endeavor,” Emrys retorted.

“But you did get in there before, didn't you? When you were drunk and high?” Abbie asked.

“You sound like such a prude, Abigail! You mustn't judge until you try!” Emrys chastised her.

Abbie rolled her eyes. “When I think of the brain cells you've lost by those activities it makes me cringe, Emrys, because I know you didn't have very many to begin with.”

Emrys sniffed. “And here I thought all of you would be mourning our loss and overcome with the joy of our return. But no, not at all.”

Abbie turned to Nate and embraced him. “I *am* so glad you’re okay. I *felt* you were. But confirmation of it is so good.”

“How long were we gone?” Nate asked.

It was Turner who answered. “Like half a minute.”

“So we really didn’t have time to mourn you,” Daniel added.

Nate visibly started. How could it have been so short? His reactions had the others even more curious. He put out there, “It felt a lot longer.”

“Falling to your death would do that,” Turner said with a wry smile as he clapped Nate’s shoulder.

“Did your life flash before your eyes? Was I in any of it?” Daniel asked.

“Do you really have to sound so *eager*?” Abbie rolled her eyes again.

“No, no life flashing. Just a lot of screaming. I’m just glad I didn’t wet my pants.” Nate realized the second before he spoke that neither he nor Emrys was wet. They were bone dry. Another wave of unreality flowed over him, but the solid press of the dagger against his spine confirmed what he remembered had happened.

“Ah! Got it! Sticky little bugger!” Emrys straightened up as the dark planked door swung open.

Daniel peered forward. Beyond the doorway, it was pitch black and hardly inviting though Nate was done with the Catacombs. “Uhm, it’s really dark in there. Can you do one of the little wispy light things?”

Emrys’ brow was furrowed. Nate had a momentary fear that his healing had done something bad to Emrys or his ability to use magic, but the older man’s words extinguished those fears.

“On the contrary, I believe I’m fully energized. Like a topped off engine of a race car.” His topaz-colored eyes slid to Nate. Nate quickly looked away and thought of whistling to look more unconcerned. But he knew that he

probably appeared guiltier than ever. “It’s a good thing … however, it happened.”

Nate knew that he was flushing and resolutely looked down at the ground. Emrys flicked his fingers and two wisps, one pink and the other violet, streaked inside the room and hovered so that they could see. It looked like the door opened directly into the tombs where the broken tile was. All of them let out a relieved sigh as they trooped in and the door to the Catacombs was shut securely behind them.

“We’re alive! Still alive!” Daniel collapsed onto the stone floor and looked like he was about to make a snow angel in the bone dust. “I really didn’t think we’d make it!”

Abbie took off the bag she had been using as a backpack with a grateful groan and lowered the heavy spell book and file to the ground. She soon was cross-legged on the floor herself with the spell book open on her lap, studying the spell they would be using. Turner leaned against one of the walls without plaques and let his eyes shut. All three of them looked exhausted. Emrys on the other hand seemed invigorated.

Since I don’t feel drained I must have a lot of energy to spare! I guess the Devil has plenty to spare! Nate bit back an inappropriate laugh.

Emrys was casting a critical eye on the space. “Nathaniel, since you and I are going to get naked here and do the deed, I think we should clean things up a bit. There is detergent, rags and some pillows and blankets upstairs. Plus some candles. Set the mood.”

“I don’t think this place could ever look like a love nest, Emrys,” Daniel said as he rolled to his side, coated in dust and who knew what else.

“Maybe not, but I would rather not find dust bunnies in my unmentionable places,” Emrys said with a finicky moue of his lips.

“Do we really have time for all that?” Turner asked.

“Sex magic is all about pleasure and concentration. I can tell you that neither Nathaniel nor myself will be at our bests on a bare stone floor,”

Emrys remarked.

"I can see that. But we still don't know how we're going to bring the Greater Demon here, guys. And we're running out of time," Turner said. His hands fisted at his sides and his expression was taut.

"Yeah, I don't imagine the Greater Demon will just come if we call," Daniel agreed.

"Actually," Nate said, seeing the answer as if it were handed to him on a silver platter, "that's exactly what he'll do."

"Nathaniel, would you mind sharing with the rest of the students? We are all eager to learn." Emrys stepped over to him.

"We summon him here using the original spell that allowed him into this world," Nate found himself saying. He knew that was the right answer as if he had an intimate knowledge of how to summon demons. A part of him quailed a little at his certainty, but another part of him felt completely at ease with it. "He can't ignore that. We're strong enough to make him come."

"But we don't know which spell they used to summon him the first time, Nate," Abbie pointed out.

"I bet we do." Nate crouched down beside her, again his body and mouth moving almost on automatic pilot as that sense of unreality flowed through him. His hand hovered over the book and the pages began to flip of their own accord until they stopped abruptly on one spell. It felt right, so very right. Everyone had gone rigid when the book starting moving on its own. They were staring at Nate open-mouthed. Nate though did not respond to their shock. Instead, he tapped the center of the page and said, "It's this one. This one will bring the Greater Demon right here, right where we need him to be at the exact time he has to be there."

"But this is a spell to bring the Unnamed One," Abbie whispered, her brows drawing together.

“It won’t bring him. He can’t be brought,” Nate answered with that odd quiet assuredness. “This spell is labeled wrongly. It brings the Greater Demon, I’m sure of it.”

You know. You’ve always known. You are me. You are me. You are me. The memory of the Unnamed One’s voice pounded through Nate’s head. *But he’s not talking to me now. I’m figuring out these things all on my own. What does that mean?*

“How do you know this, Nate?” Turner asked. He had stepped closer and was looking at Nate intensely.

Emrys was looking rather pale. “I’m sure it’s nothing –”

“You know it isn’t nothing, Emrys,” Abbie whispered.

“Nate, please tell me you aren’t possessed,” Daniel urged.

Nate stood up and dusted his knees off. “If I was possessed, I would hardly tell you, Daniel.” He turned towards Turner and spread his arms wide as if to show he was unarmed. He felt a strange smile skitter across his face as he asked, “Am I possessed, Turner? Any red glow?”

Nate didn’t know what he was hoping for Turner to say. If the Unnamed One was affecting him in some way, he thought Turner would know. But if he was the Unnamed One as opposed to being possessed then would there be any glow?

Turner sees evil not just demons. Nate forced every inch of him to remain perfect still and not quiver. What if Turner saw something? He felt like himself. He didn’t feel like the Devil. *This is me. If he sees evil then ...*

Turner stared for a long, hard time, but eventually shook his head. “You’re not.” He turned to the rest of the group. “He’s not.” Nate’s whole body relaxed, but then Turner added, “He’s exactly how he’s always been.”

That means ... what?

“But that still begs the question of how you know all this,” Abbie said. She was looking up at Nate with worried, large eyes. She looked so small and

helpless. He knew that was an illusion. She was going to be a powerful witch one day very soon.

Appearances can be deceiving.

“I don’t know,” Nate said truthfully. “But I’m right about this.”

“Demon Eaters and Necromancers have instinctual knowledge sometimes. There is a theory that it is passed down almost genetically,” Emrys said. He spoke lightly as if he hadn’t a care in the world and there was nothing odd about Nate’s actions. It made Nate relax slightly. “We know Nate’s gifts are extraordinary. This must be another example of them manifesting.”

Abbie’s brow furrowed. “I suppose you could be right. A natural, instinctual attraction and knowledge would make sense. And this book was in Whitney Manor. That might explain why it reacted that way to Nate’s need.”

“Definitely responding to what Nate needed.” Turner nodded. “That makes sense.”

Daniel’s face was all screwed up, about to say some unpleasant truth, but then his eyes met Nate’s and he said instead, “It was uber-cool what you did with the book. Hope you can pull a few more rabbits out of the hat tonight. We’re going to need it.”

If I told Daniel what happened with the Unnamed One, would he accept it? Accept me? Even if that would make his best friend the Devil? Maybe he would. He always thinks of the up side.

Emrys was suddenly crossing over to Nate. He put a solid arm around Nate’s shoulders and steered him towards the way out of the Frost Family Tomb. “We will return momentarily, children, with the supplies I mentioned earlier. Touch *nothing*.”

“Ah! The wisps are following you! Don’t leave us in the dark!” Daniel cried.

Emrys flicked his wrist and the wisps of light streamed back into the tomb and twinkled above the three teenagers. Emrys was then hustling Nate up

the stairs and into Frost Manor. They were back in the wine cellar. The now familiar scent of vinegar and dust rose up all around them. Emrys was walking briskly. His expression was set in a determined scowl. Far different than how he had been downstairs.

“Emrys, are you mad at me?”

“What? No!”

“You’re gripping me really tightly,” Nate said and moved his shoulder under Emrys’ iron hold.

The older man relaxed his fingers. “I’m sorry, but I get *tense* when I have to *lie*.”

Nate’s stomach clenched. “Lie? Lie about what?”

“About you and your sudden amazing skills!” Emrys burst out.

“But you just told them I could do that stuff because of my heritage –”

“I was *lying*, Nathaniel. Hence the *tension*. I didn’t want them to ask any questions to which you could not provide an answer. Not when the end of the world is nigh.”

They were approaching the area of the basement where Emrys was tied down and tortured and where his parents’ soot shadows still remained. Emrys speeded up as if to race them through it before resuming their conversation. But Nate dug his heels in and stopped them just before they stepped foot onto the clean concrete space, but where they could still see his parents’ shadows.

“Nathaniel, I really do not wish to linger here,” Emrys’ normally smooth voice was roughened.

Nate squeezed his arm. “I know. And I’m sorry. But I think we need to discuss this *here*. This is the most appropriate place.”

“Discuss why I’m having to lie for you? Discuss how you managed to teleport us from the hole back to Frost Manor?” A thin sheen of sweat was

already coating Emrys' forehead.

"You already know the reason," Nate said quietly. "Or at least think you do."

Emrys' right eye had begun to twitch. "And that would be?"

"You already know," Nate whispered and pointed to the wall where the shadows were burnt in.

A full body shudder went through Emrys. He was trembling slightly. "Did you ask the Unnamed One for help?"

Nate nodded. "But he refused."

Emrys blinked. "*Refused?* Because you wouldn't give it what it wanted?"

"No, he wants us to do it ourselves. He believes we can defeat the Greater Demon together. You, me, Abbie, Turner and Daniel. Well, maybe not Daniel ... but you know what I mean." Nate found that he refused to call the Unnamed One 'it'. 'He' was the appropriate gender. *This time around.*

"Decoy does make himself oddly useful at times." But then Emrys shook his head and pinched the top of his nose. "So the Unnamed One popped over to tell you it – he—wasn't going to help out and then transported us back up on the stairs?"

"No, I did all that," Nate responded. "That was me. Not the Unnamed One. I healed you, too. But that doesn't matter right now."

"It bloody well does! Nathaniel, your powers are extraordinary like I said but they don't just happen in a vacuum! You don't just *know* how to do those things. It takes years of study!" Emrys objected.

"It didn't take years for me to control storms," Nate pointed out.

"That's because bringing the lightning is your special gift." Emrys was pinching the top of his nose again.

“I’m not like you,” Nate found himself saying as if this were a speech he had been planning. “I’m not like Abbie or Turner or any other witch you’ve ever known. I’m not even sure I’m a witch.”

His mouth was suddenly very dry. His lips felt like paper left in the sun to curl up.

“Then what do you think you are?” Emrys honestly looked perplexed.

Nate opened his mouth. He was going to tell Emrys. Maybe it wasn’t the best time. Maybe he should wait until *after* the world was saved. But he couldn’t be intimate with Emrys when this secret was between them. It would seem too much like a betrayal.

He wouldn’t want me if he knew. He’d back away in horror. He’s sweating just being in a place where the Unnamed One was.

But the house suddenly rolled underneath them. Nate nearly fell to the floor. Emrys caught his arm with one hand while steadyng them both with a hand gripping one of the wine shelves. Bottles clinked together threateningly. Then it got very quiet.

“What was that? Earthquake?” Nate asked.

“I think the Greater Demon is preparing the way for his minions from the Outer Dark.” Emrys had never looked so grim yet there was a wild spark in his eyes. “Come on. No more talk. We have to make love.”

“Where are you going? The tomb is the other way!” Nate cried as Emrys yanked him forward.

“I’m not having sex on that filthy floor. No, absolutely not. My father always kept a few things in his office and we need – ah, this bottle will do!” Emrys yanked a bottle of wine off the shelf. “1953! Such a good year.”

There was a small office off in a corner that Nate had not noticed before. Emrys flung open the door and turned on the lights. It was a small, square room only slightly larger than the antique roll-top desk that had been

crammed inside. The walls must have been erected around the desk because there was no way it had gotten through the door. There was a soft, if dusty, blanket thrown over the back of the leather chair. Emrys also found a whole stack of half burned candles in one of the desk's drawers. He shoved all of that into Nate's arms while he cradled the bottle of wine to his chest.

"Uhm, is this really a fair way to divide things?" Nate muttered as the blanket was tossed on top of his head.

But then the house rolled again as if it were a ship riding great swells in the ocean and Emrys said, "I need to concentrate on holding onto the wine. It's the most important part of this ritual sex we are going to be having."

"I thought I was the most important part," Nate said as he followed Emrys out of the office.

The older man kissed the side of his head affectionately. "Oh, you are, Nathaniel, and that's why this is mostly for you."

"To get me in the mood?" Nate couldn't imagine feeling even slightly aroused with their friends in the room watching them, not to mention the damp cold of the tombs surrounding them no matter how much he drank.

“Somewhat. It’s more to lower your inhibitions. And I’m really thirsty, aren’t you?” Emrys gave him another kiss.

The floor did another stomach-lurching movement as they crossed back to the tombs’ stairwell. At the top, Emrys turned to face him.

“Before we go down, what did you want to tell me earlier?” Emrys asked.

Nate stared into his warm eyes. Even though they were going to have sex because they *had* to, Nate saw that the older man *wanted* to. Wanted to be with him. Was even enjoying the thought of claiming him in front of his friends. His persnickety cat was willing to get dirty for him. And the world was going to end if they didn’t get dirty.

Maybe it’s all a lie anyways. It’s got to be a lie. I’m not the Devil.

Nate opened his mouth and said, “Nothing. It’s not important now.” He forced a grin on his face. “We’ve got to get it on! Forget this useless talking!”

Emrys cupped his chin. “I know that there’s more you’re not telling me, Nathaniel. Undoubtedly, something terrible the Unnamed One said or did –”

“No, I –”

Emrys put a finger over Nate’s lips. “I don’t like the pretty lies, remember?”

Nate silently nodded.

The older man leaned in. “I love you, Nathaniel Whitney. From the wellspring of my goddamned soul. So there is *nothing* you can tell me – no dread secret that you have to keep out of fear I’ll feel differently. Because I won’t.”

Nate didn’t speak. Instead he leaned in and completed the kiss. He put all his love for Emrys in that kiss. He kissed the older man until they were both gasping for breath with the ground rolling beneath them like ocean waves.

I know you believe what you're saying, Emrys, because you would never guess what my secret really is. But you're lying to me and yourself. You could never love the Devil no matter what guise he wore.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN: LOVE SPELL

"It just occurred to me," Abbie said, with a rather bleak expression on her face, as she stared around the tomb.

"What did?" Nate asked as he toed off his shoes. The soles of his feet felt cold as soon as he put them onto the dusty stone floor.

She sighed. "That the fate of world depends upon Emrys' penis."

"Don't say that out loud!" Daniel hissed, flapping his arms at her as if he could physically ward off what she was saying.

"I'm just stating the facts, Daniel," she retorted. "Why are you getting all excited?"

"Because sometimes it's better just not to say anything. *At all*," he said with a sage nod that had Abbie's brow furrowing. "About *certain* things."

"Are your cryptic comments supposed to mean something to me? I don't see why —"

"We don't want Emrys to get stage fright," Daniel explained. He thrust his hips forward and back slowly and gestured down at his own crotch. "You catch my drift? He has to *perform*. We don't want him to be unable to make things happen."

Nate felt a little flare of heat in his groin. Not at Daniel. But at the thought of Emrys and sex. Even under these terrible circumstances, those two ideas in the same sentence had him feeling warm and light-headed in a good way.

Abbie cocked her head to the side and looked thoughtful before understanding dawned. "Oh, you mean he might not be able to get an erection?"

Daniel shushed her. "Don't say it! Don't even *think* it!"

“I hardly think that talking about Emrys’ potential performance issues—”
Abbie began, but she was interrupted as Emrys himself bounced back down the stairs, brandishing a corkscrew.

“I found one!” he cried.

“I can’t believe that you went upstairs as the world is ending to find a corkscrew,” Abbie tutted.

“Well, we needed a way to open the bottle of wine!” Emrys answered her.

“We could have smashed it open,” Nate offered, thinking there were plenty of hard surfaces they could have used in the tomb. Hard surfaces that they were somehow going to have sex on in a few minutes.

“Believe me there is nothing less romantic than your partner taking a swallow of wine and either cutting open his mouth or swallowing a piece of glass and needing to go to the hospital where they ask a lot of unfortunate questions,” Emrys said.

“You’ve had experience with this?” And yes, Nate felt a little flicker of jealousy. He wondered if as the Unnamed One whether he had watched Emrys have sex with other men and women.

I’m not the Unnamed One!

Emrys swaggered over to him and kissed him lightly on the mouth. “While you look beautiful when you’re jealous, I assure you that there is no need to be.”

“Yeah, especially when all other ex-lovers are going to die a fiery death if you don’t love Nate to an inch of his life. I assume the Greater Demon will use fire to destroy the world,” Daniel said.

Turner nodded. “Fire does seem to be a favorite.”

“Can we *not* discuss our potential destruction?” Abbie asked. “I find that quite as disheartening as the — the other thing we can’t discuss.”

