

TEMPLE OF MAGIC & BONE

ALESSA THORN

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THE INFERO UNIVERSE

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1

Tarael Vanth woke up to his cell phone vibrating and a ghost shouting at him. Both were surprisingly common at 2 a.m. on a Tuesday night.

"Vanth! Your phone is ringing, and it's annoying!" Cecelia groaned.

Vanth opened an eye just in time to see her ghostly fingers pass through him as she tried to shake him.

"I'm awake..." he grumbled and shrugged off the chill on his skin left behind by her touch. For a moment, she became clearer from the magic she had swiped from him. He sat up and fumbled for his phone.

"What," he answered.

"Is this Tarael Vanth? I got your number from an acquaintance, and I require your assistance," a man's voice demanded from the other end of the line.

Vanth could almost smell the entitlement through the phone.

"How many bodies?"

"Two."

"Sex?"

"Female, and they are human," the man replied and gave him an address.

It was located in the more expensive area of the human district. Vanth didn't want to have to get out of bed, so he rattled off an obscene amount of money.

"Done. When can I expect you?"

"Give me twenty minutes." Vanth hung up the phone and rubbed at his face. "Should've asked for more money."

"I keep telling you that," Cecelia said from where she sat on the end of his bed. She was an old ghost dressed in the flapper dress she had died in during the 1920s. She had taken a liking to him on his first visit to London and had been haunting him ever since. She wasn't the only one, but she was the most vocal one on trying to run his life.

"Bit of privacy?" Vanth said.

"I've seen it all before," she laughed at him then vanished through a wall.

He found his jeans on the floor and pulled a clean shirt from his work clothes dresser. They tended to be band shirts that were so old, they were falling apart. He had a messy job, and more often than not, he had to burn whatever he wore. He went through a lot of clothes. He laced his boots in the dark and stumbled into his bathroom.

The ghouls must have cleaned again because someone had rolled up the end of his toothpaste tube. Small tasks kept them busy and stopped the rigor mortis from kicking in. Cleaning and laundry were the first things Vanth taught them. That and not to bite each other for fun.

He braided back his long black hair. He had only washed it a few hours beforehand, but rich boys always made the biggest messes. After nearly ten years of being a cleaner for the rich and monstrous, Vanth knew it to be a fact.

He washed his face and ignored the permanent smudge from his waterproof eyeliner. He would be back in a shower in a few hours anyway.

Out in the kitchen, a ghoul was doing its best to make coffee and was struggling with the buttons on the machine.

"Leave it. I'll do it," Vanth said, moving it out of the way.

It shuffled off and immediately started to water the plants. The triple-storied funeral home he had converted was more spotless than usual.

He frowned, and his brain realized what was wrong. The ghouls weren't resting. Not that they needed to in the same way the living did, but usually, they only managed small tasks before getting distracted and going down to the freezers. They had been cleaning over and over again.

Fuck. He should have felt the pull on his magic that he had given them to keep them animated.

"A problem for later," he grumbled, filling a travel mug with coffee and heading downstairs. The van was already packed, so he opened the back doors so his two current ghouls could climb in.

Cecelia popped into existence again. "Be safe, Vanth. Something doesn't feel right tonight. The dead are restless."

"The dead are always restless," he said and got into the driver's seat.

"I'm not joking, Vanth. It all feels wrong," Cecelia replied, stamping her foot.

"I'll be careful," he promised her. He always was. He was still operating his business after so long because he was cautious to the point of being paranoid.

Vanth drank his coffee as he drove through the rain-drenched streets of Inferno. He lived on the edge of the mage district, and that was about as close as they liked a necromancer like him.

Even in a city full of monsters and magic, necromancy talent was rare. People feared it as they rightly should.

Vanth never had to choose the magic path; he had ghosts following him for as long as he could remember. If the mage guild knew just how powerful he *really* was, they would probably all band together to kill him.

Every few months, some cocky fucker tried to take him on, and Vanth turned them into a ghoul for their audacity. The two he had in the back of his van were mages sent to kill him. Bodies that already had a bit of magic in them tended to reanimate better, so they did him a favor.

Vanth pulled up in front of the address he had been given. It was a two-story house that was generically neat. The kind of house you didn't look twice at.

A sliver of dread shot up his spine as soon as his boots hit the concrete driveway. The hair on the back of his neck rose, and he looked around. Perfectly manicured yard, no signs of decay or rot anywhere that was a usual sign of something fucked up going on. It didn't taste like dark magic, at least not of a type he knew. His senses were never off, and every one of them flashed with a bright EVIL light.

"Fuck, I really need to learn to say no," he whispered. He could get back in his car and drive away. Just pretend like he had never felt it.

A ghost girl popped her head out of the hedge beside him. "Hide! He can't see you if you hide."

"Who, sweetheart?" he asked.

"You're late," a voice said, and Vanth looked up at the man standing in the light of a side door. It was the owner of the voice that hired him.

"I was finishing up somewhere else," Vanth lied, his hackles rising.

He let a few of his mental wards drop and instantly smelled the reek coming off him. He looked freshly showered, with no blood under his nails. He seemed as dull as the house, with pale brown hair and forgettable features. That was until he really looked at you. His eyes were dark brown and cold as a crypt despite the welcoming smile.

"I'll just get my bag of tricks, and we can get started," Vanth said, smiling back. He opened the doors to his van and let the ghouls out. He grabbed his kit and made sure his dagger was within easy-grabbing distance.

"Seems like a nice neighborhood. Do you live here?" Vanth asked, stepping inside the house. He could already smell the blood, and so could the ghouls. They bumped against each other restlessly.

"No, I don't live here. Why are you asking personal questions?" the man said, his eyes narrowing.

"I'm asking so I know if there's going to be a nosy neighbor writing down my license plate numbers," Vanth replied, keeping his tone light.

The man in front of him wasn't possessed or one of the human demon hybrids that popped up occasionally. He was just an asshole.

The man smiled. "No one is going to notice. They never do."

"Been in this kind of jam before, huh?"

"I usually take care of it myself, but your name has come up in certain circles as being discreet and reliable."

Vanth hummed. "You have to be in this business. Want to tell me what happened?"

"Let's just say I had a bad day and played a little too hard with my toys." There was a gleam in his eyes that Vanth really didn't like. He opened a pink door he was directed to and looked inside. There were two bodies that were placed on identical twin beds.

Vanth knew he lived in the gray of the world, but there were some lines that he would never cross.

"I see," he said and placed his kit down on the pale wooden floorboards. He crouched down and surveyed the carnage of the butchered bodies.

"What are you doing?" the man asked, amusement in his voice.
"Admiring the view?"

"Not exactly." Vanth cleared all the angry bees in his head before knocking three times on the floor. Ghosts suddenly appeared in the room. Small, scared little ghosts of the children that had lived in the room over the years. "Well, that settles it."

The man snorted. "Settles what?"

"What I'm going to feed my ghouls tonight." Vanth moved with all the grace and strength his fae blood had gifted him. He pulled the enchanted black dagger from his bag and drove it into the man's chest before he could raise a hand against him. He sank to the floor, gasping for air and fumbling for the dagger. Vanth smacked his hand away.

"Don't pull that out now. I wouldn't want you to die on me, and it's been enchanted to hold your blood in."

Vanth pulled out one of the drawers of his kit, took out a syringe full of a fun paralytic he had distilled, and injected it into the man. He stopped going for the dagger, his body losing feeling.

"Put this one in a bag and make sure he's in the space at the front of the van," he instructed his ghouls. The small ghosts were murmuring all around him. "You don't have to stay here anymore. He's going to suffer for what he did to you. I promise."

He had a job to do, but just not the one he had been summoned for. He sent his magic through the ether, and the little ghosts blipped out one at a time as he sent them into their Afterlife.

Vanth pulled his phone from his pocket and rang his favorite police officer in Inferno. "You need to come to the following address," he said when the officer picked up.

"Vanth? What's happened?" Dimitri murmured.

"Just do it. Oh, and don't worry about finding the culprit. It's been taken care of," Vanth said and hung up on him. He cast a quick spell to erase any DNA he might have left behind and ensured the door to the house remained unlocked.

Vanth was heading home when his phone started ringing. He was going to hang up again when he saw it was Andres. "What do you want at this time of night, creeper?"

"I just had something weird land in my crematorium, and I think you should look at it before I burn it," Andres replied.

"Define 'weird' because I've had a bitch of a night already."

Andres's voice was barely above a whisper. "Magic. Fucked up, scary magic. I can smell it, but I can't see what happened. Someone is trying to hide the evidence."

Vanth turned his van around. "I'll be there in ten. Put the coffee on."

It was just going to be one of those fucking days.

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There were multiple crematoriums, temples, and burial rites establishments in the city of Inferno. With so many creatures and cultures all living together, there was a need to have people who could accommodate all their last wishes.

Andres ran the kind of crematorium you could bring anything to and get it burned for a price. It was a service that Vanth had used more than once to get rid of evidence. Andres prided himself on his discretion, which was why he must have been really freaking the fuck out to call Vanth about a body drop-off at all.

Vanth made sure his breathing passenger was still alive before he left his ghouls to watch over him and headed in to see Andres. He checked the streets around the crematorium and made sure all his psychic wards were locked down. Where the dead were handled, ghosts loved to linger, and he really wasn't in the mood for any more that night.

Or morning. Dawn wasn't too far away, and there was no point trying to sleep.

Satisfied that no one was watching the crematorium, Vanth knocked on the back door. An eyehole slid open, and Andres opened the door for him. Andres was short, lithe, and looked more like a gamer than a cremator. It was deceptive as hell because he was a fae creature that was older than dirt.

It was frowned upon to call them 'lesser fae' anymore, though most of the older ones still used it because they were determined to keep *what*

exactly they were a secret. *Lesser fae* was a blanket term that could cover everything from pixies to selkies to goblins and trolls.

The high-born fae were more like Vanth, looking mostly human with big builds, pointed ears, and bad attitudes. It didn't really matter when most fae could use glamors to look however the fuck they wanted. Andres currently looked about twenty and had purple hair to match his violet eyes.

"Thank the Dagda, you're here," Andres said. His Irish lilt only appeared when he was stressed out, which made Vanth's hackles rise.

"You been shopping at the kids' section of Hot Topic again?" Vanth teased, tugging on a purple lock.

Andres knocked his hand away and flipped him off. "This from the male whose whole look could be described as Jack Sparrow does necromancy."

Vanth laughed. "I draw the line at dreadlocks."

"Only because you high fae are so proud of your pretty hair." Andres crossed his arms. "I didn't call you here to trade barbs with you, Vanth."

"Then show me what has gotten your Hello Kitty panties in such a bunch," Vanth said, still trying to lighten the mood.

Not a lot worried Andres, but he was so spooked, Vanth could smell the tang of fear radiating off him.

"Laugh it up, necromancer. You know I wouldn't have called you over nothing," Andres huffed irritably.

"I know. I'm just messing with you. Show me, and I'll try and figure out what it is," Vanth replied, patting him on the shoulder.

Andres waved him through a pair of metal and glass doors and into the cool chill of the morgue.

"This pair got dumped here a few hours ago by a human woman. Tall, brown hair, and dead eyes. She paid me double my rate and said it needed to be done as soon as the fire was hot," Andres said and opened a square freezer door. The magic hit Vanth before Andres even pulled the body out. It was dark power, the kind which only came from sacrificial magic.

"What the fuck is that?" he growled.

It felt...familiar.

"Think I'm overreacting now?" Andres asked. He wasn't being a smartass. He was freaking out.

Vanth put on the gloves that Andres offered him and unzipped the body bag. Inside was a high-fae female with curly black hair. She was fit with the

kind of muscles that came from constant training. Vanth checked her hands and took notice of the calluses.

"Did she have weapons on her?" he asked.

"No. She was wrapped in plastic and was naked. The same with the other, also female."

It's not your business. Vanth's common sense tried to make itself be heard for the second time that evening. *Just let it go.* But he couldn't because the kind of magic that was coming off the body was still charged. If it had been used for a spell, the working hadn't taken it all. Or the people performing didn't realize how much they had left behind. *Weird.*

"Did the client seem worried about any threat of reanimation?" he asked.

Andres shook his head. "Not that they said. Though they were insistent on it being done ASAP."

Vanth frowned and fought the urge to rub his scarred-up ear. It was from the first animation he had attempted, and the ghoul had been violent and raging. Vanth had moved fast enough to keep it from taking off his head, but his ear had been cut up enough to leave a permanent reminder of his fuck-up.

"Can you get the magic out? I don't want it released in my furnaces and contaminating them," Andres said, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"I can try, but I can't promise anything. What I don't understand is why they would pump a body with this much power and then toss it away?" Vanth said, leaning closer to the corpse.

A strange perfume was coming from the female. It was like temple incense with a strong hint of belladonna.

Vanth licked a gloved finger and traced a symbol on the female's chest. Death magic clawed up from inside of his chest before releasing. His magic touched the dead female, and gray sigils appeared all over her body. He had no idea what dialect they were.

"Would you look at that?" Vanth whispered, eyes wide.

Andres leaned over a sink and vomited. "W-What the fuck, Tarael?"

"I have no idea," he replied. He took out his phone and began taking photos. "I've never seen anything like this before."

The magic thrummed and called out to him. It felt strangely familiar, but Vanth had no idea what it was. As someone who had spent most of his seventy-seven years of life studying necromancy, to find something new

and not of his own creation was better than Christmas. No matter how fucked up it was.

Vanth could hear the song of the magic whispering, whispering, whispering. He tugged off one of his gloves and touched a smokey gray sigil. Magic shot up his veins like the purest heroin, and Vanth stumbled back.

"Vanth! Talk to me!" Andres said, catching him before he could hit the floor. Vanth opened and closed his mouth, trying to form words as the magic pounded through him like he had been plugged into a battery or hit by lightning. He breathed through it and tried to focus on making it settle.

Before a big spell, he would sometimes draw an amplification sigil and meditate in it, feeding his magic into it and letting it flow back into him. The longer he sat in it, the higher the well of his magic filled. This was like a flood, not a mere top-up. Vanth gestured to Andres to help him to the sink where he threw up his coffee.

"What the fuck did you do to yourself?" Andres demanded, his voice rising higher in panic.

"I accidentally siphoned the power out of the body. Just... Just give me a second," Vanth muttered. He rinsed out his mouth and washed his face. The power settled to a hum, and Vanth could finally think straight again. He felt like he could summon an army, and a part of him was terrified by that.

Another part wanted to try just to see if he could pull it off.

Vanth wiped his face with paper towels and tried to ignore the shaking in his hands. "Fuck, Andres. I don't know what you've stumbled on, but I need you to keep these bodies on ice for me."

Andres's purple eyes widened. "What?! I can't have these things in here!"

Vanth ran his hands over his face again, trying to get rid of the ants that were suddenly under his skin. "Look, I'll pay you to keep them for the day, and then I'll come and get them. I have two ghouls in my van that will go fucking ballistic if I put these bodies in there."

"I have a better idea. How about I burn them like I was paid to?" Andres demanded. He looked Vanth over. "Dark Morrigan, you are pulsing with magic right now."

"That obvious, huh? Fuck. Please, Andres, there's somewhere I need to be, but I'll come back. Don't burn them. There's something fucking weird

happening, and I don't want you getting rid of the evidence until I know what these sigils are."

Andres hissed, his glamor slipping enough to reveal a mouthful of sharp fangs. "I'll give you *one* day, and then I'm burning them."

"Thank you. You're a good friend," Vanth said. "Even if you dress like an emo teen."

Andres didn't bite. He was too upset. "I don't know why you can't just drop your ghouls off and come back for them."

Vanth shrugged. "I got a hot date."

"That will be the day," Andres snorted. "If you knew how to date, you wouldn't hang around ghosts all the time."

Vanth laughed. "Isn't that the truth? I'll be back. I promise. This is one appointment that I can't afford to miss."

Andres nodded. "I trust you, but I'm serious this time, Tarael. I'll burn them because they are freaking the fucking dark hells out of me right now."

To keep Andres happy, Vanth warded the two freezers the bodies were kept in to make sure the magic in them didn't leak out. It was death magic in its purest form and would reanimate anything it was exposed to for too long.

Vanth knew this for a fact because he finally figured out why the magic felt familiar—it was his.

3

The sun was coming up by the time Vanth got back to his van. The ghouls were still silently staring at the body bag. Vanth checked that the man was still breathing and that the paralyzing potion was still good.

"Only a little while longer, I swear," Vanth told the ghouls. If he went home, he would probably fall straight to sleep, and he couldn't risk it.

Instead, he went to his favorite café and loaded up on breakfast croissants, pastries, and extra coffees. He drank his cup of five espressos mixed together and drove through the fae district and towards the outskirts of the city.

The fae district was an eclectic mix of modern and ancient buildings that matched whatever personality of the family or beings that lived in it. As a result, you could go through impossible landscapes on a regular basis. A forest grew in the center of the business area for a start. Then, there were the intersecting rivers and canals that led to the ocean. As all the tales warned, it was better to stay on the main roads and not wander off while you were in their territory.

People tended to forget there were ancient gateways in it that led to Faerie, Tir Na Nog, the Green, the Otherworld...whatever your preference to call it. The point was, it led you into a place in the ancient lands of the fae where very few laws protected your ass.

The gateways acted like anchor points and had been sanctioned by the First Council. The fae didn't extort them because everyone knew if they

tried to bring in armies or monsters, Inferno would fight back. The dragons would scorch the gateways and the district and wouldn't lose a scrap of sleep over it. The fae, higher and lesser, knew better than to piss off the dragons.

Vanth parked outside the gates of what looked to be a large, fancy estate. The guards checked him for weapons and let him in with a welcoming smile.

A woman in scrubs with unicorns on them was waiting for him as he stepped into the foyer to sign in.

"One skinny cappuccino and a cinnamon roll," Vanth said, handing them to her.

"You're a saint even if you look like the devil," the med-mage said, her turquoise eyes shining.

"Clara, I don't know where you get the idea that I'm the devil."

Clara grinned. "Because I actually *know* you, Vanth. How many ghouls have you got waiting in your van today, huh?"

"Only two, but they are my housekeepers. I need them to keep up with my laundry," Vanth replied. He gestured at Clara, and she handed him a clipboard. "How is she doing today?"

"Restless. She had a bad night. I knew you were due for a visit today. Otherwise, I would have called you," Clara replied, tucking her pen into the pocket of her scrubs. She checked her watch. "She will have finished her shower by now if you want to go in."

"Thank you, Clara. I appreciate you. You know that, right?" Vanth said, giving her his most charming smile.

"Ah, huh. Smile all you like, but you know your nonsense doesn't work on me. I appreciate the breakfast, though."

Vanth shot her a wink. "Heartbreaker."

Clara only waved him on, and Vanth passed through a sharp sting from the wards.

If humans aged and lost who they were to degenerative diseases or mental disorders, they were put in care facilities and watched over with security. The magical creatures and wielders of the world were not as harmless when they went mad. Magic gone wrong led to all sorts of problems, so Inferno had facilities with everything from med-mages to witch doctors to treat and care for them. This place was one of the nicer,

more expensive ones, and it was the reason he had fallen into becoming a body cleaner in the first place.

All his grand ideas of discovering and developing new magic went out the window when his mother got sick. Everything had changed then, Vanth most of all. The facility looked like a retirement village with little cabins for the more independent occupants. There were other parts that were more like hotel rooms that nurses could keep a closer check on. His mother, at least for the moment, was in a small cabin with geraniums growing in front of it.

Eiline Vanth was fond of growing flowers at all times of the year, and slowly being consumed by a curse wasn't going to stop her from having bright, impossible blooms around her. She had a strong streak of death magic in her too, but the light and flowers side was what she liked to present to the world. It was her way of assuring people that she wasn't a threat. The same way Vanth did by hiding the true depth of his power.

Don't mind me. I'm just a little necromancer with too many black T-shirts and jeans with the knees ripped out. Nothing to see here. No, of course, my ghouls are tame and have zero desire to want to rip your face off and eat it.

Eiline seemed to sense him coming because the front door banged open, and she rushed into his arms.

"*Matháir*, what is it?" Vanth asked, hugging her back.

"Bad, bad, bad dreams, Tarael. I just needed to see if you were real," his mother said.

"Of course I'm real. How about I make you some tea, and you can tell me about it. I bought you some breakfast with me."

Eiline pulled back and stared up at him with her indigo-blue eyes still silvery with unshed tears. "Tarael, why does your magic feel so strange? What did you do?"

"Tea first," he said and opened the front door of the cabin for her.

Eiline headed inside. "I miss your father," she said so softly that if he didn't have sensitive fae hearing, he would have missed it. Vanth tried to hide his shock and went to turn the kettle on.

She *never* talked about his father. She had always made out that it was some brief hook-up one summer solstice party. She didn't know him well enough to miss him. Tarael didn't know his name. He didn't think his mother did either. Her own parents had kicked her out for getting pregnant,

and he had never known them either. It had always just been the two of them.

Vanth had been the new name that Eiline had chosen for her new life to honor the death magic they both wielded. Vanth was an Etruscan goddess of death, a psychopomp, and Eiline had always honored her. If Tarael had another family in Inferno, he had never met them, and they sure as shit had never bothered to help his single mother out.

Flustered, Vanth made a pot of tea and set out a pretty china cup for her and a mug with dancing skeletons on it for him. He set the pastries out on a plate between them. Eiline looked calmer, but that didn't fool Vanth. Like himself, still waters ran deep, and he knew when his mother was deeply troubled.

"How about you eat something and then you can tell me what has got you so upset, Ma?" he asked her gently.

Eiline shredded a strawberry Danish with her fingers. "You tell me about what you've been up to first."

Vanth stuck out his hand. "Scissors, paper, rock?"

His mother obliged him, but her paper defeated his rock. Vanth sighed. He knew better than to play against her. She had visions of the future, and he often suspected that she knew more about what he was thinking than he did.

"I got called out to this fucked up job this morning, and things just got weirder..." he began and ended up telling her everything.

The one good thing about his mother's curse giving her a form of short-term magical dementia was that he could tell her just about anything, and she would never hold it against him. In a few days, she wouldn't remember it to judge him. He had always told her everything anyway.

She had been his first mentor on how to deal with the ghosts and the power coursing through his veins. She was the only one who was like him, which was why she might be the only one who would understand him when he described the ghouls' obsessive cleaning and the weirdly familiar magic stored in Andres's morgue.

"Show me the sigils that appeared on the body," she said and gestured for his phone.

Vanth handed it over. "They were hidden until I touched it with my magic. It was like they responded to my call, but Andres couldn't get them to do it at all."

Eiline's skin lost its remaining color as she studied the photos. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, and Vanth caught her before she could face-plant the tiles. He cradled her head on his lap as the visions overtook her. He had learned long ago that there was nothing he could do but let her ride them out.

"The guardians are dead," his mother gasped in an otherworldly voice. The temperature in the kitchen dropped, and mist rose from Eiline's skin. "The Veil is unprotected, and they are trying to tear through it. The blood of the guardians sacrificed to help them accomplish what they tried seventy-seven years ago. Only wards made by love hold them back..." Eiline shook violently, and her eyes snapped open. "Tarael, Tarael, they are coming for you."

"No one is coming for me, Mama. If they do, I'll make them regret it," Vanth tried to calm her.

She wasn't listening. She scrambled to her feet and ran to her bedroom.

Vanth hated himself for doing it, but he hit the call button to alert Clara that his mother was having an episode.

He followed her, scared she would try and hurt herself before the nurses could get there to help her. Eiline tipped her small box of jewelry out on the bed before chanting softly under her breath. Magic made Vanth's ears pop, and the bottom of the box fell out. Eiline pulled out a silver chain with a pendant hanging from it. It pulsed with a protection magic that knocked the breath out of Vanth's lungs.

"You must wear this for me. Don't take it off, *mo chroí*. It will protect you as much as it's able," Eiline said, and Vanth moved his braid so that she could clip it around his neck. The pendant was of two small onyx scythes set in a silver circle. "Promise me you won't take it off, baby."

"I won't, Mama. I promise. What... What is it?" he asked, the magic pulsing against his skin before settling.

"Tell no one. Show no one," she insisted and tucked it under his shirt. "Only trust the guardians."

Before Vanth could ask who the guardians were, the front door burst open, and Eiline's face went blank, like she had pulled into some part of herself no one could reach. All the hair on the back of Vanth's neck stood on end. He hugged his mother to him.

"I promise, Mama. I love you," he repeated, hoping some part of her would understand.

"Everything okay, Vanth?" Clara asked, coming into the room.

Eiline's fingers gripped the back of his shirt before letting him go.

"It is now. Mom just...had a moment," he said.

Eiline stared at a corner in the room, showing no sign that she knew either of them were there.

"I'll come visit again soon," Vanth said and kissed his mother's cheek.

"We'll take good care of her until then," Clara assured him. "I'll just get you a cup of water, Eiline, and you can have a lie-down."

In the kitchen, Vanth took out his wallet and grabbed a handful of euros. "She likes to paint after an episode. Can you buy her some more supplies? And maybe a new soft blanket of some kind. She likes soft things when she's..."

Clara took the money and squeezed his hand. "I know, Vanth. She's going to be okay. You know this is just how it goes some days."

"I know. I just want her to have whatever she needs," he said, his voice cracking. He cleared it roughly. "I've got to go. Can you message me an update later?"

"I will. Get some sleep. You look like hell," Clara said, teasing him lightly.

Vanth laughed even though it hurt. "Yeah, it's been a long night."

Vanth said his goodbyes and hurried down the small roads leading back to the gates. The guards let him through, and it wasn't until he was back in his van that he let out a shuddery, gasping sob. He swallowed down all his anger and helplessness and the wounded child in him who only wanted his mother.

The body in the back groaned, and Vanth pulled himself together and drove home, more confused by the night's events than ever.

Vanth had bought the old funeral home with the first wad of cash that had been stuffed into his hand from cleaning up a particularly messy vampire dispute. It had taken time to outfit it with all the requirements he wanted, and he saw it as a creative work in progress that he changed to suit his needs.

One of his favorite features was a pit that was set up in the old morgue area. It had a charmed iron door that not even the most pissed-off ghoul could smash its way through. The pit was used for feeding, and despite it having an earthen floor, he knew there were no bones buried there. Ghouls were thorough that way.

Vanth looked down at the naked, paralyzed man, his eyes full of emotion. It wasn't fear but fury.

"I know you're mad that you lost, but I wasn't about to let a piece of shit like you keep preying on kids. I don't need you scared. I don't get off on terror. It's enough for me to know that you'll be dead and your soul sent on to whatever hell you deserve," Vanth told him. He pulled out his dagger and the magic holding the man's blood in started to pool up. Vanth gave him a hard shove with his boot, and the man rolled over the lip of the trap door and into the pit. His two ghouls leaped in after the body and began to circle.

"Enjoy dinner, kids!" Vanth said cheerily and slammed down the iron lid. He whistled as he bolted it shut and headed upstairs. His day might have ended in a weird, worrying jumble, but at least he had done his good deed for the day by taking out a predator.

Vanth went upstairs and grabbed some beers from the kitchen before going out onto the rooftop garden. The ghouls had been tending and watering all his plants out there too. An uneasy feeling lodged in his ribs.

Vanth loved spooky shit, but there was a bit too much weird happening, and he was starting to think it could all be related. He sipped on one of the beers and sat down on a sunbed, the umbrella above him ensuring his skin didn't burn up. After a shitty, long night, sitting out with his plants helped.

After a few minutes of calming down, Vanth pulled out the necklace his mother had given him. It was of simple make. Onyx and silver. There were no mystical glyphs or scratchings that you usually found with spelled jewelry.

Vanth lay back on the sunbed and tried to think about what his mother had said. She had the gift of foresight, so when she had an episode, it was worth paying attention to.

The guardians are dead. The Veil is unprotected, and they are trying to tear through it. The blood of the guardians sacrificed to help them accomplish what they tried seventy-seven years ago. Only wards made by love hold them back...

The Veil was a mystical boundary that separated the living from the dead, but who the fuck were the guardians? The Veil was just...the Veil. It didn't have people protecting it. Did it? As a necromancer, Vanth frequently flouted the laws of the living and the dead. There were theories that necromancers drew power from the Veil itself. If there was some kind of 'Veil police,' they would have tried to arrest his ass years ago.

Vanth wasn't so much worried about guardians, especially if they were all sacrificed, but he was concerned with whatever or whoever was trying to 'tear through.' Nothing good could come of that. Vanth's mind snagged on 'guardians sacrificed' again and almost dropped his beer. He pulled out his phone and looked at the bodies that had turned up in Andres's crematorium.

"Sacrificial magic," he whispered. It could just be a coincidence, but then Eiline had been looking at the pictures when her visions had been triggered.

Vanth needed to think, but all the buzzing of extra magic under his skin was making him want to scratch himself all over. He contemplated rolling a joint and immediately decided against it. Drugs and magic rarely mixed well, despite what the occultists would have you believe.

"Dance party it is," he murmured. He drained his beer on the way back downstairs and to where the old showing room used to be. He had ripped out all the chairs and beige carpet and had painted the room black. It had a half-decent speaker system for grieving people to play the deceased's favorite music, so Vanth just added his own collection of records and sound system equipment. Vanth let his phone select the 'Dance Party' playlist, and music started to thrum around him.

"Dance party time, losers!" he shouted and stamped his booted foot on the floorboards three times. Ghosts poured into the room, drawn to his magic and the music. He had gotten the idea from watching Beetlejuice one too many times, and he was surprised just how well it worked to siphon off the overspill of power.