“Indeed, we have to think about love and life! But especially love.” Emrys kissed Nate again. The young man clung to him tightly. Emrys looked down into his face with tenderness.

“What?” Nate mumbled against Emrys’ sweater.

“I can’t get undressed with you holding so tightly onto my sweater,” Emrys said gently.

Nate realized then that he had Emrys’ sweater in a white knuckle grip as if he didn’t want to let the older man go even an inch from him. He released his hold slowly. His hands felt numb and tingly. “Oh, sorry about that.”

He was rewarded with a kiss on the tip of his nose. “No apologies. I feel the same way. Let me get that bottle of wine open. It’ll start feeling a whole lot warmer and more festive down here once we’ve all had a sip.”

“I think we might need more than a sip to transform this place,” Turner muttered.

Nate looked around and had to agree. He couldn’t think of a less romantic place to have sex with Emrys than in this cold, dank tomb. Emrys had created a little nest on the floor with the dusty blanket from his father’s office. He had placed it strategically over the tile. Nate kept thinking that they might break the tile more by having sex on it. He could almost imagine part of the tile snapping off and then stabbing one of them right in the middle of the act.

There was candlelight in the room. Following the spell’s instructions, Abbie had lit one of the candles that Emrys had found and dripped wax in a large circle around the room. She left only a foot of space between the wax circle and the room’s walls. She had then had Turner and Daniel place the candles on all four points of the compass and light them as well. The full effect of the blanket, wine and candles reminded Nate more of a Satanic ritual instead of a romantic evening. Nate smile faded. There was already too much of the Devil in his life.

Then Nate let out an explosive sneeze. That was another issue. He couldn’t get the smell of bone dust out of his nostrils. He kept sneezing and having

to wipe his nose surreptitiously on his T-shirt. Not sexy. Not romantic. More like gross.

The sound of the cork being pulled out of the bottle and Emrys' sigh of satisfaction distracted Nate from his bleak thoughts. Maybe the alcohol *could* help.

Nate sat down on the blanket beside Emrys. The thin material did absolutely nothing to hide the hardness of the stone floor beneath them.

If I survive the night, I'm going to have bruises everywhere.

Emrys took a swig of wine and offered the bottle to Nate. A bead of dark red liquid pooled at the corner of Emrys' mouth and caught Nate's eye. It was like a jewel sparkling in the low light. Nate leaned up and licked it off.

Emrys' eyes widened in surprised pleasure. Nate then realized that everyone else in the room had gone quiet. He blushed.

Then Daniel asked, "Should we all turn around while you — uh, you know?"

"I guess there's no need to worry about performance issues," Abbie sniffed.
"I think we all can see that."

Emrys' head whipped around towards the two of them. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "*Performance issues?* Me? Surely you jest!"

Daniel waved his hands in the air and his mouth comically opened and shut like a very large goldfish. Nate had to hide a grin especially with what Daniel said next. "It's totally normal if you can't perform. I read something like one out of five men has —"

"Has what?" Emery's asked waspishly. "Performance issues? What do you know about performance issues, Daniel?"

"I hope I get to learn about them," Daniel babbled. "But if you can't get it up tonight, Emrys, then I'm never going to have that chance! And I really, really, *really* want that chance."

Emrys responded solemnly, though with a wicked glint in his eyes, “I promise, Decoy, that you shall have your chance to take the little blue pill.”

Turner guffawed into one hand. “He’s so got you there, Daniel!”

Emrys’ gaze swung back to Nate, his expression going absurdly tender in a way that had Nate squirming with joy. “I am always *inspired* to perform with just the *thought* of Nathaniel.”

“Me, too,” Nate whispered.

So what if his ass was already falling asleep against marble! So what if his nose was running from bonedust! So what if the air had the whiff of sulfur!

Nate frowned at the last. The sulfur was a new smell. The normal dankness of the tomb was there, but the underlying acrid scent of sulfur came through, too. He was about to mention it when Abbie began to speak.

She had her nose stuck into the spell book again. “I assume that we perform the sex magic first and *then* summon the Greater Demon.”

“I don’t think if we summon the Greater Demon first that he’ll wait around for them to have sex, Abbs,” Turner reminded her gently.

She nodded. “Yes, yes, of course. I’m just …” She took in a deep breath and Nate, for a moment, saw how very afraid she was, but then she clamped down on her emotions again. “That’s the logical course. The tile should hold the charge at least long enough for us to summon the Greater Demon here.” She worried her lower lip with her teeth. “That is if the crack in it won’t make it leak power or malfunction in some way or not work at all.”

Her last words had them all go silent.

But if I am the Unnamed One then nothing bad can happen to any of us, let alone the world! If I planned all this to be with Emrys, I wouldn’t want it to end now.

But Nate had a feeling that it wouldn’t be that easy. Unlike the certainty he had when he had gone to the spell book and found the appropriate spell for them to use, his mind was now blank. He didn’t feel like he had any

powers, not even the powers that he had before he found out he was potentially the Devil. His legs felt weak and shaky beneath him. He was cold and sniffling.

I just can't believe that the Devil would ever feel this way.

Not that Nate wanted to be the Unnamed One, but he wouldn't mind it too much if there was the certainty that he could take down the Greater Demon. It seemed so insane that they were going to rely upon him and Emrys having sex then somehow recreate the spell that originally brought the Greater Demon into this world in the first place and then finally trap the Greater Demon's energy in the tile itself.

Those are a whole lot of ifs! It will be a miracle if any one of the things we do works let alone all of them together, perfectly.

But his thoughts were cut off as Emrys urged him to actually drink from the wine bottle and not just stare at it. Nate took a hefty swig of wine. The aged red wine went down his throat smoothly. The wine tasted of chocolate and earth and long ago sunlight. He suddenly desperately wanted Emrys to teach him about wine and for them to drink their way through the entire cellar together. Being drunk for eternity might be a great plan. He drank some more.

Emrys jumped to his feet, clapped his hands together and shouted, “It’s time to get it on! Or at least, to first get it off. Time to undress, I think.”

“Could I have a bit of that?” Daniel reached with a shaking hand towards the bottle that Nate had.

Nate got up and gave it to his best friend. He watched as Daniel’s Adam’s Apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed the wine. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before passing the bottle back to Nate. They stared at one another silently.

“It’ll be okay,” Daniel said with a wobbly grin. “I know that you and Emrys can do it.”

Nate laughed shakily. “Yes, Emrys and I can do it.”

Daniel suspiciously swiped at his eyes even as he laughed. There was so much else to say to Daniel, but Nate realized he had actually said most of it in the past two days and the rest, his gratefulness for the other boy's friendship and love, was in his eyes.

He found himself going over to Turner next and offering him the bottle. There was a feeling of ritual in it. Turner took the bottle with a smile and took a large swallow.

"I'm sorry that I didn't meet you sooner, Nate, even though it feels like I've known you forever," Turner said softly.

"We'll have plenty of time after this," Nate responded.

Nate then went over to Abbie. She set the spell book to the side and stood up before Nate. He handed her the bottle. She took a tentative sip and then her eyes widened in pleasure. She took a great big swallow and smiled at him sheepishly as some dribbled down her chin. Nate wiped it off for her. His shirt was a loss already.

"The spells are pretty clear, Nate. I can lead us through all the steps. I know that you and Emrys will do your parts flawlessly," she said.

Nate's cheeks pinked. "I wouldn't have minded a little more practice."

She grinned. "Practice does make perfect."

Nate then turned to Emrys. His breath caught in his throat. While he had been talking to their friends, Emrys had stripped out of his clothes and was standing completely naked on the blanket. Even in the gloomy interior of the tomb, Emrys was luminous.

The candlelight played over the sleek muscles in his magnificent body. And despite Daniel's fears, Emrys was already partially erect. His beautiful cock stretched out in front of him, bobbing slightly as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. Nate's mouth went dry. He took another swig of wine before he tottered over to his lover. He stopped only six inches away before offering Emrys the wine bottle.

Emrys took it from him and took a sip without his eyes leaving Nate's face.

"I'm glad I could at least provide the wine, if not roses and a soft, clean bed for us to be on. A musty blanket and a cold stone floor aren't exactly the stuff that poets write of."

Nate raised a shaking hand to Emrys' cheek. He stroked the delicate plane, feeling the faint scratch of stubble beneath his fingertips. "You're all I need."

Emrys turned his face into Nate's hand and nuzzled it. "I never thought I would feel this way. I used to laugh and mock love." His lips fluttered against Nate's fingertips as he said with glowing eyes full of conviction, "No matter what happens, Nathaniel, my life has meant more in the past few days with you than in the prior twenty-eight years."

Nate blinked back unexpected tears. They couldn't fail now! He couldn't lose this just when he'd found it! The spells *had* to work. And they *had* to have incredible luck. Because isn't that how things were supposed to go? Shouldn't there be a happy ever after for them after all they had gone through? Emrys' evil parents and the tragedy that had befallen Nate's? Two star-crossed lovers facing off against a terrible evil? Surely, if there was any justice or meaning, the world couldn't be turned into a cinder ruled by gibbering demons who cared nothing for life or love or happiness or beauty.

Nate knew then why the Devil would come to Earth and live as a human being. This moment would be reason enough.

But now that I've tasted it, it's not enough. It will never be enough. Even if I have every day with Emrys from now until the end of eternity, it will not be enough.

At that moment, Nate thought he saw a faint glow beneath the blanket as if the tile were reacting to his feelings. But then Emrys was placing the empty wine bottle on the floor and reaching for the hem of Nate's shirt.

"Let's take these things off, okay?" Emrys asked softly.

Nate's head bobbed up and down like a marionette's on strings. Emrys' lifted his shirt over his head and Nate was blinded by the material for a

moment. He was both overwhelmed by excitement at being naked with Emrys and shy about his friends seeing that.

What are they thinking? Nothing bad. I can almost feel Daniel willing Emrys to have a really strong erection and for me to cum lots and lots!

Nate bit his cheek to stop inappropriate laughter from spilling out. Emrys, who was already unbuttoning his pants, glanced up at his face with a questioning look. Nate shook his head. “Nothing. I’ll tell you later.”

There has to be a later where we’ll joke all about this.

The unzipping of his pants sounded awfully loud. Nate sucked in his stomach in anticipation of the near tickling touches of Emrys’ long, elegant fingers against his sensitive skin. Emrys chuckled.

“So sensitive, Nathaniel!”

“Your hands are cold,” Nate excused himself.

“I’ll endeavor to warm them right up,” Emrys promised with a lascivious grin.

Nate laughed that time. He was still shaking with chuckles as Emrys had him stepping out of his pants and underwear. The clatter of the dagger against the stone had everyone freezing. Emrys reached for it. But Nate called him off.

“Leave it!” Nate was surprised at his tone. He mollified it. “Please, just ... leave it there. We won’t need it.”

Emrys nodded though there were questions in his eyes. Nate cast one last glance over at the dagger that glittered at him before wrenching his gaze away to stare solely at Emrys.

“Shall I keep my socks on?” Nate wiggled his socked toes in front of the other man.

“I think not.” Emrys then had him balancing on one foot and then the other while he slipped Nate’s socks off. “While taking you with your socks on

might be fun under other circumstances, I think it just might distract me tonight,” Emrys confessed.

Nate blushed as he pictured his socked feet wound around Emrys’ powerful back. “Right, right.”

And then he was naked as Emrys was. Naked in front of his friends. Naked in front of any ghosts. He vaguely wondered where Excelsius was hiding.

But his embarrassment was blown away when the floor started rolling again and dust sifted down from the ceiling.

“I think the words section of the evening has concluded and now the action part must begin!” Daniel squeaked.

“I agree,” Nate and Emrys said in unison.

Abbie stood by the southern candle. She placed the spellbook down beside her, open to the right page so she could refer to it if need be. She gestured for Turner and Daniel to take their positions on the outside of the circle at two of the other cardinal points. “We need to leave the east candle open. That’s where the Greater Demon will be forced to enter the circle when we get to that part.”

Daniel and Turner skittered to their places. Everyone’s eyes were too large and there was a gleam of fear in them. Nate’s throat felt tight. Every time he swallowed he tasted the bitter tang of fear. Fear had a metallic taste like blood. He knew that he would forever associate fear with cold stone spaces lit only by candlelight.

“The chant I told you all about earlier is simple. It is, ‘become one, come together, feed the eternal flame, blessed this union be.’ Remember that the words are unimportant. But like Emrys said, it is our intent that matters. We need to focus all of our good feelings upon Nate and Emrys,” Abbie explained. “And it is... quite all right to become aroused by what we see. It may actually help things.”

Turner’s eyes widened even further as he glanced over at his sister at that moment. “Seriously?”

“Seriously?” Daniel echoed.

Abbie nodded vigorously. Her cheeks were red as roses and there was a slightly hysterical smile on her lips. “Arousal is a powerful thing. It will help fuel the sex magic being performed by Nate and Emrys. So don’t hold back. No matter what, we all have to be as open as possible to enjoy what we’re seeing. Don’t let your hangups or anyone else’s judgment get in the way.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes at Abbie. “Are you one of those girls that finds the idea of two guys together hot?”

Abbie tilted her chin up and asked back, “Are you one of those boys that finds the idea of two girls together hot?”

“Well, yeah! What guy doesn’t?” Daniel asked in all seeming innocence.

Abbie pinched the top of her nose. “Then why would it surprise you that I find two men together arousing?”

Daniel did his goldfish imitation again and stammered out, “I — I guess I see your point.”

“She’s got you there, Decoy.” Emrys had drawn Nate into the circle of his arms and rested his chin on top of Nate’s head.

Nate found himself only half-listening to the conversation though even he had to laugh a little when Abbie said, “We will discuss female sexuality another time, Daniel.”

“I had no idea it was so complicated!” Daniel cried.

Turner rolled his eyes. “Man, stop digging!”

Abbie continued on as if Daniel hadn’t spoken, “Tonight we all need to be open to the beauty of what we are seeing and the love for our two friends. These are the things that will charge the tile and make it possible for Nate to send the Greater Demon’s energy inside of it. And that, of course, will save the world.”

They all went silent once more at the solemnity of her words.

Emrys pulled back so that he could see Nate's face. "The only people in this room are people who love you, Nathaniel. There is no judgment. There is no embarrassment. There is no shame. Only love and pleasure. I want you to forget everything else."

What went unsaid was that this might be the last time that he and Emrys got to make love. Thinking about it that way had Nate determined to enjoy himself and forget any embarrassment he might have had doing this in front of his friends. They would understand if he enjoyed himself and pleasured Emrys, too.

"Yes, love is all that matters," Nate answered him.

Nate reached up and wound his arms around Emrys' neck. He pulled the older man down for a soul searing kiss. All of his desperation, love and fear flowed through his lips and into Emrys' body. It felt like their kisses were devouring the negative feelings. By the time they broke off, both were breathless and flushed. Nate's eyes were heavy-lidded. His cock pressed eagerly against Emrys' silken thighs. He ground himself against the other man's skin. Emrys slipped that leg between Nate's and the young man shuddered with pleasure as he was able to ride up and down. His cock received just the perfect amount of pressure and molten heat began to build in his belly.

Then they were kissing again as Nate thrust against Emrys' muscular thigh. There was tongue and teeth and the slide of slick lips. Nate's mouth went nearly numb from opening it as wide as possible so that Emrys could get as deep inside of him as he wanted. And then Nate knew that he wanted something else in his mouth that was less agile than Emrys' delicious tongue, but was just as tender.

Nate pulled back, which had Emrys following after him, but Nate waved him off. He placed his palms flat against Emrys' chest and slowly skated down the older man's body, lowering himself to his knees. He hardly felt the cold, stone floor beneath the thin musty blanket. His mouth was directly opposite Emrys' proud, erect cock cock. He pushed his face into the older

man's pubic hair, breathing in deeply of the earthy musk and salty sweat. Nate's cock twitched, loving that scent that rose above the hideous smell of sulfur that seemed to be building in the back of the tomb. Emrys laced his fingers with Nate's.

Nate looked up at his lover's face. There was only a sliver of topaz to be seen around Emrys' pupils. Nate remembered how those eyes had glowed at him when Emrys was in his wolf form. That memory brought a wave of love again for the older man. He would get to see Emrys in his sweet, furry form once more. Another reason to make all of this work.

Nate grasped Emrys' cock in his lips. He didn't go farther than the sensitive head. He let his tongue languidly lick over the slit. Emrys' hands tightened on his as Nate teasingly lapped up the older man's sweet, musky pre-cum.

Nate drew in a deep breath before he sank further onto Emrys' thick, long cock. He loved the feel of the vein on the backside of Emrys' penis throbbing against his tongue. It throbbed in time to Emrys' heart beat. It let Nate feel Emrys' heart rate stutter as Nate sucked his cock hard. Emrys let out a low groan and Nate felt the tension in that powerful body as the older man strove not to move.

But Nate wanted to move. He wanted to give Emrys the best blowjob he could. Nate braced himself as he sank further down onto Emrys' cock. The tip reached the back of his mouth and then barely brushed his throat. He forced himself not to gag. He wanted to feel Emrys' pulsing inside of him. He knew what it was like to have his cock surrounding by hot, wet, willing heat. That's what he wanted to give Emrys. He breathed in and again sank further down. His lips brushed against Emrys' balls and pubic hair. Emrys made high pitched whine. Heat radiated out of Nate's core and traveled all the way to the end of his fingertips. his toes and even soared to the top of his head.

Emrys' head fell back. His eyes were closed. His mouth was parted. His lips were swollen and wet and lovely. Nate sucked again. Emrys' hips beat a tattoo that he just barely was able to still. Nate slowly pulled off, sucking all the time, as he moved back until only the head of Emrys' cock rested

against the tip of his tongue. A gush of pre-cum gushed into his mouth. Nate's tastebuds hungered for more of his cat's cream.

He sank down once more onto Emrys' glistening member and immediately pulled off again until he had a vigorous rhythm going. His throat was now completely relaxed and his own cock was throbbing in time to his sucking. Emrys' breathing was ragged. A beautiful sheen of sweat appeared on his upper lip. A low, moan of pleasure constantly exited his lush mouth. Then Nate had Emrys' cock all the way inside of his throat once more and he swallowed. The older man's eyelids flew open and he let out a startled cry of pleasure. But then he was pulling out of Nate's mouth and taking a step back, even as his cock, wet and glistening, seemed to reach for Nate's supplicant form.

Nate reached back for him. He wanted Emrys' cock inside of him. The older man had a rather wild look on his face. Emrys shook himself and then squeezed the base of his cock cruelly. Nate whined. He didn't want that glorious member harmed in any way.

Emrys sounded hoarse as he said, "I have to cum inside of you, Nathaniel. In your hot tight ass not your sweet mouth so we get the best results for the spell. We may not have a chance for an encore."

Nate realized then what Emrys was saying. He had almost lost himself in the pleasure. That was when he realized that the tile was definitely glowing. It was lit up beneath the blanket itself.

"I think it's working," Nate said.

Emrys was suddenly on the ground with him, kissing Nate until the young man saw stars from lack of oxygen.

"Yes, yes, it's going to work. Because I don't think love like this – the love we have for one another – is the usual thing. It's strong, Nathaniel. Stronger than anything I've ever felt."

Nate was only able to nod in response. His ability to speak seemingly stolen away by his desire for the other man. Then Emrys was gently laying Nate down on his stomach. He began to kiss Nate from the top of the spine to the

curve of his buttocks. He nuzzled the beginning of Nate's crease even as his hands pulled apart Nate's butt cheeks to reveal his tight, pink pucker.

"I'm so hungry for you," Emrys murmured before his mouth was on Nate's anus.

Nate nearly howled with pleasure as Emrys' tongue swirled around the tight muscle. He shamelessly lifted his ass into the air and spread his thighs wide so that Emrys would have as much access to his ass as the other man wanted. Emrys' tongue stabbed against that tight opening. Demanding that it release. Demanding that it allow him in.

Nate's hands fisted in the coarse, woolen blanket. He thought he heard the aged material rip as Emrys' thumbs spread open his anus wider and the older man's tongue sank inside him for the first time that night.

Emrys began to tongue fuck him. In and out. In and out. Slick with spit and heat. Nate's hips began to move in time with that tongue. He strained to lift his ass higher so that Emrys' tongue could reach deeper inside of him.

One of Emrys' hands reached around and stroked Nate's cock a few times.

Nate let out pants and whines of pleasure. Heat was already building up dangerously in his balls. He knew he was leaking. Emrys smeared some of Nate's precum over his fingers and then he was pressing those slick digits against Nate's ass.

"Do it, Emrys! Please, please, do it!" Nate pushed his ass up against the older man's hand.

"Must be inside of you now, Nathaniel! I can't last much longer."

Emrys' slicked fingers sank inside. Not just one or two, but three at a time.

Nate gasped with the full stretch, but then he was grinding his ass backward. He wanted more than just those fingers filling him. He wanted Emrys' cock.

"Yes, my love. I'll give you that," Emrys said, having read his mind.

Emrys gripped Nate's hips and lined his cock up with the young man's opening before pushing forward. There was no tentativeness about this

thrust. It was one, long, powerful movement. Nate's tissues opened to accept Emrys' girth. He wailed. Threw back his head and just let loose a cry of pleasured pain. Emrys was running his hand then up and down Nate's back to comfort him. Nate shook his head wildly. Sweat sprayed the floor.

"No, no, fuck me! Fuck me!" Nate cried.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I love you. I love you, Emrys!"

Emrys' breath was hot and heavy against his throat. "And I love you."

The older man pulled out of Nate's ass and slammed back in. Again and again. Nate pushed his ass up each time, loving the smacking sound their skin made as they slapped together. It was raw and wild and wonderful.

Emrys started stroking Nate's cock again. Long, hard, heavy strokes that had Nate thrusting just as eagerly forward as pushing himself backwards.

The tile glowed a hot, passionate red. It seemed like the light might incinerate the blanket.

There was a hum that Nate realized was their friends' chanting that he hadn't even noticed earlier. The sound of their voices was rising as Nate and Emrys' arousal crested. Their friends were shouting just as Nate's balls drew up against his body and Emrys thrust deep, deep, deep one last time.

And then there was an explosive cry all around them and from them as Emrys' semen sprayed inside of him and Nate's gushed out over Emry's fingers and the floor. The floor tile's light became as bright as the sun and Nate could see nothing else, but pure golden light.

It seemed to last forever and mere seconds at the same time. Jet after jet of semen poured from their bodies until there was nothing more to give. They toppled over as if their strings had been cut, illuminated by the tile's warm glow.

Emrys curled around him as their bodies twitched with the pleasure. They remained still connected to one another. Nate did not see or hear anything

for a time. He couldn't even open his eyes or speak as all the energy seemed to have been pulled right out of him.

"I — I think it worked," Daniel's voice floated over to him.

"I think so, too," was the answer. But it wasn't one of their friends that answered. It wasn't Emrys or Excelsius or even the Unnamed One who spoke up either.

Abbie's voice went high and tight. "Dad? Dad?"

The Greater Demon laughed, "Oh, sweetheart, when are you going to realize that I'm not your father."

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT: DEUS EX MACHINA

"Children, in the circle, NOW!" Emrys shouted.

But it was too late. The Greater Demon didn't even have to wave his hand through the air before Abbie, Daniel and Turner were all slammed against the wall and held there spread eagle, several feet off the ground. They reminded Nate of butterflies pinned to a board.

Daniel was making a gurgling sound and Nate realized that they were pinioned by their throats as well as their ankles and wrists. Turner made a choked growling sound at the Greater Demon and struggled to dislodge the invisible bonds to get to his sister. Abbie's eyes bugged out with strain as she tried to recite the spell from the spell book that was half-in, half-out of the circle.

Nate attempted to scramble across the floor for the spell book before the Greater Demon got it, but Emrys was already ahead of him. Using magic, Emrys had it moving itself fully into the circle. He also closed the circle by sending some of the candle's hot wax flying across the floor to complete the open section of the circle. That seemed like the wrong thing they ought to be doing, but Nate couldn't think of why at that moment as it clearly was keeping the Greater Demon out. He saw it balefully look at the ring of wax,

not even letting the tip of his polished dress shoes touch him as he stepped fully into the room from the catacombs.

Emrys and Nate jumped up with the spell book flying up and landing neatly in Emrys' upturned hands. Nate had felt Emrys' cock leave him as they stood and he was all too aware that their bodies were still slick with sweat and cum. The Greater Demon's eyes gleamed lasciviously as it ran his gaze up and down both of their naked bodies.

"Do you know what I like about your physical forms?" the Greater Demon asked. Nate assumed it was a rhetorical question especially after the Greater Demon answered it himself, "It's so easy to give and receive pleasure. Oh, and *pain*, of course. *Always pain*. You know that all too well, Emrys, don't you? I spend some time in the cellar, looking at where your parents sliced you up like the meat you are."

"Shut the Hell up!" Nate shouted, his body shaking with rage and fear.

Emrys touched his arm. "Don't listen to him, Nathaniel. He's just being provocative"

Nate's rage though wound him inside of him. The Greater Demon had no right to speak of what happened to Emrys. He knew, in the back of his head, that this was the least of their worries at the moment, but he couldn't help yelling, "But he –"

"Is trying to keep our attention off what we have to do," Emrys said with a meaningful glance down at the spell book.

Nate felt like an idiot. Of course, they had to perform the spell to put the Greater Demon in the tile though he had no idea how to do it. Abbie had been the one to read everything a hundred times. Emrys was just now skimming it. Nate looked over his shoulder but the text blended together in a sickening slither of letters. Nate had to look away.

Brilliant, now the fate of the world is relying on Emrys' ability to speed read!

Nate had the greatest belief in Emrys' powers overall, but this was dire.

The only good thing was that tile continued to glow softly beneath the blanket. And that's when Nate remembered why closing the circle was a bad idea. He met the Greater Demon's gaze.

"I see you have discovered the conundrum, young Whitney," the Greater Demon mused. "You need me standing on top of that tile *inside* the circle.

Yet you have *closed* the circle from me to protect yourselves. What to do? What to do?"

The Greater Demon smiled and his teeth looked to be sharpened into points.

Nate didn't know whether that was because the body was being changed subtlety or not so subtly by the demon's presence within him or if the Greater Demon had literally taken a file to Mr. Blackwell's teeth. If it was simply the demon's presence, would the effect go away?

That's assuming we live through this to see what happens after Mr. Blackwell is freed from the Greater Demon, which is looking incredibly unlikely at the moment. Unless I really am the Unnamed One ...

But Nate felt *nothing* to indicate great power or knowledge. His mind was a blank as to what to do. He was terrified as he looked at his friends. It was just him and Emrys against this thing now and Nate felt he was less than useless. He was trembling badly. Emrys gently touched his shoulder to steady him even as he whispered some of the spell's words to himself.

Nate resisted the urge to ask Emrys if what the Greater Demon said was true.

I know it's true. We need to get the Greater Demon in here with us. Abbie said as much and it just makes sense. But how are we going to do that with him out there and us and the tile in here?

"One moment, piece of garbage, we need to speak without you hearing."

Emrys was suddenly turning to Nate. The older man drew an infinite symbol in the air with his fingers and a glittering blue barrier appeared around them for a moment. He put his mouth against Nate's left ear, cupping a hand over it so that the Greater Demon couldn't read his lips.

"Nathaniel, you mustn't worry. Your plan is still sound when you realize

that how far the Greater Demon has to travel is irrelevant. Whether it across planes or across the room, we can summon him *into* the circle.”

Nate’s face was hidden from the Greater Demon as he asked back, “Can we summon the Greater Demon by ourselves without the others?”

“Yes, I believe so. Our bond is very strong and we are probably the most powerful witches in the world would be my guess,” Emrys said. “Especially with all that inbreeding that went on in our families.”

“So do not need a history lesson right now!”

“Touchy, touchy, Nathaniel, you must make the most out of these end of the world scenarios. If we survive this one, we’ll surely be in this same bad spot again. Nature of the beast. Now let’s summon the bastard a few feet.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The glittering blue barrier disappeared just as Emrys kissed the shell of Nate’s ear. The older man then abruptly sat down cross-legged and pulled Nate down as well. Nate landed on his butt and let out an oomph.

“Sorry, dearest, didn’t mean to hurt that ass any more than I already have,” Emrys apologized.

“You didn’t hurt me. It was great,” Nate said. “Best uhm, sex so far.”

“Yes, it was. We shall have a hard time topping it,” Emrys murmured.

Nate desperately wanted to believe him, but he felt only a hollowness in his chest.

“What have you got there?” the Greater Demon rumbled as he proceeded to pace around the outside of the circle. As he passed by each of their friends, they each let out a strangled cry of pain.

Nate was nearly leaping to his feet as if he could do something to stop the Greater Demon, but Emrys grabbed him and held him still. The older man’s expression was frighteningly serious. “Concentrate, Nathaniel. We must

perform the spell. That's our only chance. Now lay your hands palms up over my knees."

"Right. Can't leave the circle. Perform the spell," Nate repeated. But his gaze kept jumping over to their friends as each one continued to moan.

I have to do something! The spell. The spell I can do. But what if ... what if I could do something more?

Emrys had placed the spell book in his lap and was reading the spell. Nate did as he asked and the older man covered Nate's hands with his own, gripping Nate's wrists. Nate mirrored the actions. He felt a flare of heat, a physical reaction to the connection they shared. It gave him hope that they could summon enough power to do what had to be done.

We can do this. I don't need to be the Unnamed One for this to work. Our friends can be saved. The world can be spared.

The Greater Demon peered over Emrys' shoulder at the spell book. Nate tried to block him from reading it by leaning over it, but the Greater Demon had obviously seen enough to know what they were attempting.

"A summoning spell! Clever! Though what happens when I'm *inside* the circle with you? If you leave the circle then it is broken as to all three of us," the Greater Demon mused. "And that tile there, if I'm not mistaken is to absorb the power that you cannot, Nathaniel Whitney. Though do you really know how to use it?"

Nate didn't. He looked up at Emrys. Abbie hadn't told him yet. There had been the evidently false assumption that the Greater Demon wouldn't actually come to them before they had prepared themselves. But the Greater Demon was here and they were going to start the summoning spell right now. When exactly was Nate to figure out how to use the tile? Shouldn't he do that now? Before the Greater Demon was in a ten by ten foot space with them?

"Emrys, let me see the spell that shows how to use the tile," Nate whispered. He wasn't even sure if he could actually look at the spell

without puking. Maybe Emrys should read it to him, give him the Cliff Notes version.

And that doesn't sound insane at all.

But Emrys kept a hold of Nate's hands. His gaze was so dark. "Nathaniel, you're going to have to trust your instincts here. There's –"

"Not much time!" the Greater Demon finished for him. "Because you see the longer it takes to get me *in* there with *you*, the longer I have *out* here with your *friends*. And I intend to make the *most* of my time out here."

"NO!" Nate cried out involuntarily.

The Greater Demon paused his pacing by Turner. He stroked his fingers through the boy's dark hair. Turner's eyes blazed with rage, but his lips were trembling. Seeing and experiencing all that demonic energy was evidently playing havoc with his nervous system. His body jerked and spasmed like he was being hit with electrical shocks. Abbie let out a terrible strangled wail. The whites of Daniel's eyes were showing yet he clearly was struggling to get over to Turner.

If I were the Unnamed One, I would be able to stop this. With a word. With a thought even! But I can't! I can't!

Emrys sat rigidly, his hold on Nate like steel, his topaz eyes blazing. "Please, Nathaniel, you must concentrate. Our only chance to save them is to summon the Greater Demon inside the circle as quickly as possible."

Nate's attention snapped away from the Greater Demon and Turner and back to Emrys. He was shaking and his chest felt so tight that it was hard to breathe. Emrys looked at him with such love and tenderness right then that Nate felt some of that tightness ease for a moment, but there were beads of sweat on the older man's forehead and strain showing in the corners of his eyes.

He knows better than me what the Greater Demon can do. But he's holding it together. I have to as well. Since I'm not the Unnamed One and don't have super uber Devil powers ... Dammit, why don't I?

“Emrys is lying, you know,” the Greater Demon practically purred as he stroked Turner some more and white froth flew out of the boy’s mouth and dribbled down his chin. Turner’s eyes had rolled back into his head. It looked like he was having Grand Mal seizures.

Nate went rigid himself as he saw Turner’s agony. The desire to scream at the top of his lungs was restricted by the fact that he was strangled by the emotions he felt.

Why can’t I stop him? Why don’t I feel any great knowledge? Was the Unnamed One lying? Must have been. But why? Why lie about this? So I’ll realize just how small, insignificant and useless I am compared to a demon? Newsflash, I already knew that!

“Nathaniel, look at me. Only look at me. Only hear my voice. You need to repeat the chant just as I saw it and you need to concentrate on our bond,” Emrys said fiercely. “I’ll lead us through the spell. We can do this. And our friends will be safe.”

“Right, right.”

Nate struggled to look only at Emrys even as his peripheral vision tracked the Greater Demon’s movements. He had, thankfully, left Turner. The young man was limp in the invisible bonds that held him. His eyes were closed and his skin was an unnatural gray pallor. He was still breathing. Barely.

But what about his brain? Is it still working?

Nate could only hope that the Greater Demon would want to keep them all alive and fully aware as long as possible to cause the maximum amount of pain and suffering for all involved.

“Do you want to know what he’s lying about and why?” the Greater Demon asked.

Nate forced himself not to acknowledge the Greater Demon. Emrys had begun the chant. The words sounded like mush in Nate’s ears. He tried to

repeat them, but his tongue kept fouling it all up. Emrys patiently repeated the phrase, but Nate wasn't getting it.

"Oh, this is too damned easy!" The Greater Demon chortled. "What Emrys is lying about is that you can't finish the summoning spell – especially with your pathetic delivery — before I torture and kill all of your friends."

Nate's mouth froze in mid-mangled word. He stared at Emrys and tried to read the older man's expression. Emrys though looked at him opaquely and that made Nate realize then that it was true. He felt like he swallowed glass at that moment.

There's not enough time. Not enough. Those guys are going to die. Horribly, and then even if we get the Greater Demon inside of the circle it will attack us. How is this going to work?

"Nathaniel, the chant," Emrys murmured.

"What happens when it gets in here with us?" Nate found himself asking softly.

"Nathaniel –"

"Oh, that's the best part!" The Greater Demon giggled with an insane, tittering glee. "Emrys is going to sacrifice himself to give you enough time to come after me. Or I should say to use your vaunted instincts to attempt to eat my energy, which we all know will lead to you failing horribly. But you all will have given it the good college try!"

Nate felt numb inside. Numb and strangely silent. There was a hollow rush in his ears like the ocean. He could feel the warmth of Emrys' hands in his. He could feel the thump of Emrys' heart in the pulse points on the older man's wrists. The scent of sweat and sex and Emrys washed over him. Nate felt the sheer *aliveness* of the older man.

And that's going to end. He's going to be snuffed out. Because I'm not the Unnamed One ...

There were a million other reasons why their plan wasn't going to work, but Nate felt a shriek of fury rising up in his chest at that one explanation.

Why can't I be the Unnamed One? Why? He realized he had gone from fearing the possibility to desperately wanting it to be true. *The Devil would never feel this afraid or uncertain!*

"Nathaniel, we have to focus," Emrys pleaded.

"It's true. What he said is true, isn't it?" Nate asked.

If only I was the Unnamed One, I'd be able to save us.