The playlist stuttered on Lady Gaga and turned to 'It's Been a Long, Long Time' by Harry James before Cecilia appeared in front of him. "Dance with me, Vanth. Your waltz needs work."

Vanth grinned and pulled her close. "You taught me how to waltz, sweetheart. If it needs work, that's on you."

Cecelia huffed out a laugh, her form getting more solid with every kernel of power she drew from him. "You are all charged up. Did you get up to something naughty? I mean, apart from the serial killer currently being eaten in the basement."

They glided through a group of ghosts that were so faint that they could only sway a little, like barely corporeal zombies. Vanth tossed them some power from his fingertips, and they became more coordinated. But they were old white guys, so their dancing skills didn't improve by much.

"You know me, Cecelia. I touched something I shouldn't. It's okay, though. I just need to wear myself out so I can sleep. I'm sure everything will make sense in the morning."

"It's morning now, my boy," she pointed out.

"Not for me. And please, don't wake me up this time. If the building isn't burning down, it's not an emergency."

Celia cocked a pencil-thin brow but didn't reply. It was amazing how judgmental a ghost could be. The sound system changed songs again, and Vanth let the dance take over him until finally, he lay down on the only couch in the room and fell asleep, exhausted.



ACROSS THE STREET, standing in the shadows on the roof, a hooded and cloaked figure watched the half-fae male dancing in a room full of ghosts.

This is the necromancer everyone is so afraid of?

Elektra pulled the pendant out from where it was tucked into her leather body suit. She whispered a soft word under her breath, and the pendant rose in the air. The onyx and silver scythes on it pointed insistently in the direction of the necromancer.

"Fuck," she muttered under her breath. This *couldn't* be the son.

Elektra had been expecting someone a bit more...serious. She couldn't deny that he had power. It was all but radiating out of the wards set around the building. The pendant wouldn't lie to her. She had expected some kind of bookish mage, not a good-looking male that seemed so casual and fun.

What choice do you have but to go to him? Absolutely none.

Her suit still smelled of the blood of her slain sisters and brothers. She had been on the run for days, and she needed to stop the cult hell-bent on destroying everything. She had to trust that this male could actually help her. His mother had been one of them, after all, so maybe under the dancing nonsense, there was someone who could help her get her revenge.

She tucked a blood-red curl back behind her pointed ear from where it had slipped free in the wind. The necromancer had disappeared again, and Elektra settled in to watch and wait.

Charon, give her patience because she was going to need it.

Elektra had slipped into Inferno without anyone noticing, and she had used all her training not to be tracked by the fucking cult bastards that were after her.

Don't think of it. You can't until you are safe. Elektra pulled her silvery cloak around her and let the magic of it blend her into the side of the building. The ghosts in Inferno had given her directions to this necromancer and none of the others in the area. The pendant hummed insistently against her again.

"Fine, I'm going," she told it and scaled back down the building.

The first thing she needed to do was get through his wards. Elektra's lips tugged up into the first smile in days. She always loved a challenge.

5

Vanth didn't know how long he had been sleeping when his magic burned alight like he had been hit by lightning.

"What in the fuck," he gasped, rolling off the couch and hitting the floor with a thud.

Dazed and disorientated, he tried to get his bearings. His magic was running through him over and over like he had fallen asleep in an amplification circle. He ran his hands over his arms and tried to get the feeling of burning ants to go away. He blinked rapidly and then woke up enough to realize what was wrong.

Something or someone was in his house. It wasn't a new ghost. He knew what they felt like. Vanth pulled the black-bladed dagger from his boot.

"Time to make a new ghoul," he mused. That was what he usually did to people who invaded his space without his permission.

Where the fuck were his ghosts? They should have still been about from all the energy he had been feeding them when they were dancing. They were nowhere to be seen, which meant they were scared too.

Vanth opened the door to the kitchen and found a fae female going through his fridge. She had wavy hair the color of blood that fell to her shoulders and was braided on one side to show off her pointed ear.

Inferno was a place that had a lot of eccentrics, but this one would have stood out in any crowd. She wore a leather suit that he had only ever seen superheroes or assassins use. Over it was a sleeveless, hooded robe that fell

to her ankles. It was a silvery gray color with designs stitched into it with black thread. Definitely enchanted somehow. Just fucking great.

"Let me guess, the fae are having a superhero convention, and you're the Black Widow?" he asked.

The female turned from the fridge. "Funny. Where is all your food?"

"I have been too busy to grocery shop. Also, what the fuck are you doing in my house?" He didn't ask how the fuck she had gotten through his wards. That was a problem for later; right now, he was laser-focused on the threat in front of him.

The female turned, and he tried not to do the cliché male thing and get stunned at how pretty she was. All the fae were attractive. This one was no different. She had full lips and strong cheekbones, but it was her eyes that really made him pause. They were dark gray and full to bursting with death magic. The smell of sweet pine and cinnamon was in the air, as well as incense and blood. He didn't know how much of it was hers.

"I'm here because I need your help," the stranger said.

Vanth smiled. "Sure. I'll help you right the fuck out of my door."

"I'm serious," she growled, showing a flicker of fae aggression.

Vanth's hand tightened on his dagger, that same territorial part of him ready to throw down.

"So am I, darling. You can book an appointment. I think I have free time next year."

The female eyed the dagger before reaching under her cloak and bringing out two black batons. At least, Vanth thought they were batons right up until the moment two silvery blades flicked out to reveal that they were combat sickles. They pulsed with a death power he had never felt before. It made his own rise up in self-defense and curiosity.

"You don't want to go down this road, darling," he said, his feet sliding into position. "Leave peacefully. I really don't have time to train another ghoul right now, even a pretty one."

She actually smirked at him. "I'm not leaving until you agree to help me. I know you've had a long night, but that's no reason to be rude to strangers."

"Me? Rude? You're the one that broke into my house."

Again, that maddening smirk. "It wasn't all that hard."

"Ghoul it is," he replied. He lashed out with his magic instead of his blade, but she was ready for it. She shifted, moving like a ghost, and swiped

at him with her sickles.

Vanth blocked her with his dagger, and the impact rattled through his arm. She had more than a little training behind her. Vanth aimed a kick for her knee, but she moved with the same eerie speed, blocking him and bringing up that same knee aimed straight at his balls. He turned and absorbed the blow with his hip.

"Straight for the nuts? Are you flirting with me?" he teased and then gasped as she drove the butt of one of her sickles up into his sternum.

Vanth stumbled back, and she used his temporary disorientation to hit him with a spell. He didn't have time to counter it, and it sent him smashing into the tiles. She was on him in a blink, disarming him and pinning one of his biceps with her knees. A blade pressed into his throat, the other resting cool on his unpinned arm.

"So you *are* flirting with me," he said, looking up from between her thighs at her furious face. "If you wanted a date, you should have just asked."

A silver necklace slipped free from her suit and pulled down towards him. Metal shifted against his own skin, and the pendant his mother had given him hours before flew out from under his shirt and collided with hers like magnets.

The fight was forgotten as they stared at the matching pendants straining towards each other. The female leaned closer, and the pendants collided. They slid together like they were two halves of the same necklace. Magic, strong and dark, pulsed between them before a song started to play. It was a sweet tune despite the death magic that was powering it. Vanth's mouth went dry. His mother used to hum that song when he was a child and couldn't sleep.

"Where did you get that? What the actual fuck is going on?" he said, staring up at the murderous female on top of him.

"As I was trying to say, I need your help, Tarael," she said. Her eyes darkened with leashed power. "It's got to do with your father."

Vanth couldn't breathe, and it wasn't because of the female on top of him.

"As much as I enjoy this position, can you let me up? I'm going to need coffee before I make you explain yourself," he said, still trying to fathom what she had just said. His father. What the fuck was going on?

"You promise to talk to me like an adult if I let you go? Because you are in danger, and I've risked my own skin coming here," she said, the edge in her voice as sharp as the blade at his throat.

"I promise. I'd even cross my heart if I weren't too scared to move right now," he replied with a grin.

The female leaned down and purred, "Good boy."

Vanth's body tightened at the effect the praise had on him. Yeah, he really needed to get coffee into him. The female unclipped their pendants and moved off him before his thoughts could get any dirtier.

"If we are going to talk like adults about whatever the fuck is going on, we need to go out in public to get food. You need to change into something that isn't going to attract so much attention, Scary Black Widow," Vanth said, getting up off the floor. "Also, what the fuck have you done to scare my ghosts?"

"I haven't done anything. They are wary of me because they know I can reap them and send them through the Veil. A task that you should have done already," she replied. She picked up a bag by the fridge that he hadn't noticed in all the excitement.

"Don't tell me and my ghosts what to do." Vanth pointed. "There's a spare bathroom though there. You could do with a wash. The blood on you, I mean. It's not yours, is it?"

Cool gray eyes assessed him. "Not a lot of it."

"Are you hurt? Do you need...assistance?" Vanth didn't know why he felt the need to offer. What the fuck was wrong with him? He should be kicking this strange female out, not offering to tend her wounds for her.

"I am fine. I will accept the shower. I have been on the run for three days, and there hasn't been time," she replied.

Vanth nodded and then asked, "What's your name?"

"Elektra Nova."

"Sounds fake."

She smiled. "I wish it was. You know how the fae are with their ridiculous names."

"I do, so please call me Vanth. Tarael makes me feel like I'm in trouble."

Elektra huffed out a soft laugh as she headed for the bathroom. "You are."

The door to the bathroom closed, and Vanth's brain tried to catch up with everything that had just happened.

"Yeah, I really fucking am," he whispered and then went to find his own shower.

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Maybe Vanth was too trusting of a strange female in his house, but if she had wanted to kill him, Elektra could have done so already. He washed off the previous night and studied his half of the pendant again. Nothing had changed, except now he knew it had another half and played a pretty tune.

His mother's words came back to chill him, '*Tarael, Tarael, they are coming for you.*' He got out of the shower and got dressed. He needed food, and so did his mysterious visitor.

Three days on the run...from what? Elektra had training; she had thrown him around without breaking a sweat. So what had her so spooked that she would run for that long to get to him? And what did his father have to do with it?

Vanth had never known anything about his father other than his mother had made a point of never bringing him up. There was a niggling in the back of his brain. His intuition told him all sorts of things his rational mind didn't know what to do with. He had a touch of his mother's foresight power but not in visions. He would just get feelings about things, and he had learned to trust them.

Right now, it was telling him that Elektra was the key to something important. He didn't like to get into fights that weren't his own, but she had information that he wanted to know. Like who his father actually fucking was.

With his mother's curse eating away at her, there was a strong possibility she didn't even remember who had knocked her up.

By the time Vanth had put clean clothes on and come out of his room, Elektra was already waiting for him. She wore tight black jeans and a gray T-shirt, her black boots laced tight. She didn't wear any make-up and had no jewelry except the necklace that matched his own. She was a warrior of some stamp, but the death magic pulsing off her was confusing.

Vanth knew all the necromancers in Inferno—the list was damn short—and he had no idea who she was. Mysteries made him nervous.

"There's a café just across the road that I like. Let's get food, and then you can tell me why you're harassing me," Vanth said, pulling on a leather jacket. The ghosts still hadn't returned, and the ghouls would still be too busy eating. Everything seemed too quiet.

"Food would...would be appreciated," she said.

All the fire that had been in her eyes had been banked. Exhaustion radiated off her, and Vanth felt a protective instinct kick in, thanks to his fae side. She wasn't weak or helpless, so he fought the urge to fuss.

Outside, the sun was setting on the day. Vanth's body clock was so far out of whack he had to take a moment to orientate himself. Dinner instead of breakfast. He could work with that. The café across the street was where he ended up most nights he wasn't working. It sold alcohol, so it also served as a bar, and fuck, could he use a drink.

Elektra studied the bare brick walls, the art by local painters, and the Edison bulbs hanging artistically from the ceiling. She stared, wide-eyed, like she hadn't been around people for a long time.

"Hey, Vanth, you want your usual?" Isaac called from where he stood at the counter.

"Yes, and food. Lots of food," Vanth said, grabbing some menus.

Isaac's blue eyes landed on Elektra, and he cocked a questioning brow. Vanth shook his head. No, she wasn't a date. Isaac rolled his eyes. Like Cecelia, he believed Vanth needed to go on more dates.

Vanth had often thought about asking Isaac out, but he liked him too much as a friend, and his relationships always ended badly. The last one had been over a year ago, and even though she was a werewolf, she couldn't handle that Vanth was a necromancer. These days, it was easier to have one-night stands when he wanted sex, and he never told them what he did for a job.

"Your usual table is free," Isaac said with a grin.

Vanth led Elektra to a darker corner and sat at the polished wooden table. The dinner crowd hadn't come in, and it was still quiet enough to be able to talk privately. He passed her a menu, and she studied it with a confused expression.

"Are you okay? You are looking about us like you've never been in a café before. What are you? Amish? A nun?" he asked. *Please don't be a nun.*

Elektra shot him an annoyed glare. "Neither. I just feel exposed here."

"Because of the people you are running from?" he guessed.

She nodded. "They will be in Inferno already."

"They won't start shit here, and if they do, I'm close enough to summon my ghouls, and it will even the odds a bit." Vanth bit back a grin. "Really glad you're not a nun."

Elektra frowned. "I don't know why it would matter to you if I was."

"It doesn't. I just need to know if you are going to preach to me about your gods, that's all."

Elektra put her menu down and gave him her full attention. "I'm a devotee of Charon, but there're many gods that those like me serve. Most of them are psychopomps."

Vanth didn't have time to formulate a reply before Isaac was there with a notebook. Vanth ordered a burger and a steak, as well as an espresso and two beers. He was starving, and his body needed as much protein as he could get.

"I don't know how you stay so fit when you eat like a shifter," Isaac teased. He smiled at Elektra. "What can I get for you?"

"I'll have the same, but I want an extra side of bacon with my burger," she replied.

Vanth's grin widened as Isaac's brows shot up in surprise.

"Sure thing. I'll be back in a second with your drinks," he said, giving them both quizzical looks.

"You haven't told him how much magic burns," she commented. "Especially necromancy."

Vanth shook his head. "The less people know about me, the better. I have too many people trying to kill me on a regular basis that I'm private about my magic."

"And that's why you came out of your room ready to attack this morning? You thought I was there to kill you?" Elektra asked, her small smirk making another appearance.

"You did break in," Vanth pointed out.

Elektra leaned forward. "If I were going to kill you, I would have done it while you were sleeping. I would have tossed your body into the fancy pit in your basement, and no one would have even known I was there."

So glad she's not a nun, Vanth thought unhelpfully.

"Stop talking to me like that, or I'm going to think this really is a date," he replied. Elektra gave him an unimpressed stare, but there was the slightest pink on her neck. "Why don't you start from the beginning? Like, who are you, and why should I help you?"

"As I said, it's got to do with your father," Elektra said.

Vanth shrugged. "Why the fuck should I care about the sperm donor sorcerer my mother hooked up with?"

"Sperm donor sorcerer? How dare..." Elektra's expression went from anger to confusion. "You don't know who he is, do you?"

"Don't know. Don't care. He never hung about long enough to look after my mother or me, so why should I?"

Isaac came back with their drinks and looked between them. "Everything okay here?"

"I'm going to need three shots of tequila in a glass, no ice," Elektra said, rubbing her temples.

"Vanth, are you giving this nice lady a nervous breakdown already?"

Vanth gave him a smile. "She's no lady." Elektra stuck her middle finger up at him, making Vanth laugh. "You see? Get her the tequila."

Isaac gave him a salute and headed back to the bar.

"So what order or whatever are you a part of?" Vanth said. Clearly, the subject of his father was something she was going to have to work up to.

"I'm a reaper with the Temple of Magic and Bone. The same one that your mother was a member of. She told you that, at least?" Elektra asked.

Vanth shook his head. She let out a long breath of expletives.

"None of those better be aimed at my mother," he said and drained his espresso.

Elektra rubbed at her temples again and ignored his threat. "Let me eat something first, and I will try and explain things the best way I can. Where is your mother?"

"Somewhere safe. I'm not going to tell you until I can trust you," Vanth replied. He gave her a wry smile. "You charge in and say that people want to kill me, and it's got something to do with my father and a temple my mother used to be a part of. I'd have to be pretty fucking stupid to tell you where she is, darling."

"I suppose that's fair." Elektra's eyes narrowed. "And stop calling me darling."

Vanth's smile only widened. Oh, he was going to enjoy playing with this one. She was feisty, and he liked it. Paired with the death magic humming around her, he couldn't help but want to press all her buttons and see what made her work. He had never met anyone who could get through his wards or scare his ghosts, for that matter.

He was going to find out exactly what she was because she might very well be the one person in Inferno who could kill him.

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By the time their food arrived, Vanth was ravenous. Isaac looked between him and Elektra and the mountain of food that was between them. They must have looked insane, but Vanth was too hungry to care. Isaac could tease him later about it.

Elektra all but fell on her food. She must have been starving the last three days. That protective urge welled up inside him again, but Vanth ignored it.

"When was the last time you ate?" he asked as she picked up bacon with her fingers and stuffed it into her mouth.

"It was dinner time about three days ago," Elektra said. She swallowed her bacon and stared at her plate. "They attacked the temple that night."

"Who are *they*?" Vanth asked, putting down his burger. She seemed to hesitate, so he added, "Come on, I need to know everything if I'm going to trust you. I need to know what I'm getting myself into and who exactly is after me and how the fuck my father fits into all of this."

"They once lived with us at the Temple of Magic and Bone. It exists in a place that is neither the Veil nor this world. It is an in-between place where very few can enter." Elektra picked up her beer and drained half of it. "Your mother was a reaper for over two hundred years. The main purpose of our temple is to protect the Veil and to ensure that its power isn't abused by people with our special abilities. Our members all have a form of necromancy power. They are reapers who assist in sending lost souls through the Veil and make sure that no creatures or malicious spirits come

through it from the other side. Did you never wonder where your powers came from?"

Vanth pushed a chip around his plate and tried to process what she was telling him. "To be honest, I always thought that I was probably cursed. My mother taught me how to handle most of my power when I was a boy, and then mages in the city taught me the rest until they realized the connection that I had with the dead, and that scared them. I left them without completing my studies." Vanth ate his chip. "My mother never told me any of this. Her magic is different from mine. She has abilities to see the dead and to feel them, but she can't control them like I can. She also has gifts of foresight that I don't. I don't know why she would never tell me she was a part of some special temple of reapers that looks after the dead."

Elektra pushed aside her plate just in time for Isaac to bring out their steaks. "That is because it is a secret. Only a select number of people know that we exist because people fear necromancy so much. Usually, if any children present abilities like ours, we will recruit them. That's why there's so few necromancers wandering around."

Vanth knew necromancy was an unusual ability, but maybe it wasn't as rare as he thought. "So why didn't one of you come and try and recruit me when I was a kid? Don't like half-breeds?"

Elektra's eyes narrowed. "We don't care what you are or where you come from. By the time that we knew you existed, you were too old to be recruited. Your mother was pregnant when she left us, but only our high priestess knew about it. They were both determined to keep you a secret in order to keep you safe."

"If that's true, how do you know about me now?" Vanth asked.

Elektra cut her steak into precise pieces that told Vanth she also had a lot of experience with daggers and other bladed weapons.

"I don't really know where to begin this story," she said, stabbing one of the pieces with her fork. "I expected you to know most of this. Why hasn't your mother told you? According to our high priestess, Eiline was meant to tell you when you came of age."

Vanth hesitated and then said, "My mother is unwell." He didn't want to tell her much more than that. Her curse made her too vulnerable. "Why don't you start by telling me who attacked your temple? And why do you think that they want me?"

"They call themselves the Cult of Shadows and Blood." Elektra's lip lifted in a sneer. "They have styled themselves as the opposite of the reapers and the Temple of Magic and Bone."

"How very Dungeons and Dragons of all of you," Vanth replied, trying not to laugh. "Why should I care about them?"

"I can admit their name is ridiculous, but that doesn't mean you should underestimate how dangerous they are. The leader of the cult, Lazarus, used to be one of our members before he took a small group of his followers and decided to try and steal power from the Veil." Elektra stopped eating. "I was a teenager at the time, but I remember the fear that went through all of the reapers because of the rebellion. The cult tore a hole in the Veil, and only your mother and father had the power to close it again. The tear was mended with a kind of metaphysical patch, but it wasn't fully healed. Lazarus's cult has gathered their power and has waited until now to try again."

Vanth wasn't ready to talk about his father yet, and the more he learned about his mother, the more uncomfortable he became at how many secrets she had kept from him.

"If the reapers stopped them last time, why can't they do it again? I've seen how badass you can fight," Vanth replied.

Elektra went pale, and for a second, he was worried that she would vomit. He reached out to steady her but pulled away before he could touch her. When she looked up at him, her gray eyes were dark with grief and rage.

"They killed..." she began and stopped.

"Everyone but you," he realized. He did reach for her hand then. There was no way to fake the kind of despair and sadness rolling off her. "That's why you have been running for three days?"

Elektra nodded and drained her tequila. She cleared her throat. "I was away on a reaping job when they attacked. By the time I got back, everyone was dead or missing. It was like their power was sucked clean from them like they had been sacrificed."

The hair on the back of Vanth's neck stood on end when he thought about the bodies he had seen in Andres's crematorium. His deadline for keeping them was almost up. Fuck. "How did you know to come to me?"

"The high priestess. She gave me the necklace and said it would lead me to the one person who could stop Lazarus and heal the Veil. She told me

that Eiline had a son, and I was to find you both. She died in my arms before I could learn anymore," Elektra replied, her eyes full of unshed tears.

"Do you know what happened to the people who were missing from amongst the bodies?" Vanth asked softly.

Elektra shook her head. "There was no time. I figured they were out on the grounds, and I didn't stop to explore. I didn't have time to bury them. I just...ran."

Vanth ate the last of his dinner and hoped he wasn't about to make a terrible mistake. "I got a call in the very wee hours this morning from a friend who owns a crematorium. There were some bodies that came in that freaked him out. He was worried, and he's a lesser fae, so not a lot spooks him out. The bodies had been used in a sacrifice of some sort, but most of the magic was still stored in them." He pulled out his phone from his pocket. "I have pictures that I would like you to look at." He brought the photo gallery up and passed it over to her.

Elektra took the phone and stared at the pictures. Vanth half expected her to throw up her dinner. She clearly had experience around the dead, but it was always different if it was someone you knew.

"Charon, grant them safe passage," Elektra whispered. She zoomed in on the sigils. "They were reapers. I should have looked amongst the dead to see who was missing. The high priestess made me promise to come straight to you. Fucking Lazarus. This is definitely his work. Did you burn the bodies?"

Vanth shook his head. "No, but I don't have long before Andres does. He's hanging onto them, going against his client's wishes, which is a big deal for him. If I take you to them, could you explain what the fuck was done to them?" He didn't mention how the magic felt like his own. It was darker and more powerful, and yet the same.

"I can do my best, but I can't make any promises. Lazarus and his followers were into blood magic, and only the gods know what he's been doing for the last seventy-odd years." Elektra passed him back his phone. "I'll need to pick up a few items I left in your house before we leave."

"Dinner and a trip to the crematorium. You sure know how to show a necromancer a good time," he said and grinned at her. "You know, when you're not trying to murder me."

"I haven't tried yet, Tarael," Elektra replied, sending a thrill through him. Maybe all the necromancy over the years had broken his brain. He

shouldn't be flirting with her at all. He didn't do complicated as a rule, and the female in front of him was all kinds of complicated.

Elektra finished the last of her fries. "I still think we should talk to your mother."

"We will, but not tonight. She had a vision this morning, and it upset her..." Vanth swore as his mother's words came back to him.

"What is it?" Elektra asked.

Vanth ran a hand through his long hair. "I showed her the photos of the bodies already, trying to get any insight into what fucking magic was on them. It triggered her. She said something about the guardians being dead and that the Veil was unprotected. There was someone trying to get through? Fuck, let me think."

Elektra nodded and drank her tequila as if she had all the time in the world to wait for him to get his shit together.

Vanth's memory was usually better, but the last day was a blurry mess in his mind, thanks to his lack of sleep. He took a few breaths, and the words came back to him. "The blood of the guardians sacrificed to help them accomplish what they tried seventy-seven years ago. Only wards made by love hold them back."

Elektra put down her drink. "If she's right, there must be more survivors. We have to find them before they are used to rip open the Veil. We start with the bodies in the morgue."

"Giving orders pretty quick there. I don't know if I trust you yet," Vanth said, though it felt like a lie.

"I don't trust you either. Unfortunately, we only have each other right now." Elektra managed one of her infuriating smirks despite her grief. "You can trust I want Lazarus dead. Isn't that enough?"

Vanth nodded. It would have to be because Elektra had too many secrets that he needed to know, and he wasn't going to let her go until he got his answers. Despite that, he still looked her straight in the eye and said, "I'm happy for us to work together on this for now. Just so you know, if you betray me or bring harm to my mother in any way, I'll do more than kill you."

The threat didn't bother Elektra. She only smiled. "Like what?"

A tingle went through him that she seemed curious and not afraid. He laughed to cover up his sudden interest. "And ruin the surprise? Not likely, darling."

"Fine. Be boring." Elektra finished her tequila. "Now, let's go look at these bodies."

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The parking lot at the crematorium was empty when they arrived, but Vanth still checked their surroundings before getting out. Elektra didn't strike him as someone who got frightened easily, and he could smell her anxiety whenever Lazarus was mentioned. Whatever she had seen him do at the temple had freaked her the hell out.

Vanth had a million things he wanted to ask her. 'Who the fuck is my father?' was the main one, though how his sweet mother had closed the tear in the Veil was a high second. He knew she was powerful, but maybe, like him, she had been shielding just how deep her necromancy abilities went.

Elektra was carrying a small shoulder bag that she hadn't had before. Vanth assumed it was a work bag of some kind that she had put into her pack during her flight from the temple. Her sickles were shoved down either side of her boots, their blades neatly folded down.

"Try not to scare Andres too much," he said, and her glare eased.

"I'll try, but all of this worries me. I should have stayed and checked the bodies. Buried them," she replied, her guilt evident.

Vanth wasn't used to trying to comfort people. "If you had done that, then this Lazarus asshole would have you too. We will do everything we can to find them, Elektra. That has to be enough."

Elektra's gray eyes softened, and she nodded. "You are right. It still hurts though."

"I know. Try to think about how good it's going to feel to kick their asses." Vanth knocked on the back door of the crematorium before he did

something epically stupid like try to hug her. He didn't even fucking know her. *Stupid fae instincts.* "Open up, Andres."

The door unlocked. Andres took one look at Elektra and let out a surprised yip before bowing low and saying something in an ancient fae language. Vanth knew some of the dialects but had no clue what Andres spouted at her in a gush.

Elektra smiled, and it transformed her whole face. "I have not seen one such as you for a long time, old one. Thank you for welcoming me."

Andres beamed. "If I had known you were coming, my lady, I would have been more prepared. It is an honor to have a reaper from the Temple of Magic and Bone in my establishment."

"You know who they are?" Vanth asked.

Andres gave him a cool look. "I'm surprised a big hotshot necromancer like you *doesn't* know about them."

Vanth was starting to think that there were many things his mother had made sure he never found out about. He looked at Elektra and cocked an eyebrow. "I've never seen Andres be so excited or polite before. What are you, some kind of princess?"

"Yes," she replied calmly, making him startle. "At least, I was before I joined the reapers."

"The Nova family of the Celestial Court is much loved and revered, even here in the human world. You would know this, Vanth, if you ever bothered to look into your own family history," Andres chided him.

Vanth shrugged. "Why should I? My mother's family disowned her when she found out she was pregnant with me. Bunch of snobbish assholes."

Elektra bit her lip, eyes wide, and then shook her head.

"What?" Vanth asked.

"I don't think they really disowned her, but that's a conversation for later," she replied. She glanced at Andres's turned back and then back to Vanth. Another secret. He nodded, but fuck, he was done with the secrets bullshit.

"We are here to see the bodies. Princess here has confirmed that they were members of her temple," Vanth said, trying to focus.

Andres bowed to Elektra again. "Forgive me. I had no idea who they were. I would never..."

"It's okay, Andres. You have been pulled into a mess you could not know about. Show me the bodies, and then I will allow you to burn them," Elektra replied. She placed a hand on the smaller fae's shoulder, and it looked like Andres was about to faint.

"Hop to it, fan girl. More lives could be at risk," Vanth said, really not liking her hand on him.

Andres glared at him. "For once in your life, show some respect, you animal."

"She broke into my house and tried to kill me. I'm not going to fall on my knees in front of her," Vanth huffed, and Andres hurried down the halls, muttering.

Elektra's mouth twitched as she walked past him. "That's a shame. I think you would look good on your knees."

Vanth's mouth fell open, everything following and falling offline. Elektra kept walking so he could do nothing but stare at her ass and try and get his brain working.

Had she just flirted with him? Or was it a princess thing? Fuck, he didn't know, but damn, was his mind going to filthy places.

"Are you coming or what?" Andres called down the hallway.

Vanth rearranged his shirt to ensure it was covering the sudden and inconvenient bulge in his pants.

She is not for you, he told his dick and then went to join them. Maybe the coldness of the morgue would cool the sudden fire in his veins. He didn't need to be crushing on some fancy princess.

He might not know much about the fae kingdoms if they didn't have representation in Inferno, but he had heard of the Celestial Court. They were a kingdom in Faerie, and they were known for their star worshippers, astronomers, and oracles. Having a name like Elektra suddenly made sense. How had one of their precious princesses managed to get away from their duties and start worshiping Charon of all gods?

Even more fucking questions. Maybe he needed to tie Elektra to a chair until she answered everything he wanted to know. His dick approved of the idea. Yeah, he really couldn't think about tying her up either. He needed to get his game face on. *Fuck*.

By the time Vanth made it into the freezer room, Andres had pulled out both bodies. Elektra's face had become a cool mask, the mischievous light in her eyes already gone.

Vanth stood back to watch. It would be better to keep out of her way. His magic hummed under his skin, restless and hungry. Elektra unzipped the first body bag. The sigils that Vanth had seen were still showing on her skin.

"The magic from this spell has already been released," Elektra commented. She pulled on a pair of latex gloves before examining the marks.

"Thoughts?" Vanth asked, taking a step closer.

"Definitely Lazarus's work or maybe a follower. These marks are his."

Vanth nodded like he knew what she was talking about. He had never seen sacrificial magic like it before. He understood about sigil work. Every magic user utilized them at some point or another. They became highly personalized to focus the power and intent behind them. They were almost like signatures that could be used to identify the practitioner.

"Her soul is gone," Elektra said sadly, bringing Vanth out of his thoughts. "I'll look at the other body now. Thank you, Andres."

The small fae hurried to unzip it, and the heavy thrum of power radiated out of it.

"Do you feel that?" Vanth whispered, the magic almost choking him. Elektra turned to him. "Assist me, Vanth," she said.

"Don't tell me what to do, princess," he replied but still put on a pair of gloves and joined her.

The second female's skin was pale and blank.

"Where are the marks? I can feel them just hovering under the surface," Elektra said and looked at him. "How did you get them to show last time?"

Vanth hesitated. "I can show you, but you might not like it."

"We don't have time to get squeamish about each other's methods," Elektra said and made a hurry-up gesture at him.

Vanth licked his gloved thumb and sketched his own revealing sigil on the dead female's chest. Power slithered over her dead flesh like smoke, and the dark marks became clear. Vanth's skin itched. The body was full of unspent power, just like the other one had been.

Elektra placed her hand over the female's eyes. "I can still feel her soul trapped in there," she whispered, horror lacing her words. "It's fueling the spell."

"If that's the case, why burn them? Why not use them as batteries?" Vanth asked, brows drawing together. "Sacrificial magic is fucked up and takes a lot of effort. Why go through it all and then toss the bodies away?"

"Perhaps fire added a layer to the spell," Elektra mused. She went into her bag and pulled out a small clay lamp about the size of her palm. It had scythes and other symbols carved into the sides that Vanth didn't recognize.

Vanth had seen lamps like it before, but only artifacts at the catacombs in Rome. The little lamps had been found in the thousands; their lights used to help people find the resting places of their loved ones.

Instead of oil, Elektra's lamp was filled with something else. There was sandalwood and myrrh, but everything else Vanth couldn't identify. Smoke rose in silvery lines from the lamp and covered the body.

When nothing happened, Elektra swore. Taking a sharp dagger from her bag, she cut the pad of her thumb. Elektra opened the dead woman's mouth and dripped blood over her teeth.

Vanth sucked in a breath as power filled the room. It was as dark as night and searing as the cold fire of the stars. It raced across his senses and tasted like black wine on his tongue. He had never experienced a magical signature like it before. He wanted to lick it straight off her lips. He swallowed the lump in his throat and tried to focus.

Elektra leaned down and whispered something into the dead female's ear. "The magic is holding her soul in place. I am trying to release it so that

she can give us information. Can you see where the block is?"

Vanth shook himself and went to join her by the body. The sigils burned into her skin and seemed to shiver as he approached.

He ran his hand over the body, careful not to touch her. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the fact that Elektra was there watching him. Most of the time his magic operated on instinct and not on any learning that he had gotten from books. His fingers paused over her stomach, where a twisting line seemed to burn hotter than any of the others.

"This here. This is what's acting as a soul trap. It feels different to the others," Vanth said and then moved out of her way.

Elektra didn't argue with him, which surprised him. She only nodded and used her still-bleeding thumb to strike a line through the sigil. Instantly, the air pressure went pop, and a ghost rose from the female's body. Like all ghosts, she looked around, disorientated, as if she didn't know how she got there.

"Look at me, Heidi," Elektra commanded, and the ghost's face swiveled towards her.

"He came for us in the night," Heidi said, her voice barely above a whisper. "There was so much screaming. So much blood. We tried to fight him, but nothing seemed to work."

Elektra's teeth ground together. "Was it Lazarus?"

Heidi covered her face with her hands. "We tried to fight him," she repeated.

The ghost was on a loop—the usual side effect if the person's death had been traumatic. Vanth stepped forward because Elektra looked like she was about to throw up.

"Where did he take you, Heidi?" he asked. "Do you remember where you were when you died?"

Heidi removed her hands from her face. "It was dark. It was cold. There was a strange smell in the air, like sewage and bleach. Someone had tried to cover up the smell, but there was no getting rid of it. He's so powerful. No one is going to be strong enough to stop him."

"Stop him from doing what?" Vanth asked.

Large ghostly eyes hovered in front of him. Heidi's outline became brighter, and Vanth saw that Elektra had put her hand on the ghost, and it was feeding off her energy.

"They're trying to raise your father. Lock him down tight and get him to do their will. They're going to control the Veil." Heidi turned to Elektra. "That's all I know. Now let me go. I am so tired."

Elektra took out one of her sickles and flipped the blade free. "May you find peace in your afterlife, sister." With that goodbye, she swung her sickle, severing the ghost and soul from the body, and Heidi disappeared with a smile.

Vanth was shaking. He had no idea who his father was, but he had to be dead if they were trying to raise him. Elektra re-sheathed her sickles.

"That settles it. We need to go and talk to your mother," she said.

Before he could reply, she swayed. He raced forward and caught her before she hit the cold tiles. She was completely out cold in his arms, and he tightened his grip on her.

"Looks like visiting is going to have to wait until tomorrow, princess."

Andres was nervously shifting his weight from foot to foot. "What should I do with the bodies?"

"Burn them," Vanth said without hesitation. "Let them be at rest. There is nothing we can do for them now. I'm going to take this troublesome necromancer home."

Andres's whole demeanor shifted, his eyes turning ancient and deadly. "You will see no harm comes to her."

"For fuck's sake, Andres. I'm going to look after her. She's been on the run for days and used the last of her energy on that shade."

Vanth looked down at Elektra's sleeping face. What in all the hells had she brought to his door?

10

Elektra woke on an unfamiliar couch, with a pillow under her head and a soft woolen blanket tucked around her. Sunlight was streaming through the windows, and it took her a few disorientated moments to realize she was back in Tarael Vanth's house. She tried to remember how she got there and came up blank. Slowly, the previous night came back to her, and she recalled the crematorium and poor Heidi.

Lazarus really is crazy, she thought as she stared at the stars that someone had stuck to the roof. She suspected that they were glow-in-the-dark.

Vanth really was nothing like she expected, and when his magic had filled the room, it had felt like some primal beast waking up and stretching. What kind of male was he? Would he be able to see this through? He was still her best shot at stopping Lazarus. She was so fucking fucked.

Elektra couldn't keep hiding who his father was from him. She really hoped that she wasn't about to deal with another megalomaniac when he found out. They really needed to talk to his mother, and he would probably not believe Elektra even if she told him.

Eiline was a legend amongst the reapers. Despite the circumstances, Elektra couldn't wait to meet her. She wanted to know about the curse that was currently eating away at her. Was it something that was a side-effect of the spell she had done seventy-seven years ago to protect the Veil? All Elektra had was more and more questions. She could only imagine how Vanth was feeling.

A door opened further into the house, and Vanth appeared shirtless, wearing only a pair of black flannelette pajama pants with grinning skulls on them and the necklace that matched her own. Elektra pretended to be asleep so she could get a better look at him.

He was beautiful in a strange and alternative type of way. His fae genetics were strong with his pointed ears and a lean build. He had a surprising amount of muscle that had been hidden under his black shirt and leather jacket the night before.

Peeking out from the hem of his pajamas was a tattoo that crept up his hips and stomach to his navel. She could make out skulls and roses and serpents, but she looked higher as heat crept over her cheeks. Most of his straight black hair had been styled into a half-pulled-through knot, the rest spilling down his back in a silken wave. She wanted to know how he got the scars on his ear. He looked her way, and his black brows drew together in a frown.

"Are you awake over there, princess?" he asked, his voice husky with sleep.

"Only just," she replied and yawned. "What time is it?"

"A little after 9 a.m. The facility where my mother is held won't allow visitors before ten, so we have time for coffee. All the coffee. I might be convinced to share if you want some." Vanth grinned, and the unfamiliar heat flared through her again. She pulled the blanket over her head.

Maybe you are coming down with a fever? Elektra really hoped so. She mumbled. "Yes, please."

"Not a morning person either? Maybe it's a necromancer thing."

Elektra waited until his footsteps receded, and she stuck her head out again. The blanket smelled of lavender laundry detergent and an unfamiliar male cologne. She wasn't mentally equipped to deal with the fact his scent was now all over her. It was a weird fae thing to be bothered by it.

She had lived with the temple for decades, far away from palaces swathed in twilight, and yet some things never left her. Smelling like a male that you weren't related to or were mated to was frowned upon amongst royalty. Not that she was a princess anymore. If she was, there was no way in the seven hells that she would be on some male's couch. She allowed herself a small smile. She was so glad she wasn't royalty anymore.

Elektra slowly sat up and ran her hands through her curls. She was still fully dressed, thank the dark gods. She had been so out of it, she didn't want

to think about if she would have passed out in front of anyone who wasn't Vanth. She stood up and stretched, her neck cracking so hard, dark spots danced in front of her eyes. Gods, she needed coffee.

"It's only for a few days..." she heard Vanth say when she neared the kitchen.

"You know what she is, Vanth! She's going to reap me!" a woman's voice argued.

"No one is going to reap you, Cecelia, not until you're ready," Vanth replied before the espresso machine purred to life.

Elektra walked around the side of the wall in time to see a pretty ghost girl perched on the edge of the kitchen counter. She glanced over at Elektra and then glared at her.

"I don't have the energy to reap you right now," Elektra said, amusement quirking her lips. "Maybe after I have coffee."

"Don't tease her." Vanth offered Elektra a steaming cup of black espresso. "Princess."

"Stop calling me that," she sighed and thanked him for the coffee.

Cecelia made a disgruntled huffing sound. "Don't you dare get him killed, or I will go full poltergeist on your ass," she said before vanishing.

"Ex-girlfriend of yours?" Elektra asked. If he said yes, maybe she would find the energy to reap her after all. She had a big mouthful of too-hot coffee and let it scorch the feeling away.

Vanth chuckled. "She wishes. She is a hitchhiker I picked up when I was in London, and I've been trying to convince her to move on ever since."

"Why don't you just send her through the Veil? You know how."

"Because I believe in having a choice," Vanth said and leaned a hip against the counter. It was weirdly sexy, and Elektra figured she must have hit her head when she fainted the night before. "Cecilia is harmless, and she keeps the other ghosts in line for the most part."

Elektra lifted her cup to her lips. "Better be careful she doesn't siphon you in your sleep in an effort to become alive again."

"She knows it won't work. Besides, it's keeping her out of the bathroom while I'm showering that I struggle with."

Hot coffee shot up Elektra's nose as she choked back a laugh. "She doesn't."

"Oh, she does. I had to ward the whole room." Vanth's smile widened. "Better make sure she doesn't do the same to you."

"If she does, I really will reap her."

Vanth's smile softened. "You okay after last night?"

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" Elektra asked.

"Heidi was one of your reapers. It must have been hard to see her like that," he said, dark eyes softening with compassion.

Elektra ignored the sudden ache in her chest. "They both deserved better. I'll grieve once Lazarus and all of his followers are tossed into Tartarus."

"Oh, that sounds like fun. Can you really dictate where a soul goes?"

Elektra laughed. "No, but I can always try."

"Damn. I thought you had some sexy reaper superpower to do that. I usually just turn my enemies into ghouls and make them serve me to teach them a lesson." Vanth said it casually, but it didn't stop the chill from sweeping down Elektra's spine.

"Do they know that they are ghouls in there?"

Vanth's smile turned vicious. "Hardly seems like punishment if they didn't. Does that bother you?"

"All depends if they actually deserve it and didn't do something like cut you off in traffic," Elektra replied. She had never tried to make a ghoul. The temple and its reapers were about stopping things from coming back from the dead, not bringing them back to life. Or a half-life.

Vanth's smile disappeared. "If you really want to know, my current two ghouls were pieces of shit. One tried to kill me, and the other was a ghost eater."

"A what?" Elektra asked, putting her coffee down.

"He was a mage that was using magic to trap ghosts and then feed off their soul energy. Kind of like a less advanced version of what Lazarus did to those females in the morgue, now that I think about it. And if you are worried about what the ghouls were eating last night, he was a serial killer with a fondness for children who was going to pay me to clean up his mess. I decided to clean him up instead," Vanth replied and crossed his arms. "Anything else?"

Elektra took a moment to think about it. "Did the serial killer suffer?"

"Most assuredly."

"Good," was all she said. She knew she needed Vanth to stop Lazarus, but she really hadn't expected to like him as much as she did. She cleared her throat. "You better go and find a shirt, Tarael."

Mischief sparked in his dark eyes. "And why is that, princess? Am I making you uncomfortable?"

Elektra snorted. "Fine. We will visit your mother with you in your skull pjs." She reached over and snapped his hem. "Very cute, by the way."

"I'm glad you think so," he replied, a smile dancing over his lips. "I can't wait to see what yours look like. Let me guess, moon and stars? I can only imagine."

"Wrong." Elektra put her cup in the sink. "I sleep naked."

Vanth's smile widened. "That's okay. I have a *very* good imagination."

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11

Elektra felt naked not wearing her normal uniform. Vanth had convinced her to stick with jeans and a T-shirt, but she wasn't happy about it.

"I'm not going to have you freaking any of the other residents out at the facility," he said stubbornly. "You are intimidating enough without the leather murder suit."

"It's not used for murder. I am a reaper. The suit is tactical when fighting things that manage to get through the Veil."

Vanth hadn't budged, so Elektra had given in to the jeans, but she still carried her sickles.

"It's a hospital, Elektra. *You* are the most dangerous person there," Vanth said, getting into the driver's seat of his van. For all of his bluster, he carried a dagger in his boot, and the two ghouls were already in the back, watching her with dead eyes.

"Apart from you," she replied drolly.

"Please. I'm a pussy cat."

Elektra pulled a face. "Save your lies for someone who will actually believe you."

Elektra had never been to a hospital for magical people. Vanth had explained that it was for anyone with magic and degenerative diseases. The wards were almost as powerful as the prison back at the Celestial Court. She tried not to shiver. She hated feeling caged in.

Vanth smiled and talked to the security guard, but the man didn't even bother taking their weapons.

"They trust you here," she commented, giving him a questioning look.

"They know they wouldn't be able to take me in a fight, and it's not weapons that are a threat here anyway. Most of the people are in independent housing."

Vanth opened a door for her, and they stepped into a reception area. A pretty woman sat behind a counter. She was all smiles at seeing Vanth until she realized Elektra was with him.

"Vanth, back again so soon?" the woman asked.

"I was worried about her. How has she been since yesterday, Clara?" he asked.

Elektra's magic itched as the two dropped into an easy rapport that spoke of friendship. Her fae senses were twitching, telling her that something wasn't right, but she couldn't see what.

"And who is your friend?" Clara asked. The way she said 'friend' sounded strongly of jealousy. So she had a crush on Vanth. No surprise there. He was charming when he wanted to be. It just wasn't the side that Elektra liked most.

"I'm Elektra. A cousin," she replied and gave her no more information.

Vanth cleared his throat. "Eiline hasn't seen her in years, and I thought it might help get her back into a more lucid state."

Clara pursed her lips but nodded. "Just don't upset her more."

"Cross my heart," Vanth said and winked at the nurse.

Elektra's magic burned again. She didn't know why it was acting so weird all of a sudden. It probably was still getting used to the human world's rhythms. The temple existed in a liminal space between the real and spirit world, and Elektra hadn't spent serious time in the real one in years.

That had to be it.

Elektra didn't hear the rest of whatever Vanth and Clara had said. She quickly scribbled a nonsense signature where Vanth pointed on a form and followed him out. She took a deep breath of fresh air and tried to clear her head.

"You okay? You looked like you dissociated for a bit there," Vanth said as they walked through the gardens.

"Why? Did the girl with the big eyes for you have something important to say?"

Vanth laughed. "Clara doesn't have 'big eyes' for me."

"Takes a female to notice."

"Sweet Clara likes to flirt, but she couldn't handle what I really am," Vanth said and shrugged. "There are few people who could look into the reality of what we are and what our magic is and not run screaming in the opposite direction."

"Most people are boring that way. We are unique, Vanth. I don't feel bad about that, and neither should you." Elektra had been tossed out of the Celestial Court a long, long time ago for what came naturally to her. She had gotten over apologizing for what she was and how she was made. Elektra had been talented but otherwise normal amongst the temple acolytes. She suddenly felt sorry for Vanth, having to come to terms with his power without anyone around him who had similar abilities.

She felt a whole lot less sorry when Eiline opened her door, and her magical aura smacked her in the face. Eiline didn't look older than about thirty-five, but that was typical fae genetics.

Elektra's training had her bowing low in the way she would to any high-ranking priestess.

"I see you have made a friend, Tarael," Eiline said, her voice soft and sharp at the same time.

"This is Elektra. She broke into my house, and I haven't been able to shake her," Vanth replied, hugging his mother. "How are you feeling today?"

"Hazy. Get inside, the pair of you. I don't feel safe right now, and I don't know why," Eiline said.

Elektra stepped into a comfortable and brightly decorated cottage. It wasn't what she expected until she saw the painting on the wall.

"Did they not give you enough canvases, Ma?" Vanth asked.

"Not big enough. I don't understand why I would paint this. Seems rather frightening," Eiline said. She was making tea, moving lightly.

Elektra couldn't tear her eyes away from the painting. The temple was trashed, and there were bodies scattered in the gardens and fields around it. In the background was painted a shimmering wave of lavender and blue light, like a brilliant wave about to crash down on top of them. It was the Veil, as only very few could see it.

"Your reapers?" Vanth whispered softly.

Elektra's jaw clamped too tight to form words, so she nodded.

"How do you like your tea, miss?" Eiline asked.

"Black with one sugar, thank you," Elektra said, shaking off the cold feeling in her stomach. "My name is Elektra. I... It's an honor to meet you."

"Is it?" Eiline asked, her brows drawing together.

"She doesn't know," Vanth said softly. "She doesn't remember."

Elektra pulled out her necklace. "I was given this by a friend of yours. Her name was Maria."

"Maria..." Eiline said and stared at the necklace.

Vanth took out his and slotted the pendants together. Sweet music rose up from it, and Eiline dropped the spoon she was holding. She moved slowly over to them and took the singing pendant in her shaking hands. "I remember." Tears filled her eyes, and she pressed the pendant to her cheek. "Orcus, my love."

12

Of all the things that Vanth expected his mother to say at that moment, the name of the Etruscan god of the dead wasn't one of them.

"What about Orcus?" he asked.

The music had stopped, and Vanth pulled his half of the pendant free. "Were you a devotee of him like she is with Charon?"

Eiline swallowed, clutching the pendant so hard, her fingers whitened. Her gaze cleared, and Vanth knew she was lucid, her curse pushed back for a moment.

"I was never a devotee of him. Orcus is your father. And you, Elektra must be a reaper. A good one too if Maria gave you this."

"I am, my lady. It's an honor to meet you," Elektra replied, bowing again.

Eiline nodded and looked at the mural she had painted. "Fuck. It's starting, isn't it? They are trying to break the patch on the Veil because it's weakened. When did this attack on the temple happen?"

"Four days ago. The high priestess sent me to find you and your son," Elektra replied. "A shade of a reaper told us Lazarus is also trying to find a way to trap Orcus in order to use his power."

"The audacity of that bastard," Eiline hissed.

Vanth was still frozen in shock. He forced his mouth to work. "What do you mean Orcus is my father? Which Orcus? Be specific because there're a lot of necromancers out there who get off on giving themselves dumb names."

"*The Orcus. The real one,*" Eiline said primly. She placed her hands on his cheeks. "It's a long story, my baby boy, and we aren't safe here."

"None of you are going anywhere," Clara said, coming into the cottage with three men. They were all mages with hard eyes, their magic humming.

"Clara?" Vanth couldn't make sense of what was happening, only that his world was breaking. The nurse he had been friends with seemed to have a completely different aura. How had she hidden it for so long?

"She's one of them. How long has Lazarus had you posted here to spy for him?" Elektra asked, looking down her nose at Clara.

For the first time, he could see the imperious royal in her. Damn, she was so beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

Clara's return smile was chilling. She didn't even try to deny it. "As soon as we located Eiline hiding in this place, I was sent to watch her. The curse has kept her from being useful until now. Whatever this reaper bitch has told you about us is wrong, Vanth. You know you can trust me."

"Can I?" He was going to be sick. He had been bringing Clara coffee and flirting with her for years. He thought she had actually cared. What a fucking fool he had been. He pointed to the mural. "So that didn't happen? Is it a lie? Or is your boss responsible for murdering people for their magic?"

Clara's smile widened. "It served a higher purpose. All of you will come with us now. Don't make it harder than it needs to be. Lazarus doesn't want to kill you, Vanth. He wants to recruit you. Talk to him, and you will see what we are really trying to do."

Elektra unsheathed her sickles and shot Vanth a glare. "I'm so glad you talked me out of wearing my suit. Why would I need tactical gear in a hospital?"

"Don't sass me, or I'll spank you," Vanth clapped back.

Elektra winked at him. "Stop threatening me with a good time, or I'll take you up on it."

"Stop flirting and come with us. We don't want any more bloodshed," Clara interrupted.

Vanth pulled his dagger from his boot in case any of them were dumb enough to get close enough for him to use it. "You clowns aren't going to lay a finger on my mother."

The three mages reacted before Clara could say a word. The first one threw a fireball towards Elektra. She dodged it, and it hit the mural,

blowing a hole right through the wall. Before he could summon another, Vanth picked up a dining chair and threw it at him. It crashed into him, distracting him long enough for Elektra to close in on him. She sliced off one of the mage's hands with her sickle before taking off his screaming head with the other. Two ghouls crashed through the back door.

"You guys took your fucking time," Vanth snarled. "I swear it's like you stopped for a snack on the way."

They threw themselves at the other two mages who had been closing in on Eiline to trap her in a room. Spells bounced off the ghouls as the mages hurried to try and go on the defense. It was useless. The ghouls had a hunger that could never be satisfied. They tore into the screaming mages and ripped their throats out. Clara was nowhere to be seen.

"Are you okay, Mom?" he called.

Eiline's shimmering gold protection shield dropped. "Yes. We need to leave."

"And go where? They know exactly where I live because I wrote it on the hospital's paperwork," Vanth replied. His safe little sanctuary had been an illusion all along.

Eiline went to her wardrobe and pulled out a battered black pack. "Car. Now. Clara will be calling for backup, and we can't stay here. I'll explain on the way."

"You take the lead," Elektra said to Vanth, her sickles still in her hands. "I'll protect our backs with your abominations."

Outside, the grounds were quiet as they always were. They ran down the twisting lanes to the main gate. The gate had been broken, and Vanth could only assume his ghouls were to blame. The security guard was cowering in the small box he worked from. He was still alive, so Vanth didn't have time to feel bad about his ghouls traumatizing the guy.

They piled into the van with Elektra in the back with the ghouls. They were looking at her with dreamy expressions, like they were infatuated with her.

Something to look further into later. They drove out into the streets of Inferno without looking back.

"Where am I meant to be going now?" he asked, feeling more unhinged by the second.

"The fae district, on the west side, near the forest. I'll guide you when we get there," Eiline said. She reached over and squeezed his arm. "I don't

know how long this lucid period will last, so if you can put your foot down, my heart, I would appreciate it."

Vanth did as he was told, the van lurching forward. "Okay, what is in the fae district? Where are we going, Mom?"

Eiline leaned back into the passenger seat. "We are going home. We need to see your grandfather."

Well, fuck.

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Vanth followed his mother's instructions to a part of the fae district he had never been to before. It felt darker and wilder, a psychic pulse of danger spreading out to warn people to stay the fuck away.

"We have to leave the van here, and your ghouls can't come either," Eiline told him before hopping out of the passenger seat.

Behind him, Elektra gave his shoulder a squeeze. "Don't freak out on me, Vanth. I'm having too much fun."

He laughed. He couldn't help it. "You're going to tell me some of your secrets when we get to safety. You should've told me about my father."

"Would you have believed me?" Elektra asked, her gray eyes curious.

"I'm not sure I believe it now."

Elektra winked at him. "Exactly. Now, get your ass out of the car." She opened the back door and shut it behind her.

Vanth looked at his ghouls. "Watch the van. Anyone tries to steal it, you can eat them."

He grabbed his spare bag of clothes that he always had in the van for emergencies and went to see where Elektra and his mother had gotten to.

They were waiting for him next to a moss-covered oak tree. The forest had appeared not long after the city had been founded.

The story was that the fae had opened the first door to Faerie there, and the forest had moved in overnight. Vanth could only imagine how many doors they had now. The ruling council didn't care as long as the doors

opened into the fae district. It gave them more of an incentive to guard them and ensure no monsters decided to come through.

The monsters could wear a kind face too, so only the gods knew what was actually lurking in the woods. That was the thing about Inferno—there was always a bigger monster to take you out if you stepped out of line.

Eiline smiled weakly at him. "I know you are angry, but one day, you will understand. Now, stay close to me. There are few who can get to my father's land, and if you wander off, I won't be able to find you again."

Vanth looked at Elektra. "Want to hold hands? You know, just to make sure you don't get lost."

"If you are scared of the woods, just say so," she shot back.

Eiline was looking curiously between them but shook herself. She searched through her pockets and pulled out a handful of random items. Amongst the spools of thread, dried flowers, and toothpicks was a bent iron nail. She took the nail and put the rest of the items back in her pocket.

"Stay close," she repeated and placed the iron on her palm. She whispered soft words to it in a fae dialect Vanth barely knew. It was like a mash-up of Gaelic and Old Norse, and he caught something of the rhyme being about smiths and forges.

Beside him, Elektra sucked in a sharp breath. "So *that's* who your grandfather is. I've changed my mind. Maybe we should hold hands."

"Too late, princess. I want my hands free in case I need to kill something," Vanth replied. He took his dagger and sheath from his boot and tucked it into the band of his jeans for easy access.

Elektra had one of her sickles out but hadn't released the blade. "Good point."

The nail in Eiline's hand straightened itself out and began to spin like the needle of a compass.

"Follow me," she said, her eyes sparkling with delight. "He's going to be so happy to see you, Tarael." He couldn't remember the last time his mother seemed so excited. He couldn't stay mad at her despite the sting he felt about being lied to for so many years.

The forest closed in around them, and he felt like the world was holding his breath. His mother took the lead, following the direction of the iron nail in her hand. Elektra didn't seem to find any of it odd, but he supposed it was because she had lived more time amongst the fae than he did. For all he

knew, the hand full of junk in his mother's pocket were all enchanted objects.

One thing Vanth remembered from all the fairy tales was to stay on the path when walking through an enchanted wood. His mother seemed to ignore this advice altogether.

"I hope that we aren't going to end up in some gingerbread house in a cage together," he said to Elektra.

"I really doubt that would've been your first time in a cage." Elektra smiled at him, and he felt the swift bite of attraction sink its teeth into him again. Under any other circumstances, if he had met a necromancer like her, he would have asked her out. Her scent reminded him of some kind of mix of pine, cinnamon and the flavor of her magic when she used it... He shook himself. Definitely not the time to be having those kinds of thoughts. He wasn't even sure that reapers like her could go on dates.

"If you keep talking to me like that, I'm going to think that you're hot for me, princess," he teased. "And no, it wouldn't be the first time I was in a cage."

Ahead of them, his mother was leaping from stone to stone across a stream and humming to herself.

"How long do you think she will stay lucid for?" Elektra asked.

"Hopefully, long enough to get us where we are going, or we will be properly fucked." Vanth looked about at the dark forest. He didn't like the feeling that it was watching him. He pointed to the rocks. "Ladies first."

"Oh, no, godling. After you. I told your mother I would watch your back. She's scarier than you," Elektra replied. Despite her teasing tone, she was studying the dark water.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just thought I saw something. I haven't been in Faerie for a long time, and it's messing with me."

Vanth stared at the trees. "We have passed into Faerie?"

"A little while back. The change is subtle. Maybe a half-blood isn't as sensitive to it."

On the other side of the stream, Eiline waved at them. "Hurry up, children!"

Vanth hopped out onto the first stone, and when he didn't immediately slip over and fall on his ass, he hopped to the next. He was almost at the far bank when the hair on the back of his neck stood up, and he turned back to

check on Elektra. She was moving across the stones with a lot more grace than he had, her booted feet moving swiftly and surely.

Vanth was about to turn back around when the water rippled beside Elektra. He opened his mouth to shout a warning when a head made of water, weed, mud, and teeth lunged for her. She went sprawling backward into the water.

"Elektra!" He shouted, pulling out his dagger and diving after her.

The water was freezing. Sharp pain bit against his skin as he swam toward the fiery red of her hair. The creature had her caught in its teeth, and she was thrashing to get loose.

Vanth plunged his dagger into the creature's equine neck, the blade going deep. The creature bucked hard against him, its strong back colliding with him and sending him shooting backward through the water. He swam back toward it and plunged his knife into its belly.