"It doesn't matter. We have to try. The whole world is at stake." Emrys ran his thumbs comfortingly along the soft inner skin of Nate's wrists.

If only ... I could stop all of the pain.

"I can't!"

If only ... I could save my friends and ... and Emrys ...

"We can." Emrys leaned towards him. "If we don't do this then everyone dies *regardless*. We have a shot, Nathaniel. A very small shot to make this work. Let's take it."

If only ... I could destroy the Greater Demon with a thought

Before Nate could answer Emrys though, the Greater Demon stepped in front of Daniel, "I think I have to up the ante here. Make you really go nuts. Ah, yes, Daniel, isn't it? You're Nate's best friend and the one without any powers? Oh, this ought to be fun! You're squirming already! And I haven't even begun to hurt you yet!"

I could stop all this.

Daniel tried to curl up into a ball on the wall, but the invisible bonds that held him wouldn't let him do it. His face was flushed and terror was written in the whites of his eyes and the unfamiliar tear tracks on his face. The Greater Demon drew his fingers along Daniel's neck and blisters

formed in his fingertips' wake. Daniel screamed. Nate's mouth opened in silent agony.

If I was the Unnamed One, I could make the Greater Demon scream.

You are the Unnamed One, a voice suddenly answered. It was his voice. Older, deeper, but still his. It was the voice he had heard in the deep lake. It was the voice he had heard whispered in his ear in the house. It was the Unnamed One.

You're here! It's you! Thank God – I mean, thank you! Thank you for coming!

I haven't gone anywhere. I'm you. We're the same. We're one yet apart, the Unnamed One answered.

You need to help us!

YOU need to remember. Then you can help yourself.

That was what it had said to him in the lake. Something about remembering his powers. Not learning, but just simply remembering. But Nate's mind felt so furiously blank.

How do I remember? Tell me how! Please! Nate begged, but his mental conversation was broken as the Greater Demon continued his threats.

“Or should I go after the damsel in distress first?” The Greater Demon tented his hands before him and looked pointedly over at Abbie. “It’s a bit trite to hurt a woman. After all, she is by far the cleverest and strongest of mind compared to all of you here so it’s not like she’s helpless by any means. But I do think that there is an innate urge to protect the fairer sex, don’t you?”

Abbie stared at him stonily. She was absolutely still and silent. Nate could feel her preparing for whatever torture lay ahead. She would face it stoically until the Greater Demon made even her scream. Daniel started to make frantic noises to draw the Greater Demon’s attentions back to himself

even as the blisters on this throat broke and wept. The Greater Demon turned to look at him.

“I see that chivalry is *not* dead after all! Let’s give you a taste of being a true gentleman.” The Greater Demon drew his fingers along Daniel’s crotch. The young man’s eyes bulged from their sockets.

Nate felt like such a weakling for looking away. But he dropped his gaze from Daniel and found he was looking at the dagger that still reflected Daniel’s agonized expression.

Remember. Choose to remember, the voice that was his and not his murmured.

Nate’s hand shot out and grabbed the dagger, breaking his connection with Emrys. The older man tried to grasp his hands to reconnect them. Nate realized dimly that the older man had been trying to perform the spell by himself, but without them physically touching he might as well have been reciting the alphabet. But he shrugged Emrys off as if the other man’s strength was no greater than a fly’s.

Remember. I want to remember. I want to remember being the Unnamed One. I want to. I want to. I want to.

Nate stared at his own eyes in the reflection. He watched as they turned black. It was like a spot of ink dropped into a glass of water. The blackness raced across his iris until pupil and iris were a solid well of darkness.

Nate smiled and got to his feet leisurely. His mind wasn’t filled with knowledge exactly. He just *knew* he could do whatever was required to keep his friend’s safe, the world safe, Emrys safe. His thoughts were almost too large for him to comprehend, which made it seem like he was thinking nothing at all.

“Stop,” Nate said softly.

“Nathaniel!” Emrys scrambled to his feet.

But Nate put a hand out in the air between them and Emrys sank back down with a look of bewilderment on his face. “Don’t worry. Everything is going to be just fine. I promise. You have to trust me.”

“No! Something’s wrong!” Nate tried not to laugh at the fact that just about then *everything* was wrong. But he knew what Emrys meant. The older man stammered, “I — I —”

“I’m going to save you. Like I did before.” And the image of Emrys’ parents crouching over their son like vultures flashed before Nate’s mind. He *had* been there. He *had* seen. He *had* destroyed them. He could do it again.

Emrys saw it, too. He was seeing into Nate’s mind. “It can’t be! You are *my* Nathaniel! You’re not — not — no!”

“Yes,” Nate answered simply. “Don’t you remember seeing me there? With you? Always with you?”

“You were a little boy when —”

“Time isn’t a straight line,” Nate found himself saying.

“You’re *my* Nathaniel,” Emrys repeated.

“And I always will be. But now, I have to do this. I love you though you don’t believe me capable of it.” Nate leaned down and kissed Emrys’ forehead. The older man drew in a sharp breath. Nate tried to ignore the slight flinch. Then he straightened up and faced the Greater Demon. “I thought I told you to stop.”

Turner, Abbie, and even Daniel seemed to still at that moment.

The Greater Demon turned his head over his shoulder towards Nate’s voice, noticing that he wasn’t the center of attention anymore. He was drawing lines of acid with his fingers over and over Daniel’s genitals. “Stop or what? Do you still want to make a deal? Because I think we’re past that now. Should have taken what I offered when I first offered it!”

“Deal?” Nate let out a laugh. “It’s funny you should mention that word. Because I’m usually the one accused of offering *deals*.”

What would you sell for your soul? What would you give?

Emrys shuddered. He stared at Nate without speaking. Nate wasn’t sure if that was because he wasn’t allowing the older man to speak or whether Emrys was simply speechless. He would not look into Emrys’ eyes. He didn’t want to see when the confirmation of what he was became visible there.

And love will turn to hate. But it can’t matter. Because there’s no other way this can be stopped. Besides, I had to tell him sometime. Better to save the world and our friends while revealing I’m the monster he fears the most.

The Greater Demon frowned and turned towards Nate fully. “What are you on about?”

“Do you remember *why* you wanted to make that deal with me in the first place?” Nate asked.

The Greater Demon laughed. “No idea now! You’ve all turned out to be such disappointments as far as adversaries go!”

A slow smile crawled across Nate’s face. “Well, we’re not done yet. I might have some surprises in store for you.”

Maybe it was his words. Maybe it was the smile. Or maybe it was the fact that the Greater Demon noticed Nate’s eyes were fully black that caused the him to pause.

“Yes, you saw the future — in your pitiful way — but you misinterpreted it, of course. You realized that I was a threat.” Nate turned the dagger over in his hands. It was such a wicked thing even in its unpolished state. It was raw with power. It thrummed in his hands. “You didn’t understand exactly how I would be able to stop you. You only saw that I *might* stop you and you guessed that if you didn’t destroy me — which you *can’t* — or turn me to your side — which would be absurd — that your plans might fall apart. All of that was relatively true. You just didn’t see the most important part.”

“You’ve got me at a loss.” The Greater Demon was leaning away from the circle, which made Nate want to laugh again. The demon was showing fear even though he wasn’t altogether sure why. He didn’t even realize he was doing it.

“Loss or lost? You must have lost your mind to come here in the first place and try to play with *my* things.” Nate placed the point against his thumb and spun the blade. A bead of blood oozed out of the pricked area. His blood was black and he was not surprised. The blade glowed with cold radiance as it soaked the blood up like a sponge.

The Greater Demon saw that and flinched. He licked his lips. “I don’t think I understand. Has your mind snapped perhaps?”

Nate laughed. It sounded like chimes or breaking glass. He wasn’t altogether sure. “*My mind?* Snap? Because of the likes of *you*? ” Nate shook his head. The words came so easily like he had been practicing them. Maybe they had been bottled up for centuries as the Unnamed One waited for this moment to unfurl. “No, no, not at all. You see *this* is my world. And you’re *fucking* with it. I don’t like that. You’ve even made me reveal myself earlier than I planned. And I *really* don’t like that either. All in all, you’ve completely *pissed* me off.”

“Who – who, exactly are you saying – who – *who are you*? ” The Greater Demon backed against the wall, which was so pathetically dumb that Nate did laugh that time. As if physical distance meant anything!

I feel so cold inside. Like ice. Like nothing warm can ever get to me again. Just hate and hate and anger and rage and acid and ice. Is this who I am? Is this all of me? No, part of me. The part I need right now.

“You already know,” Nate murmured and he thought he heard Emrys cry out ‘no’ once more.

“I – I didn’t know! I mean I know *now*! But I didn’t know it was *you* before! You mustn’t be angry! I was summoned here! I was only doing what I thought was your will –” On and on the Greater Demon babbled and pleaded and begged.

Nate tuned out the words. Instead, he drew the blade across the palm of his left hand. A line of black blood appeared. Then he stepped out of the circle and stood in front of the Greater Demon. Nate smiled as he lifted up his bleeding hand and held it half an inch from the Greater Demon's face.

"Do you know what the best thing is about being the Devil?" Nate asked.

"No, my lord, my master, what?" the Greater Demon begged.

Nate's lips writhed back from his teeth as he thought of the agony that this creature had caused those he loved, of the fact that they might no longer love him back, of all the lives that had been destroyed from this one insignificant being in front of him. "It's the fact that I get to kick your ass."

Nate lowered his hand onto the Greater Demon's face and heard him howl.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE: PLANNED

Nate could feel the hot breath of the Greater Demon on his palm as the creature let out a hideous scream when he thrust his bleeding palm over the demon's mouth. Immediately, the bonds holding his friends to the wall dissolved. He heard, rather than saw them, drop to the ground with audible thumps and groans. Abbie raced over to Turner, who was slumped on his side, and seemingly still unconscious.

He has to be okay. He has to be.

"Turner! Oh, Turner, talk to me! Are you okay? Oh, please be okay!"
Abbie cried.

Daniel groaned and Nate's gaze snapped to him. His best friend was curled into a ball, rocking in agony, with cold sweat on his brow. Daniel's eyes were tightly closed as if he could block out the pain if he couldn't see anything.

"Oh, Daniel!" Abbie added to her cries.

She was reaching for both her brother and Daniel at the same time. She couldn't quite reach both of them. Nate imagined Daniel sliding across the floor to her. He heard his best friend give a yelp as Daniel suddenly scooted over to her just like Nate envisioned it. He felt an hysterical giggle rising up in his throat.

"Is Turner okay?" Daniel asked, his voice filled with agony, even as he lifted his head up to look at Turner's still form.

"I don't know. He has a pulse. But he's not showing any signs of consciousness," Abbie said.

"Oh, no way, man. Turner, wake up. Come on! Wake up!" Daniel begged.

Fresh anger filled Nate. This shouldn't have happened. This shouldn't have been allowed. He ground his black blood against the Greater Demon's lips, tongue and teeth. With his other hand he grabbed the Greater Demon's nose and forced him to swallow his blood. When he felt the Greater Demon choke the blood down, Nate let him go and stepped back. The Greater Demon slid down to the floor, desperately gasping for air, his mouth smeared with blackness. The Greater Demon coughed violently and wiped spittle and blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I know you want to leave that body. To flee. But I've made it so you can't," Nate said. He was surprised at how calm he sounded even while he seethed inside. He wanted to smash the Greater Demon's face in. He wanted to howl his rage. But he just stared down at the Greater Demon with hatred. "The only way you leave there is if I let you — or if I take you out."

The Greater Demon babbled, "*I swear — I swear* I thought that I was acting in your stead —"

"Quiet!" Nate shouted and the Greater Demon could no longer speak. He had willed it and it was done. This could become addictive. The silence was almost deafening though and he immediately wished someone would speak.

What should I do? How can I make this creature pay?

He knew that the blood he'd made the Greater Demon ingest would allow him to manipulate his body like he was a marionette's as well as locked the creature inside of it. He could do whatever he wanted. He could make the Greater Demon scream just like his friends had.

Former friends. I can't look at them. Can't see the expression of fear and horror on their faces now that they know what I am. What do I do? Where do I go after this? The Greater Demon is responsible for this! I wouldn't have lost them but for him!

Nate's hands fisted at his sides. His dug his fingernails into his palms. Black blood dripped down and sizzled as it hit the floor. Even his blood was toxic. Evil. How did he not realize what he was earlier?

It doesn't matter. I'm the Unnamed One. And I can protect them from this creature.

Magic thrummed through the air from his blood. He saw a red glow limning his hands. It turned the white walls of the crypt a lurid crimson.

The Greater Demon slammed back against the wall as if it could meld through the stone to get away from him. But it couldn't get away. No place was safe for it. He would find it and destroy it no matter what. Nate smiled.

“Please don’t hurt my father, Nate!” Abbie cried.

Her voice ripped through Nate’s consciousness. He had forgotten for a moment that this was Mr. Blackwell’s body. It really wasn’t the Greater Demon’s. Could it be Abbie and Turner’s father’s again?

How do I get the Greater Demon out? Can I? Will Mr. Blackwell be returned? Emrys would know, but I can't ask him. I can't hear the fear and hate in his voice for me.

“Yes, yes, remember that I’m in her father’s body! You — you wouldn’t want to destroy him just to get to me!” the Greater Demon begged. He actually clasped his hands in front of his body as if in a parody of prayer.

Nate lips writhed back from his teeth. The begging seemed to light a flame under him, an irrational rage, for all he had lost because of this creature.

“I’m the Unnamed One. Do you think that matters to me?”

The Greater Demon paled and curled into a protective ball.

Obviously not. Does it matter to me? What do I really feel? Should I care? Shouldn’t I just take my revenge and flounce off?

“But it *does* matter to you,” it was Emrys’ voice that rose up behind him instead of the Greater Demon’s. “Not that I think you shouldn’t torture the living shit out of the Greater Demon. But I know you and you don’t want to hurt Mr. Blackwell in the process.”

Nate didn’t turn around even though every part of him wanted to. His spine straightened though as Emrys’ voice reverberated through him.. “You don’t know me at all, Emrys. That much must be clear now. I — I don’t even know myself anymore. *I am* the Unnamed One.”

“You *are* Nathaniel Whitney.” Emrys was at his back now. His hands tentatively rested on Nate’s shoulders. His fingers slowly stroked Nate’s skin so tenderly.

“You’re afraid to be near me. Afraid to touch me. I can feel it” Nate trembled even as he longed to push into Emrys’ touches. They had once been just for him, but now they were for the others, to calm him down so he wouldn’t harm anyone. It wasn’t out of love for him anymore. He was a wild beast. “You’re doing this for Abbie and Turner!”

“And me, Nate,” Daniel said softly, pain lacing his words.

Nate’s head snapped over to his best friend. Daniel was struggling to sit up to see him. Immediately, when he met Daniel’s eyes, he looked away. He couldn’t face him.

“Oh, God, Daniel, are you okay? I mean — I can’t help you. I can just hurt this creature! It’s the only thing I can do — that I *know* how to do. Hurting people … I guess that’s my thing,” Nate bit back anything more.

“Nate, are you really the Devil?” Daniel asked. His voice was curious, not afraid.

“Y—yes. Daniel, I can’t talk right now. I have to — to ...” He didn’t know what he had to do.

“Then let me talk, Nathaniel. I’m not doing it *just* for them, which includes Decoy,” Emrys said. “I’m doing this because *you* want me to. The spell you had me under is gone. I can move and speak now.” His breath whispered against Nate’s ear and neck.

“I — I probably just lost concentration! I didn’t mean for you to get up and — and —”

“Nathaniel.” Emrys’ arms went around him and the older man held him.

It felt so good. He wanted to just sag into the older man. He wanted to turn and bury his head in Emrys’ neck. He wanted to forget all this and just go home. He imagined them in the Whitney Manor, his lying against Emrys with the others hanging out.

But that can never be true now. I’ve lost them. I’ve lost everyone.

“Emrys, don’t you realize that — dammit! I’m the Unnamed One! And I’m going to take my revenge on this piece of shit that messed everything up!” Nate’s voice cracked and went high at the end. “I have to do it.”

“If you really are the Unnamed One, Nate,” Abbie said, her arms full of her brother and Daniel. “Then you don’t need to do anything. You’re the free-est of all of us. You can do whatever you want.”

“You want to protect us. You want to help Mr. Blackwell,” Emrys whispered.

“Do you think the Devil wants to do that?” Nate trembled

“I think that Nate Whitney wants it,” Emrys said certainly. “Whoever else you are, you are also my Nathaniel and I believe in your good heart.”

Nate shut his eyes and reached up to touch Emrys' arms. He stroked the soft skin. "Are you scared of me? Horrified? I have to know."

And if he says yes what will I do? Of course, he'll lie and say no. But maybe it won't be a lie. Maybe ...

"I'm a little afraid, but not for me. For you," Emrys murmured.

"Me? Why for me? I'm the Devil, what could possibly be scary about that for me?" Nate let out a choked laugh. He was terrified of what he was. And he had a feeling that he didn't know the half of it yet.

"You forget that you allow me to read your mind," Emrys answered. "I can see into it now, Nathaniel, and I know how frightened you are. I can see how much pain you are in. It's agony to me for you to feel this way."

Nate's mouth opened and shut. "But — but you shouldn't be able to! I'm the Devil! I'm —"

"I can't always sense your thoughts. But I can now. You must want me to," Emrys answered.

"I don't know what I want. Except you. But I can't have that anymore, can I?" The last came out more as a question than the statement he'd intended.

"You have me. I'm right here." Emrys held him tighter.

"But you hate the Unnamed One! I've seen the loathing in your face!" Nate burst out.

Why am I reminding him of this? I should just shut up!

"And you've seen the love in my face for you," Emrys' voice grew rough with emotion. "You're the only one I've ever loved. The only one I ever will."

"Don't you need time to process this? Don't you need time to really think about this?"

Again, shut up! But Nate couldn't help himself. He had to remind Emrys just in case.

"But I *can*, Nathaniel. Just like I knew I loved you from the first. Maybe part of me knew for a very long time. It's not completely a surprise."

Emrys shook himself even as he continued to hold onto Nate tightly. "It doesn't have to be logical to be real. It just is. My feelings have *not* changed."

"You're in denial!" Nate cried.

"Undoubtedly, a little bit," Emrys admitted. "But I am *certain* that you don't want to hurt Mr. Blackwell. And I am *sure* that I love you."

"I don't want to hurt him," Nate whispered. "I want to get him back for Abbie and Turner. I want Daniel to be okay. I want the world to be safe. I want *you* to be safe."

Emrys kissed his shoulder and Nate leaned back against him. He wanted those lips on his. But he couldn't turn around and face him.

"Now we just need to figure out how to get Mr. Blackwell back where he belongs. But first let's help the others," Emrys said.

A flash of the falls from his dream came to Nate and he knew what he had to do and where he had to go.

Nate suddenly straightened again. "Emrys, I know how to do it. I know how to banish the Greater Demon and bring back Turner and Abbie's dad.

You need to help everyone here. I don't think that healing is my gig, you know?"

"What are you going to do, Nathaniel?" Emrys was standing to the side of him now, looking intently at Nate's face, but Nate still wouldn't turn to look at him head on.

"I'm going to take us to the end of the universe. It's this place I visited once in my dreams. But it's real. There are these falls and I'll be able to separate Mr. Blackwell from the Greater Demon," Nate said, remembering

the thunder of water in his ears. He turned towards Emrys, feeling his heart thud faster in his chest as he that beloved face came into view. And there was love in Emrys' eyes. Concern, too. But not hate or overwhelming fear.

Not like before with his parents. When he saw me then he was so afraid. But not now. He knows me now. Or thinks he does. God, I was really there. Somehow. Seeing him. Saving him.

“You will disappear?” Emrys’ tone was concerned with that.

Nate cupped Emrys’ cheek. He ran his thumb along the delicate eye orbit. “I will be back. Please help everyone here.”

“Yes, of course. I will.”

Nate leaned in, half-expecting and half-terrified that Emrys would pull away. But the older man’s eyes closed and his head tilted to the side, awaiting the kiss that Nate placed on his lips.

“I love you,” Nate whispered.

“I love you, Nathaniel,” Emrys said as his eyes opened.

Nate stepped back and gestured for Emrys to move away. “I — I can’t have you near when I do this. I’ll become distracted again.”

Emrys nodded and backed off, but Nate could feel his love still staying with him. Nate mentally compartmentalized it, keeping it safe from what he was about to do. He let his eyes go to Turner who was still unconscious though his color was better. Then he looked at Daniel, who was struggling not to show how much pain he was in.

“You’re going to make it right, Nate. I know you will. Save the day and all that. Kick ass,” Daniel said. There was no fear in his eyes.

He really does think its cool to be the Devil’s best friend.

Finally, his gaze went to Abbie, who faced him with that fierce determination. “You’ll bring him back. You’ll bring our dad back, won’t you, Nate?”

He just nodded. He could do this. He *felt* it. He looked back at Emrys one last time. It seemed impossible that they were still on his side. For all he knew this wouldn't last. When he returned they all might have snapped back to their senses.

"Come back to us, Nathaniel," Emrys said.

"You couldn't keep me away," Nate whispered.

Nate turned away from them then. He looked down at the Greater Demon. Red beady eyes peered back up at him. There was fear in them, but Nate didn't mind seeing it there. It belonged there. He sank down onto his haunches.

"It's time for us to go. Look your last at this world. For it will be the *last* time you will ever see it," Nate promised.

What will happen when we get to the falls? The Falls of Oblivion. That's what they're called. I can remember some things. But there's so much I don't know. It's like I'm operating on one single command.

The Greater Demon shook his head violently. He did not wish to go to the Falls. He knew what would happen there even if Nate didn't. A trickle of fear ran down Nate's spine. He was going to find out. If it was terrible, which it was sure to be, he'd see it.

"You should never have come here. You should never have done what you did," Nate said. He was just realizing that the Greater Demon had done more than just hurt his friends. He had been the cause of his mother's death and his father's incarceration. "We have things to settle."

The Greater Demon trembled this time. For a being that didn't have a human body normally, the Greater Demon was having quite the experience of it. Nate gripped the knife again and drew it along his palm. More blood flowed, but it immediately became fiery ash swirling around his arm.

He slammed that hand against Mr. Blackwell's chest. The Greater Demon let out an unearthly shriek as the ash started to consume both their bodies,

flowing over them both, obscuring the room. Nate closed his eyes and did not open them until he heard the roar of the Falls.

They were about ten feet from the edge of the falls. He was standing on top of the water. Nate laughed. He knew the water was miles deep, but only the soles of his shoes were getting wet. Strange constellations whirled overhead. The water gushing over the edge made an almost musical sound.

He could imagine bringing Emrys here to see it. He would bet the older man would be amazed. It was beautiful. At least the part that was visible from where he was standing. The Greater Demon was still lying on his side, also on top of the water.

“Stay there. I want to see something,” Nate said to him unnecessarily.

Nate walked to the edge of the Falls. He leaned over and looked down. He couldn’t see the amorphous creature that devoured the water far below him.

It’s not water. It’s energy. Life. And that’s me. I’m a part of that. What would Emrys say about that?

Nate stared at the falling water. The mist that rose up looked silver under the heavy, pregnant moon. Nate looked up. It wasn’t just one moon, there were three.

That’s not a moon. That’s a space station.

Nate suppressed a laugh. It was nervous laughter. He walked back to the Greater Demon. He sat down on his haunches in front of it.

“I’m not sure what to do to you. I don’t have all this cosmic knowledge. It’s more like one thought comes then another thought comes and then ... well, there you are,” Nate said. “Abbie thinks I have all this freedom. But I might as well just be an appendage of what’s down there.”

Nate pointed to the edge of the Falls. The Greater Demon’s red eyes followed his hand. There was another tremor that went through him. He strained forward, wanting to speak. Nate allowed him to.

The Greater Demon let out a groan. “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“Doesn’t have to be what way?”

“You and me could take over the Earth and —”

“I don’t need you to do that,” Nate interrupted him with a roll of his eyes.

“And I don’t want to do it.”

“But why —”

“Because it’s already mine,” Nate answered and blinked. He shook his head. “Talking with you is useless. I just need to separate you from Mr. Blackwell. I’m sure the thought will come just like it did to bring you here.”

“Why did you let me kill that woman?” the Greater Demon asked.

“What woman — *my mother*? I didn’t let you —”

“Didn’t you?” The Greater Demon stared hard at him. “You allowed all of it to happen. You *made* all of it happen. Put us all out there on the chessboard like the pawns we all are. And now you’re angry with me?”

Nate just stared at him. “You’re crazy.”

“No.”

“Then you’re lying. Why would I want to destroy my life before it even began?” Nate let out an ugly laugh.

The Greater Demon considered him. “Because you want Emrys Frost. You wanted him to love you. You wanted to love him.”

“And we couldn’t have if I let my mother live and my father be free?”

Those red eyes narrowed at him. “You’re being purposefully obtuse. You know human nature better than that. Even if you are as limited as you claim in knowledge. You needed to be able to relate to Emrys. You had to be broken ... broken in a way that you fit with him. *Perfectly.*”

Nate reared back. One of his hands rose. He was going to strike the man, wipe that knowing grin off that smug face, but then he remembered it

wasn't the Greater Demon's face. "You're wrong."

"I'm not. I'm right and you'll realize it," the Greater Demon said. "Every single thing that happens on Earth to you, to your *friends*, to Emrys, you've planned. You've made happen. You're responsible."

Nate stood up with his arms outstretched, limned in red fire. Anger, and if he were honest, fear, coursed through him. But he knew what to do. The knowledge had come. It filled him like a cup. The Greater Demon was suddenly lifted up into the air and moved until he was hanging over the abyss. Nate heard the glugging sound of his other self drinking, feeding, eternally. Yes, this was right.

"Even if you're right, and I planned all this, doesn't mean I *made* you do anything you didn't want to do. You choose your fate," Nate said. "And now you're going to pay the consequences."

Nate slammed his two hands together. The Greater Demon was suddenly stretched out like the Vitruvian Man. Then Nate pulled his hands apart.

There was a shriek as the Greater Demon was separated from Mr. Blackwell. On the left was Mr. Blackwell, hanging unconscious in the air. To the right was something, it had red eyes, scaly skin and a tale. Perhaps claws, too. But Nate didn't keep the Greater Demon suspended for long.

He let it drop into the abyss. He knew the moment that it had been consumed.

He drew Mr. Blackwell to him. The man's eyes were starting to flutter open. It wouldn't do to have him become conscious here.

Nate smiles as the ash rose up again around himself and the older man.
"It's time to go home, Mr. Blackwell. We have people waiting for us."

CHAPTER FIFTY - COMING HOME

The Falls of Oblivion disappeared and the Frost family crypt took its place. The ash that swirled around them fell onto the floor of the crypt when they stepped back into this world, the human world.

But the Falls are not that far away. Just a step. A single step. Or maybe even a breath.

The ash was bright red in the air until it hit the floor and became black before it disappeared into nothingness. Nate's gaze immediately went to Emrys as though he was a magnet and Emrys his true north. The older man was kneeling beside a supine Daniel, his hands laced with blue fire as he moved them in an infinity symbol through the air over Daniel's chest and groin. His best friend's eyes were closed, his body lax as if with sleep, and his breathing was slow and even.

On the other side of Daniel were Turner and Abbie. Turner was sitting up, but there were black circles under his eyes as if he had undergone a terrible illness. Nate's heart clenched as he guessed that the Greater Demon had blasted Turner's mind with pure demonic hate. The young man's sensitivity was used against him, to torture him. He was holding onto Abbie as if she was the only thing keeping him from sliding over onto his side.

But despite the fact that his friends were currently still hurt, Nate felt a wave of relief go through him. Emrys had been able to help them enough. They had survived. They would recover. The Greater Demon had not taken something forever from any of them.

If only I had acted sooner then they wouldn't have been hurt in the first place. But a memory of the Greater Demon's voice echoed through his mind claiming that he had been the one to plan all of this. *That would mean my friends' injuries were all part of my plan ...*

“Dad!” Abbie cried as she finally caught sight of him and Mr. Blackwell. She would have leaped up to get to her father, but with Turner needing her support, she was forced to sit still. But the wild look of relief on her face was almost palpable. Nate wanted to make that look stay and grow.

“Don’t worry, Abbie, Turner. I’ll send him to you,” Nate said. “Mr. Blackwell, open your eyes. You’re safe. Your body is your own again.” Nate’s voice both sounded and did not sound like his own. It was older or perhaps wearier.

Mr. Blackwell was swaying on his feet. His eyes were closed. His dark gray hair was tangled. The suit he wore looked like it had seen better days and it smelled, too, of sulfur. Nate knew that the clothing had been tainted by the Greater Demon's presence and the Falls of Oblivion were not good on natural fabrics.

Mr. Blackwell's eyes snapped open the moment that Nate commanded them to. He blinked rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the candlelight. A bewildered expression crossed his face as he took in where he was. His head snapped around when his daughter called out to him again.

"Abbie?" he asked and he sounded nothing at all like the Greater Demon had. Nate felt relieved.

"Turner, is he – is he Dad or still – still the other one?" Abbie asked her brother. Her hands gripped her brother's shoulder. Her knuckles had gone white.

Turner's eyes narrowed as he stared at their father for a long moment. Then a smile crossed his wan face. "Yeah, it's him. It's *just* him."

"I've been ... *away*, haven't I? Something happened. There was this *blackness*," Mr. Blackwell murmured. He rubbed his forehead with a shaking hand.

I wonder if he'll remember any of it or if it will stay a blur? Mom remembered when she was herself.

"It's all right now." Nate moved to the older man's side and gently pushed him towards his children. He sensed that Mr. Blackwell still feared that some of the blackness was inside of him even if he didn't know exactly what it was. "You're fine. You're *clean*. They need you."

Mr. Blackwell's eyes, now a warm brown, darted up to Nate's. Nate smiled as welcomingly as he could. Part of him though tensed as he wondered if the older man remembered anything that the Greater Demon had said to him in the Falls of Oblivion. But then Mr. Blackwell gave him a tremulous smile back and went over on stiff legs to his children. He managed to half collapse on the floor beside them. He awkwardly gathered both Turner and

Abbie in his arms and hugged them. Nate sensed that he was not used to showing his children affection.

What better time to start then now?

Abbie mouthed ‘thank you’ to Nate as she buried her face in her father’s suit coat. Nate could almost feel her love for her father in the room like a living thing. Her father patted her gently as if he wasn’t quite sure what to do with an emotional Abbie. Turner allowed his father to throw a manly arm around his shoulders. He looked grateful that his father was back. He glanced up at Nate. His face was filled with questions, but no fear. Not exactly. Nate knew that Turner was aware of what he was, who he was.

But he doesn’t see evil so he’s not sure how to handle it.

At that moment, Emrys let out a large gasp and his head dropped forwards. The blue glow disappeared from his hands that flopped at the sides of his body. He was drained after healing both Turner and Daniel. Nate’s best friend’s eyes opened and they were clear and free from pain.

“Oh, man, Emrys, you saved my balls!” Daniel said and sat up. Abbie struck him — *very lightly* – on the shoulder. “But he did!”

“Yes, I did,” Emrys said, his voice showing a trace of exhaustion.

“Hey, Nate! You’re back! You brought Mr. Blackwell with you!” Daniel crowed, turning around to face Nate, his face glowing with happiness and pride.

Yeah, because literally ripped the Greater Demon out of him and fed it to myself. God, Daniel, you are the most loyal person I know. How lucky I am for you.

Daniel’s unbridled enthusiasm caused Nate’s eyes to burn with tears. His throat felt too thick to speak at first and he had to clear it half a dozen times before he said simply, “Oh, yeah. Course.”

But then Emrys was looking at him, too, and Nate felt his breathing hitch and the tightness in his throat come back full force. Emrys said, “We’re all

so glad, Nathaniel.”

Are you? Are you certain? I'm the Unnamed One, Emrys. Now that you've had a chance to think about it are you really sure that you want anything to do with me?

“I promised you I would return,” Nate answered finally. *I will never leave you.*

“So you did.” Emrys got up to his feet, dusting the bone dust off of his knees.

“You don't need to get up. I can tell that you're exhausted. Just sit there,” Nate said.

“I'm not overly fond of being on my knees – well, unless I am doing something *far* more fun.” Emrys flashed him that cat-like grin.

“Right. We'll have to do that later – I mean – well, we could if you wanted or if you didn't then we wouldn't ...” Nate flushed hotly, but this time it wasn't just because he was talking about sex inappropriately with everyone else present, but because he was supposing that Emrys would ever let them touch again.

“I'm sure I could be convinced.” Another flash of that grin and Nate's groin tightened.

“Good. That's good,” Nate said and shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. Did that mean that Emrys wanted to be with him? It seemed to indicate that, but maybe he was wrong. Maybe he was misreading all of this.

Emrys approached him, that sultry grace in his every step, completely unconcerned about his nudity. He stood before Nate. Just six inches separating them. Maybe less. So close that Nate could feel the heat from his nude body. Nate's cock would have taken an interest if it didn't feel like a vise was cutting off all circulation in his chest with worry that Emrys wouldn't love him.

I'm the Devil! How could I don't know?

And yet he didn't know. His mind was an absolute blank. He didn't even feel like a witch.

"Is that a knife in your hand or are you just happy to see me?" Emrys asked lightly as he pointed down to the blade still in Nate's left hand.

"What? Oh, shit! Sorry, Emrys. I forgot!" Nate hadn't even felt the incredibly light weight of the dagger in his right hand. He nearly dropped it as it seemed ridiculous to be armed around Emrys. But he knew that wouldn't be good. He imagined that the dull, metal thump against the cold stone would cause a reverberation that would call bad things to them. Instead, he gently laid the dagger on top of the pile of his clothes. It was an incredibly dangerous weapon and he would safeguard it.

Emrys' hands slid around Nate's waist as soon as the young man straightened up. He was looking down into Nate's eyes for long moments. "Are you okay?"

"Am I – yeah, I'm fine! I'm good. You know. All good," Nate babbled. "If you're good. Are you *good*? Are we ... uhm good?"

Or do you hate and fear and loathe me?

Emrys glanced over at their friends for a moment. Abbie, Turner and Daniel were all speaking with Mr. Blackwell, filling him in on what had happened, and pretending that they didn't notice what was going on between Emrys and Nate anyways.

Emrys turned back and rested his forehead against Nate's. His voice was very low so that only Nate could hear it, "Look hard at me, Nathaniel. There is just love in my eyes. There is *only* love. Do you see it?"

Nate swallowed hard again. He nodded as he really couldn't speak this time. Fear and love and need and relief pumped through him. He buried his face against Emrys' shoulder and allowed tears to flow as the older man couldn't see them. He could likely feel them, but he didn't say anything about them.

The Devil can evidently cry with relief, too.

Emrys' arms flowed around him and he held Nate with one arm while he stroked the young man's hair with the other. He slowly rocked Nate like he really was a child and the young man felt his breathing start to even out and the hitching crying stop.

He knew that they would have to really talk about all this. There were going to be so many things to say. He would have to tell Emrys about what the Greater Demon had said. Had Nate planned all of this all along? All the bad things that had not only happened to him, but maybe to Emrys, too?

Just so they could love one another? But for now there was perfect understanding between them: Nate was the Devil and Emrys didn't care.