Elektra had kicked herself free and was swimming fast towards the shore. The monster in the water gave up on her and turned its attention back to him.

Instinct drove Vanth to reach for his magic, and he sent a warning pulse of his death power toward it. The creature shrieked and bolted on stone hooves through the water and as far away from him as possible. Vanth breached the water and sucked in lungfuls of warm air.

"What in the ever-loving fuck was that?" he called out as he swam to the shore. Elektra pulled him out of the water, her face pale with shock.

"That, my boy, was a selkie," his mother said. She looked him over. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Not me, but it had its teeth in Elektra."

Bright blood was seeping through her jeans. "It's nothing. It didn't have me for very long."

"How far away are we from your father's house?" Vanth asked his mother.

"I'm not exactly sure. Navigating this way isn't an exact science."

Vanth crouched down and reached for Elektra's jeans. "Show me how bad it is. Fuck knows what was on those teeth."

"Stop fussing. I'm fine."

Vanth sat down on the grass. "I'm not going anywhere until you show me."

He wasn't sure if fae instincts were guiding him or not, but the sight of her blood was making him feel crazy. He had been crazy to follow her into the water with a creature he had no idea how to defeat.

Elektra hissed in annoyance at him and pulled up the leg of her jeans. Bite marks in a large crescent had punctured the flesh of her calf, the skin around it jagged and torn from where it had pulled away so suddenly from her.

"It's nothing. It didn't have me long enough to cause any real damage. We can patch this up when we get where we're going," she said, her tone laced with annoyance.

Vanth grabbed her ankle to keep her from pulling away from him. "It's not nothing. If I don't wrap this, then you will be leaving a trail of blood through the forest that will no doubt attract some other larger predator to attack us."

His backpack had somehow stayed on during the tussle in the water, and he had never been so grateful that he had placed a waterproofing spell on it. He rummaged around in the bag and pulled out a small first-aid kit. In his line of work, accidents tended to happen. He pulled out two white patches and pulled off the protective tape on one side. They had been a gift from a med mage friend of his and were guaranteed to heal her in the next few hours.

"This might sting a little," he warned before he placed the patch over one side of her leg. Elektra made a soft hissing sound but didn't object to him placing the other patch on the identical ring of bite marks on the other side of her calf.

"Do you always fuss this much?" she asked.

Vanth ran his thumb over a spare patch of skin. "I haven't decided if I am going to kill you still for breaking into my house, princess. I don't want some selkie claiming my prize. I need you to be fighting fit or it wouldn't be fair."

Elektra only laughed at him. "I love that you still think you stand a chance."

Vanth stroked his thumb over her soft skin again and smiled at the goosebumps that rose in its wake.

"Maybe I stand more of a chance than you think," he whispered.

Her gray eyes widened, and he quickly looked away. It wasn't the time or the place.

Vanth pulled her jeans back over the patches and reached into his bag again for a small vial of black sand. He opened it and sprinkled the sand over the blood that she had left behind. Instantly, it began to smoke and disintegrate into dust.

"We can't be leaving a trail or allow any creature from here to get their hands on your blood. I really don't need to deal with you being under some monster's spell right now," he shot her a wry smile. "None but mine anyway."

Eiline called out to them from the other side of the glade. "Can we keep moving? I can feel the madness returning, and I don't know how much longer I can hold it."

"We are coming!" he shouted back. He stood up and slung the strap of his bag over his shoulder again. "After you, princess. I need to ensure you aren't dripping on anything as we go."

Elektra reached out and placed her palm on his chest, and the hammering beat of his heart slowed as it calmed. "I'm okay, Tarael. Thank you for jumping into the water after me."

"I'll figure out how you can repay me later when I'm not nervous that something else is going to jump out to try and eat us."

"I don't know, it makes things interesting." Elektra removed her hand and hurried to catch up to his mother, only slightly limping on her wounded leg.

Vanth didn't know what to do with the worry and panic for her that were suddenly smashing into his heart. He really fucking hoped that it was some primal instinct that he had never encountered before. *Fucking fae genes.*

Time didn't seem to make any sense in the forest. One moment, they were in startling morning sunshine, and the next, twilight gloom.

Eiline was almost jogging in her haste to get to her father's house. Vanth didn't know how he could help her counter the madness that was threatening to come back. He could only do his best to keep up and watch over them.

It was getting dark when the smell of blood hit his sensitive nose and tongue. No, not blood. *Iron.*

The loud bang of hammer against steel rang through the trees, and Eiline started running.

Vanth felt a ward trigger with a magical warning as he stepped through it, and a house appeared between the trees. Smoke was rising from a

building next to it, and the biggest fucking fae he had ever seen stepped out from amongst the shadowy interior. He had dark brown hair that hung in a messy braid and a gray-flecked beard. He carried a hammer and looked ready to bash in heads until he spotted Eiline. She threw herself into his arms, uncaring of the sweat and soot that covered him and his apron.

"*Athair! Athair!*" she said as he lifted her up and squeezed her.

"My little flower. You've finally come home. Who are the kids?" he asked, his voice a husky grumble. He studied Vanth with a face similar shaped to his own.

"That's Elektra. She's a reaper. This is Tarael. He's your grandson," Eiline said and then promptly burst into tears.

The smith stared at Vanth, and they both said at the same time, "Well, fuck."

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"Eiline Brokkr, you didn't tell me you were pregnant last time I saw you," Vanth's grandfather snarled, giving Eiline a hard stare.

"If I had, you would have never let me leave!" she said, defiantly putting her hands on her hips despite her tears.

"Damn straight, I wouldn't have! Now you have a curse on you as well? By Weyland, I taught you better," he roared.

Vanth stepped between them. "I don't give a fuck who you are. You don't get to shout at her that way. Now, back off, old man."

The smith was a good foot taller than Vanth, but he still stepped back and threw up his hands. "Bah! I'm going back to the forge to hit something." He stormed away, leaving them standing in the garden.

"It's okay. Let Grandpa Flynt cool down a little. He will come around. Are you hungry?" Eiline said, like nothing was wrong, and hurried inside the cottage.

Vanth let out a frustrated groan. "This is just great."

"It could be worse. You should see my family," Elektra commented from beside him.

"Least you know they exist. I had no idea about my father *or* my grandfather." Vanth wanted to go and sit in a dark room for a long time.

Elektra nudged him with her shoulder. "You won't get your answers standing out here and pouting."

"I'm not pouting," he lied, and Elektra's smile widened. Gods, she was pretty even after a dip in the river. He reached up and pulled a soggy leaf

out of her red hair.

"Are you always this much trouble, Vanth?" she asked.

Vanth didn't have to think about it. "Yes. Usually, it's not family stuff, but I always seem to have someone trying to kill me for one reason or another. Or people are trying to drag me into their fights as an ally."

"I suppose it's better than being boring. Come on, let's find some tea. I'm cold, and these wet jeans are chafing where I shouldn't be chafed."

"I have a balm for that if you need a helping hand."

Elektra smirked. "Do you always flirt this much?"

"Do you, princess?" Vanth pulled another leaf from her hair. "If it's bothering you, tell me to stop, and I will."

"If it starts bothering me, I will," Elektra replied, following Eiline inside.

Vanth watched the sway of her hips and cursed his dick under his breath. *Not the time. Not the time. Not the time.*

He considered going and jumping back into the cold river. He probably would have if he weren't scared about what else it held apart from selkies.

Flirting with Elektra felt dangerous, and he liked that about her. He couldn't deny it was also distracting enough to keep him from having a complete meltdown. It wasn't only that she was beautiful; it was the feeling that she was the one person he had met who would understand the dark power in him and not run away screaming. She knew he was the son of Orcus and hadn't seemed intimidated by it either. He certainly fucking was.

Vanth pushed his hands through his damp hair. There was only one way to find out the truth about all the lost parts of himself. He stopped pouting and went to find his mother.

The house was like a cross between a hobbit hole and if the fae decided they loved cottagecore. Nearly everything was made of wood, and the fabrics used on the curtains and couches looked handwoven.

It was meticulously clean, which seemed out of character for the fae that they had encountered outside, who was covered from head to toe in ash and grime.

Vanth found his mother and Elektra in the kitchen. A cast-iron kettle was already hanging over an open fire, and Eiline was helping herself to freshly made cookies out of a jar.

"Are you sure that it's okay that we are here? Grandfather didn't seem too happy to see us," he said.

"He is happy. He's just been thrown off by the idea of you existing without him knowing. He will hammer out his frustration and worry and come in for tea when he's ready," Eiline replied.

At least she had stopped crying. There were a few things that Vanth really couldn't handle, and her tears were one of them.

Eiline pointed to the direction down the hall. "There is a bathroom through there if you need it, Elektra. You look like you could use a change of clothes. Be careful of the hot water. It's heated from the forge, so it will be boiling."

Knowing that she didn't have any clothes, Vanth offered his bag to her. "Everything in it is clean, so help yourself. We can get your clothes washed and dry tonight."

Elektra took the bag with a grateful nod and headed towards the bathroom.

"You like her, don't you?" his mother said. She might have a curse on her, but there wasn't much that she missed.

"And you don't? One of your precious reapers that I knew nothing about until now," he replied, still pissed at all the lies that he had been told. He didn't want to think about what he was feeling where Elektra was concerned.

Eiline offered him a cookie. "I know you're angry with me, but I have only ever done what I could to protect you. I couldn't trust anyone but Maria within the temple, and I couldn't stay under their protection when I found out that I was pregnant. Lazarus had too many spies, and I knew you would be the most gifted of children."

Vanth took a cookie and ate it, the sugar making him feel a little better.

His mother continued. "You were far too unique to have anywhere near the fae either. It's why I couldn't keep you here. These lands belong to my father, but they are too small for someone with your abilities, and as soon as you stepped out of them, there would be one Fae Lord or another trying to entrap you into their service. They might play nice on the Inferno side of their lands to ensure PR is good, but you should never forget what they really are and what they are capable of."

It was a lecture that Vanth had heard many times before. It was one of the reasons why he was so surprised that his grandfather still lived and that his mother actually loved him. She had always made a point of telling him how much she hated the fae and how they ruled their people.

He said, "And you changed our name from Brokkr to Vanth so they wouldn't connect us with your dad?"

"Yes. My father is notorious enough. As I told you before, I took the goddess Vanth's name for protection. She is a psychopomp and guides souls to the Afterlife," Eiline replied. "I was a devotee of hers."

Vanth's jaw was clenching too tight. He tried to steady his thoughts before opening his hurt, angry mouth.

"I understand why you never told me when I was a child. I just don't understand why you didn't tell me when I came of age so that I would understand some of this. I mean, for fuck's sake, Mom, my father is supposedly the god of the dead," he said and took another cookie. He didn't want to yell at her and had to check himself before he did just that.

Eiline took the cast-iron kettle from the fire and poured steaming water over tea leaves into a porcelain pot.

"There is no 'supposedly' about who your father is, sweetheart. Orcus is your father. That is why your necromancer power is so strong. You get your abilities from me as well. I was never meant to fall in love with him," she said, staring out of the windows at the forest beyond.

A change came over here then, just the slightest shiver of air moving around her, and she stared at the cup in her hand, her expression blank.

Vanth knew that the curse had hit her again, and her temporary reprieve from its power was gone. He took her by the hand and guided her to the chair by the fire.

"Sit down here, Mom. Stay warm, okay?" he said and took the cup from her hand. "I'll make the tea."

Vanth wanted to hurl the cup at the wall. It wouldn't solve anything. It wouldn't bring her mind back or help him get the answers he needed.

Instead, Vanth made tea and sandwiches and tried to process what he had learned in the last few days and puzzle out the weird magic Lazarus was doing.

By the time Elektra came out of the bathroom, Vanth had set everything out on the table and was waiting for her. She was wearing his faded Tenacious D shirt, the bottom knotted in one corner, and a pair of his black boxers.

She still had the patches on her wounded leg, but she must have bathed because she no longer smelled of river weed. Her scent was sweet and sexy, and he wanted to bury his nose into the fire of her hair. He remembered

how her soft skin felt on her calves and thought about what it would taste like.

Vanth stared at Elektra silently for a minute, all worries of his parentage and Lazarus and the Veil disappearing under the burning lust that punched into him.

"What? Did I miss mud? I found some in my ear of all places," she said, sitting down at the table.

"No. It's just weird seeing someone wear my clothes. Can you keep an eye on Mom? She's drifted again, and I need to get rid of mud too," he blabbed, his hands starting to shake.

"I'll watch her." Elektra's gray eyes turned suspicious. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Vanth stared at the firelight dancing on her curls. "No, I'm really not," he said and hurried towards the bathroom before he gave into his irrational instincts to drag her off and fuck her senseless.

In the bathroom, his bag was next to the iron tub, and he shut the door behind him, careful not to slam it. He could smell Elektra's scent in the small room, and his whole body burned.

He didn't know if his attraction to Elektra was fae instinct or something else, but he really hoped she hadn't seen the bulge in his wet jeans. He shouldn't be having that kind of response to her scent. He shouldn't be thinking about her in that way at all. His world was burning down, and all he could think of was getting her naked and under him.

Vanth's hands shook as he stripped off his muddy jeans, breathing a sigh of relief as his full erection sprang free and his piercings stopped digging into his zipper.

He turned on one of the shower taps, and it came out ice cold. Perfect. He stepped under the spray and tried to will the fire in his veins to disappear.

It had to be some kind of stress reaction, he lied to himself. He barely knew her. It wasn't like him to ever feel out of control.

The cold water wasn't helping, so Vanth reached for his dick. The first stroke had him biting down a moan. He couldn't remember being this horny or his dick so sensitive. He jerked himself again, fingers tugging against the bars through his end.

"Fucking hell," he whispered. He tried to summon enough embarrassment to be ashamed of himself, but it felt too fucking good.

Vanth imagined Elektra on her knees before him, full lips and wicked tongue moving over him. Her husky voice whispered dirty things through his imagination, and within a minute, he was coming so hard, he had to put his other hand on the wall to stop himself from toppling over.

He rested his burning forehead against the cold wall as a phantom Elektra whispered in his ear, "Good boy."

There wasn't a single thing about it that wasn't totally fucked. He needed to get his shit together, not lose it over a pretty girl because he hadn't been laid in months.

"Stress reaction," he told his bedraggled reflection in the bathroom mirror. Steam was rising off his skin despite the straight cold shower. That was new. He stared into his dark eyes, "You are so fucked."

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Elektra studied Eiline by the fire and tried to feel out the curse that was affecting her mind. It was like tentacles moving through her head, shutting down and protecting some parts but not others. It was an intentional madness.

Vanth came out of the bathroom, looking slightly more relaxed than when he went in. Elektra couldn't imagine how hard it must be for him. She knew where she came from and who her family was. To go from thinking that he had no one to have his whole world shaken... Elektra hated putting him through it.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"As good as I can be." Vanth sat down on the warm stones next to the fire. His long black hair was a ruffled mess he was methodically attacking with a comb. "Any changes with Mom?"

Elektra's hand itched to touch his hair. She clenched her fist tight. "Not that I can tell. I have been trying to study the nature of the curse. It's protecting parts of her brain, and I think it's those parts that we need."

"Fuck," Vanth muttered, attacking a knot. "I had a theory once that she had put the curse on herself, but I could never find a reason why she would. Do you think this has something to do with Orcus?"

Elektra reached over and took the comb from him. "Let me. You're going to hurt yourself in this mood and make the knots worse."

Vanth passed her the comb and turned his back to her. "I can't understand why she never told me about him."

The hurt in his voice was like a stab in Elektra's heart. At the temple, everyone tended to hide their emotions and get on with the job. There were partners and friends, but Elektra had never been a part of any close cliques. Vanth had become her friend in the blink of an eye, and suddenly, she cared too much.

"If I had to guess, I think your mother put the curse on herself to ensure that if Lazarus ever found her again, he wouldn't be able to get the information about the Veil from her. Your mother had worked with Orcus to fix the breach the first time around. Because it was broken once in that place, it's possible that Lazarus wants to use that weakness to open again. I don't know much more than that. The high priestess, Maria, who told me that much, died before she could tell me the rest," Elektra explained softly.

She worked through the first section of his dark hair and went on to the next. There was a strange intimacy in combing his hair, but it also seemed to relax him, so she didn't stop. It satisfied the strange need to touch him at the same time.

"We need to find a way to deal with her curse. Otherwise, we might never know what the fuck is happening," Vanth replied.

"I might be able to help with that," Flynt said, standing in the doorway of the kitchen. He must have had another bathroom in the forge because he was clean and in fresh clothes. He pulled out a necklace from his pocket. It had a pendant hanging from it that looked like iron but with a magical signature that hit Elektra like a sharp slap. Forgotten magic in her blood sang at the sight of it.

"It's made of star steel. Meteorite," she said, correcting herself.

Flynt nodded. "It has stronger effects than normal iron. This pendant has other healing properties too, so I'm hoping it will help put a temporary block on whatever is going on in her brain," he grumbled. He placed the necklace over Eiline's head. "Now we wait for it to work."

Flynt poured himself some tea and sat down at the table. He studied Vanth. "You look like my side at least. What the fuck happened to your ear?"

"The first time I created a ghoul, it swiped out my earrings. Taught me a lesson about having anything in my face during a fight," Vanth said.

Flynt looked at Elektra. "What's your story? You really a reaper, or are you only here to brush his hair?"

"He saved me from a selkie. It's the least I can do," Elektra said, the fae protectiveness rearing its ugly head.

Flynt grinned at her. "Ah, huh. If you say so. Okay, kids, fill me in on what you can."

Elektra tried not to think about what was behind his smug grin and told him about the Veil, the recent attack on the temple, finding Vanth, and coming to Faerie. Vanth remained quiet for the whole time.

"Eiline never could date anyone normal," Flynt said once Elektra was finished. "I had wondered why it had been so long since she had come to see me, and now I know why."

"Surprise," Vanth replied.

"How long have you been taking care of her because of the curse?"

"About twenty years."

Flynt's dark eyes softened. "You poor kid. I'm sorry you had to do it alone. Did you kill the person who cursed her?"

"If I knew who it was, I would have. We think she did it to herself," Vanth replied, his shoulders tensing.

Flynt huffed out a laugh. "Sounds about right."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Eiline said. She rubbed at her eyes. "How long was I out?"

"Not long."

Flynt crossed his arms. "You better start talking, my girl. What did I always tell you about gods?"

"Never make deals with them and never have sex with them," Eiline sighed. She glanced across at Vanth and then back at her father. "One out of two isn't bad."

Elektra laughed before quickly trying to swallow it. Vanth looked over his shoulder at her which made her laugh break free. "It's still not as bad as my family arguments. I can imagine Orcus was quite something."

Eiline smiled, her face softening. "He was."

"You were a devotee of his?" Elektra guessed.

Flynt grumbled. "Couldn't have picked a nice Celtic god to worship. Oh, no. That would have been too logical."

"None of them would talk to me because of you." Eiline rolled her eyes. It was clearly a long-standing disagreement. "I was a devotee of Vanth. She is Etruscan like Orcus is."

"So how did you meet him?" Vanth asked, his shoulders bunching up again. Elektra placed her hand on his shoulder, and they eased down from about his ears. She removed her hand, unsure of why she had just done it. Fuck, what was going on with her? She didn't have a chance to think about it because Eiline started talking again.

"I met Orcus the way you usually meet a god," she answered, a soft smile back on her face. "I did a ritual, and he answered."

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Vanth was trying his best to keep an open mind, but there were limits to what he wanted to know about his mother's sex life.

"Why did you summon him to begin with?" he asked.

Eiline sipped her tea. "It was just after Lazarus and his group of followers decided to separate from the temple. They had been trying to find ways to use its power, to siphon it if you will. They had created a tear in it, and I had no idea how to fix it. None of us did. Only our numbers stood in the way of Lazarus trying again. We only had a matter of time before he returned. I did the ritual to summon Orcus in order to learn how to fix it."

"And what? He asked to have sex with you in return?" Vanth asked, his temper building again.

Eiline frowned at him. "Of course he didn't. He's not a part of this reality, and he could only guide me on the magic to mend the tear. He didn't even want to help in the beginning, and I convinced him with my sheer tenacity more than anything else. Sex was not a part of our bargain. It wasn't even a bargain. He knew what chaos would be unleashed if Lazarus succeeded." She tapped her fingernails against the leg of her chair. "Orcus had to teach me the magic to heal the Veil, but ultimately, I wasn't strong enough, so I could only temporarily mend it with a patch. I fucked up because I didn't have enough power. The mending changed the nature of the Veil, and Orcus was locked on the other side of it."

Eiline hugged herself, tears slipping down her cheeks. "I will not give you details of our romance. That's my business. But we did love each other,

and I won't apologize for that to anyone. You were made with love, Tarael. Never doubt that."

Vanth tried not to flinch. He had been expecting that the god had taken advantage of her and was relieved that he had been wrong. "If Orcus isn't a part of this reality, how did you have sex?"

"The temple sits in a liminal space between realities. It's like a place where the Veil meets the living world," Elektra said behind him. Her fingers brushed over some of his hair that she had de-tangled for him. It was a casual touch that he had no idea how to interpret. He only knew that he was enjoying it too much to move away from her. Her presence was keeping him grounded somehow, and he needed that most of all.

"And then what happened? You've been gone a long time, my flower," Flynt said. He had a bruised look in his eyes that Vanth felt on a visceral level. She had lied to both of them. "Why didn't you come to me?"

Eiline brushed a fresh tear from her cheek. "I knew that one day, the son that I was growing inside of me would be able to mend the Veil properly so that I could once again see his father. Tarael would have the power that I lacked to do the job right. What I did really was a weak patch. It's what Lazarus is trying to tear off now, and he's not going to let the reapers get in his way like last time."

"That's why they slaughtered us. It wasn't only for our magic," Elektra said, her voice tight. Vanth's hand closed around her cool ankle beside him, hoping that the touch would ground her as it did him.

"Reapers can move in the liminal space and fight him there. Lazarus isn't taking chances this time," Eiline replied, toying with the new pendant about her neck. "This is holding some of the curse back but not all of it. I don't remember how I made the spell with Orcus, and I don't know where the location of the tear is. Maybe my books will have the answers."

"What books?" Vanth and Elektra asked at the same time.

"The ones you left here on your last visit?" Flynt guessed.

Eiline nodded. "I knew they would be safe here, *athair*. Before you start, I wouldn't have been. I didn't want any of the Fae Lords using Tarael as a way to control you, and I didn't want him growing up here where it's too easy for them to entrap him in some way."

Flynt growled a feral and angry sound. "You didn't even give me a chance to protect you both."

"It was safer for all of us if I lived in Inferno. I couldn't trust anyone but Maria in the temple either. She helped me fake my death, a hunt gone wrong, and I disappeared," Eiline replied. Her chin had a stubborn lift that Vanth knew too well. She had thought she was doing the right thing, and no one was going to convince her otherwise.

Flynt must have known it too because he only grunted, "How do we lift the curse properly?"

"You can't. Only Orcus can because I used one of his spells to do it. I couldn't risk anyone finding out what I knew. It was to protect the Veil and Tarael. I won't apologize for trying to do it either," Eiline replied, crossing her arms.

Vanth didn't know if he wanted to cry or punch something. "Okay, Mom. Let me see if I have this right—Lazarus is back to fuck up the Veil and try and capture Orcus. The key to fixing the Veil and making it so Orcus can traverse it again as well as remove your fucking curse is all locked in your mind."

"Or in my books," she said with a nod.

"Fuck my life," he murmured. "I need to go and hit something too. Can I use your forge, granddad?"

"Fuck no, you will break something," Flynt replied and then shot him a smile. "There's a training room attached to it you can use though. Knock yourself out, kid."

As Vanth got to his feet, Eiline grabbed his hands. "My room is on the way to the training room. Have a look in there for my books."

"Yes, Mom," he said and dropped a kiss on her head. He didn't want to be mad at her, and he needed to walk away before he said something he was going to regret.

Vanth explored the halls of his grandfather's house, wondering how he would find his mother's room in it. He could feel the magic inside of it, like some kind of Fae Tardis, with more on the inside than the cottage seemed on the outside. If nothing else, it gave him time to think. He didn't know how he felt about being a demigod or that he was the key to fixing the Veil. It all felt like a fuck ton of responsibility he'd never asked for.

He had spent his whole adult life trying to avoid being the center of attention. He had taken his mother's caution to a whole new level. The mages in Inferno actively hated him, so it was easier for him to isolate himself. He had few friends, and most of those were there because they owed each other debts in some form or another. None of them would be able to have the slightest chance of understanding what he was going through anyway.

Elektra does, a small voice prompted him. It was the truth. He didn't have to hide a single thing about himself around her. She could feel his power and knew what he was capable of, but she didn't seem bothered by it. Maybe it would have been better if Eiline had sent him to the reapers when he was a kid. He wouldn't have felt so different and alone.

You would also be dead because Lazarus killed them all. It still didn't stop Vanth from wondering what his life might have been like if he had people around him with the same abilities.

Vanth paused by a room with a bunch of flowers carved into the door. Little flower. That's what Flynt called his mother. Vanth opened the door, and his mother's scent hit him. It was old, but it was still strong. He opened the door and turned on the lanterns.

"Holy shit," he murmured.

When she had said to look through her books, she had failed to mention she had a god's damned library in her room. It was more like a library crossed with an alchemy lab. Her bed was pushed back into a far corner. Everything else was books of arcana, grimoires, and magical artifice.

Vanth knew his mother was a brilliant mage. She had taught him more than the toffs in the mages' guild did, but he had no idea the depth and variety of her obsession.

How the fuck was he going to find the book he needed in there? Vanth took a breath and went to the overflowing desk. He picked up the books and studied the titles, but none of them were related to death magic. He left the desk and went over to the counters covered in long dried-out experiments. He was still there thirty minutes later when he felt someone watching him.

"If you want to be alone, just tell me," Elektra said, her gray eyes concerned.

What the hell had he done to deserve that kind of worry from her? He didn't know, and he didn't care. He was too selfish to question it.

"I don't want to be alone," he said and swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. Gods, he had been alone his whole fucking life and thought he enjoyed it. Right until the moment he met someone who actually understood him.

When Vanth looked at the gorgeous fae female in front of him, he was torn by thoughts of 'please be my best friend' and 'I want to fuck you until we both pass out.' He had never felt that way about anyone.

He realized he was staring and turned back to his book. "I mean, I can't do this alone. Look at all this stuff. I'll be here for the next year trying to figure it out," he quickly added, clearing his throat.

Elektra joined him at the counter and looked around her. "Did you find anything interesting so far?"

"Oh, plenty," he said, snapping the book he was holding shut and picking up another. "Just none of it is what we are looking for. If she weren't my mother, I would shake her for putting that fucking curse on herself."

Elektra ran a hand through her curls and stared around the room. "She must have been so scared. I can't even imagine."

"I know. I get it, but I'm still frustrated," he admitted. "Must make me the biggest prick ever."

"You're taking it all better than I would be. It's okay to be mad about being lied to. Doesn't matter if you understand the reasons behind it," Elektra replied. She held his gaze a second longer before quickly looking back to the mess around her. "Maybe we need to work smarter and not harder. We don't have time to sift through this the old-fashioned way."

"What do you propose, princess?" he asked.

"Magic, of course." Elektra's wine dark power filled the air, and Vanth's mouth watered. Yeah, he had it bad. "The spell would feel like the Veil. Let me see if I can tune into it."

Vanth watched her fingers dance as she walked about the room, scrying in a way he had never seen before.

Just think about all the magic she could teach you. That wasn't a helpful thought because he was distracted enough by how she looked in his beat-up clothes.

"Can you lift up this pile? There's something underneath it, and I can't drop the spell, or I'll have to start it again," Elektra said from the other side of the room. Vanth moved where she was standing and shifted the pile of clothes on the floor by the bed. Underneath them was a polished wooden box. He opened it, and inside was a pair of shining sickles.

"Oh, that must have been her weapons when she was with the temple," Elektra said, staring down at them with wide eyes.

Vanth picked up the sickles, and the soft leather hilts warmed in his hands. Death magic pulsed through them, and he could feel the layers of spells over them.

"They can cut specters and other incorporeal creatures?" Vanth asked, turning them over. He had never felt power infused into blades like it before.

"Amongst other things. It's how I could separate Heidi's shade from her body in the morgue," Elektra said. She must have seen the excitement in his face because she smiled. "Do you want me to show you how to use them?"

Ten minutes later, they had found the training room. It was well used, with big leather punching bags and wooden dummies that had bits taken out

of them. Weapons of all kinds hung on the walls, and there were occasional scorch marks and other damage on the floors.

"Do you think he brings weapons in here to test out?" Elektra asked.

"He must. Look at the state of that dummy. It still has a mace in its chest," Vanth pointed out. He stared around him at his grandfather's work, and something twinged in him. "I don't know what to think of my grandfather being alive and a Weyland of all things. I thought they were a myth."

Elektra selected two daggers from the wall. "No offense, Vanth, but there's a lot about you that's mythic. Maybe just get used to having weird shit in your lineage and stop pouting about it."

"And you can talk, Miss Celestial Princess," he replied, taking the sickles out of their case again.

"I haven't been a part of that world in a long time. I don't even have their powers which pissed my father off to no end. He thought I was only going to be good for a marriage alliance, but luckily, a representative from the temple found me first," she said and looked at him playing about. "Do you have any weapons training at all?"

"Daggers, short swords, and hand-to-hand stuff. I have found that if you toss a ghoul at someone, there's not much they can do against it," he said matter-of-factly.

Elektra put the staff down and gestured at Vanth. "Give me one before you hurt yourself."