"I was always told that I was going to bring about the end of the world. I just didn't realize it would happen, because I fell in love," Emrys whispered with a soft laugh.

Nate knew that he was joking. Well, *half-joking*. "You don't have to worry. I'm not going to —"

Emrys shushed him. "We don't know what the future will bring, Nathaniel. Just know that ... I will be *beside* you no matter what."

Nate didn't respond. He imagined that a part of him knew *exactly* what that future was. Because for that part of him, the past, present and future were all the same. They were all *now*. Instead, he just held onto Emrys more tightly and relished being in the arms of the man he loved and who loved him back despite what he was.

"Should we get out of here? I don't know about you guys, but I'm sort of hungry," Daniel said.

"You're *always* hungry," Turner remarked.

"Well, yeah, but I would think that you guys would be hungry, too, after nearly *dying*," Daniel whined.

Turner smiled and shook his head.

“I vote that we go to my grandmother’s for walnut and banana pancakes,” Nate said, inspiration striking him. “I imagine that she will be awake, waiting to hearing from us.”

Daniel was nearly swooning with the thought.
“Paaaaacaaaaakkkkkkkeeeeeesssssss! Oh, yes!”

“They’re that good?” Abbie asked.

“They’re marvelous! They’re delectable! They’re everything in the world that is yummy and good!” Daniel assured her.

“They really are, Abbie,” Nate assured her.

“Then I think we’re all in,” Turner said, rallying some energy despite the fact that he looked like he was about to fall asleep.

“But before we go there, I need us to stop somewhere else first,” Nate said.

“Where, Nathaniel?” Emrys asked, his head tilted to the side in confusion.

“We need to go to the Council. Mr. Blackwell, I know that you’ve been through a lot, but I would request that you come as well. I need all of you there so that they believe the danger has passed … for now at least,” Nate said.

Mr. Blackwell nodded. “Abbie’s been filling me in on some of what happened. I – I believe I owe you more than just my life and my children’s lives.”

Nate’s gaze shifted to Turner and Abbie. Had they told their father who Nate really was and how he was able to save everyone? Turner made an almost imperceptible shake of his head. Abbie’s gaze confirmed it.

“Don’t worry about that. I did it just as much for myself as anyone else. I deserve no thanks,” Nate said.

Because the Earth is mine.

“Why do you want to go see those crazy old witches on the Council?” Daniel asked with a disgusted shake of his head. “They didn’t help us *at all*. They’re probably hiding under the covers waiting for the world to end!”

That was the question, wasn’t it? But Nate needed something from them.

“Because I want my dad out of the sanitarium,” Nate said quietly, but his voice was filled with conviction and a tremor of anger. “I want his name cleared. I don’t care what crazy story they have to make the populace swallow. I don’t care if they have to lie, because it won’t be a lie really. He didn’t kill my mother. He killed a *monster*. He doesn’t deserve to be locked up. And they *will* get him released.”

“But Nate, can’t you like magic him out with your uber —” Abbie slapped a hand over Daniel’s mouth, stopping from him from outing Nate to Mr. Blackwell.

“This has to be done by the Council. They need to make this right as they should have eighteen years ago.” Nate’s gaze zeroed in on Mr. Blackwell.

“You know what this creature was like, intimately, Mr. Blackwell. It possessed my mother and attempted to kill me. My father had no other choice, but to stop it *through stopping her*.”

Mr. Blackwell got to his feet. He was steadier than he had been when they had first arrived. “Of course, Nate. I’ll be happy to help in any way I can.”

His head lowered slightly. The arrogant businessman seemed slightly abashed. “I was slated to join the Council before all this happened. I don’t imagine they will be making that offer now so I don’t know how much weight my opinion will be accorded.”

“You’re *fine*, Dad. It wasn’t your fault what happened,” Abbie said, tugging on the sleeve of his suit.

He patted her narrow shoulders. “They won’t say it to our faces, Abbie, but they’ll think I’m tainted or worse … *weak* and that’s why I succumbed to the Greater Demon.”

“You’re not weak, Dad! It could have happened to anyone!” Abbie protested.

“How did it happen, Dad?” Turner asked.

His father ran another shaky hand through his thinning dark hair. “I honestly don’t know. That’s the worst part of it. I was reading the agenda for my meeting with the Raita Corporation and then … nothing. Oh, God, what did that demon do to my company?”

“Nothing that can’t be undone, I’m sure,” Emrys soothed. “And your daughter is correct that this particular demon was hardly a walk in the park.

Mr. Blackwell’s head jerked up and he really looked at Emrys then. “You seem awfully familiar, but I don’t know –”

“It’s Emrys Frost, Dad,” Abbie filled him in. “He’s come back to tow after being away. He’s going to teach us at Dunhaven this fall.”

“Emrys Frost? My God, I thought you were dead,” Mr. Blackwell said, a shocked look crossing over his face

Emrys gave that sharp smile that Nate didn’t like. He petted his boyfriend’s arm. “So did a lot of people. Or at least they *hoped* I was.”

“Well, I’m gladder than I can say about what you’ve done for me and my children and my – oh, my, where is your stepmother?” he asked Turner and Abbie.

Abbie tried not to roll her eyes. She managed to stop it mid-roll. “She’s on a spa and shopping trip that *you* arranged for her in Arizona.”

“*I* arranged it?”

“No, but I figured it would be better to keep her out of harm’s way. Just don’t be confused when she thanks you for it,” Abbie said.

“That’s my girl!” Mr. Blackwell smiled and thumped her back. “Always thinking ahead, my Abigail.”

“Indeed she does. Both your children were quite invaluable in saving the fate of the world,” Emrys murmured.

“Is that a compliment, Emrys? I don’t know how I feel about that,” Abbie said archly though there was a wide smile on her lips.

“A *very small* one, Abigail, and I’m sure it has something to do with the *endorphins* released due to the relief I feel that we’re all alive and not under demonic rule,” Emrys responded dryly.

“Now that’s better.” Abbie tossed her head and smiled wider.

“So now that that is settled, I’m going to get some pants on,” Nate said.
“It’s a little chilly in here.”

Turner snorted and soon all of them were laughing. Was it hysterical laughter? Yes, but it felt like a waterfall of relief, too. Nate was still sputtering as he pulled on his pants and shirt. Emrys sighed as he did the same.

“I can definitely say that I am wanting a bath to clean bone dust out of my unmentionable places rather badly, but I do miss seeing you naked,” Emrys said.

Nate kissed him. “I’m sure that can be arranged again. And maybe we’ll even have that shower together.”

Emrys grinned.

All of them walked up the steps to the cellar. Nate was the last one. He could feel the dagger snugly tucked into the back of his pants against his skin. Emrys waved a hand through the air and the will o’wisps winked out behind them. Just as they did, Nate thought he caught sight of a glowing figure back near the entrance into the catacombs.

Excelsius. So that’s where he went off to. Probably hoping that he could harness the energy in the tile from the Greater Demon. Poor fool, there’s

none there. I wonder if he heard about who and what I am. I wonder if that will be a problem.

Nate turned away from the ghost and hurried up the steps. They all entered the cellar and the difference in temperature from the cold stone vault and the cellar felt astounding. Mr. Blackwell was ahead of them with Turner and Abbie on either side. Daniel followed close behind. As soon as they got to the area where the ghostly imprints of Emrys' parents were still burned into the walls, Emrys stopped and Nate's heart thundered hard in his chest. But Emrys didn't have the sick, frightened look on his face this time as he had before. He looked almost at peace.

"Abbie, Turner, Daniel, could you three wait a moment. Mr. Blackwell, we'll meet you upstairs. One last piece of business to attend to," Emrys said.

Mr. Blackwell nodded. "Of course, I'll be waiting."

The three other teenagers moved back to where Nate and Emrys stood. Emrys waited for Mr. Blackwell to disappear between the racks of wine and for his footsteps to fade out as he went up the stairs to the first floor. But even still Emrys went to the extra step of putting a silence spell on them.

"Now no one can hear us," Emrys said.

"What's up, Emrys?" Nate asked.

Emrys cupped his face. "It's adorable that you're asking. It just shows that ... well, it just shows that you truly are innocent. I don't know how that can be exactly, but its true."

Nate blinked. "Oooookaaaayyy."

"I thought that this was the most appropriate place to say this." Emrys held each of their gazes. "None of us can ever tell *anyone* about Nathaniel."

"You mean about him being the Devil?" Daniel asked.

“Always master of the obvious, Decoy.” Emrys nodded. “But yes, exactly about that fact.”

“Why exactly are you worried?” Nate asked.

“I mean Nate’s the Devil and he can kick ass! Who could hurt him?” Daniel argued.

“My powers aren’t infinite, Daniel. If they were, I would have been able to stop all this before it began,” Nate said. *Unless I planned it.* “I just have *moments* where I know — where I *remember* stuff and know what to do.”

“Don’t stress it, buddy. You fixed it in the end.” Daniel thumped Nate’s shoulder.

“Guys, I know how this is going to sound, but I’m not all powerful. I don’t have infinite knowledge. I’m still ... *me*. The Nate you’ve known. I feel just like all of *you*.” He gestured to Abbie. “And sometimes not even half as confident or smart. I’m not going to take over the world or anything. I know what happened in the crypt must have seemed —”

“You did what he you to do,” Turner was the one to interrupt. “There’s no evil in you, Nate. There’s nothing like what I’ve felt before. You really are you. I believe it.”

“But the problem isn’t you, Nathaniel, it’s other people,” Emrys explained.

“You’re thinking about what Nate might attract, aren’t you?” Abbie guessed. “If people heard who he was they would seek him out.”

“And all sorts of bad shit would go down,” Turner added.

“Oh, like Devil worshipers and stuff?” Nate went a little pale. “I wouldn’t want those people anywhere near me!”

Emrys squeezed Nate’s shoulder. “Do not worry. We are going to keep them away from you. By being *silent*.”

Everyone nodded almost in unison. There were murmured agreements around the room.

"If you guys have anything you want to ask me, you can," Nate said. He pointed towards the spell book and the file about the Whitneys in Abbie's hands. "I have a feeling that the mysteries though in those books might have more answers than I ever will. But I want you guys to feel comfortable with me."

"We do," Abbie said. She shook her head as if to clear it. "I have no doubts about you. I should logically, but I don't."

"You're still my bestie, Nate," Daniel said.

"Like I said, Nate, you're okay in my book," Turner confirmed.

Nate's gaze swung to Emrys. "And you?"

"No problems, which you will believe in time." Another squeeze from Emrys. "So our silence must extend to friends, families and lovers — when you all get any." Everyone rolled their eyes. "You cannot tell your father the truth. Do you understand, Abigail? Turner?"

Both nodded with no hesitation.

"I don't think he'd believe us anyways," Turner said with a wry smile.

Emrys smiled. "Then let's go see the Council."

Luckily, there were still cars in the Frost Manor's garage that worked. All of them piled into one of the large Mercedes sedans and drove towards Sarah Hawthorne's house. Nate was certain that the Council was there even though dawn was just peaking over the horizon. The winding roads were empty, but Emrys drove at a far more sedate pace than he had on their original trip to the Council. One hand was holding Nate's the entire time. The gates for Sarah Hawthorne's mansion were open as were the front doors. Someone was standing in the doorway, framed by light.

Emrys pulled into the driveway.

“I think they’re waiting for us.” Daniel pressed his nose to the glass.

“It’s Henry, the demon butler,” Nate said and he felt a frission of *something* in his chest.

“Are they giving us the bum’s rush before we even get in to see them?” Mr. Blackwell’s face flushed an angry purple.

“I don’t think so,” Nate said. “Guys, wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Nate popped open the car door and slid out. He could smell dawn on the air. It was sweet. He knew that the day was going to be hot and fine. He jogged over to Henry who stepped out to meet him. Though it was still before dawn, Henry was dressed in a three-piece suit and had not a hair out of place. He had a small smile on his lips and looked very alert.

“Ah, Henry,” Nate said as he slowed and then stopped before the butler.
“We need to see the Council. They *are* here, aren’t they?”

“They are. But you do not need to see them,” Henry said.

“Excuse me?” Nate snapped.

“Your instructions to me were quite explicit,” Henry said.

Nate blinked. “*My* instructions?”

“Yes, sir.”

Nate shifted from foot to foot. “Do I often give you instructions?”

Henry smiled. “*Of course*, sir.”

Nate froze and his mouth went dry. He was almost terrified to ask the next question for what the butler might say. “What *exactly* were my instructions to you?”

“To make sure that the Council sought and obtained Shane’s release from the sanitarium this morning and that they cleared his name — as best as could be accomplished,” Henry answered.

“And they did this?” Nate’s palms were sweaty.

“Of course, sir. I made sure of it. They will, of course, believe they did it to repay you for your ... *kindness* for saving the world and to right the injustice of his incarceration,” Henry explained. “He is waiting for you right now, confused, relieved and filled with anxiety about you.”

“He’s — my dad is waiting for me at the insane asylum?”

“In the lobby.”

Nate swallowed hard. “He gets to come home with me?”

“Yes, sir, just as you wanted,” Henry said. “And without the fuss and delay of seeing the Council to get this accomplished ... until the party, that is.”

“The party?” Nate parroted.

“Yes, Mr. Frost’s party. He’ll have it in about a week. They’ll be invited,” Henry answered. “To celebrate your victory.”

Victory. We won. We really, really won. I need to just hold onto that.

Nate spun in a circle and gave out a loud bark of laughter. He grasped Henry’s arms and shook the demon butler. “My dad is free! He gets to go home with me! He’s free! Everybody’s alive! We’re going to have pancakes! It’s so fucking awesome!”

Nate knew he was laughing like a loon. Henry just smiled and nodded as if this was a completely normal thing to be doing.

“Thank you, Henry, thank you so much!” Nate said.

“I am always eager to be of service, sir,” Henry said with equanimity.

Nate froze for a second time. “Henry, do you — do you know who I am?”

Henry smile slowly. “Of course, sir. How could I not after serving you my entire existence?”

Nate's smile was not as certain, but he pushed out of his mind the unnerving parts of this encounter. It didn't matter. Nothing else mattered, but the fact that his father was coming home. Finally! He raced back to the car, laughing again, feeling light as air. He slid into the passenger seat. Everyone looked at him expectantly.

"We're going to need a bigger car," Nate said in answer to their stares.
"We've got to go pick up my dad."

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE Part 1: BLUE SKIES

One week later ...

Nate's eyes were closed, but he could see the golden-red light of sunshine and his own blood through them. He was sitting on Emrys' beach. He could feel the hot sand beneath his palms and bare feet. He was wearing a dark red swimsuit and nothing else. His skin soaked in the sunlight. The rush of shush of the waves was almost hypnotic. He could still hear though the sounds of his family and friends' voices and laughter. He wanted to join in with them, but every time he did, he felt a wave of guilt run through him. For all he could think was that their happiness might be short-lived.

And it will be all my fault.

Today was the first day he had spent any time outside since they had gotten his father out of the psychiatric hospital. He replayed that moment behind his closed eyelids even as he heard Shane's voice rising up as he urged his mother to take a dip with him in the sea.

A free man. Finally free. Finally out where he belongs. But while I'm responsible for getting him out, I must have also been responsible for putting him there in the first place.

They had left the Council and driven to the Blackwell Manor not the sanitarium. Mr. Blackwell's shoulders had been sagging and his exhaustion was evident in every line of his face and body. He tried to insist on there should not being any delay on his account for Nate to get his father, but one look at the man had even Nate saying to drive him home first. He was

anxious to get to Shane, but the thought of Mr. Blackwell suffering would have been wrong.

When they had gotten to the Blackwell Manor, Mr. Blackwell insisted, however, that his children go with Nate, Emrys and Daniel to the psychiatric hospital.

He leaned down, one hand on the hood of the car and said, “This is part of what you fought for. Not just for me, but for seeing justice done. You won’t want to miss this. Trust me.”

“Are you sure, Dad?” Abbie looked slightly worried as she looked at her father’s rather haggard expression.

But Mr. Blackwell cupped her cheek with one of his large hands. “I’m more than certain. I will just be sleeping, my dear, and you can see me do that anytime.”

“We didn’t know if we ever would again, Dad,” Turner whispered. He was blinking back tears.

Their father smiled gently at them both. “Don’t worry. I will be annoying you both in no time. Now go on. Get Nate’s father. Celebrate your incredible, wonderful success.”

“We’ll see you soon, Dad,” Abbie called.

Mr. Blackwell waved them on in response. But they watched him walk wearily up the stone front walk and disappear into the faux-French chateau that was the Blackwell Manor. Once he was safely inside the house, Emrys took off towards the expressway and the sanitarium. Turner continued to watch the house out of the back window.

“Don’t worry, Turner. I’ve got a tracker on him,” Emrys said when he noted the young man’s gaze. “We’ll know if he has any difficulties. From what I can tell, he has just collapsed into bed and is nearing sleep. He should be fine.”

Both Abbie and Turner nodded in response. It looked as if both of them were too overcome to speak.

“Nothing is going to happen,” Nate said. “Not now. I know why you’re worried about leaving him just after you got him back, but … it really will be all right.”

“That’s a relief to hear you say so, Nate,” Turner responded with a smile.

“Should we grab a larger car? Mr. McCollum is a bit bigger than Mr. Blackwell,” Daniel said as they had begun driving to Riverside Psychiatric Hospital. “We’ll be *really* squished back here with him inside.”

“I can sit in Turner’s lap. We’ll have plenty of room,” Abbie answered.

“I would say you could sit on my lap, Abbie, but —” He looked down at his groin and with a hot blush said, “I know that Emrys healed me and all, but ah …”

“Its phantom pain,” Abbie said with a clinical tilt of her head. “Nothing to worry about, Daniel. It will go away.”

“I hope so. It will really put a cramp in my dating life if it doesn’t,” he answered.

Emrys, of course, had not been able to stop himself from saying, “Ah, hope springs eternal that you will have a dating life at some point, eh, Daniel?”

Nate whapped his arm. Emrys just laughed. Daniel did his best Abbie-imitation with an eye-roll.

“The Devil is not pleased that you dissed his best friend.” Daniel harrumphed.

“We shouldn’t even joke about that,” Abbie said after an uncomfortable silence had fallen in the car. Nate could see her eyes in the rear view mirror dart to him and then away.

“I wish we would,” Nate said suddenly. He saw Emrys glance at him out of the corner of his eye. “Eyes on the road, Emrys.”

“I’m capable to driving without looking at the road!” Emrys groused, but he did as Nate asked.

“You want us to joke about you being the Devil, Nate?” Turner asked, one of his eyebrows raising.

Nate’s hands twisted in his lap. “I really don’t know if I can deal with this if we all act like it’s the third rail. So let’s joke about it. Really. I need you guys to – to talk about it, because I can’t … I think I’m going to need to.”

“You’re worried if we don’t talk about it that your thoughts will fester,” Abbie guessed.

“Nate broods.” Daniel nodded sagely.

“I don’t brood!”

“You so do. There is nothing worse than Broody Nate. Take that as a piece of well-earned advice, Emrys,” Daniel said.

Nate crossed his arms over his chest. “I so don’t brood.”

“You’re a sensitive, attractive boy, Nathaniel. You *must* brood.” Emrys caressed Nate’s chin.

“You realize that you are saying that the Devil is moody, don’t you? That seems … *odd*,” Nate said.

“The Devil also has really bad fashion sense,” Emrys muttered. “Though most of your days will be spent in Dunhaven’s school uniform, I *am* so taking you shopping beforehand.”

“Stop snickering, Daniel!” Nate shouted.

“You’re going to wear a uniform!” Daniel laughed.

“So are you,” Nate said with a smile.

“What?” Daniel’s laughter ceased and his mouth hung open. “Uh, Nate, my folks can’t afford Dunhaven.”

“I’m paying for you, Daniel,” Nate said quietly. “We — I need you. I think you’ll keep all of our feet on the ground.”

“You’ll be comic relief at least,” Turner said and thwapped the back of Daniel’s head.

“Ow!” Daniel rubbed the back of it, but looked totally pleased. “You know that my folks are going to totally freak, Nate, that you’re going to do this for me.”

“But they will recognize what a good thing it is for their offspring to go to school with the elite institution,” Emrys said.

Daniel chuckled. “If they knew that you guys were the *elite* they might think otherwise.”

Nate was grinning at the back and forth between all of them, but that grin died as the car glided off the ramp and the dark spires of the hospital came into view. In the pre-dawn light, the hospital had been even more imposing than in daylight. It had an almost spectral presence that had Nate’s shoulder blades drawing together and the skin between them twitching.

“We’re almost there, Nate.” Abbie reached forward and grabbed Nate’s shoulder.

“He’s going to be free, Abbie. After eighteen years,” Nate whispered. “I’ll get to take him *home*.”

“Will that be your grandmother’s house or Whitney Manor?” Emrys asked.

“Grandma’s first, but the Whitney Manor later.” Nate’s forehead furrowed. “After we cleanup the zombies. I’m assuming that with the Greater Demon destroyed that they turned back into *remains*.”

“Eweh! Are you saying that there are a bunch of dead bodies lying in the hallways?” Daniel asked.

“I guess so.” Nate though was hardly paying attention as he said that. He was leaning forward, straining to see the front of the hospital. His heart

leaped as he saw two figures standing outside of the front doors. One of them was his dad and the other was a very flustered Dr. Roman.

Good job, Henry. He's right here waiting for me. You didn't even make him spend one extra minute inside that hateful place.

Nate practically flung the door open before Emrys stopped the car. His lover squawked unceremoniously, but Nate hit the asphalt running. Shane was dressed in pale blue jeans and a white t-shirt. He looked shockingly young to Nate. There was a single duffel by his feet. Nate dashed into his arms. Shane picked him up easily and held Nate tightly against his. Nate buried his face in his father's shoulder. Shane smelled of soap and warmth. His heart hammered wildly in his chest. His father was kissing the side of his head.

"Nate, oh, God, Nate!" Shane repeated over and over.

"It's okay, Dad! Everything is going to be okay!" Nate cried. He gripped his father's back as if Shane might disappear like smoke.

"You're here, Nate, and you're all right. Everything *is* okay," his father said with another frantic kiss on the side of Nate's head. He squeezed Nate tightly. "I can't let you go. I truly thought I — I might have — lost you."

Nate bit back an hysterical laughter that wanted to erupt out. "There's no need to worry about that, Dad."

No need at all. Because I'm the Devil and make other people lost.

"I just don't understand what Dr. Roman has been saying," his father said.

"If he just wanted to let me see you then why are we out here. With my things. And in street clothes."

"You're going *home*, Dad. You're going home with *me*," Nate said with a ferocity that caused black spots to flare before his eyes. He swallowed hard to suppress the rage at all the time he and Shane had missed from overflowing and causing a magical storm around them. The sky did rumble along with a flare of far-off lightning though before he got a complete hold of himself. Nate pulled back to look at Shane's beloved face.

“Home?” Shane repeated the word as if it were alien.

“You’re a free, Dad. This nightmare is over,” Nate said.

“How did you manage this?” his father asked. He looked utterly bewildered. He glanced around him as if the outside was suddenly far more real than before.

“Better not to ask too many questions,” Emrys said, his voice wry and low. He had sauntered up behind them. Daniel, Abbie and Turner were hanging back, watching eagerly, from the side of the now parked car. Abbie was wiping away tears. Even the boys looked rather emotional. “You’re a free man, Shane. That’s all that matters.”

Shane’s eyes widened as he glanced among all of them. He guessed the cause was something nefarious or, at least, nothing that could be said in front of the good doctor. He turned to Dr. Roman. The man was blinking owlishly through his glasses. He still looked half asleep though when Shane’s attention was on him, he perked up and smiled.

“Oh, the poor man is losing his love. Let’s hope that’s not going to be a problem,” Emrys murmured.

“He’ll have to deal with it. Dad’s never coming near this place – *or him* – again,” Nate said with heat. He saw that Dr. Roman was holding a sheaf of papers. Nate tapped them. “These are my father’s releases, right? Do any of them have to be signed in triplicate or anything?”

“Ah, no, no! Everything is in order.” Dr. Roman turned to Shane. He touched his father’s arm and half stroked it, which had Nate nearly rolling his eyes. “To think that all this time you were innocent!”

“Innocent?” Shane frowned and looked at Nate for explanation, but he didn’t know exactly what the Council had whipped up as an explanation to get his father out.

Or what Henry whipped out. At my direction ...

But Dr. Roman answered for Nate in what sounded like a rehearsed script, which likely indicated a spell, “Yes, your wife was killed by a stranger and this person set your house on fire. You were able to save your son, but the shock of losing her and smoke inhalation caused you to have a mental breakdown. It also later spurred the delusions you had.”

Shane just stared at the doctor and then his gaze swiveled over to his son. He opened his mouth to speak, but Emrys stepped in quickly and said, “It’s been quite a surprising turn of events, *but the end result is all that matters.*

That you are free.” Emrys stared at Shane sternly. “Because your son *needs* you to be.”

Shane nodded after a moment and his arm tightened around Nate’s shoulders. “Of course. I’m relieved to be released. I intend to spend the rest of my life taking care of Nate. I’d do anything for him.”

Nate felt a wash of emotion run through him. His throat tightened and he leaned against Shane’s side. He loved the solid feeling of his father’s body. It felt perfect in a completely different way than Emrys’ did, but comforting all the same.

He loves me. He adores me. He means what he’s saying. But do I deserve it? Nate strove to shake off the feelings of unworthiness that ran through him.

“Well, I’m glad that we could at least assist you with those delusions that sprang up after your wife’s tragic murder!” Dr. Roman clapped his hands together and smiled. “Witches. Demons. Ridiculous!” His last word seemed to echo.

“You forgot the Devil, too, Dr. Roman,” Nate found himself perversely saying.

“Oh, well, yes, the *ultimate* figment of imagination of the diseased mind! You’d be surprised by how often he shows up in people’s delusions. Whispering evil thoughts into their ears. Tormenting the supposedly righteous! Oh, the Devil must be a very busy man to do all he is accused of!” Dr. Roman enthused.

Daniel suddenly had a coughing fit. Nate imagined that Abbie was staring at him open-mouthed while Turner looked anywhere but at him.

“Yeah, he must be,” Nate whispered. Emrys touched his back, comforting him.

“But Shane is all right now. Perfectly sane. Absolutely cured,” Dr. Roman said eagerly.

Emrys said, “Well, now that Shane’s a free man, I think we ought to go so he can start his life. Better not wait a minute longer.”

“We will miss you hear, Shane.” Dr. Roman nearly sniffed.

Nate did roll his eyes that time, but Dr. Roman wasn’t looking at him at all. His gaze was purely on his father.

Shane gave him a tight smile and shook the doctor’s hand. “Thank you for all your assistance, Dr. Roman.”

“Good luck to you!” Dr. Roman waved as they walked to the car. “I will always remember out times together with the *greatest* of fondness!”

“He is *really* going to miss you, his dearly beloved patient,” Emrys said with a shake of his head.

“I’m sure the spell I used on him will wear off,” Shane said with a guilty glance back at the doctor who was wiping what looked suspiciously to be tears from his eyes. “I’m sure it will. It *will*, won’t it?”

Emrys patted his shoulder. “Whatever happens to him, it’s far better than what would have happened to you after eighteen years of electric shock therapy.”

Shane’s shoulders twitched. “Yes, yes, quite right.”

“Dad, you take the front seat. I’ll get in the back,” Nate offered as he slid in the crowded back seat with his friends. He didn’t like to be away from Emrys, but he wanted his father to be comfortable.

“I’m glad we did see this,” Abbie whispered beside Nate. She squeezed his hand.

“Me, too,” Nate said, squeezing her back.

As soon as all the doors were closed, Emrys gunned the engine and they shot out of the parking lot like a bullet. Nate couldn’t breathe properly until they were on the highway and out of sight of the hospital.

“It’s so cool to see you out and about, Mr. Whit—I mean McCollum,” Daniel said. “I’m Daniel, by the way. Nate’s best friend.”

“I know exactly who you are. My mother has told me all about you,” his father said as he twisted around in the seat to face them. “And you are the Blackwells.”

“They’re all my good friends, Dad. The world couldn’t have been saved without them,” Nate said.

“Speaking of that. How did you manage all this? What happened with the Greater Demon?” Shane asked.

Nate’s mouth opened and then quickly shut again. He could feel the stillness that filled the car. How could he tell Shane who and what he really was? His mouth dried up and no words wanted to exit his mouth. Later, he would realize that this was the moment when his unalloyed joy.

“Nate?” His father reached for him in concern. Nate felt his fingers brush across the back of his hand and he realized that he couldn’t lose this man so soon after finding him.

“I – I,” Nate got out.

Emrys saved him. He said breezily, “The Greater Demon is gone. He won’t be coming back.”

Shane blinked. “Gone? Truly? Then Mr. Blackwell is no longer possessed? But is he ... is he ...”

“He’s alive and well,” Abbie said with a flushed smile. “Nate made sure of that.”

Shane’s eyes dropped from hers. “Then it was possible to remove the demon without killing its host.”

Abbie blanched as she realized what this meant about Nate’s mother. “Oh, I — I —”

“Dad, there was *nothing* you could have done,” Nate said authoritatively.

“You say that, but Emrys would argue it was because your mother and I eschewed learning magic and allowed our lack of knowledge to be used against us. Our lack of connections with the other Magic Houses caused us to be on our own when trouble struck,” Shane said despondently.

“I know it must seem that way,” Nate began.

But Emrys interrupted him. He saw a flash of Emrys’ topaz eyes in the rear view mirror warning him off. “But that is all over and done now, Shane. You have friends. Powerful friends. Us among them. But also the Council.”

“The Council? Is that how you got me freed from the sanitarium?” Shane guessed, shaking himself from some of the malaise that had fallen over him.

“Yes, they agreed to your freedom as a *reward*, if you will for our actions.”

Emrys’ voice dipped in anger, “Personally, as you shouldn’t have been incarcerated in the first place, they were only doing *now* what they should have done *then*.”

“They had no reason to intercede back then,” Shane said. “A illegitimate Frost child and a Whitney that had rejected her heritage?”

“The Greater Demon didn’t stop being a threat when Mom died, Dad,” Nate said. “It was still causing havoc. They should have known that and taken steps.”

“I see. What was it doing, do you suppose, for those last eighteen years?” Shane asked, his gaze turning to each of them in turn. “He wasn’t always

possessing Mr. Blackwell, was he?”

Nate felt a trickle of unease. What had the Greater Demon been doing?

“Time moves differently for those from the Outer Dark,” Emrys said with a breezy wave of one hand. He quickly put it back down onto the steering wheel when he saw Nate open his mouth to object. “Eighteen years for us might have seemed like eighteen minutes for it.”

“Or it was really busy causing mischief elsewhere and we haven’t found out what it was doing,” Abbie said with a worried frown.

“That’s a real positive thought to leave us on, Abbs,” Turner said.

“It’s merely a reasonable assumption, Turner. We need to be on our guard even if ... well, even though the Greater Demon is gone, its evil may live on after,” she said with a sniff.

“Yes, and as to how the Greater Demon was vanquished ... perhaps we leave that story for another time? When it is not so *fresh* in everyone’s minds?” Emrys suggested.

Shane blanched at the last. He gripped Nate’s hand. “Of course! That was thoughtless in the extreme of me to bring up such bad –”

“No, Dad, you should ... you should know what happened,” Nate said. His mouth was dry as dust. His heart hammered in his chest. He had no idea how to discuss this with him.

If I lie to him now, will he ever forgive me? I don’t know. I don’t know!

“Another time, Nate. Like Emrys said, all I need to know is that you are all right,” his father said with a beatific smile.

“Yes, Nathaniel. *Another time,*” Emrys cautioned.

Nate’s smile felt small and sour in response, but he held onto his father’s hand like it was a life raft in the ever darkening stormy ocean. If Emrys thought it was a bad idea to tell his father then it really was. And that meant

that his fears about how Shane would react to who and what he was would be as terrible as he thought it was.

Emrys turned into the road where his grandmother's house was. Shane immediately sat up straighter and was looking out the windscreen just as Nate had been when he was looking for Shane at the hospital.

"I haven't seen the house in so long. I grew up there, you know, Nate," Shane said. The eagerness and tremulousness in his voice was almost painful to hear.

"It's just the same, Dad." Nate though intended for things to change. New roof. New plumbing. New everything. Though, truthfully, he intended his grandmother to live with him in Whitney Manor. Her and his father. But he sensed that during the school year he guessed that neither of them would want to ramble about the large Manor.

Before Emrys had turned off the motor, his grandmother burst out of the front door. She was white and frantic. The world clearly hadn't ended so she knew that some things had gone well, but she had no idea how well. Nate felt both a welling of pride and shame at her hopeful expression.

I'm bringing her son home to her, but I am the reason he was put away in the first place.

Shane paused with his hand on the door handle. "It does look *exactly* the same. God, how I've missed it."

Nate reached forward and squeezed his father's shoulder. "Get out. Go to her. She has no idea that you've come."

"Come home." Shane got out of the car and stood up.

Nate stayed inside, watching his grandmother's reaction to Shane exiting the vehicle. Everyone else stayed put, too, watching. They were all holding their breath or so it seemed to Nate. When his grandmother caught sight of Shane, she fell to her knees. Abbie let out a harsh breath, but Shane grabbed her and held her up at the last moment so she didn't hurt herself.

“Let’s get to her!” Abbie cried.

She immediately popped the door open and rushed to his grandmother’s other side. She petted the old woman’s back. The others quickly followed suit except for Nate and Emrys.

“Don’t you want to be out there?” Emrys said. “With your family?”

Nate licked his lips. “Are they *my* family, Emrys?”

Their eyes met in the rear view mirror.

“Nathaniel ...”

“No, Emrys. You didn’t want me to tell him about who I was. You think he will react badly to it,” Nate said.

“Hearing it in the car after being released from a mental institution less than an hour before, yes, I do,” Emrys said. “We must be *careful* with how we tell him. That’s all.”

Nate looked out the windows again at the scene. Daniel was telling his grandmother that it wasn’t a dream, that everything was cool, and that she mustn’t cry too much. Turner was swiping at his eyes and awkwardly standing by his sister. Shane and his grandmother were clutching one another as if they, too, believed Shane would be ripped away.

Did I plan what happened to him? Did I intend for all of this?

Through his tears of happiness for her and his father, Nate noticed that the pot of flowers by the door had an even greater profusion of blooms than before. The aggressive life though did not charm him anymore. It seemed almost predatory in some way though the flowers were delicate and beautiful.

They are deceptive. Just like me.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO: BLUE SKIES part 2

Nate shifted his feet in the hot sand as the memories of the past week crowded behind his closed eyelids, each one vying for his undivided attention. Over the rush of the waves, he heard Emrys teasing his father about working for him, but more importantly for being Emrys' spy at Dunhaven. His mind immediately went to three days ago when Emrys had originally made the offer and Shane had accepted.

Midway through the past week, Emrys had determined that they should relocate to Whitney Manor. Emrys was relieved as he was sick of cramming both him and Nate into Nate's small bed at his grandmother's. The allure of having "quiet" sex, so neither Shane nor Nate's grandmother heard them, had lost its allure after the second night when Emrys had awoken on the floor. Nate had accidentally kneed him in the gut, causing Emrys to fall off the bed.