Vanth passed her one, and she began to show him how to hold it properly, how to use it to hook and grapple, and how to slice. She was a good teacher and soon had Vanth moving in slow drills.

"Now, let's pour some magic into it," she said, facing him again. "Do it mid-drill so you can feel how they work together," Elektra instructed. Her eyes were shining, her own magic filling them.

Heat licked up Vanth's backbone as he tried to concentrate on fighting her and not anything else. They moved together, the sickles clanging each time the blades struck.

Vanth's magic burned out of his hand, and the sickle responded, eating the power he fed it and making it move of its own accord. Something in his brain clicked into place, and he leaned into it, changing up the drill and making Elektra step back.

"You're so not ready for those kinds of fun and games," she purred, magic soaking her own blade.

"I'm a quick learner," he said. It was like his muscle memory was waking up, and adrenaline pumped through him. "I still owe you another tussle after you broke into my house."

Elektra hummed, her feet sliding into a fighting position. "You still pouting that I broke your wards so easy, sweetheart? Hurt your feelings, did I? Not such a big boy necromancer after all."

Vanth laughed as he attacked her. She was purposely stirring him up, but he loved it. She wasn't wrong either. He really wanted to know how she broke the wards when no one else could. He let his brain shut down and his instincts take over. She would be able to handle him, but he wasn't going to make it easy for her.

Vanth moved backward, blocking each strike Elektra aimed at him. With his other hand, he let his magic unfurl into a cord of gray smoke and whipped it out at her. Elektra leaped to dodge it, but it grabbed her around the waist, tugging her forward, forcing her to toss aside her weapon or land on it. She dropped it and rolled, swiping out a leg and hitting him in the back of his knee.

Vanth went sprawling, his sickle skittering across the floor. Elektra was on his back a second later, wrapping his own whip of magic around his throat. Vanth rolled, disintegrating the whip at the same time. Elektra let out a filthy curse as they grappled, and he ended up pinning her down. Her furious expression melted, and she started to laugh. It was big and joyful, and Vanth couldn't stop from joining in.

"You feeling better now that you have some of that energy out of your system?" she asked breathlessly.

Vanth didn't think. He leaned down and kissed her smiling lips. Elektra made a soft noise of surprise before her legs tightened around his waist, pulling him flush up against her. The world spun, and suddenly, he was on his back, staring up at her triumphant smile.

"Never let your guard down, even if your enemy is pinned," she said, the teacher back in her voice. "No matter how distracted you are."

"It's not my fault. You are...very distracting," he admitted.

Elektra cocked a red brow, and just when Vanth thought she might hit him, she shifted a little to grind herself against his hard dick.

"Oh? I'm *that* kind of distracting, am I?" she asked, her gray eyes widening a little.

Vanth let out a husky laugh. "I can't help it. It has a mind of its own." She wasn't getting off him, so Vanth moved his hands to her hips. "It really likes you in my T-shirt."

"Does it?" Elektra rolled her hips against his, and he sat up to take her mouth in another kiss.

Fucking gods, she tasted good, like death magic and starlight and searing hot female. His hands slid under her shirt to brush against soft skin that was burning hot to the touch.

Elektra's hands swept into his hair, fingers twisting it in a way that gave it just enough bite. Vanth's thumb brushed over the soft lace of her bra, her nipple already hard. She let out a breathy whimper that almost had him coming in his jeans. He could smell her sweet as fuck arousal and knew if he put his hands into her boxers, he would find her pussy wet. His mouth watered just thinking about how she would taste...

"Tarael? Elektra? You still down there?" Flynt's shout echoed down the hall.

Elektra was off him so quickly, he was left holding air. She picked up the sythes and was innocently examining them as the smith appeared.

"Ah, here you are. What are you doing on the floor?" he demanded, looking down his nose at Vanth.

"I kicked his ass, so he's a bit dazed. These are beautiful. Did you make them, sir?" Elektra asked sweetly.

Vanth's vision was still red from the burning need riding through him.

"I did, and Eiline infused them with her magic. How about you come and help me in the kitchen, Vanth? Your mother wants steak pie for dinner, and you're looking a little glazed. Did you hit your head?" Flynt said, offering Vanth a hand off the floor.

"Something like that," Vanth muttered.

Flynt looked between them like he didn't believe either of their bullshit. "Eiline is in her room if you want to join her, Elektra. She's determined to find her old books."

"Sounds like a great plan. I'll return these to her," Elektra said and shot Vanth a brazen smile. "Any time you want another rematch, godling, just ask."

Vanth fought the urge to pounce on her as she wandered out of the training room, grinning from ear to ear.

"I don't want to know," Flynt said and gave him a hard pat on the back. "Better you than me, kid. Now, let's get some firewood. You look like you could do with some fresh air."

Elektra was still smiling by the time she got back to Eiline's cluttered rooms. She stood outside in the hallway and tried to school the blush from her cheeks. She hadn't expected Vanth to kiss her, but damn if she didn't like the way he took control and did it. He kissed like a demon, and if it wasn't for the interruption, she would still be in his lap with her tongue in his mouth.

It wasn't as if she had lived as a nun at the temple; there had been the occasional one-night stand when she was in the human world and felt the need. She hadn't really liked someone enough to have a connection with them before the sex started though. There was the other small issue of people being put off by her or outright afraid of her. Vanth didn't seem to be either of those things.

Elektra had thought that Vanth was a clown when she first saw him dancing with ghosts. That playfulness had been deceptive. Vanth was like her. There was the face he showed to the world, and then there was the darker one who loved the death power that roiled inside of them. Like called to like, despite the power level differences.

Elektra didn't think that Vanth had any real idea just how deep his magic went. Gods, she hoped she was there when he found out. The touch of his magic in the training room had made her mouth dry and pussy wet. She could still feel the thrumming echoes of it.

Elektra took some deep breaths. She needed to calm down if she had any hope of being helpful that day. One brush of his hands against her skin

had made her burn from the inside out. Fuck, he was so beautiful pinned down beneath her.

"Are you going to come in or just hang about in the hallway?" Eiline called from inside the room.

"Fuck," Elektra muttered before schooling her face and going in. "Sorry. I just had to get my thoughts together."

Eiline looked up from her place at her desk. "Has my son been stirring you up? He does that, you know, with people he likes. He doesn't mean anything by the teasing."

That's not how he was stirring me up. Elektra placed the sickles back onto the work counter. "I was just showing him how to use the sickles. He's a natural."

"That doesn't surprise me. He's always been a quick learner. I could barely keep up with him when he was a child. I sent him to the citadel of mages so he could go through their library more than anything. I knew they wouldn't be able to hold him for long either," Eiline said, closing the book in her hand and picking up another. "I see the way he looks at you."

Elektra's heart skipped a beat. "Like he's waiting for his chance to kill me?"

"No. Like he's a kid on Christmas morning," Eiline clarified. "I haven't seen that expression for years. I hope that your mating cycle isn't the thing that's causing it and you like him back. A broken heart is the last thing he needs right now."

"I'm sorry, my what now?" Elektra choked out. "I'm not on a mating cycle. That's impossible... I'm too old... I mean..." She didn't have the words.

Eiline started to laugh. "Oh, dear gods, you have no idea, do you?"

"I'm too old. All that nonsense was skipped in my fifties," Elektra replied stubbornly.

Eiline must have noticed how freaked out Elektra suddenly was because she stopped laughing.

"What age were you when you went to the temple?" she asked.

"Seventeen," Elektra replied, suddenly struggling to breathe. "I was about to be married off, and then I was recruited. Why?"

"Because the temple itself sits in a liminal space between worlds, honey. You never went through a mating cycle because you were there outside of

time. I bet this is the longest time you've been in the real world since you were recruited. Right?"

Elektra nodded. She was going to throw up. All fae females went through a mating cycle at least once. It was a fucked up primal way to tell everyone that you were mature and ready to be mated. The chemicals your body produced were a way of attracting your mate to you. Elektra thought she had gone through it already, but maybe everything had gone dormant the way Eiline implied.

"And you think I'm going through it now?" Elektra squeaked out.

"I know you are. I can smell it on you, and so can my father. He was too polite to ask if you and Tarael were 'doing the dance' when you were around, but he cornered me about it," Eiline replied. She lifted an expectant brow.

Elektra flushed. "No! I had no idea. I... I've only been thinking about how to stop Lazarus." *And how to get railed by your son. Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Had Vanth kissed her in the training room because she had been sending out pheromones? Or had he actually wanted to?

It cast a whole new and horrible light on their flirting.

"If it makes you feel better, I don't think Tarael knows what's going on either. He's not been around the fae enough to understand. But you do. That's why I'm politely asking you not to take advantage of his lack of knowledge," Eiline said, a flash of fiercely protective mother in her eyes. She had been one of the temple's most feared reapers, and Elektra knew she could still kick her ass if she wanted to.

"I would never take advantage of him in that way. I'm kind of offended that you would even suggest it, but I understand that you are protective," Elektra said, trying to summon a shred of dignity. Gods, she was so fucking embarrassed.

"Tarael is a demigod. You are the only person outside of the family that knows this. When he comes into his full power, he will be unstoppable. Some females would try to ensure their place beside him before he comes to that realization." Eiline's eyes softened, and she moved to place her hand on Elektra's arm. "If you two really like each other, the mating cycle won't matter in the long run. I just don't want you to hurt him. I like you, and I don't want to have to kill you."

Elektra choked out a laugh. "That's fair. I have no designs on him or his power, Eiline. I just want to do my job and protect the Veil. That's all." A

small pain stabbed at her heart as she said it. This changed everything between her and Vanth.

She had to protect herself because she was vulnerable during the cycle. Every part of her was crying out for a mate, whether she wanted one or not.

She had grown up hearing horror stories of females who had gone mad with lust as they had tried to fight it. The cycles didn't always end up with a permanent mate. Some females already had partners they could ride out the storm with.

Elektra had none of that. All she had was a mission and an iron will. There would be no more flirting. No more wound tending or fighting where she would end up with him on top of her. She had to stay focused because if she didn't, she would get them both killed. She already had so much blood on her hands. She wouldn't have Vanth's as well.

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That evening, they all sat around Flynt's scarred kitchen table, eating the steak and stout pie with mashed potatoes and vegetables that Eiline had wanted her father to make.

It was weird for Vanth to see them interacting together, and it caused a small twinge of jealousy too. How different would his childhood have been if he had someone like Flynt in his life? His mother had never dated; there had been no father figure at any time.

He didn't have the awe and respect for the old male mages like the citadel wanted their students to have toward them, which pissed them off no end. He would always go to the women mages and teachers first before them. They were better at magic anyway.

Flynt had obviously missed Eiline too, and even though the fae lived long, he had been hurt by her absence as well. Vanth had helped him get wood and make food and had tried not to feel like a wide-eyed, intimidated kid the whole time.

Elektra and his mother hadn't found anything useful yet either.

"I know it's in there. I think I just need to be in the room and have some time to search," Eiline said, pulling Vanth back to the conversation. "It will come back to me."

"We can't stay hiding in Faerie. Lazarus could still have some of the reapers alive," Elektra said. She looked at Vanth. All the bright, playful fire he had seen in her eyes in the training room had been snuffed out. He didn't like that one fucking bit. "You should stay here with your family and keep

looking for the spell. They want you two, not me. I'll return to Inferno tomorrow and track down where Lazarus is hiding."

"No fucking way. You're not going back there alone," Vanth growled.

"You're not her boss, kid," Flynt said mildly from the end of the table.
"Best you remember that."

"I'm not trying to be her boss. I'm trying to be her backup. Mom can stay here and search. I'm no use here," Vanth argued. "I know Inferno. From its dirty underbelly to the top of the shining citadels. A lot of people owe me favors, and it's about time I called them in."

Elektra didn't say anything. She just turned back to her food and let them argue it out.

"If Lazarus gets you, love, he has won," Eiline said. She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "You understand that, don't you? Us finding the mending spell won't mean a damn thing if you're not alive to cast it."

"I know that, but I won't hide out here when I can be useful. Lazarus doesn't want me dead. Clara was trying to recruit me before his goons attacked." Vanth looked at his mother and grandfather. "You guys aren't the boss of me either. Just in case you needed the reminder."

Flynt huffed out a laugh. "He's as stubborn as you, little flower. Sleep on it for the night, Tarael. Make a decision in the morning when you're clear."

Vanth knew that the argument was over for the time being. He wasn't about to let Elektra out of his sight for a moment. Lazarus wanted reapers for his spells, and Vanth was going to do everything he could to make sure the fucker never laid a hand on her.

Elektra had barely looked at him since she had come into the kitchen. He didn't know what had changed in the time they had been apart. Was she regretting kissing him that badly? Fuck, it was only a kiss and some light groping. She had been into it at the time, so what did he do wrong?

Vanth wasn't going to ask her or try to kiss her again while he was in his grandfather's house. He knew how good fae hearing was. He would wait until they got back to Inferno and then corner her. Or pin her down. Preferably on his bed with no clothes on.

Elektra and Vanth washed up as Eiline and Flynt walked back to the living room to sit by the fire.

"Can I ask you something?" Elektra asked, handing him a soapy plate.

"Sure," he replied. He rinsed it in the scalding water before drying it.

"Why the dancing?" Elektra's cheeks flushed red, and he wanted to kiss them. "When I first tracked you down, I watched you."

"Stalker."

"I needed to see that pendant hadn't led me to the wrong person." Elektra blew a stray curl back from her face as she continued washing dishes. "I saw you dancing with a whole room of shades. I thought that the pendant had really fucked up."

Vanth grinned. "Sorry I wasn't what you expected, princess. If you must know, the dancing is a way for me to burn off magical excess."

"What do you mean?" she pressed.

"I get a build-up sometimes. That night I had accidentally taken the magic still stored in the reaper at the morgue. It was driving me crazy because it had nowhere to go," Vanth explained. "When stuff like that happens, I get the ghosts together, and we have a dance party. They siphon off the excess power that's making me crazy." He nudged her with his shoulder. "And it's fun. You know, fun? Some ghosts barely remember who they are, but they hear the music, and it triggers something. They can't help but get involved. Even the super grumpy ones."

Elektra stopped washing and stared through the window and out at the night-blooming garden. "I honestly don't know if I'm impressed or horrified right now. One of the first things you learn at the temple is to never let a shade feed off you. Ever. And you just do it for fun?"

"I suppose at the temple, you're constantly using your power, so it probably makes it so you don't get the magical build-up in the same way," Vanth replied. "I live in a big city. I didn't want my magic to explode because it built up too much. It seemed like the most benign way to get rid of it."

Elektra started washing the dishes again. "I suppose when you put it that way, it makes sense. The shades seemed to be really enjoying it. I still think they need to be moved on."

"They will when they are ready. Once they remember why they are lingering to begin with, I try to help them with their unfinished business. They move on after that, or I help them. I don't have a fancy sickle blade to do it. I just use my magic to help." Vanth grinned. "I'm actually terrified to find out why Cecelia is hanging about."

Elektra smiled, the first one of the night. "As long as it's not to try and kill you to become alive again, I'm sure you'll be okay."

Vanth shook his head."Knowing her, she'll try and make me kill someone."

"Would you do it?"

"I suppose it depends on the person. Cecilia died a long time ago. Everyone she could want revenge on would be dead anyway," Vanth replied. He didn't mention that he had killed people for ghosts before.

Some of them, like the serial killer, deserved to die. He always made sure that they were guilty first, but he had done it. Elektra didn't ask him further questions. She already knew that about him. She also wasn't trying to lecture him about it or run in the opposite direction. That acceptance turned him the fuck on more than her gorgeous body or her wicked mouth.

Vanth knew something had changed between them since the training room. It hung like an ax between them. It was driving him crazy, but magic had taught him how to be patient. He would let Elektra work out whatever was going through her head. And then, when they were alone again, he would just have to tie her down and not let her go until she told him.

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The following morning, Vanth woke to find that Flynt and the others had set up breakfast in the garden. The sun was shining, strange birds were singing, and if he didn't know better, Vanth would have thought it was a beautiful, calm day in Faerie.

"He finally wakes. I was about to come and dump a bucket of water on you," Flynt said cheerfully.

"I didn't sleep much," Vanth admitted. He had been awake, thinking about his father, the Veil, where Lazarus could be hiding, kissing Elektra... The list went on. He had a shit enough time trying to sleep when life was normal.

"Never mind. I have some strong coffee to help wake you up," Flynt said, passing him a steaming cup.

Vanth took a sip, and the caffeine hit his brain almost instantly. "That's so good. I'm kind of surprised you have coffee here at all."

"The Fae Lords might be tyrants, but they do let trade through."

Eiline kissed her father's cheek. "You are lucky they still let you trade at all."

Elektra offered Vanth a warm bread roll, and he gave her a grateful wink.

Vanth asked, "And why do the Fae Lords not like you, grandfather?"

Flynt scratched his cheek. "May have slept with a few of them. Then they went to war against each other and wanted me to pick a side. I said no."

Elektra laughed from the other side of the table. "You're lucky they haven't tried to kill you."

"They have. They just haven't succeeded," Flynt replied with a grin.

"You sound like your grandson," Eiline said, and they fell into conversation about the citadel of mages and their not-so-subtle way of encouraging students to try and take him down. Vanth was starting to think it was a part of their advanced curriculum.

A large raven swooped down and landed at the end of the table, interrupting them.

"Vanth, get your ass back to Inferno. They came back with more bodies," it cawed.

"What?" Flynt asked, and the raven repeated itself.

"It's come from Andres. He must have figured out that we are in Faerie. He likes to send a raven occasionally to be dramatic," Vanth said. He glanced across the table at Elektra. "I'm not letting you go back alone. This is my fight too."

Elektra didn't look happy about it, but she still nodded. "I don't want to put you in harm's way, but I don't think we have a choice. If Lazarus has any more reapers, I need to save them. I'll find them faster with you."

Vanth tried to ignore the looks that were passing between Eiline and Flynt. They didn't argue with Vanth about it, so he dug into breakfast, knowing it was going to be another long ass day.

After eating, Vanth grabbed his bag of gear and went to meet Elektra outside. He said goodbye to Eiline and promised to keep her updated.

"Try not to put yourself in too much harm's way," she whispered, and he gave her a reassuring squeeze. She passed him three books. "Take these with you. I'll keep searching, but I know these three hold magic I was doing while at the temple. Elektra will understand them and know if any of the magic can help."

Vanth put the books in his backpack and left her in her cluttered room. He did his best to ignore the pang of guilt for leaving her behind. She would be safer in Faerie, and Flynt would protect her. If the curse took her mind again, he would ensure that she was looked after.

Vanth had been responsible for her for so long that it made him feel unsure and uneasy about sharing that with anyone else.

"She's going to be fine," Elektra said as soon as he stepped outside. "She has to find that mending spell for us."

"I know. It just feels weird," Vanth replied. She had light purple smudges under her eyes like she'd had a night as bad as his.

"Focus on your part of the problem, and let her focus on hers," Elektra said, adjusting the sickles that were folded down and in her boots. "We still need to get back to Inferno, and this time round, we don't have a guide."

"I have a solution for that," Flynt said, coming out of the forge. "I need to make sure that my grandson can find his way back and visit me sometime. We have a lot of time that we need to make up for." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small leather bag. He opened it and tipped out a silver ring. It was thick and plain and clearly made for a male's finger. Vanth could feel the enchantments on it and cautiously slipped it on his finger.

"This isn't going to attract unnecessary attention, is it? I can feel the magic it is throwing off," he said.

His grandfather tied his head back and laughed. "You are safe wearing it. The magic that you feel is only so strong because you are at the location that it's meant to find. It's a simple tracking spell that will guide you back to a doorway to Inferno and allow you to come back again. Each time you step into Faerie, it's a different path to follow."

"Thank you, grandfather. Here is hoping I don't die before I can actually hang out with you properly," Vanth said.

Flynt smiled. "I have something that might help with that as well." Vanth followed him into the forge and presented him with a short sword that was like an elven gladius. Vanth gave it a few experimental swipes. It had perfect balance, was light, and looked sharp enough to cut through bone. Its blade and hilt were both matte black.

All the better to kill my enemies in the dark, Vanth thought approvingly. "This is awesome."

"The metal in it has been attuned to hold magic, like the sickles you were using yesterday. You will be able to channel your magic down it without breaking it or compromising its strength," his grandfather promised him. He handed Vanth a leather belt with a back sheath for the sword and a spare one that sat horizontally at Vanth's back.

"The extra sheath is for that dagger in your boot. You're going into a fight, my boy. You need weapons you can reach easily and not be digging about in your shoes for," Flynt explained.

Vanth hesitated before giving his grandfather a hug. Flynt froze for a second before hugging him back.

"Thank you. Please look after my mother," Vanth said.

Flynt patted him on the back. "You know that I will. Now, get moving. The sooner you two find a way to end this, the sooner we can get the curse lifted off Eiline. Elektra? Make sure he doesn't hurt himself."

Elektra bowed to the smith. "I'll do my very best."

"If you keep him alive there might be a new weapon in it for you," he said and kissed her hand goodbye. Vanth had the sudden urge to smack the older fae male's hand away.

Elektra blushed redder than her hair. "In that case, I will wrap him in cotton wool and lock him in a cupboard as soon as we get back to his house."

Flynt laughed, and they said their final goodbyes before heading into the forest. As soon as they were out from underneath his grandfather's wards, the ring on Vanth's finger started to hum with magic. He pointed to a barely-there path through two oak trees. "We go that way."

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Elektra stayed a few feet behind Vanth as they made their way through the forest. She hadn't lied when she said that she was going to protect him. She didn't think he had ever been this far into the Faerie realms and didn't have the proper kind of awareness of his surroundings.

She didn't know if letting him return with her to the city was a good idea, but she couldn't handle the thought of leaving him behind. She had spent the night staring into the fire in the lounge room and turning over all that she had learned in the past few weeks.

What would happen to the temple now that everybody was dead? She might have been the only one left, which meant the responsibility of either walking away forever or starting up a new temple lay on her shoulders. It was also another reason why she needed to make sure that she didn't let things with Vanth go too far.

Not that she was ready to take a mate, but the more she thought about it, the more she knew it was going to be impossible, even if she was.

They both had responsibilities that neither could walk away from.

"So are you ready to tell me why you have been acting so weird? Or should I wait a little bit longer while you brood?" Vanth asked over his shoulder.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Elektra said. Her gaze drifted over his wide shoulders, down his back to where his jeans hugged his ass.

"Yes, you do. You've been weird ever since my grandfather interrupted us yesterday." Vanth slowed his pace until she became level with him. "If

you're bothered by it, just say so. You know I'm not the kind of asshole to pressure you into something that you don't want to do."

"I know that. I'm not bothered by it, and I don't regret it. I'm just doing my best to keep my priorities straight. I can't get distracted with wanting to flirt and make out with you. It will end up getting us both killed," Elektra replied.

Gods, she really didn't want to hurt him. She also didn't want him to be a victim of the pheromones that she was currently pushing out either. Other females might not have cared, but she wasn't one of them.

Vanth fixed his black eyes on her. They skimmed across her face, lingering on her lips. "Are you sure that's all it is? You looked... I don't know...*different* when you came in for dinner last night."

"I saw the extent of your mother's hoarding. That was probably it."

He looked like he was going to argue with her and then decided against it. "If you say so."

Somehow, Elektra knew that he wasn't going to drop it. Maybe she should just come out and tell him the truth, and then that way, she wouldn't feel so guilty about encouraging him and then immediately pushing him away.

Elektra stopped walking and let him go on ahead again. She was too close to him, and the urge to touch him was getting worse.

It's just the mating cycle. Breathe through it, and everything will be okay.

She was still trying to reason with herself when someone dropped from a tree behind her. Two fae males dressed in the same greens as the forest smiled as she whirled around.

"Can I help you?" she demanded. She didn't risk turning back around to see where Vanth was.

"You tell us, lovely," the brown-haired male said. "We were going about our business when we smelled your call."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, her hands itching for her sickles.

The other male smiled like a cat. "Deny it all you wish. I can smell how ripe and wet you are for mating."

They started to close in on her when suddenly she was pulled backward, and Vanth was standing in front of her. His magic seeped out of him in smoky, threatening tentacles. The ends of them formed into sharp points

and all focused on the two males. Elektra couldn't see his face, but whatever was on it made the strangers step back, their honey complexions turning pale.

The brown-haired male dropped into an elegant bow. "My apologies, good sir. We didn't know that the lady had already chosen a consort for her mating cycle."

Elektra prayed for the Earth to open up and swallow her whole. Of all the big-mouthed, fucking assholes in Faerie, they had to find her.

"Well, she has, so fuck off before I tear your eyes out for coveting what is mine," Vanth growled, standing his ground. The two males backed away, and with a flash of light, they both turned into swallows and disappeared through the trees. He turned slowly to face Elektra. "You want to tell me what that was all about?"

"Not here," she replied, her eyes scanning around the trees in case they had more friends. She hadn't even heard them because she had been too caught up in what was happening between them.

They needed to get out of Faerie before she opened up to him, or they would be like sitting ducks.

Vanth's magic floated around him for a few silent seconds before he let the power go, and the gray shadows blew away on the breeze. His face clouded with worry, and he reached up to brush her cheek with his thumb. It took all of Elektra's self-control not to lean into the touch.

Vanth's expression hardened, and he lifted her chin. The dominance in the gesture sent lust singing through all of her senses.

"It better be a good explanation. Anyone looks at you or talks to you like that again, I'm going to chop their fucking heads off with my new sword," he said. He leaned down until his lips almost touched hers. "Understand?"

"Yes?" Elektra's head was getting fuzzy, and her heart began to race. She tilted her head up invitingly.

Vanth stared at her lips. "Good," he growled, letting her go and stepping away. "Inferno is this way."

Elektra watched him stride away. She took three shaky breaths and then hurried to catch up with him. Maybe if she told him the truth, he would freak out, and that would remove the problem of her growing ache to do very dirty things to him.

Somehow, she doubted it.

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Vanth felt like his bones were going to crawl out of his skin. He had to keep walking, keep breathing, keep his eyes off Elektra. Vanth had never been quick to violence, but it had taken all his control not to let his magic rip the two fae males to pieces. It wasn't like him at all. Elektra was a better fighter than he was. She didn't need his protection. She certainly wouldn't welcome the possessiveness he had no right to feel toward her.

Fae genes, fae genes, fae genes, he chanted to himself over and over. The alternative was that he was a raging dick. He had never been that way over anyone before. He hated the other males who controlled their partners, and he swore never to become one of them. Elektra hadn't kicked his ass into next week, so he would count his blessings and keep his mouth shut until they got back to Inferno.

Vanth knew the second they had stepped out of Faerie and back into the human world because his connection to his ghouls lit up in his mind like a magical flare. There had been no gateway or stone circle or any obvious door.

He looked at the ring on his finger. Maybe it found the nearest weak place between worlds and sent them through it? He shook his head and tried not to worry about it. If he survived the fight with Lazarus, he would be able to return to Faerie and ask Flynt.

They found his van ten minutes later. It was covered in a dusting of light-yellow pollen but otherwise looked in one piece. His ghouls were in

the forest, eating gods knew what. Vanth tugged on the magic binding them, and they shuffled out of the trees minutes later.

"For fuck's sake, look at the state of you two," he complained, staring at the mud and blood that covered their fronts. He would have to get them some clean clothes once they had rested. They looked stuffed and slow from eating. He probably should have been more concerned about what they had found to gnaw on, but he had bigger problems. Starting with the reaper in his car. He locked the ghouls into the back of the van and climbed into the driver's seat.

Elektra was already on the passenger side, one leg drawn up to her chest and her gray eyes distant. Vanth pushed down all his worried feelings. She would talk to him when she was ready to.

The sun was going down in the city, and the time differences between Faerie and the human world were unpredictable at best. Vanth was wired, his magic dancing incessantly under his skin.

"I was seventeen when I first went to the temple," Elektra said, breaking the heavy silence in the cab. "My father and mother had already arranged a marriage for me. I was royal, so that's not uncommon. For other females, it's different. I don't know if you know this, but fae women go through certain hormonal cycles that can occur between the ages of twenty and fifty."

"Like a menopause?" Vanth asked, making her laugh softly. "Honestly, my mother did everything she could to keep me away from fae shit. So no, I have no idea what you are talking about."

Elektra shifted uncomfortably. "They aren't like menopause. We call them mating cycles. You basically pump out a whole bunch of pheromones to attract a suitable partner. Sometimes, it doesn't even result in a true mating. Some females who are in a relationship already will just ride it out with whoever they are with. Others will get a fuck buddy for the duration so they don't lose their minds."

Vanth had a sudden feeling about where this conversation was heading.
"You are...in a cycle?"

"Your mother believes so, and those douchebags in the forest confirmed it. My cycles have been put off because I was living at the temple. I haven't been back in the human world for this long, and it's been triggered. I'm mortified," she said, her voice cracking as she covered her face with her hands for a moment.

Vanth resisted the urge to reach out and touch her. "And my mother told you this last night after we made out in the training room? That's why you've been...cooler?"

Elektra removed her hands from her face and leaned back in her chair. "Yes. I didn't want to believe her, but the way those males reacted, the way you and I have reacted to each other..."

"Woah up. You think me wanting to make out with you is because your cycle has hit?" Vanth asked. *Fae genes.* Had her genes been confusing him and not his own?

"It's possible, Vanth. I want to be honest about it because you might not be in charge of your own desires right now. My scent is like a beacon, and I don't want anything happening between us that we are going to regret once the cycle passes," Elektra replied, her face and neck turning scarlet.

"I understand," Vanth replied, his mind whirling. Had she been flirting with him because of the cycle? The thought hurt a surprising amount.