Emrys hadn't suggested his own home on the sea as their base of operation, because he knew that Nate would not leave his father and grandmother. And Nate guessed that Emrys couldn't quite bear the thought of his eyrie-like space overrun with people. Imagine how many of the rooms would become "eating rooms"!

"We need more room! The Whitney Manor undoubtedly has bigger beds. I'm fantasizing about gorgeous four-posters with acres of white sheets, heaps of pillows and soft as silk comforters." Emrys punched Nate's pillows that sagged sadly with the abuse. "This — this is simply not acceptable!"

"It's not all bad here. I think you've have fallen in love with my grandmother because of her cooking," Nate teased.

Emrys nodded. "Her bread-baking skills are divine. She must come with us to Whitney Manor. I believe she will make that exquisite pork roast again. It will go perfectly in the formal dining room there."

"If you flutter your eyes at her, I'm sure she'll make it for you again," Nate said, his gaze drifting out to the window, watching the sunlight flicker through the green leaves. He saw Emrys turn towards him out of the corner of his eye.

“I would give up any thought of your grandmother’s glorious food or even a decent night’s sleep if you might actually start doing something other than staring off into the distance.” His finicky cat’s worried expression came through loud and clear.

Nate blinked and turned back to Emrys. “I’ve just been a little … quiet. That’s all.”

“Quiet? Say silent. Nathaniel, you can’t keep punishing yourself for who you are.” Emrys grasped his hands. “You need to reach out and reconnect to everyone. Even me.”

The last had brought Nate up sharply. “You? You’ve felt … uhm, neglected? You know I love you! You know I adore you!”

“I do not wish to be loved and adored by a statue, Nathaniel. You’ve cut yourself off. I cannot hear your thoughts. I cannot feel your heart.” Emrys stroked his cheeks. “I need you back. Please!”

Nate knew that people had been moving around him, talking and laughing, eating and drinking, trying to draw him out again and again while he had responded only mildly before falling back into the quiet of his mind and the squirrel that chased its own tail, which was whether he told, or how he told, his father about being the Devil.

“I didn’t realize. I’ve just been … thinking and I haven’t come up with any solutions about what to do about …”

“About what?”

Nate let out a soft laugh. “About me.” He ran a hand through his hair.

“That’s the thing. You can’t come up with a solution to such a knotty problem on your own. You need help. And I can only help you if you talk.” Emrys wrapped his arms around Nate, stroking the back of his head. Nate snuggled tightly against the older man’s chest. He breathed in Emrys’ comforting scent.

“So we talk,” Nate said, but then he had an idea. “We talk in that incredible library at Whitney Manor … after cleaning up zombie parts.”

He could think of no better place than the Whitney library to be with his friends. He felt he might be able to speak there and not be so much in his own head. Maybe staring into the fire, with the lights low, and the silence of the beautiful two-story library would loosen his lips and let the words flow. He wanted that so desperately.

“Perhaps we’ll get lucky and the zombies broke down the door to the tomb before they fell to pieces,” Emrys said.

They weren’t that lucky.

“This place looks like a mortuary,” Abbie cried upon glimpsing the piles of bones on the library’s thick carpet and various heaps of corpses on the runner in the hall.

Emrys had a dust pan and broom. He handed them to Daniel. “Start cleaning, Decoy.”

“Hey! Why am I always the one made to do the dirty jobs? Can’t you use magic to clean this up?” Daniel cried.

Nate was the one to answer, “I don’t think we should use any more magic for a while. Magic has its consequences.”

“Yeah, but it has its benefits, too, Nate,” Daniel sighed as he took the broom and tried to clean up the nearest piles of bone, sinew and dust.

“Surely, this place has a vacuum.” His grandmother had her hands on her ample hips as she surveyed the disaster that the undead had left.

“I think I know where one is. Hold on, Mom, I’ll get it.” Shane kissed her on the temple before jogging out of the room.

“I’m sure there are more brooms and dust pans. Come on, Turner, let’s go search!” Abbie grabbed her brother’s arm and tugged him out of the library with a determined look on her face.

“I think I’m allergic to bone dust!” Turner cried as they disappeared out of the library door.

“I’m surprised that the mysterious force that’s kept this place clean for twenty years hasn’t done something about all this,” Nate said. He hated that the space he had loved so much was still such a disaster. The old Chinese food containers were still sitting on the table. With his nose screwed up, he tossed each one of those into a black garbage bag. Luckily, Daniel’s appetite had left little left to dry out and rot.

“Mysterious force?” His grandmother’s eyebrows rose.

“Well, yeah. I mean how else have things stayed so clean in here for twenty years?” Nate asked, gesturing around them.

His grandmother laughed and shook her head. “Money is what has kept this place clean, my dear Nate. Money to hire people to come in here and keep it clean. Your money.”

“My money. God, that does still seem strange,” Nate said. His father came in at that moment, lugging two vacuums. “Dad, we have to think of a dozen things that you want to do — that you haven’t had a chance to do and have fantasized about. I guess we can afford it.”

Shane gave him a small smile. “That sounds wonderful, Nate, but I won’t have you spending your money on me. I intend to get a job and take care of you.”

“A job? What are you going to do, Mr. M?” Daniel asked as he inexpertly swept a few bones into the dust pan.

“Let me show you how it’s done, Daniel. You’re making more of a mess than you’re cleaning up,” Nate’s grandmother clucked as he expertly used the broom and dustpan to clean up one of the undead.

“I don’t know.” Shane leaned over and plugged in one of the vacuums into one of the outlets. “My skills aren’t exactly as up to date as they once were and I haven’t thought of what I would like to do either.”

“And though you’ve been cleared, people might still be a tad bit worried to hire a man that’s been in a mental institution for twenty years for allegedly killing his wife and nearly incinerating his son,” Emrys pointed out as he leaned against the arm of the couch. His lazy grace drew Nate’s gaze. His lover was probably the most beautiful being he could imagine.

“Thank you for pointing out the obvious, Emrys,” Shane said with a soft frown. “I know it won’t be easy getting people to trust me, but I must start somewhere. I won’t sponge off my son and mother’s money. I will help take care of the both of them.”

“Dad, you’re not sponging off of me!” Nate cried, shaking his head to clear it of Emrys’ beauty.

“Shane, don’t be silly!” his grandmother chimed in.

Emrys continued on, “Your son is a billionaire, Shane. He doesn’t need you to go out and work some job that will take you away from him and bring home a measly paycheck that will be less than pocket change for him. What he needs is for you to be around.”

Shane’s face though had a slightly mulish expression. “I won’t sit idle. Nate will be in school next year at Dunhaven —”

“Yes, he will, and you should be with him,” Emrys cut in.

“I’m a little old to be attending a high school,” Shane said though he looked remarkably young again today. He was dressed in a pair of khakis shorts and black t-shirt. Already, his skin had taken on a golden hue from sitting out in the sun every day. It was like his father could not get enough of being outside and in nature.

He’s lost twenty years of sunshine. Who can blame him?

“Emrys, what do you have in mind?” Nate asked.

“Simply this: Shane, you come and work at Dunhaven,” Emrys said.

“As a teacher? I’ve never taught anything in my life!” Shane cried.

“No,” Emrys was shaking his head. “As an executive assistant. Just like you were with Dr. Roman.”

“You want me to be your assistant?” Shane’s eyebrows rose into his hairline.

“Though I love you both, Emrys, my son will end up cutting you if he has to work for you. The two of you are like oil and water except when it comes to my grandson and then you are a singular force. Don’t ruin that with a job,” Nate’s grandmother said with a shake of her head. She had already cleaned up three undead. Daniel was holding open a trash bag to take the leavings.

“Very well said, Bess, but that’s not what I’m suggesting. Though I own the institution, I am only going to be a humble teacher at Dunhaven,” Emrys said. “It is the school’s headmaster who needs a new assistant and you are the exact man for the job.”

Shane blinked. “I — I don’t know —”

But Nate jumped in, “It’s perfect!” He rushed over to his father’s side and grasped Shane’s hands in his. “You would have a job, a purpose, and you would be at the school with me.”

His father looked down into Nate’s face. The love in his expression was almost a physical thing that had Nate swallowing. He had tried to make himself more open again as Emrys had requested. It was both painful and wonderful.

“I guess the job has that going for it. All right, I’ll do it,” Shane said, squeezing Nate’s hands warmly.

“Excellent!” Emrys pushed off the couch, a smile on his face. “Oh, there might be another reason why you taking that job is … well, a good idea.”

“What reason would that be?” Shane asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Oh, well, I have good reason to believe that the headmaster may be involved in leading the students astray into … Devil worship.” Emrys

buffed his nails against his shirt as he said the last.

“What?” That seemed to be said by everyone in the room. Nate knew that he might have shouted it the loudest.

Emrys raised his hands and his gaze quickly darted to Nate. “I’m not worried about the Devil actually showing up. From what I know, the Unnamed One never does bother with these things, but the other demons use it to gain a foothold into this world.”

Seriously, why would I waste my time? But what about other demons? They would latch on that like flies on crap.

“And we’ve seen how well that’s worked out,” Nate murmured, feeling fire and ice run through his veins. Destroying other Greater Demons appealed to him, but at the same time he wanted nothing to do with the Outer Dark for a long time.

“Exactly.” Emrys smoothed a hand over Nate’s hair.

“If you think the headmaster is doing this then you should fire him!” Shane cried. “Don’t let what happened to us and the Blackwells happen to anyone else!”

“That would be the easiest course, but the not the best course,” Emrys said.

“What are you thinking, Emrys?” Nate asked.

“I don’t know how deep the corruption goes,” Emrys pointed out. “I need to know who I can trust and who I can’t. Shane is my way to determine that. He can be my inside man.”

Shane nodded after a few moments. “I will do my best, of course. Though won’t he suspect me of being in your corner since you’re dating Nate?”

Emrys laughed. “Actually, I think that will work in our favor.”

“I’m dreading to know how that is true,” Shane murmured.

“Come now! You already know the answer to that! And you’ll just have to tweak your annoyance with me. Because, after all, what father wants Emrys Frost romancing his son?” Emrys waggled his eyebrows at Shane.

Nate rolled his eyes. Shane just gave him a pointed look and a shake of his head.

“I suppose you’re right. Though I don’t think I’ll have to tweak my annoyance,” Shane said. “It’s quite in the forefront of my mind.”

“Good!” Emrys enthused, one of his arms sliding around Nate’s shoulders. “It makes it all the more exciting to think of you disapproving of our trysts!”

“You’re a riot, Emrys.” Nate rolled his eyes and let out a laugh.

“I guess I’ll have little need to act with this headmaster,” Shane remarked.

“Then that’s all settled! You’ll seem like a natural enemy of me! You’ll become fast friends with the headmaster to be sure,” Emrys enthused. “And then you’ll report eve-rything that’s truly going on in the headmaster’s office.”

And so it was settled that Shane would be working at Dunhaven. A knot in Nate’s chest eased at the thought. Though he was seemingly frozen from speaking of his own thoughts, being with his friends and family helped hugely. But Emrys was not going to let Nate off the hook from talking.

The two of them were lying on the leather sofa in the Whitney Manor’s library. Despite it being summer, there was a fire in the fireplace. The shades were drawn so that the light was dim. Daniel, Abbie, Turner and Shane were off in the kitchen helping Nate’s grandmother prepare dinner. Nate and Emrys were alone and curled around one another. Emrys’ hands stroked down Nate’s front. The beauty of the firelight flickering against their clothes and skin amazed Nate. But he knew that this was just a reprieve from the insanity than what would come.

What else do I have planned that I don’t know about?

“Nathaniel, what are you thinking?” Emrys’ voice rose out of the semi-darkness. Nate had thought the older man asleep.

“Nothing,” Nate said.

“Now that is a bold faced lie, young man. It’s not even pretty.” Emrys squeezed him.

Nate let out a huff of air and buried his head against Emrys’ throat. The fire snapped and popped as the wood’s sap heated and dissipated. He was quiet for a minute, before he let out a soft confession, “I don’t know what I’m going to do this.”

“Do what?” Emrys stroked his back and carded his fingers through Nate’s hair.

“Be – be me,” Nate whispered. He was shocked by the tears that sprang up saying that. They fell on Emrys’ shoulder before he had a chance to wipe them away.

But his finicky cat didn’t seem to mind. He just held Nate tighter. “Nothing has changed, Nathaniel.”

“Are you crazy? Everything’s changed!” Nate choked out. “I don’t know who I am! I don’t know what I’m capable of! Emrys, I’m the baddest of the bad. How am I supposed to deal with this? I feel like I’m a stranger in my own skin!”

“I know that everything feels new, but the truth is that only your perception has changed,” Emrys said. His fingers dug into Nate’s hair. “The person you were two days ago is still the person you are now.”

“But I know now that I’m the Devil now! I know that I am responsible for terrible things. God, there are so many things I’ve done that I’m not even aware of,” Nate whispered. “Terrible things, Emrys. How do I ever trust myself again?”

“You are not responsible for them. You have only existed for 18 years,” Emrys said. “And in those 18 years, you have done nothing to harm

anyone.”

“Until I destroyed the Greater Demon,” Nate said. “I utterly obliterated him. And I’m not sorry about that.”

“Nor am I,” Emrys said.

Nate could only see the outline of him in the firelight. Emrys’ face was normally so expressive and showed so much. Maybe he was glad of not being able to see those subtle nuances of expression, because Nate didn’t want to know if Emrys was lying in any way, telling him pretty lies, because he needed to believe the other man.

“The last thing the Greater Demon told me was that I had planned all of this,” Nate said. He stilled, waiting for Emrys’ reaction.

The older man shifted his head on the pillow. “We have free will, Nathaniel.”

“But there’s Fate, too, right? You said so yourself once. We were fated to be together … maybe really fated,” Nate said. His hands fisted in the covers. “Like you had no choice.”

“You are pulling the blanket off of me, Nathaniel, when you do that,” Emrys growled.

“Oh, sorry!” Nate quickly began to cover Emrys up with all the blanket that covered both of them. He didn’t want his finicky cat to get cold.

Emrys caught his hands and rolled Nate on top of him. Their bodies pressed against one another. An electric spark went up Nate’s spine. His voice was fond and full of love as he said, “How can you worry about being evil, Nathaniel, when you can’t bear me being cold?”

“But I –”

“And the reason you have tried to stay away from Shane, your grandmother and your friends was from you feeling unworthy of our love.” Emrys let out a soft laugh. “But your love for us was a like a beacon. The Devil you may be, Nathaniel, but you are not like anyone ever thought. Especially me. So I

know that you did not plan anything terrible for us or anyone. I know that you never could.”

Nate sank down on top of him. His eyelids felt full of sand at that moment. He was so tired and worn out. He just wanted to be held and loved and to let these bad feelings fall away.

Avoidance again. Like I did with my father and mother for so long. But I just need to curl up and lick my wounds for awhile. Is that so bad?

“I wish I could believe all that, Emrys,” Nate’s voice was little over a whisper.

Emrys kissed his tenderly. “You will. It will just take time.”

And time it continued to take. Here he was on Emrys’ beach. The sun was shining beautifully overhead. His friends, his family and the Council was all over at Emrys’ house. Henry was there. He had made various sandwiches, salads and delicious cookies that Daniel was devouring like there was no tomorrow. Nate opened his eyes. He blinked until he was able to see clearly.

Abbie and Turner were dashing into the water and just as quickly, dashing out. Abbie was yelling delightedly as the ocean’s spray covered them. Daniel’s mouth was full of sugar cookie, but he was rooting them on.

But his friends and family weren’t the only ones there. The Council was as well. And Nate had a special amusement in seeing them there. The more that they were on his side, the people who were supposedly in charge, were on his side. He would make sure that it stayed that way.

Samuel Thurlow was drinking a beer and grinning grimly at the others. His old body took on a wash of warmth in the sunlight. Beside him was the elegant Leticia Waite. Her swimsuit was black, of course, with a long wrap that covered her to her knees. Atticus Snow had no shame. Though he was the oldest by far, he was wearing a speedo that left little to the imagination. Nate quickly drew his eyes away. Finally, Sarah Hawthorne wandered past them, offering cat cookies to anyone who would have them. Nate smiled.

Henry, in a suit jacket, but with shorts and sandals, was suddenly offering him a sandwich and cookie. Nate smiled indulgently. He took both. “Thank you, Henry.”

He touched his forehead. “Of course, sir.”

Nate’s mouth opened to say something. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to say or to ask. There was so much on both counts. Henry knew things. Henry knew him. Henry might know the future. But all the questions died on Nate’s lips. Suddenly, he realized that the sun was being blocked by a cloud. Aggravated that this perfect day might be marred by the weather, Nate’s anger was roused. He felt his aggravation jump up to the cloud and rip it apart. The sky abruptly became clear. A cloudless blue sky that nothing would spoil came into view. And it was as if Nate saw clearly for the first time.

I can determine what happens. I can keep my friends safe. It’s one thing when I was ignorant of who I was and what was possible. But now I’m awake and aware. Everything is different. I can make things as I want them. I can make my friends and families’ lives perfect from now on.

Nate smiled broadly. Why couldn’t he make things perfect to those he wanted? Surely, the worst was behind them. Surely.

“Blue skies, Henry,” Nate said.

“Yes, sir, they are beautiful blue skies,” Henry agreed.

“And they are going to stay that way,” Nate said authoritatively.

Henry said nothing.

Emrys suddenly sat down beside him. He was clad only in a scrap of black cloth around his hips and groin. Acres of beautiful, pale skin was available to his eyes. He couldn’t quite look away from it. Emrys’ skin was wet from the sea. He had been thrown in by Shane.

“It’s a beautiful day, Nathaniel. Won’t you go swimming with me?” Emrys asked.

“Yes, of course,” Nate said. “Whatever you want, my love.”

Emrys leaned over and kissed Nate’s cheek. “You are all I want.”

Nate smiled. So long as that was true, blue skies would be all they would ever see.

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