They were silent for the rest of the drive back to his house. Vanth let out the ghouls and followed them into the cool rooms in his morgue. His phone was dead, so he plugged it into the spare charger he kept in there.

Elektra leaned against the fixed embalming table, her skin still flushed.

"Are you going to say anything else? I thought you would be freaking out?" she demanded.

Vanth tried to appear relaxed, but his insides were anything but calm. "It's your body going through it, Elektra. I'm not entitled to have an opinion on it. You say it's only started in the last day or so?"

"According to your mother, yes. I'm at the beginning of it," Elektra said, her pointed ears flushing. "It's why you wanted to kiss me all of a sudden when we were in Faerie."

Gods, she was so damn beautiful. She was also wrong.

Vanth's mouth twitched into a smile. "I hate to break it to you, princess, but I wanted to kiss you long before that."

"How long?" she asked, gray eyes widening.

"Somewhere between the moment you first kicked my ass and when I watched you eat a burger the size of your head," Vanth admitted. He closed in on her, his hands moving to grip the cool metal table on either side of her, caging her in. "My urge to protect and possess you kicked in the moment I saw you. You might want to blame what's burning between us on your pheromones, but it started long before your cycle did. If you want to blame

it for kissing me yesterday, you can. I know my own desires. I know what I want."

Vanth could see the flickering pulse on Elektra's neck and smell the sweet honey arousal building between her thighs. She looked up at him from underneath her long lashes. "And what's that exactly?"

"Right this second? I want to kiss you until you believe that I want you because you are Elektra, and not some bullshit fae impulse," Vanth replied.

"Please do that..." she whispered, her hands moving to his waist.

Vanth crowded her and captured her mouth with his. Elektra didn't hesitate. She opened for him, groaning when his tongue slipped inside her mouth in a silky stroke. Vanth couldn't think of anything but the sensation of her lips, the seductive thrill of her taste swamping his senses. Her hands moved under his shirt to caress his skin.

Vanth pinned her in, his leg slipping between hers as he fucked her mouth with his tongue. She let out a whimper when his thigh brushed against her core. Vanth moved his mouth from her lips, kissing along her jaw and to the soft skin of her throat. Her skin was scorching under his mouth, like she was burning up with a fever.

Elektra's sharp nails dug into the muscle of his back, and another breathy sound escaped her. She ground up against him, and a tremble went through her.

"What's the matter, princess? You trying to tell me something?" he purred in her ear before biting down on her lobe.

Elektra dragged him closer again. "More. I need... I can't..."

"Shh, it's okay. I know what you need," Vanth replied. He pulled back from her and spun her around. He took her hands and pressed them to the cool metal of the table. "Keep them there, or I'll stop."

"I'll be good. Don't stop," she said, her ass moving to rub against the front of his jeans. Fuck, she was like a cat in heat, and she was all his. Vanth ran his hands over her back and down her sides.

"If you don't like something, say so," he said, leaning in to nip at her pale neck.

"I will," she replied, her voice getting a desperate edge that went straight to his dick. He wanted to strip her bare and cover her with his marks. His dick strained painfully against his jeans, but he ignored it. He was going to take his time to figure out just how to unravel his sexy little reaper.

Vanth unsnapped the button of her jeans while he kissed her neck. Elektra's fingers gripped the metal but didn't move them, so Vanth slid his hand under the fabric to cup her pussy.

"Fuck, your skin is so hot," he said, his fingers gently stroking.

"It burns. Everything burns," she gasped.

Vanth dipped his fingers lower, both of them groaning when they found her wetness. With his other hand, he turned her face towards him and kissed her again. He wanted to taste every desperate gasp and moan.

Elektra didn't move her hands from the table, but she chased each stroke of his fingers with a desperate roll of her hips. Vanth took her hints and pressed two fingers inside of her.

Elektra cried out, her voice echoing around the cool steel room as he stretched her. Fuck she was so damn perfect and like hot silk in his hands.

"Fuck, Vanth. Harder. I need it harder," she panted, fucking herself faster onto his fingers.

"Shh, it's okay. I'll get you there," he crooned. He was going to be addicted to watching the stoic reaper fall apart. "Don't move those hands."

"I'm not. Fuck! I'm not," she said. Vanth moved his hand out of her jeans, and she swore. "Wait, don't stop... I didn't move!"

Vanth licked the wet sheen of her from his fingers, and his vision hazed. Fuck. A growl escaped his lips, and he pushed her down until she was pressed against the steel table.

A sob escaped her. "Please don't make me beg."

"You're already begging, princess, and I like it," he said and yanked her jeans and panties down. Her ass was so pert and perfect, Vanth's mouth watered. "You stay where you are, or this all ends."

"You're such a sadistic prick," she complained.

Vanth went down on his knees behind her. "Try harder to convince me that you don't love it," he said and licked her soaked slit. She almost levitated off the table, but his hands gripped her thighs tight enough to bruise, holding her in place. He lost himself in every swipe of his tongue against her sweet, hot pussy. Vanth savored every inch of her, paying special attention to any part that made her squirm or gasp.

Elektra rose up on her toes as he fucked her with his tongue, over and over, until she was screaming his name. He couldn't get enough, and he didn't give her time to settle before he was winding her up again. He fucked

her with his fingers and tongue over and over. Elektra's legs were shaking, her body being held up by his hands and the cold table under her.

He could have kept her there all night, but his dick was so hard, it was hurting. He didn't know how much longer he could neglect it before he came in his pants like a teenager. He made her come one more time before he finally pulled away from her. He kissed a sucking bruise on her soft inner thigh before slowly getting off his knees.

Elektra looked fucked out and dazed, her eyes glazed with tears and utter bliss. Pride and male satisfaction filled him as he looked at the utter mess she was in. Vanth's heart squeezed even as his dick insisted on getting inside of her.

"Still with me, little reaper?" he asked, brushing a damp curl from her face.

Elektra nodded but didn't say anything. Vanth chuckled and reached for his belt just as his phone started screaming.

"Fuck," he growled and hung up the call. "Fucking Andres can fuck right off..."

Elektra's eyes focused. "The tracking spell..."

"Fuckkkk," Vanth complained. He leaned down and slowly pulled up her jeans, kissing the now-cooled skin of her thighs. He helped her straighten and kissed the tears on her cheeks. He checked the red marks on her hips and rubbed them softly.

"What are you doing?" she asked shakily.

"Checking that I didn't hurt you. I wasn't exactly gentle," he replied and raised a brow at her. "No one has given you a bit of aftercare?"

Elektra shook her head. "No one has stuck around long enough."

"What assholes." Vanth's heart clenched again, hating the thought of no one treating her the way she should be treated. He grabbed some clean tissues and gently wiped her face before kissing her softly. Her fingers tangled in his shirt, pulling him closer.

His phone started ringing again. He groaned and released her. "I have to let you go, or I will take you upstairs and fuck you for the next six hours."

"Duty first, sex after," she said, letting him go.

"Easy for you to say, you just got to come," he complained.

Elektra palmed his dick and gave it a squeeze that had him seeing stars. "I'll make it up to you later."

"Fuck. Deal. Oh, gods, don't do that, or I'm going to blow in my pants," he said, removing her hand and kissing her knuckles. He grabbed his phone and answered with a snarling, "What?"

"Finally, you pick up your fucking phone. Stop doing whatever it is you're doing," Andres snapped back. "I had another visit from that person with the reaper bodies last night."

"Your pet told me," Vanth replied, trying to get his brain to refocus.

"The tracking spell worked, and they finally stopped. I have a location for you," Andres said, his tone softening just a little. "I don't know what the fuck is going on or why you were in Faerie, but you better be taking care of the princess and not dragging her into your bullshit."

Vanth looked at Elektra, who was at the sink, getting a drink of water. "Oh, I'm taking care of her all right," he said and bit back a laugh when she shot him the finger.

"I don't want to know. These people are fucking serious, Vanth. For once in your life, you need to be serious too," Andres replied. He hung up on him, and a second later Vanth's phone pinged with an address.

"Are you up for a hunt tonight, princess?" he asked with a grin. She still looked sexy and disheveled, but her expression had gotten a laser-like focus back in them.

"I'm always up for a hunt," she said, her smile turning feral. "I'll go get my suit on. And Vanth?"

"Yes, princess?"

"Don't die tonight, and I'll let you fuck me any way you want," she replied before disappearing out of the morgue.

Vanth went to a freezer, took out an ice pack, and held it to his dick. It was going to be another long night.

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Elektra pulled on her tight leather suit and tried not to think too hard about what had just happened. So she had let someone go down on her in a morgue. Nothing weird about that. Except her pussy was hypersensitive, and she wanted to tear Vanth's clothes off and get on her knees for him. *Shit. Not the time.*

Elektra zipped up her suit and let the muscle memory of a thousand missions try and cool her lust. She needed to find any remaining reapers and drive a sickle into Lazarus's head. That was what she needed to focus on.

That resolve lasted until she got back downstairs, where Vanth was waiting for her by the van. He had braided his hair back tight and changed into another set of clothes. They must have looked like a ridiculous pair, with her in an intense battle suit full of hidden blades and him in battered jeans, boots, and a faded Evil Dead T-shirt.

Vanth looked her over, his grin widening. "You are intimidating and sexy at the same time," he said and whistled.

"You really should invest in some body armor or something. Just because you're a demigod doesn't mean you can't be killed," Elektra replied.

"I've tried it in the past, but it only slows me down. I'm not worried. You'll protect me," Vanth said and got into the van.

Elektra huffed out a laugh. "You hope I will. I'm going to be too busy protecting myself. Where are the ghouls?" she asked and clipped on her seat belt.

"They are too full to be useful. Don't worry, little reaper. I'm a big boy and can take care of myself," Vanth replied.

They drove out into the dark streets, and Elektra tried to find the meditative calm she always fell into before a fight. It would have been easier if she wasn't surrounded by Vanth's scent, which made her want to climb all over him.

Fuck, this mating cycle. That was all it was. Surely. It didn't matter what Vanth said about wanting to kiss her before it started. Her body couldn't be trusted.

It was terrible timing to be trying to attract a mate, and Vanth was a demigod, for fuck's sake... She looked across the bench seat at him, and suddenly, all the hang-ups she had disappeared. He was perfect for her, and it killed her that they hadn't met before all the mess with Lazarus started.

Vanth knew all about the strangeness of her abilities and wasn't afraid of her bloodthirsty side. If they made it through the fight with Lazarus and her mating cycle, then she would try and court him properly. If he wanted it.

Something in Elektra settled at the thought, and she couldn't blame it on her crazy fae impulses. She really liked him.

"I don't know what's going through your head right now, but if you keep looking at me like that, I'm going to have to pull over and kiss you," Vanth warned her playfully.

"Focus on the road, or we'll crash," she replied.

"Lucky we are making a stop then." Vanth pulled into a Greek takeaway drive-through and ordered them gyros. "I need to fuel up before a fight, and you need to fuel up for what I'm going to do to you later."

"Ah, big promises, necromancer. We could die before then," Elektra said.

"I'll find you in the Afterlife and fuck you there. Dying won't save you," Vanth promised, and they both laughed.

"I don't know what it says about me that your nonsense does it for me," Elektra said, unwrapping her gyro.

"I'm just a mystery that way," Vanth replied. "Maybe it's my secret demigod power."

"Somehow, I doubt your sense of humor is it. Orcus is a big hitter, Vanth. I don't know if you have properly considered what you are capable of," Elektra said before biting into her food. She groaned. Gods, she was hungrier than she realized.

Vanth hummed thoughtfully. "I'm trying not to think about it. If I start, I will spiral and won't be able to focus on what's in front of me. I'll want to bury myself in research and try to learn the limits of my power. I can get a bit nuts when I'm hyper-focused on magic. Right now, I need to be hyper-focused on stopping Lazarus and his cult from doing any more damage. Once he's dealt with, then you are next on my list."

Elektra swallowed a mouthful of food. "I am?"

Vanth nodded and then looked uncertain. "Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah, I think I am. Is that weird? I barely know you," she replied and quickly shut her mouth so she didn't spew any of her sudden anxiety out onto him.

Vanth smiled at her. "You actually know more about me than anyone else, besides my mother. I didn't have time to make some bullshit mask for you. You know exactly what I am, what I am capable of. You're not intimidated by it, and I've never really let anyone see that side of me. The world knows me as some low-level necromancer who cleans up bodies for rich people. Not exactly a sexy or glamourous job."

"Depends on who you ask," she replied. He was grinning, and it made her feel reckless, so she added, "Your face isn't half bad either."

"Wow, look at you go, charmer," he laughed. He reached over and lightly flicked her ear. "If you think the face is okay, wait until you see the rest of me."

Elektra was still laughing when they passed into the streets of the mage's district. The citadel of mages stood in the center of it all. Elektra rubbed at her eyes and stared at it. It was built like the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome but was much taller. It was like a fortress of stone and not what she had expected at all.

"If you look at it from different angles and different times of day, it changes. The inside is also bigger than the outside. Making it look as boring as possible was a way to say, 'We are no threat. We are harmless, boring scholars who won't accidentally release a demon from another dimension,'" Vanth said and gave the tower his middle finger. "Pretentious assholes."

Elektra raised a brow. "Why am I not surprised you don't get along with the establishment?"

Vanth shook his head. "You got it all wrong, princess. They don't get along with me. I went there with the best of intentions. I wanted to learn. They just didn't know how to teach me. The necromancers there only do

basic shit like summoning ghosts. Anything else terrifies them. They let me do independent study, but after I had worked my way through their library, I quit. They must have decided I was going to be a danger to Inferno in the future, so they started sending assassins after me."

Elektra reached over and rested a hand on his knee. "I'm sorry you have had to go through that. You would have been a cherished asset at the Temple of Magic and Bone. You still would be. I don't know if there are many reapers left, but you will have a place amongst them if you want it. If not, you will be an ally."

"It would be nice to be able to talk necromancer magic with people who aren't idiots. I'll keep it in mind," Vanth replied and placed his hand over hers to keep it there.

The address Andres had given them ended up being a house in a middle-class suburb in a cul-de-sac. Each property had active wards and looked neat and tidy, even in the darkness. They were the kind of places that were full of well-paid, respectable people in society who had families and mortgages.

"This doesn't feel right," Vanth said, looking around. "This is the mage version of Legoland. Why would Lazarus be hiding out here?"

"Maybe he's not. It could just be where one of his followers lives," Elektra replied and stared at the painted white fences and perfect gardens. "These kinds of places freak me out."

Vanth's brows shot up. "Me too. It's the creepy sameness of it that messes with my head."

Elektra let her magic slip free and brush against the wards around the property. There was an electric snap back, and she swore.

"They don't have the average wards around this place," she said and studied the house more closely.

Vanth nodded. "They feel like..."

"Bone wards," they said at the same time.

Elektra's mouth twitched. "Animal?"

"Definitely. You take the front corners of the property, and I'll do the back?" Vanth suggested.

"Deal. Watch your ass," she said, and he blew her a kiss. He would be fine.

Elektra went to the very edge of the property's wards on the left side. She whispered a shielding spell over her hands and dug about in the earth.

Underneath the perfectly manicured turf, she came across bones. She took a calming breath and began to disable them. The trick was to be able to do it without waking up whoever had cast them.

She threaded her magic through strands of power, holding the ward energy to the sacrificed life of the animal. She hated the dirty feel of the magic against hers. Nothing made her angrier than the sacrifice of an innocent life for magical gain. She released the shade of the animal with a quick flick of her magic, and the ward powered down.

Elektra quickly hurried to the right side of the property and began on the next ward. Vanth appeared through the gardens just as she broke it. He had a pissed-off look in his eye.

"What is it?" she asked, brushing the dirt from her hands.

"I found something you better have a look at," he said. She followed him into the darkness. There was a large greenhouse and a refrigerated van at the back of the property. A pretty decal on the side of the vehicle said, 'Bright Light Blooms' in fluro pink. Elektra wasn't sure what had gotten Vanth riled up until she stood in the garden around the greenhouse. Death and decay pulsed up from the ground beneath her boots, the dark, sticky feeling of magic making her gag.

"They have been using human blood and bone," Vanth growled softly. "I found ground barrels of it behind the greenhouse."

"Fuck. This is..." Elektra didn't have the words. She cleared her throat. "Why not add the reapers to the mix? Why take them to Andres to be burned?"

"Maybe they have had too many bodies to dispose of," Vanth replied. He nodded at the greenhouse doors. "You ready?"

Elektra slid one of her sickles out from her thigh holster. She left the blade locked in but needed a weapon in her hand to steady herself. "Ready."

Vanth took the lead and opened the door. No alarms screamed or lights went on, so they slipped inside the moist heat like shadows. There were rows and rows of flowers growing in pots. There was a lit-up room at the far end that had hydroponic lights burning. They each took one row and walked the full length of the greenhouse. Nothing seemed out of place except for the thick haze of death from the blood and bone.

Vanth walked in front of her into the hydroponics area and held out a hand for her to stop walking. "Well, well, looks like these florists have more

than one side hustle," he said. He examined the plants under the strange blue lights.

"Weed?" Elektra guessed.

"Magic weed. Not a big crop, so it could be their private stash or used in rituals or potions."

Elektra moved around him, her intuition tingling at the back of her head. She went to a potting table at the back of the room where the lights weren't hanging. Blood magic burned on her tongue, and she gagged. "Help me move this table?"

"Maybe we don't need to," Vanth said, feeling about underneath it. Something clicked, and the potting counter slid away to reveal a large metal trap door. A complex sigil was carved into it.

"To keep people out? Or to keep something in?" Elektra asked, peering down at it, her mind already trying to unravel it.

Vanth squatted down and, with a quick burst of his magic, dissolved the sigil. It was one of the sexiest things Elektra had ever seen. He hadn't even had to think about it.

"Wow," she whispered and cringed when she realized she had said it out loud. Vanth waggled his brows at her and lifted up the trap door. It was a pit of darkness that smelled of rotting meat, blood magic, and bleach.

"I don't suppose I could convince you to go first?" Elektra asked.

"All right, but you're going to be washing the stench out of my hair for me later," Vanth replied.

She leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to his surprised lips. "Deal."

Vanth's eyes narrowed playfully. "I should warn you, using your feminine wiles on me will get you everywhere," he said and dropped down into the darkness.

Vanth fell into the hole, whispering a cantrip on the way down so he didn't shatter anything. It also gave him the ability to see in the dark, which came in handy more often than he thought possible.

"You do know there's a ladder," Elektra called from above him, amusement in her voice.

"I do now. Watch your step," Vanth said. He hovered underneath her as she descended in case the ladder broke. It was rusted. At least, he hoped it was rust.

"Gods, it stinks. Do you have a light?" she whispered.

"Don't need one. Let me show you," he said and placed his fingers on her temples. He whispered the cantrip again, and his magic slid over her. Elektra made the sweetest little gasp as it took effect. He could get addicted to all the little sounds she made.

Get this checked out, then take her home and make her scream, he scolded himself.

"They really know how to pick quality locations, don't they?" she said, looking around. The tunnel looked like a part of the underground sewer system. Thankfully, it was dry, and the lingering smell of bleach suggested someone had tried to clean it. They would've had to have blocked off the tunnels and redirected the water and sewage. It would have taken planning, time, and a lot of magic. They would have had to have been damn sneaky about it too, because otherwise, someone in the city would have noticed.

Vanth walked along the tunnels, taking the lead because his pesky protective instincts were rearing up again. Elektra didn't seem to mind. She had both of her sickles out and looked ready to hit something.

"If they had all of this space to hide bodies, as well as the blood and bone-making above, I still don't understand why they would be taking bodies to Andres," she said, keeping her voice low.

Something crunched under Vanth's boot. There were skeletons littering the tunnel floor, but they were too small to be human. They looked like rats, and fuck knew what else.

"I'm still thinking it's a quantity issue. There's too much for them to go through, or whatever magic they are doing with them needs to be burned; otherwise, it will fuck up the blood and bone mixture. Can't grow anything with a body tainted by death magic," Vanth replied and walked around another pile of bones.

Elektra sucked a breath through her teeth. "Makes sense in a disgusting sort of way."

Vanth held out an arm and pointed. There was a curve in the tunnel up ahead, and light was coming from it.

"Someone is home," he whispered in her ear.

Her smile turned vicious. "Good."

Clearly, he wasn't the only one angry about the bone wards that they had found. Vanth had known blood mages before. They weren't all into pain and sacrifice, but the ones they were hunting definitely were. He could feel the suffering around him like a heavy aura. He was definitely going to need a shower or three when he got home.

The tunnels opened up to a circular room with two other entrances leading into it. There was a stone altar built in the middle of it, and candles were burning in sconces and clusters. There were sigils painted on the floor around the altar, making Vanth freeze. He didn't know what they did and wasn't dumb enough to step into a circle he hadn't made. That was going to be a problem because there was a body on the altar. It was of a young man with black hair. He had blood sigils all over him and didn't appear to be breathing.

"You two might as well come out," a smooth voice said. A tall man strode out of the tunnels with a book in his hand. He was stunning, with golden hair and eyes, and was striking in a way that would make a crowded

room turn to look at him. Evil could wear beautiful faces just as easily as ugly ones.

"I'm not dumb enough to step into a magic circle," Vanth said.

The man stepped over to the closest sigil and scratched his dagger through it. Vanth's ears popped as the spell dissipated.

"There. No harm will come to either of you. I was hoping we could have a civilized conversation," the man said. "I'm Lazarus."

Vanth couldn't sense any other traps, so he stepped into the light. He didn't venture far in. He knew the tunnel he had come out of was an easy way out. He always liked to have an escape plan.

"Yeah, I'm not sure if you can do civilized, Laz," Vanth said, gesturing to the dead body on the altar.

"I didn't think a corpse would bother a necromancer, or a reaper for that matter." His golden eyes rested on Elektra. There was a hunger in them that instantly set Vanth's teeth on edge.

"Lazarus, nice place you have here," she said, her voice calm.

"Princess Elektra Nova of the Celestial Court, I was hoping our paths would cross. I missed you at the temple," Lazarus said, his smile stunning in its intensity.

Vanth could appreciate a good-looking man as well as anyone, but something about Lazarus smiling at Elektra made Vanth want to cut his pretty face clean off.

Keep your temper in check. Don't show him your magic until you absolutely need to.

Elektra's sickle blades flicked out. "Me too. You're going to pay for what you did to my brothers and sisters."

"Is that what you think? Be a good girl and put the blades away. This is a friendly conversation, not a fight," Lazarus said.

Elektra's nostrils flared. Patronizing her wasn't the right path. Vanth tracked the figures that were now slipping into the room from the other tunnels, a familiar face amongst them.

"Clara," he greeted coolly. "Betray anyone recently or just me?"

"I never betrayed you, Vanth. I looked after your mother, and I am your friend. Just because I believe in Lazarus doesn't change anything," she said, her expression conflicted. "Including how I was beginning to feel about you."

Elektra snarled, the sound pure predator. "The fuck you just say?"

"You were a plant. Nothing more," Vanth snapped, trying to ignore how possessive Elektra was being. He was going to have a lot of fun with that later.

He would be a little more understanding of Clara's position if it had just been him that she had betrayed. It was the thought that his mother's vulnerable life had been in her hands that he couldn't get over.

"Enough posturing. Vanth, I have heard about you and your talent for years," Lazarus said, his tone cutting the arguments off. "I served at the temple with your mother, and I would have loved to recruit her to my cause. She was a singular talent."

Vanth smirked. "Yes, she's singly kicked your ass too. She's somewhere you will never be able to find. I guess you're just going to have to settle with me this time around."

"You are arrogant like she was as well. I thought she would be smart enough to look at all the possibilities that controlling the power of the Veil would bring. I have learned a lot in the past seventy years, and this time round, there will be no mistakes," Lazarus said and held out his hand. "Join me. The both of you would be a boon to this enterprise. You have all the talent and hunger of curiosity. Don't you want to know what the Veil is really made of, what separates us, the living from the dead? Don't you want to know what lies beyond in all the afterlives? To be able to traverse them at will?" His golden eyes were glowing with pure passion. He absolutely believed in his cause, and Vanth almost felt sorry for him.

"I get what you're selling. I really do. But there is a reason why the Veil exists, Lazarus. We all get to find out what lies beyond when we die. The living are not meant to know," Vanth replied.

The minions were getting restless, edging slowly towards them. Elektra's gray eyes tracked them, not buying into Lazarus's charisma.

There were at least ten of them, but Vanth wasn't worried about being outnumbered. He let his magic trickle slowly out into the tunnel behind him. No one, not even Lazarus, noticed how fine webs of it crept around the room.

"You can't possibly believe that. A man such as you, who defied the citadel of mages and sought knowledge where they were too scared to tread. I know what you are, Vanth, and you are not meant to stop at limitations just because they have never been passed before," Lazarus said, his eyes narrowing. "The 'natural order' only exists because we have been fooled

into believing it by beings who took power for themselves. We will be the new gods."

Vanth shook his head. Lazarus was certifiably crazy. "You really think trying to trap a god like Orcus is going to be a good idea? Even if your theory is correct, and they were just very powerful magic users that became gods, there's no way that he is going to share that information with you."

Lazarus gave him a soft, pitying look. "You really think I've spent the last seventy years doing nothing? I know exactly where I need to push in order to get Orcus to talk. That's why, whether or not you decide to join me of your own free will, you won't be leaving this place. I know whose blood is in your veins. I know that even a god will want to protect his own son."

That made Vanth laugh. "I'm sorry, but have you read *any* mythology? Gods rarely care about their kids at all. I haven't even met my dad, so I really doubt I'm going to be the bargaining chip you think I am."

"We will see, won't we? Take them," Lazarus said with a wave of his hand.

Vanth grabbed the webs of magic he had been weaving around them and gave them a hard pull. Small, angry skeletons burst to life and swarmed their attackers. Elektra took down one of the minions in a blink. Vanth grabbed her hand to pull her back.

"Leave them! We need to get out of here now," he said.

Lazarus started to chant, but Vanth's power was quicker. He latched onto the corpse on the altar, and it shuddered to life. It pulled a dagger from its ruined body and launched itself at Lazarus. He screamed in fury, his chant breaking off as he turned to wrestle the corpse.

"Quickly now, princess. Let's get up that ladder," Vanth said as they ran back down the tunnel. "Hopefully, our little rat friends will keep them amused long enough for us to get up."

"You could've told me what you were doing," Elektra panted from beside him.

Vanth grabbed her around the waist and lifted her up onto the ladder.

"There was no time. Anyway, I thought you might like to enjoy the surprise," he replied, racing up after her. He could hear heavy footsteps in the tunnel behind them, and he tumbled out into the greenhouse after Elektra.

"Quickly, let's lock them in," she said.

"Not just yet." Vanth rummaged around in the shoulder bag he had with him and pulled out something small and round. He had been waiting for an opportunity to use it and couldn't stop the wild laugh that tore out of him.

"Get ready to run, princess," he said and pulled the pin of the magical bomb. He tossed it into the tunnel and slammed the hatch down. Elektra was already running through the greenhouse, and he tore off after her.

They were almost back at the van when the earth shook underneath them, sending them both sprawling into the grass. An ear-piercing boom shook the night as the greenhouse exploded into a fireball.

"Time to leave!" Elektra said, pulling Vanth to his feet, and they hurried to get into the van. The house was caught in an inferno, and alarms and sirens were going off.

Vanth put his foot down, and they tore out of the street, the night sky burning red behind them. Next to him, Elektra slumped back in the passenger seat and began to laugh. Vanth joined in until they were both breathless, and he could barely see the road.

"I can't believe you attacked them with rat skeletons. What was even in that bomb? Talk about overkill," Elektra said between giggles. "Do you think we got them all?"

"Maybe not Lazarus, but I can hope," Vanth replied.

"If he is dead, it's one less thing to worry about. We still have to find a way to mend the Veil and get Orcus to help your mom," Elektra said. She sniffed her hair and pulled a face. "But first, I think we better have that shower."

The more Vanth thought about it, the more the encounter in the tunnels bothered him. Lazarus would have had a decent enough shielding spell to survive the firebomb, which still made him a problem.

"You are looking awfully pensive all of a sudden. What's wrong?" Elektra asked. She had a smudge of ash on her cheek that was adorable as fuck. He was so gone on her, it was disturbing.

"Lazarus has been sacrificing reapers, and fuck knows what else. He didn't have that much power in the tunnels. He's storing it somewhere, or his main base is somewhere else. Not to say that he never used the tunnels for magic. There just should have been more of it," Vanth replied and took out his phone. "I'm going to need you to drive while I make some calls." He pulled over, and they swapped places.

"I suppose it was just wishful thinking that the bomb could have gotten the bastard. Maybe he's storing the power in some kind of magical battery?" Elektra said and pulled back out onto the streets. "It would make sense that he would need to channel a fuck ton of magic to summon a god and tear the Veil. Your mother was a devotee already, so that might have been the reason that Orcus replied to her call. Lazarus has only ever cared about power, so he would have to force Orcus somehow to come to him."

Vanth nodded. "Makes sense. The problem is a magical battery like that is a nuclear bomb waiting to go off. We need to find it, and I have to warn some people."

Vanth hit a contact number and didn't have long to wait. Dhampir were up all hours.

"Vanth? This is a surprise," Zia answered.

"Hate to interrupt the honeymoon. Please tell me you are still in Florence?" It had recently been announced that the new head of the Volso family, Ares, was going to take Zia for his bride. It shocked everyone in Inferno except for Vanth, who had seen the two murderous, love-struck idiots together and knew it was a done deal.

"We are here for a few days. Why? You're sounding more agitated than usual," Zia replied. She had truth magic, so Vanth knew he couldn't lessen the threat of Lazarus and his bullshit. He gave her the abbreviated version instead.

"Let me get this straight. You are telling me that an unhinged necromancer is running around Inferno with a magic battery so he can use it to summon a god, gain control of the Veil, and basically raise an army of zombies?" Zia said, and Vanth heard Ares curse in the background. "And you're informing me of all this why exactly?"

"I need you to warn the vampires about it. I'm about to call Thor, and he can use his contacts to warn the wolves. I need everyone to be on the lookout for Lazarus and also to be keeping watch on their people who are vulnerable. I wouldn't put it past Lazarus to be grabbing anyone with magic to harvest," Vanth replied. In a city of powerful monsters, there were plenty of people who were seen as prey. No one would notice if they went missing. "Elektra and I are going to try to locate Lazarus and stop him. I just wanted you to know and maybe stay in Florence out of harm's way."

"Aw, Tarael, I knew you liked me."

Vanth grinned. "I do not. You're a nuisance, but I don't want you hurt. Warn Mercury and Asteria. Mercury has magic and will be able to sense things that other vampires won't. Maybe he's felt a disturbance in the city."

"Will do! Watch your ass, Vanth, and keep your girl safe," Zia said. He didn't know what she had read in his tone, but it didn't matter. She was right. Elektra was his, whether she knew it or not.

"I will. I'll text you if I learn anything," Vanth replied and hung up. Next, he tried Thor's number.

Thor was technically a vampire, but he could also warg out into a wolf if he wanted to. He had a clan of ancient Viking warriors that could do the same and had become such a menace to the vampire council that they had

given him a seat as a Lord. He was a silver-haired, tattooed giant that looked like the son of Geralt of Rivia and the goddess Freya if they decided to make a baby together.

Vanth liked him immensely because he rarely said anything, but when he did, it was always worth listening to. He also had a tendency not to leave behind anything that could lead back to him at murder scenes, which made Vanth's job of cleaning them a whole lot easier.

After seven rings, the phone finally picked up. Depending on what mood he was in, Thor tended to answer his phone in one of the Scandinavian or Nordic languages. He must've had a bad day because he answered in English with a growly, "What the fuck do you want?"

"Some dickhead necromancer is trying to raise an undead army and break the Veil. Thought you should know if I can't stop him, then the city might be invaded by the dead. Maybe get your brothers to spread the word to the wolves if you're not fighting with them," Vanth said, not wanting to waste Thor's time or get in the way of his legendary temper.

Thor grunted out some ancient curse. "Me and my clan have fought *draugr* before. I'm not afraid," he said before hanging up the phone.

"He sounded absolutely charming," Elektra commented, not looking up from the road.

"He's a Viking. He has a lot of charm when he wants to use it. They have had problems with certain werewolf families in Inferno. It's coming to its natural conclusion, and Thor is grumpy because I think he was convinced to solve it with diplomacy as opposed to using his battle ax," Vanth replied. He tapped his phone against his palm. "I suppose that's good news for everyone. I really don't have the resources to be cleaning up after a group of enraged Vikings right now. They will spread the word no matter how grumpy Thor is tonight."

Elektra pulled into his parking garage and turned off the van. "I will get stuck into your mother's books tomorrow. I really need to sleep before I start digging around, trying to unravel whatever magic she was using at the time."

Vanth took her hand and kissed her palm and the soft skin of her wrist. "Aren't you forgetting your promise to wash my hair for me?"

Elektra's grip shifted on his hand and tugged him closer. "I haven't forgotten a thing." She kissed him softly before her sharp teeth nipped his

lip. Vanth groaned, but she was already getting out of the van with a cheeky little laugh.

"So a lesson is in order. Good," he said with a soft laugh and hurried to follow her.

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Elektra knew it was probably dangerous to stir up Vanth too much, and she still couldn't help herself. He was sweet and silly right up until magic or sex got involved, and then something else came out to play.

She was in awe of how he had used his power in the tunnels. There was a subtlety that spoke of experience and control of his power few could ever attain.

She wanted to climb into his clothes just thinking about it. She didn't think it was her mating cycle that was forcing her to have this reaction to him. She was attracted to competence, and she was hard to impress. She didn't know if she should be terrified instead of horny, but she wasn't afraid.

"You better be in my bathroom by the time I get there," Vanth called in the darkness behind her. The seeing spell he had put on her was still active, so she had no problem making her way through the house.

She kicked off her boots and squealed as he suddenly grabbed her by the hips and hustled her through the door of his bedroom and into his ensuite.

They didn't need to bother with lights; Elektra could see him perfectly as she turned in his arms and kissed him. He tasted like magic and blood and something that was uniquely him that she couldn't get enough of. She dragged his shirt up over his head so she could skim her fingers down the smooth grooves of his chest and touched the necklace that matched her own.

"If I unzip this suit of yours, are any blades going to jump out at me?" he asked, tugging on the zipper tab at her throat.

"You will just have to find out. You're not scared, are you?" she teased, her breath stuttering when his warm fingertips brushed against her skin.

"No, but you should be," he replied, teeth against her throat. He unzipped the front of her suit and stripped her out of it until she was naked before him, except for the pendant around her neck. Vanth stared at her for several long moments, making her squirm under his gaze.

"If you don't start touching me, I'm going to explode," she complained. "You don't want to trigger a frenzy now, do you?"

Vanth's head tilted curiously. "What would that entail?"

"From the stories I have heard, I would lose my mind unless you fuck me to exhaustion. *Literally*, go crazy," she stressed because his grin was widening.

Vanth trailed his fingers down her throat, sending tingles down her whole body. He stepped closer so he could whisper in her ear. "Is that what you need me to do, Elektra? Fuck you until you're exhausted?"

"Yes," she whispered. The scent of his arousal was washing over her like a spicy musk that made her mouth water.

"I'll take care of you, don't worry," he said, his fingers moving over the curve of her belly. Her pussy clenched in anticipation, and then he let her go. "But first, you promised to wash my hair."

Vanth slid open the glass door of his large shower and turned on the taps. Elektra was still too dazed and frustrated to move.

Vanth undid his belt. "I should warn you; I'm not built like the other boys."

"All boys say that." Elektra's quip died as he dropped his jeans, and she saw the two bars through his dick. "Oh."

"Don't worry. You see this tattoo?" Vanth pointed out the circle of sigils around his base. "It ensures no pregnancy or STDs. I got a med-mage to put it on me when I was old enough to know what my dick was really for."

"Did it hurt?" she asked, eyes wide. The sigil blended into the tattoo of serpents, skulls, and roses that decorate his V up to his navel.

"I wouldn't know. I had drunk so much vodka I couldn't feel a damn thing," he replied.

Elektra couldn't look away. Her mouth was watering, and she wanted to lick and explore the beautiful artwork.

"Princess, if you keep looking at me like that, I'm not ever going to get my hair washed." Vanth unraveled his braid so that the dark silk fell in kinks to his chest.

Gods, he was beautiful. He took her hand and pulled her gently into the mist with him. Vanth sat down on a marble seat under the spray and passed her a shampoo bottle. Elektra wanted to climb into his lap and get him inside of her. He raised a brow at her, and her pussy clenched at the dominance in such a small gesture.

"I'm waiting, princess," he said.

It had been a long time since Elektra had allowed anyone to use that tone on her. She found herself squeezing the shampoo into her hand and stepping in between his legs to get closer to him. She didn't know why her heart was suddenly racing as she slowly worked the mixture into his dark hair.

Vanth's hands slid over her wet skin. She was hyper-aware that her breasts were practically in his face. She didn't stop gently lathering, adding more because his hair was so thick. When she started to massage him, he did the same, his hand slipping to her pussy to tease her. Elektra's massaging stuttered as she tried not to get lost in the feel of him. Vanth stopped playing with her. She let out a soft sound of protest.

"Stay on task, or I'll stop," he warned her.

"Fuck, you really do want to send me into a frenzy," she grumbled. Elektra continued to wash his hair, and he touched her again.

"You know you can tell me stop any time you want, and I will," Vanth said, looking up at her with his endless black eyes. "But until you do. You'll do as you're told." He made sure she was still watching as he lowered his mouth to her nipple and sucked on it.

Elektra whined in a way she wasn't proud of but continued to wash his hair while he edged her. His fingers slipped inside of her for the briefest of seconds before disappearing again. She felt like crying. Vanth only handed her the conditioner.

"Is there anything you don't like?" he asked, and she had to try to focus on what he meant.

"I'm not sure. Usually, my sexual encounters have been hurried one-night stands or bathroom fucks. It was about getting off as quickly as possible and not exploration," she admitted. She was glad it was dark, so hopefully, he wouldn't see how red her face was.

Vanth kissed her between her breasts, just above where the pendant hung. "Then the same rule applies. If I do something you don't like, you tell me about it. Don't be afraid to speak up."

"Okay," she whispered, her heart doing a strange flutter.

He was dominant, but he was considerate. She didn't trust anyone easily, but she trusted him with her body and her life.

"Is there anything you would like right now?" he asked while she worked conditioner through his ends.

"I would really like to get a better look at your piercings," she said, forcing the words out. Talking about her wants wasn't something she had been taught to do growing up at the Court or the temple.

Vanth hummed. "You have five minutes while this conditioner sinks in. And Elektra? Don't you dare touch yourself." Her face flamed, but she still sunk to her knees between his thighs. His dick was hard even before she tentatively touched him, her fingers exploring the twin bars all the way down to the tattoo that encircled him.

"Damn, you're going to kill me. I just know it," Vanth said, not sounding so confident now that she was the one touching him.

"Is there anything you don't want me to do?" she asked, wanting to extend him the same courtesy he did her.

"No, princess. Do whatever you want to me," he said, stroking her cheek gently. "Just be aware you might put me into a frenzy too."

"Then we'll burn together," she replied and put her mouth on him. She explored the strange sensation of his piercings on her tongue before dragging it down the underside of his cock. A shiver went through Vanth, so she did it again.

He widened his legs further, so she had full access to every part of him. He looked gorgeous from the angle she was at, his head leaning back against the marble wall, water droplets sliding down his throat. Elektra sucked him, her hand moving to stroke and gently squeeze his balls.

Vanth's fingers curled in her hair, the touch possessive in a way that made her ache. Now that she was used to the strange feeling of his piercings, she took him deeper.

"Fuck, that feels so good. Your mouth is...fuck," Vanth said, the praise encouraging her to keep going.

Her fingers moved from his balls to his taint, and his hips rose off the marble.

"Cheeky girl, you keep doing that, and I'm going to come down your pretty throat. I promised myself I wouldn't until I could be in that needy little cunt of yours."

Elektra whimpered, his dirty mouth making her thighs clench. She sucked him harder, wanting him undone, needing the salty taste of him on her tongue. Every soft curse and whimper out of him made her bolder. She licked and stroked, catching her breath before taking him again.

"Looks like I'm going to break that promise to myself tonight," he growled, his fingers tightening in her hair and thrusting into her mouth. "Pinch my leg if it gets too much. Otherwise, I'm going to use that mouth of yours however I want."

Elektra nodded as best she could. She wanted him to use her, wanted to give him the same pleasure she had experienced when he tongue-fucked her in the morgue. He thrust into her mouth harder and faster. He swore again when she circled his ass with her fingertips, and her mouth was filling with the spicy, salty taste of his come. She tried swallowing, but it still leaked out of the sides of her mouth and down her chin.

Vanth was panting heavily, fine tremors running through his body. He eased her off his cock and pulled her in his lap. He licked the come off her chin before kissing it back into her mouth.

Elektra felt used in the best possible way. She kissed him back with everything she had in her. She wanted to kiss and mark and claim. Every stroke of his tongue and nip of his teeth sent her desire higher. She wanted him to ruin her.

"I will, my dirty little reaper," he replied, making her realize she had said it out loud. "You said I could fuck you any way I wanted, and I plan to."

He thrust his fingers into her sensitive pussy, making her gasp at the invasion. She bore her weight down on them, needing relief so badly, she could cry.

"Look at you fucking my fingers. Such a needy girl, so fucking wet for me." Vanth bit her neck hard, making her pussy clench around him. The bite was hard enough that she knew it would mark, and she almost came at the thought of having his claim on her. "You look so fucking wrecked. A nice male would show you a bit of mercy, but I don't think you want me to be nice to you, do you, princess?"

"No," she gasped, fucking his fingers harder. *So close. So close.*

"I didn't think so. I'm going to turn you inside out until all you want to do is be my filthy little whore. Until not a bit of the proper little princess remains," he growled into her ear. His other hand stroked down her back to her ass.

"Fuck, Tarael, please," she sobbed, half-mad and helpless against everything he was making her feel.

"Shh, it's okay. Come for me. Drench my fingers, Elektra. Show me how much you love them," he growled.

Her orgasm shattered her into a million pieces. Elektra buried her face into his neck, smothering her cries and tearing at his neck with her teeth, marking him up as he marked her. *Mine*.

Her whole body was shaking in his embrace. Ruined and still wanting more.

"Look at me," Vanth said, and she pulled back from him. He removed his fingers from her pussy, making her whimper. "Open."

Elektra opened her mouth and accepted his fingers, covered in her pleasure. She could still taste his come in her mouth. Vanth kissed her, sucking her tongue, taking in both of them. He groaned and held her tighter to him.

Elektra languished in the feeling, letting herself enjoy belonging to him, even if it was only for a moment.

What the hell was that? Either Vanth's seeing spell had worn off, or he had come so hard, he'd lost his vision. The latter wouldn't surprise him, considering the warm, trembling female in his arms. Nothing was ever going to be normal or simple when Elektra was involved.

"Come on. Let's get you to bed," he murmured. The hot water was running out, and they both needed to sleep. He lifted Elektra up and set her down on her feet. She braced herself against the wall as he turned the shower off.

With gentle swipes, he towed them both off before leading her into the bedroom. Blindly, he pulled a shirt and some boxers from his drawers. He gave her the shirt before sliding his boxers on.

"Get in bed. I'll get you some water," he said softly.

Elektra pulled on the shirt. "You don't want me to sleep on the couch?"

"Fuck no. The choice is yours, but I have blackout curtains in here," he replied, and it almost killed him to say. He went into the kitchen and grabbed some bottles of water from the fridge. He really needed to buy food.

He sent his magic through the quiet house. The wards were set, the ghouls had tucked themselves away for the night, and the ghosts were peaceful. Dawn wasn't far away, and maybe they were all exhausted.

Vanth went back to his room and found Elektra tucked up on his favorite side of the bed. He let her have it because he was happy she was in his bed at all.

What are the odds? He had spent a long time alone and thought he preferred it that way. She was making him question everything about himself. He set the water down on the bedside table.

"Thank you," she whispered drowsily.

Vanth stroked her damp hair. "You're welcome, princess." He got in beside her and rolled onto his side. "I should probably warn you. I like to cuddle after sex."

"Of course you do. And we didn't have sex," she said in sleepy amusement. "We never seem to get that far."

"Is that a no to cuddles?" he asked.

"I didn't say that."

Vanth took that as permission and dragged her in to be the little spoon. Elektra wriggled back against him, and he groaned. "Cut that out, or I'm going to get another erection, and then we will never get to sleep."

Elektra laughed softly and finally stopped moving. Vanth waited until she slept before daring to nuzzle his face into her hair. He breathed in her scent, and some deep, restless part of him settled for the first time ever.

This isn't just an effect of some mating cycle, he thought and pressed his lips to her neck.

Everything with his father, the Veil, and Lazarus was a big jumble in his head. Everything about Princess Elektra Nova of the Celestial Court was crystal clear.

He was going to slay their dragons and help his mother, and then he was going to win the heart of the princess.

Get some sleep first, Romeo. Vanth smiled and closed his eyes before finally letting the darkness take him.



THE NEXT TIME VANTH WOKE, he was alone. The room was still dark, and the space beside him was cool. He tried to orientate himself, and with a brief glance at his phone, he saw that it was past midday.

There were no messages from the vampires. He just had to hope that they would get the word out like he requested. His stomach grumbled, and he pulled himself out of bed. He threw on the first lot of clean clothes he found and went to find his beautiful reaper.

Elektra sat at the dining table, Eiline's books opened in front of her. Cecilia was sitting on the edge of the couch, filing her nails. It was such a human action, but Vanth had caught the ghost doing it more than once.

Elektra was still wearing his shirt, a much-worn favorite of the Mongolian metal band 'The Hu,' but she had also put on jeans and a bra.

What a shame. Vanth was starting to wonder if mating cycles were contagious.

"Hey, there's breakfast in the oven for you," she said, not looking up from her books. "Isaac said the breakfast burritos are your favorite, so I went with those."

"You are fast becoming my favorite person," Vanth said, meaning every word.

"She also got clothes and groceries delivered. She has her shit together a lot better than you," Cecelia chirped from her perch.

"I wouldn't go that far," Elektra said, pushing the book away from her and rubbing at her eyes. "Don't take this the wrong way, Vanth, but I'm not sure how sane your mother was before the curse. Some of the magic in these journals and grimoires doesn't seem possible. I'm not a slouch of a student, and so much of this is beyond my understanding."

Vanth helped himself to the pot of coffee that was freshly brewed and felt a spark of genuine love.

"Let me eat and have caffeine, and I'll take a look. She used to home-school me because she found normal mage schools too pretentious with very little learning. Her words," he said and found his still warm burritos. Definitely in love.

Elektra got up and poured herself more coffee. "You will have to because I can't go through all of them alone. Every page is a rabbit hole of possibilities."

Vanth nodded. "Two heads will be better than one. Don't feel bad. She really is a genius. How did you sleep?"

A small smile tugged the corner of Elektra's lips. "Good. I haven't been awake for very long. I didn't want to disturb you."

"I like it when you are at your most disturbing," Vanth said with a teasing wink.

"If you two are going to make out, I'm leaving," Cecilia said and blipped out.

"Feels rude not to now," Elektra said, rising up on tiptoes to kiss Vanth lightly on the lips. She went to pull away, but he grabbed her by the back of the shirt and pulled her back for more. Her body melted against his, and warmth spread through him. Her hands slid under his shirt and trailed over the base of his spine.

"We have to stop, or I won't be able to think straight," she whispered against his lips.

"You're right. Save the world stakes and all that," Vanth babbled, letting her go and rubbing his hands over his face. "Fuck. Early to bed tonight."

Elektra nodded. "If we aren't out killing things or animating them."

"Stop making me hornier," Vanth complained, and she shot him a wicked smile before she went and picked up the book she had been reading again.

"Eat your breakfast, and then I'm putting you to work," she said.

Elektra hadn't been kidding about the complexity of some of Eiline's spells. Some he recognized parts of from other workings she had showed him. Others were a whole different language.

It would have helped if Vanth hadn't been thinking about the sacrificed bodies and the possibility that Lazarus was building some kind of battery.

It hadn't been in the sewer hideout. Vanth would have felt it. There was no way a shielding spell could disguise it, which meant that it probably wasn't in the city. Or if it was, it was hidden somewhere next to an even greater power source to disguise it. Neither thought was good.

Vanth had a lot of magic and talents, but tracking wasn't one of them. He usually left it up to his network of friends and informants to help him find people. Contacts that hadn't returned any of his calls. The sun was starting to go down when he finally let out a long, frustrated breath.

"What's wrong? Elektra asked, not looking up from the sigil she was sketching out piece by piece.

"I have an idea of how we can find Lazarus."

"So why the pout?"

"It means calling in a favor I really wanted to keep for a rainy day." It was one of the few big cards he had up his sleeve.

"We have a deranged necromancer threatening to open the Veil and raise an undead army. If that's not a rainy day, Vanth, I don't know what is."

Vanth ran his hands over his braid. "Gods damn it. We need to go out. He's a bit of a prick and never answers his phone. We are going to have to

go to him."

Elektra tossed her pencil onto the table. "Good. I need a break."

"You say that now, but I have to warn you. This contact is probably one of the most arrogant and insufferable people you're ever going to meet."

Elektra's gray eyes sparkled. "I'm royalty. I know how to handle the insufferable."

Vanth knew she was right, but no one did insufferable like Galen Fucking Murphy.

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It was still early in the night when Vanth and Elektra drove to the other side of the mage's district, which shared its border with the dragons.

There was a joke that got around in Inferno about certain districts named after Dante Alighieri's structure of hell. The Dragon District was frequently called Greed, but never when any dragons were around.

Galen had a sense of humor that was questionable when he decided to call his club 'The Circle Eight' because it was where sorcerers were sent when they died. It was an upscale club that nobody seemed inclined to get rid of despite its reputation and that of its owner.

"What is it about this guy that's making you so edgy?" Elektra asked.

"I'm not edgy. I am just cautious because that's how smart people are around Galen. He's probably the only member of the mages guild who is more disreputable than I am," Vanth replied.

Elektra smiled. "Oh? Tell me more. I didn't think anyone was more disreputable than you."

"Galen was quite brilliant. I mean, he *is* quite brilliant. I suppose he just got too arrogant and ended up fucking up. He was a sorcerer that the mages were all proud of. They knew exactly what to do with him, as opposed to what to do with me. He decided that to be a true sorcerer, he was going to summon a demon to serve him," Vanth began and tried to remember all the details he knew that weren't just rumors. "Galen didn't decide to summon any demon. That would be too simple. He decided to go into the forbidden

archives at the citadel and try to summon a demon who was a Lord. To say that he bit off more than he could chew is an understatement."

Elektra swore. "Oh, gods, who did he summon?"

"According to Galen, he wasn't trying to summon someone so big, but I don't know if I believe that because Galen was nothing if not ambitious. He ended up summoning Mammon by accident. If you don't know your Hebrew mythology, he is one of the seven princes of Hell and is in charge of wealth and greed. I don't know the full details of what happened that night, but apparently, he was possessed by the prince. The elders at the citadel won't release any of the information about that night, but Galen managed to exorcise Mammon on his own."

"Holy shit," Elektra whispered. Her hand was resting against her throat in shock, and Vanth wondered if he had done the right thing by telling her the story. Not many people knew it for a reason. The main one was that enterprising shitheads would try and get Galen to redo the magic. "So what happened?"

"Galen left the mages and disappeared for a while. When he resurfaced in Inferno, he opened up the club and has been there ever since. I'm only speculating here, but even though the demon prince may have been exorcised, he still had control of Galen's body for a night. And Galen hasn't really been the same since. I think the club is a way of feeding what Mammon left inside of him."

"Any idea what he did while he was away?" Elektra asked, her brow creasing into a frown.

Vanth shrugged. "Not sure, but when he came back, he started doing regular visits with an Irish Catholic priest here in the human quarter of the city."

"So he's not a sorcerer anymore?"

Vanth laughed. "That man couldn't stop being a sorcerer any more than he could stop being Irish. I think the priest is more like a therapist to help him deal with whatever it was that Mammon left inside of him. Or he could be an old family friend? I haven't been able to figure out which."

"And this man who isn't afraid to summon a prince of Hell owes you a favor? Should I be worried about what you actually did for him to earn it?" she asked, her gray eyes already filled with concern.

Vanth usually tried not to think about that night. "It's complicated, and I'm not sure I'm actually at liberty to tell anyone, even you. In fact, it's safer

if you don't know. It's a really big favor, though, so fingers crossed Galen doesn't give me too much grief for calling it in."

They arrived at the club ten minutes later. It wasn't open yet, and there was already a line down around the corner. The building was black brick with a stylized logo of eight red and gold circles. Vanth drove around the back and parked in the loading bay.

"Now what?" Elektra asked, looking around at the dark alley.

Vanth spotted a security camera turn and focus on him. He stuck his middle finger up at it. "Now, we wait for someone to come and open the door for us. Also, try not to stare."

"At what?" Elektra asked.

The back door to the club opened, and a six-foot-eight creature with curving white horns stepped out. The male cambion was stunningly beautiful with black and silver hair, pale blue eyes, and pearlescent skin. His father had been an incubus, and his mother was a witch. Only in Inferno could such a child find a safe place to live.

"Hey, Harper, how have you been?" Vanth asked, smiling up at him.

"Better for seeing you, my naughty little necromancer. I do wish you wouldn't be so vulgar about getting our attention. You could just knock, you know?" Harper said, his voice like satin and sex. He looked Elektra over. "My, my, what did you do to get the attention of the Novas?"

Vanth smiled his fake, innocent smile. "Oh, you know me, Harper. I like to make friends everywhere I go. Speaking of which, is the boss in? I need to bend his ear before opening."

Harper opened the door and gestured for them to come inside. "Anything I should be worried about?"

"Not yet. We have it under control." Vanth didn't want word to get around that there could be an undead army raised in the city. He liked Harper but didn't trust the cambion to not accidentally open his pretty mouth and gossip to someone what he shouldn't. With any luck, no one would know about the threat on a large scale because they were going to stop it.

Harper led them through the kitchens and out into the dark club. It was filled with candles of red, gold, and black, with large chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. It was like horny Goths had designed the place, especially for orgies.

Galen ran a safe place for anyone to come and drink and party. Just because the atmosphere was dark and sexy and dangerous, that didn't mean that it was. He didn't tolerate patrons or staff members being handled or mistreated in any way, shape, or form, and he had more than one cambion on his staff to frighten the shit out of anyone who tried to break Galen's rules.

Vanth received a few nods from staff members that he knew, and Elektra got more than one curious look. She wasn't wearing any makeup or dazzling party gear, but she could make even jeans and his beat-up T-shirt look sexy as fuck.

Vanth really hoped Galen wasn't in the mood to flirt with her because he was in the mood to throat-punch anyone who looked at her too long. Maybe he *was* getting too obsessive and possessive. He wasn't sure if he liked this side of himself but couldn't seem to switch it off either.

They walked up a twisting flight of stairs where Galen had his office. Harper knocked on the door and then left them to fend for themselves.

"Come the fuck in, or fuck the fuck off," Galen's deep Irish brogue boomed through the wood of the door.

Vanth opened the door and held it out for Elektra. "Language, my dear fellow. We have ladies present."

Galen Murphy was a bear of a man in a bespoke suit. He was too broad and built for anything to fit him properly off the rack and look that damn good. He had a wizard's mane of dark brown hair that fell artfully around the base of his neck and deep indigo-blue eyes. You could never call him pretty because his features were too strong for that. He was pure power and carnal energy, and it all fused with an undercurrent of magic that made the hair rise on the back of your neck. He wouldn't have looked out of place with a magic staff in a castle, and the accent just made the image grow.

He had quite taken Vanth's breath away when they had first met, but Vanth had since learned that Galen's sex appeal had been honed like a weapon, just like everything else about Galen.

"I apologize, my dear. I thought it was only the rabble that I was dealing with tonight," Galen said, turning up the Irish accent to a panty-melting purr. He got out of his chair to kiss Elektra's hand. "I have not had the privilege of hosting a royal under my roof for a while. What on earth are you doing hanging about this miscreant?"

"He's helping me deal with a pesky necromancer problem. He seems to think that we need your help," Elektra replied with a smile.

Vanth knew what her flirting smile was like, and this one was different. Whatever effect Galen usually had didn't seem to be working on her. Vanth relaxed just a little. He wasn't sure if putting the two of them in the same room together while she was on her mating cycle was going to be a good idea. He had never felt insecure before, either, but then again, he had never cared for one of his hookups like he cared for Elektra. Maybe it was love, after all.

"Are you sure he isn't the necromancer problem? Because it's usually him." Galen let go of her hand and went back to his chair behind the desk. "What is this about, Vanth? I have a club to open in twenty minutes and things I need to do."

"Do you remember how you owe me a favor?"

Galen's smiling face went rigid. "I do. Are you calling it in at last?"

"All depends on whether or not you have the power to help me," Vanth replied. He quickly summarized the last few days and everything that happened in them. About halfway through, Galen poured some of the good whiskey that he kept in the drawer of his desk.

Vanth purposely kept some details from Galen, like the fact that Orcus was his father. He wanted to keep his demigod status a secret for as long as possible. His life was complicated enough.

"From what you're telling me, we're fucked, right?" Galen said once Vanth had finished speaking.

"Not if we can find them in time. That's where you come in," Vanth replied. "That sacrificial magic must be contained somewhere. Finding that kind of thing isn't my specialty, but I hope that it's yours. Do you think that you can use your wizard powers and find it for me?"

"All depends if you stop calling them wizard powers. I can look into it for you, but I can't make any promises. This Lazarus seems to have a following of magic users, and if they're all using shielding spells, it might take a while for me to crack," Galen replied. He drained his whiskey, and a flicker of vulnerability danced through his eyes. "Is this something that I really need to be afraid of? Do you think you can stop it, or should I be getting out of town?"

"If you can find Lazarus, then we will stop him. You have my word," Elektra said with cool confidence. They finished their whiskey and rose to

leave.

"I will do the magic for you, and then we will be even. Deal?" Galen said.

Vanth nodded. "We will be even. At least until next time you have a mess for me to clean up."

Galen's most charming smile finally made an appearance. "Go home and rest, you two. You've got a big fight ahead of you, so be careful those love hearts in your eyes don't blind you too much."

Vanth chuckled. "Fuck you, sorcerer."

"I'd never have you," Galen shot back.

"Don't worry. I know who you are sweet on, and she will never have you either." Vanth saw the second his barb hit because Galen's eyes darkened.

"You don't know shit. Don't push your luck, Vanth," he said, and Vanth didn't.

He took Elektra's hand and got out of there. Despite loving to torment the sorcerer any chance he got, Vanth knew where the line was. He didn't have a death wish, and Galen was one of the few people in Inferno that he was genuinely afraid of pissing off.

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"Do you think we can trust him?" Elektra asked.

They were back at Vanth's dining table, piles of books and papers between them.

"I trust he wants to get out of his debt to me," Vanth replied, looking up from the sigil he was trying to decipher.

He was once again facing the unsettling feeling that he didn't know his mother at all. Some of the grimoires contained echoes of things she had taught him in the past, but then there were others that made his brain boggle. Vanth's magic had always come to him more intuitively. He learned the basics of the magic and then let his power and intuition guide him the rest of the way to understanding.

"I think this spell deals with using the fabric of the Veil, but it doesn't seem to say anything about mending it," Vanth said after a long silence.

Elektra tapped her pen against the page she had been working on. "Don't forget she had to summon Orcus for help in the end. What we are doing is hoping that your magic can figure out the rest without his input."

"It won't matter if we can't find Lazarus."

To do magic so big, the bastard had to be working on a ley line at the very least. Maybe Vanth should dig out his old ley line maps.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Elektra said, breaking his train of thought.

Vanth leaned back and rubbed his eyes. They had been at it for hours, and his eyes were beginning to itch.

"Anytime, Elektra," he said when he realized she was waiting for him.

"Do you worry about meeting your father?"

Vanth didn't have to think too hard about an answer. "No. Just because his absence has now been explained, it doesn't change anything. My mother raised me. He donated the sperm. I don't give a shit if he finds me disappointing or not. Other people's opinions have never really mattered to me. If he wants to build a relationship with me, I will definitely give it a go. I'm not about to forget he's a god. They don't tend to involve themselves with mortals unless it's to fuck with them. All I want from him is to heal my mother."

Elektra got up and refilled her glass of water. "I know you say it doesn't matter to you, but I think Orcus would be crazy not to be proud of you. You are a good person, Vanth. No matter how much you hide it."

Vanth might not care what anyone thought, but her praise still made him blush like an idiot. "What about you? Do you miss your family or living at the Celestial Court?"

"Not even a little bit. The temple never kept us captive. I could have visited, but I never wanted to," Elektra replied.

"I suppose a princess like you would have been married off and not here with me to protect you from eager fae boys," Vanth teased.

Elektra raised a red brow. "Oh? And what are you?"

"Halfies don't count."

Elektra finished her water. "And why is that?"

"We aren't possessive dick bags for a start." *You liar, Tarael Vanth.*

"Ah, huh. So what you are saying is that after all this, you won't care if I go and date someone else?"

Vanth forced his mouth to work. "I'm not your boss, princess." He grinned, and her cheeks turned pink. "Even if you like that sometimes. But just so you know, if you do choose someone else and they hurt you, I'll turn them into a ghoul and make them serve you for all eternity."

Elektra moved to his side of the table and ran her hands through his hair. "That's so fucking sexy."

She kissed him, and Vanth pulled her into his lap. He didn't mention he would fight for her, that he would turn himself inside out to be good enough for her and to keep her right there in his arms.

Elektra's lips skimmed his jaw and caressed the scars on his ear. "Take me to bed, Tarael."

Vanth didn't need to be asked twice. He scooped Elektra up in his arms and carried her to the bedroom. "That mating cycle giving you a hard time again, princess?" he asked between kisses.

Elektra admitted, "I don't know if it's the cycle or just you. I've wanted you all day."

Vanth groaned, intoxicated by her words. "You've been needing my attention and didn't say anything. Were you wet?"

"Yes," she said and nipped at his neck. "I can't stop it. I can ignore it until you start getting growly, and then I want you inside of me so badly, I can't breathe."

"Fuck, Elektra. Don't suffer in silence next time."

"It's embarrassing," she murmured against his skin.

"It's hot as fuck, just like the rest of you." Vanth placed her down on her feet and tugged at the hem of her shirt. "I don't know what is hotter, leaving my favorite shirt on you or taking it off."

"Everything needs to be off. I need to feel your skin against mine before I explode," Elektra said, her hands already undoing his jeans. "If everything goes to hell tomorrow, I don't want to die, not knowing what it felt like to have you inside of me."

Vanth stripped her. "Get on the bed."

Elektra lay back on his sheets, her skin glowing softly in the dim light.

"I need to see more of you," he said, lighting a few candles. He didn't like artificial light in his bedroom, and the warm glow of candles loved Elektra, turning her to gold and delicious dips and shadows. He couldn't hide how hard he already was for her. She studied him with just as much lust and longing in her eyes.

Vanth slowly moved over her, kissing his way across her skin, taking his time to savor her in the way they hadn't in the shower the night before. He wanted to know what every part of her felt and tasted like. Every sigh and gasp he got her to make was a victory. He could smell her arousal as it dampened her thighs.

"Please, no more foreplay. Get inside of me," Elektra begged, her body squirming underneath him.

"I don't want to hurt you with my piercings, so spread your legs and show me how wet you are," he demanded. Her whole body flushed red, but she obeyed him. Her pussy gleamed, and Vanth lightly skimmed his fingers over her. "Are you sure you don't want my tongue first, princess?"

Elektra shook her head. "I want to come with you inside of me."

"Gods, Elektra." Vanth unraveled every time she admitted what she wanted him to do. He moved to his bedside drawer and pulled out a bottle of lube.

"You are wet, but I'm still going to make sure your first experience with piercings is going to be a good one," he said, slicking himself down. Elektra's gray eyes followed every stroke of his hands. When she licked her lips, he almost came. He wanted to feel them around his dick again, but not as much as he wanted to be inside of her.

She widened her legs to make room for him, and he lay down on top of her. He kissed her deeply, his tongue sliding into her mouth. Her fingers scratched down his back, pulling him closer.

Vanth rolled, so she was on top of him. "Take it if you want it, princess. I want you to do this at your pace, not mine. I want to watch how you take me."

Elektra's chest flushed red, but it didn't stop her from taking his dick in her hand and lining herself up. She rubbed his head over her clit, and he gripped the sheets at the warm, silky tease. Maybe he should have taken control. He didn't know how long he would handle being edged.

Elektra lowered herself down onto him, her eyes blowing wide as his piercings moved over her.

"Oh," she gasped softly.

Vanth stroked circles on her thighs, needing to touch her. He watched his dick enter her, the tightness of her squeezing against him until he thought he might cry in frustration. They were both shaking by the time she was fully seated on him.

"You okay?" he asked, his breath shallow.

"I feel like..." she whispered, her hips rocking a little. "I feel like this is the best thing that's ever happened to me. Oh, gods, something is happening..." Her hands started to shake.

Vanth sat up, suddenly concerned. "What's wrong? We can stop—"

"No," she growled so ferociously that her voice didn't seem like her own. "I think it's the mating cycle. I need to fuck you. Now."

"Then fuck me," Vanth said, tilting her head up so he could look at her in the eyes. There was something primal shining out of her. A warning light went on, and something she had said about a 'frenzy' came back to him. "It's

okay, Elektra. I'm here with you. Take what you need. I'll give you whatever you want, for as long as you want."

Elektra shifted her hips up, the slide of her pussy against him making his heart race. "I'm going to fuck you until you don't know your own name. I'm going to claim you so that no one will ever be able to look at you again and not see me."

"Fuck me however you need to," he babbled because he was so fucking ruined over her already.

Elektra fisted his braid tight and began to ride him fast and deep. He didn't try to match her pace. He just let her use him however she needed to. Her head dropped back, and he kissed her exposed neck, tasting her pulse in his mouth. He grabbed one of her bouncing tits in one hand and dropped his other to her clit.

"Fuck yes, right there," she gasped, her nails digging into his shoulders. Vanth circled her harder, and she came with a sudden cry, thighs tightening around him. He kissed her softly, but she only bit his lip and growled. "Again. And harder."

Vanth laughed softly and lifted her off him. He flipped her onto all fours and angled her so her perfect ass was sticking straight up in the air. "The frenzy has you, does it?"

"Please," Elektra begged, her voice slightly smothered. "It hurts, Tarael. Fuck me, now."

Vanth made a mental note to research fae mating cycles, but right then, if Elektra wanted it, he would give it to her. He spread her, admiring the view of her tight little ass and flushed, wet pussy. If they did get eaten by an undead army the next day, at least he was going to die happy. He thrust his cock deep into her, his hands gripping her hips to stop her from sliding too far forward.

"Oh, gods, just like that," Elektra begged. "Fill me until I can't take it anymore."

Vanth chuckled and squeezed her ass hard enough to leave finger marks. "There she is. My fancy princess has turned into my whore after one orgasm." Elektra moaned and nodded.

Fucking hell. He really didn't deserve the gift she was. The dark side of him rose up, needing to dominate, needing to undo her and remake her. Vanth lost himself in the feeling of her tight pussy, squeezing him with every deep thrust. It was taking all his control not to fill her with his come.

Elektra pushed back against him. "More. I need more."

"Dark gods, woman. I don't want to hurt you," he growled.

"You won't. I need it. I trust you."

"Fuck, Elektra." Vanth almost unraveled. He held her tight to him to stop them both from moving so he could catch his breath. Her scent was scorching his way through his senses, the pheromones coming off her in waves that begged him to do all the dark and wicked things he wanted to her.

"Just remember to breathe, and I'll look after you," he said, leaning down to kiss her spine.

"I know you will. Just fuck me before I scream."

"Oh, you'll definitely be screaming by the time I'm done with you. You keep pushing me, and I'm going to have both of these pretty holes tonight." He licked her skin, and he could taste the high she was riding. Fucking hell, what was she?

"I told you—you can fuck me however you want. Just *do* it," Elektra insisted, her voice rising.

Vanth's hand slid around the base of her throat and shoulder. "Easy, princess. I'm not going to hurt you by being impatient. I'll make sure you come so hard that it feeds your frenzy."

Elektra nodded, settling a little under his dominance. Damn. He didn't know which one of them was going to be more wrecked. The trust she had in him alone was enough to drive him insane. Maybe they were *both* caught up in a frenzy.

Vanth thrust into her slow and deep, making her whimper in a way he would never get enough of. He grabbed the lube and slicked up his fingers before running them over the tight pucker of her ass.

"Oh, fuck. Fuck," Elektra gasped.

"Don't forget to tell me to stop if it's too much," Vanth insisted, trying to be a gentleman despite the madness tearing its way through him.

Elektra nodded and pushed her hips back against him, urging him on. Vanth played with her, watching her face as pleasure overwhelmed her. He slipped his finger in, and she came hard, her whole body shaking. Vanth stopped to let her have a second, but she snarled a purely feral sound.

"Don't stop," she demanded.

"You're going to kill me, woman," he huffed in utter awe and fucked her through the high riding her. "You want another finger?"

"Yes, I want you to fuck me there too," she admitted, her eyes glassy.

Vanth had to take some steady breaths before he continued. She was going to ruin him, and he wanted to be ruined.

He added more lube, determined not to hurt her despite her urgings. He fucked her pussy as he slowly added another finger, letting her adjust as he slowly worked her open. She came again in a sob, her pussy clenching him so tight, he saw stars. He pulled out of her before he came.

"Just breathe, love," he purred, kissing her neck and ears as he pressed the tip of his dick to her ass. Elektra's eyes went wide, but she didn't freeze up. He kissed her face and neck gently as he worked his way inside of her with slow thrusts.

"Oh, gods. Oh, fuck," she whispered. Her fingers entwined with his and hung onto him tight.

When he was fully inside of her, he waited, letting her adjust to him. After a few moments, she relaxed under him, and her breathing evened out. Only then did he begin to move inside of her, her body so hot around him that he felt like he was burning up. He slid his hand under her, lifting her high enough to play with her wet pussy.

"*Tarael*," she moaned, moving in time with him. He thrust two fingers into her cunt, and then third. The next time she came, he went with her, unable to hold back his own cries as he shattered from the inside out. She was chanting his name as he filled her with his come, his back bowing and lungs burning.

"Fuck, Elektra. Fuck," he murmured. He was shaken to his core as he leaned down to kiss her. She was sobbing softly, so he licked the tears from her cheek. "Are you okay?"

"I am everything right now," she whispered back, her pupils blown out.

Vanth eased himself out of her and lifted a sheet over her still-shaking body. "I'll be right back."

He went into the ensuite and turned on the bathtub before going to the kitchen and grabbing a bottle of water and some juice. He paused only for a second to try and catch his breath. He didn't feel like he was in his body properly, but his need to take care of her overpowered everything else.

He put water and juice next to the tub before going back to the bedroom. Elektra hadn't moved. He carefully removed the sheet and lifted her up into his arms.

"Don't want to move," she murmured sleepily.

"You have to let me take care of you," he replied and lowered her into the warm bathtub. He opened the juice and gave it to her. "Drink that."

Elektra's eyes were still unseeing, but she drank. Vanth climbed into the tub with her and added more hot water. He took a flannel and began to wash her lightly. Her neck and shoulders were red and bruising. She was covered in his marks, and his dick tried to rally at the sight.

She sighed and leaned back against him. He cradled her with his body, and she laid her head on his chest. "Thank you," she whispered.

"I think I should be the one thanking you for that, princess," he replied, running the cloth over her. "Are you sure you are okay? You're not hurting anywhere?"

"No. Just feel high."

Vanth kissed the top of her head. "Feel what you need to. I'll take care of you."

"Always?" she whispered sleepily.

Vanth's heart squeezed, not knowing what she was really asking him. It didn't matter. He knew the answer. "Always, princess. Always."

Someone was banging on a door in an aggressive beat. Elektra rolled over, her limbs heavy with exhaustion, and pushed at Vanth's shoulder.

"Vanth! Get up! There's a very handsome and angry Irish man outside," Cecelia's voice called through the door.

"We will be right out," Vath grumbled back. He rolled over and kissed Elektra on the cheek.

"Up you get, gorgeous. Galen is going to want to talk to both of us." Elektra didn't move. Vanth brushed his fingers through her hair. "How are you feeling? You're not aching anywhere?"

Elektra did a quick scan of her body before she opened her eyes and smiled up at him. "No. I feel good. A little tired and tender and that I could do with another five hours of sleep. Stop worrying."

Vanth frowned. "I'm allowed to. Aftercare is important. Especially when you have other forces influencing your normal limits, like a mating cycle."

Elektra reached up and kissed him in the middle of his brows. "Thank you for checking. I appreciate you looking after me, but we really need to get up."

"Galen can wait," Vanth said, moving to kiss her.

The wards around the house shuddered, and Elektra laughed. "Galen doesn't seem to be in a waiting mood."

"He better have a good fucking reason for being here so early," Vanth grumbled.

They got dressed, and Elektra went to the bathroom while Vanth answered the door. Elektra couldn't remember getting out of the tub and into bed the night before. She had been so blissed out.

She bit back a gasp when she saw the state of her neck. There was a ring of fading bruises around it and trails of them over her chest. Being fae with rapid healing meant they would be gone by the end of the day. Heat and desire raced through her veins.

Vanth had marked her in a way that would scream ownership to any other fae who saw them.

He wasn't raised to know what this means, she tried to tell her racing heart.

She quickly washed up and put on one of the new shirts she had bought the day before. The collar was high enough to hide most of the bruises. Voices were getting louder out in the kitchen, so Elektra hurried to join them.

Galen was pacing and agitated. He was out of his power suit and dressed in expensive dark blue jeans and a black T-shirt. He didn't look like he had slept a wink.

"Okay, we are both here now," Vanth said, putting on the coffee. "Why don't you tell us what bug has crawled up and bit you on the taint."

Galen collapsed in a chair. "Last night, the demons in the club went crazy around 1 a.m. They lost it and started brawling."

"Is Harper okay?" Vanth asked.

"His power was the only thing that stopped the fights. His incubus side surged, and everyone who wasn't trying to fight was trying to fuck. We had to get the cops in to deal with the humans, and I had to get all the cambions into containment circles," Galen ranted. "I don't know what happened, but when Harper cooled down enough, he said some kind of power hit the city like a shock wave. He said it felt like the other side was pushing its way through. I swear to Christ I never told them a thing about why you visited."

"I don't know what to tell you," Vanth said, rubbing at his chin. "What do you think, Elektra? Is Lazarus capable of something like that?"

Galen looked between them, expression growing darker. "Aren't you two meant to be able to feel something like that? What were you up to..." His blue eyes rested on Elektra's neck, and he swore.

"We aren't linked to the Veil, and the cambions would be more connected to feeling disturbances," Elektra said, ignoring the sorcerer's

grumbling. "Maybe Lazarus has begun to poke at the mending to see if it's weak enough?"

Vanth poured them both coffees, and Galen added whiskey to his from a flask in his pocket.

Vanth asked, "Did you come here with any good news at all? Or did you wake us up just to have a rant?"

"I tracked the magic, but the location doesn't make sense. It's like it was on the map but not on a map?" Galen said and pulled out a square of cloth from his pocket. "It was a big signature that tracking it down should have been a dream. I did the magic three times and still got the same result."

Vanth and Elektra shared a look, and he nodded at Galen. "Show us. We know of some places like that."

Galen tossed the cloth into the air, and as it fell, it unraveled into a large map of Inferno and the countries around it. The map began to shift and change as Galen's magic manipulated it.

"This is us," he said, pointing at the city and the expanse of sea it was nestled beside. "This is where the location spell keeps leading me. The best I can pinpoint is that it's here in the Rhodope Mountains, but then it does this." The red dot on the map began to flicker in and out and in different locations along the range.

Elektra's heart skipped a beat as she moved closer to study the dot. Vanth leaned in beside her, and her eyes fluttered closed for a moment, taking in his scent.

Fuck, not now. She forced her concentration back on the map.

"What are you thinking, princess?" Vanth asked, his eyes mischievous. No doubt he could sense *exactly* what she was thinking when he looked at her like that.

"I think that the original tear in the Veil was located somewhere near the Temple of Magic and Bone. It's why the location keeps moving so rapidly. One of the entrances to the temple located in the human plane is in that range."

"What do you mean by entrances?" Galen asked.

Elektra hesitated. There were some secrets that the temple held sacred. But would that even matter if there were no reapers left to tend to it?

"The easiest way I can explain it is to imagine a house that exists in a space outside of time. There are doors all over the world that open to it. It's between the real world and the Afterlife."

"Like the filling in a sandwich with the living and the dead worlds being the bread," Vanth said. Galen and Elektra stared at him. "What? I'm hungry, and it's how my brain is understanding it."

"So how are you two going to find it if the location is moving?" Galen asked, turning to Elektra.

"We need to go back to the temple and use it as a starting place," she said, tapping her lip thoughtfully. "Is this map enchanted to stay locked onto the source of the magical disruption?"

Galen nodded. "It is, but I can't promise it will work any more accurately. Why?"

"If we take it to the temple, the interference might stabilize it," Vanth guessed.

Elektra knew that she had to go back; she had known it since she had left. She was just afraid to. There had been nothing but death and carnage left behind, the dying demands of the high priestess ringing in her ears that had made her run without thought.

Vanth's arm went around her shoulders, bringing her out of the memory. "Hey, you won't be going there alone. Whatever we find there, we will face it together."

Elektra nodded, leaning into his warmth and comfort. *Mate. Mate. Mate*, her primal side insisted. That was something for her to examine after all the other mess was over. She didn't have room in her heart for any hope that wasn't beyond surviving.

"If that's all you two will need from me, I'll get out of your hair. I have my own affairs to see to," Galen said, placing his empty mug in the sink. Vanth thanked him for his help, and Galen shrugged it off. He paused by the door. "Vanth, take some free advice? Don't leave Inferno without seeing the dragons. If you fail, and an army of the undead is unleashed on the city, then dragon fire will be the only thing to stop them."

Vanth groaned. "They won't see me."

"Just try to say that you did in case it all blows up in your face." Galen smiled. "Because knowing you, it probably will."

"Okay, but you better go see your priest and get your soul prepared," Vanth teased back.

Galen didn't laugh. "No point. I know who's going to claim my soul as soon as I'm dead, and there's nothing anyone can do about it."

Vanth waited until he was gone before turning back to Elektra and the map. "When do you want to leave?"

Elektra rubbed at her tired eyes. "As soon as we can. He's right about the dragons too. There needs to be some kind of contingency if we fail. The first thing I need to do is have a shower, and you need to come with me."

Vanth's expression brightened. "I do?"

"Yes. I'm not going into some epic showdown with Lazarus and his cult without a hot shower." Elektra pulled him closer and lightly brushed her lips against his. "And without being with you one last time."

Vanth tucked her hair behind her ear. "I'm all for moving lovemaking, princess. Just don't act like we are about to die, okay?" He kissed the tip of her nose. "I only just found you, and I'm not going to let you go without a fight, even if it's Death doing the claiming. Understand?"

Elektra hugged him tighter to her. Despite knowing she shouldn't, reckless hope filled her as she kissed him just below the ear and breathed him in. "I understand."

Elektra didn't settle until she was under the hot steam of the shower with Vanth pressed against her, warm and naked. He was so careful with her that it made tears build at the back of her eyelids.

She couldn't let the fear of losing him overwhelm her or distract her from what needed to be done. At that moment, she didn't need anything but to be with him, so she kissed him, and when he finally slid inside of her, she enjoyed every second of it. She memorized how he looked at her in awe and savored each caress and softly whispered word. It felt more than just getting off, and the urgency her mating cycle had sparked wasn't riding her. It was just them, and she gloried in it.

Afterward, Vanth washed her tenderly and kissed his way over her shoulders.

"Are you feeling better now? You seemed to disappear when Galen was talking," he asked.

"It's not easy for me to admit that I'm afraid of going back to the temple. I was doing what I was told when I left, and it still feels like I am a coward. I don't want you to think that I am too when..."

Vanth turned her in his arms. "Elektra, there's no way I would ever think that. You are one of the most fearless people I have ever met. Nothing we find there will make me think otherwise. You're here with me, and that's more bravery than the majority of people I have met in my life."

"You're not so bad. Maybe your sense of humor," Elektra teased because everything felt too heavy. "But I kind of love that about you too."

Vanth's lips twitched. "You love stuff about me, do you?"

Elektra swallowed hard but nodded. "Lots of things, actually. It's a bit disturbing, and it's not my rampant horniness from my mating cycle talking either."

Vanth's eyes went wide, and he stroked her wet cheeks. "So I'm not alone in feeling that this is something beyond stress relief and a good time? Because I love everything about you. It's killing me not being able to say it."

Elektra's heart thudded painfully against her ribs. "Even me being bossy and kind of mean?"

"Oh, *especially* when you're bossy and mean, princess."

Elektra rested her head against his chest. "This wasn't what I expected to happen when I saw you dancing with the ghosts that day."

"It wasn't what I expected to happen when I found you rummaging in my fridge. Maybe I had more of an idea when you kicked my ass afterward," Vanth said, and she couldn't stop the laughter that bubbled out of her.

"What a pair we are," she said.

"The perfect pair, in my opinion. How about we go kick Lazarus's ass, and then we can explore how in love we are in detail and many different positions?" Vanth suggested. Elektra went up on her tiptoes and kissed him. She had never heard of a better plan in all her life.

31

The dragons were in no mood to be talked to. At least, according to the receptionist who kept answering Vanth's calls. No, he didn't have an appointment. No, it couldn't wait. Yes, it was urgent. None of that seemed to matter because their gatekeepers were not interested in passing on messages, no matter if there was a perceived emergency. Vanth was at his wits end with them, so he walked downstairs to check on his ghouls and stock the van with supplies that they might need for their adventure.

Elektra was still going through Eiline's journals, and Vanth wasn't much use to her. Besides, he kept looking at her, and all his cohesive thoughts were leaving his head.

"You are like a love-sick puppy, and I'm so happy about it," Cecelia said, popping out of nowhere to scare the shit out of him.

"I don't know what you mean," Vanth replied, his ears going red.

Cecelia cackled like a banshee. "It's adorable. It's about time someone did a number on you. It's a shame it had to be a mean reaper that terrifies all the ghosts in the house, but at least she is pretty."

"You guys will get used to her. She's not going to reap any of you because she promised that she wouldn't."

Cecelia nodded. "You two kind of match. She will keep your nonsense in check, and make sure you do the human things like eat and sleep. You're even getting laid for once. I feel like I don't know what to do."

"What you will do is not spy on us when we are fucking," Vanth said, laughing as she pouted.

"Why are you so determined to ruin my Afterlife."

"Go haunt a sex club, you perve. I'll move you to one myself if that's how you want to spend your time."

"I don't know about a sex club, but I wouldn't mind an outing to Galen's place. He's not bad for an Irishman," Cecelia replied and pulled on his braid. "You should take me over there before you leave. In case you die horribly."

Vanth opened his mouth to reply when a wave of magic hit him hard enough to knock him back a step.

"What the fuck? Vanth!" Elektra said, coming down the stairs.

"That wasn't me, princess."

Cecelia flickered. "Vanth? Something is wrong. I don't feel so good. Something is tearing at me!"

Vanth reached for her hand and fed her some energy. "What do you mean?" he asked.

The strange magic was still scorching the air, leaving a taste of iron in his mouth.

"The other ghosts... Oh, Sweet Mother Mary. Vanth, it's taking us! It's taking us all!" Cecelia screamed, her body flickering.

Vanth grabbed her other hand. "Hold on, Cecelia!" he urged, panic overwhelming him. He tried to feed her more of his magic, but she began to vanish through his fingertips. "No, no, no."

Her big eyes turned silver. "I never told you that I stuck to you that day in London because you were so lost. More lost than me. And so alone. I knew I could never leave until you had someone that would have your back," she said and touched his face. "You look after each other now."

"Cecelia, don't let go," Vanth urged. "Don't leave me."

Cecelia smiled. "I can't stop it, honey. It's got us all."

"No! Cecelia!" Vanth's hands were empty. He had only seen a ghost disappear like that once before.

"Tarael?" Elektra whispered, her face pale. "What just happened? I've never seen that... I can't feel any of your ghosts anymore."

"It's because they were all just stolen," he said, voice flat. "There's either someone else in the city, ghost trapping for power, or it's Lazarus. I killed the last trapper. He's in the basement being a ghoul. I made sure all of his devices and research were destroyed." Vanth's power pulsed angrily under his skin, reacting to the boiling anger in his veins.

"What are we going to do? What do you need?" Elektra said, her hand wrapping around his forearm. "I'm with you."

She was calm and steady as a rock despite the power pulsing out of him. He held onto that calm and tried to pull it inside of him.

"We need to go and see the fucking dragons," he growled. "And this time, I'm not taking no for an answer. It might get me into big trouble. Or burned alive. You never know."

"Sounds like fun." Elektra kissed his cheek. "And I just thought of the perfect plan to get us in front of them."



THE DRAGON DISTRICT of Inferno lay at its very heart. Originally, the plans of the city had been circular, like ancient Baghdad, but the population of Inferno had grown around it, so from the air, it now represented a flower.

The heart was still a circle and still run by the dragons because the original five still lived there. The eldest, Azhdaha, was the not-so-secret king of Inferno. The dragons wanted everyone to look after their own people and have their own autonomy, but if problems got big enough to get the dragons' attention, then everyone in the situation was fucked. Nobody wanted the dragons' attention. *Ever*.

That was why Vanth was looking up at the black and gold building before him, wondering if what he was about to do was a good idea. Okay, he knew it was a very *bad* idea, but Galen was right. If Lazarus succeeded in raising an undead army, then only the dragons would be strong enough to protect the city.

Elektra sat beside him, dressed in her reaper suit and her sleeveless hooded robe. They would do their best to warn the dragons, and then they would head straight to the temple.

"You got this?" Vanth asked. He wasn't sure what the plan was exactly, but Elektra held herself with her usual confidence. She cocked a brow at him.

"Why? You nervous?"

"Shitting myself, and you should be too."

Elektra only tossed her red curls with a scoffing sound and got out of the van. Vanth followed her because he wasn't about to let her out of his

sight. His heart hurt over Cecelia, and there was something about Elektra that stopped him from losing his shit. He couldn't feel a single ghost in Inferno. They were all gone. It had to be Lazarus. No one else in the city would be stupid enough to try it.

The doors to the building slid silently open, and Elektra's magic washed over Vanth like a wave of darkness and starlight. Her leather suit melted and changed to an elegant gown of indigo velvet and silk, sprays of stars in its train. A matching crown perched on her head.

"Close your mouth before something flies into it," she whispered to him. "It's just a glamor, so as long as no one touches me, it will be fine."

"You are so beautiful," he replied and tried to get his game face on.

The foyer of the building was mostly purple porphyry and bronze. It had expensive lounges for people to wait with plants in large, expensive pots. Everything about it was beautiful and designed to make anyone who went into it feel intimidated.

A woman sat behind an ornate counter of ebony wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl designs. There were guards standing watch at the elevators. Everyone that was waiting seemed to pause in hushed awe as Elektra strode past them, every inch an annoyed, entitled princess.

"Good afternoon, Miss—" the receptionist began.

Vanth instantly recognized her voice as the same unhelpful one he had been speaking to all day.

"It is not a good afternoon," Elektra said, staring down her nose at the shocked receptionist. "I am Princess Elektra Nova of the Celestial Court, Lady of the Twilight, and I demand to speak with Lord Azhdaha immediately. It is of the utmost importance and emergency. My counselor here has been trying to inform you all day, and you have disrespected my people. Now, you will take me to Lord Azhdaha, or there will be consequences."

Vanth watched in awe as Elektra tore shreds of the receptionist, her gray eyes flashing with indignation and fury. He tried to keep his expression calm and entitled as she forced the receptionist to do exactly as she wished. She was every bit a princess, and it took less than five minutes before she was escorted into an elevator before she started to make even more of a scene. By the gods, she was magnificent.

The elevator doors opened, and they were led through a long hallway filled with beautiful art and murals of dragons fighting legendary battles.

Elektra ignored all of it. The double doors at the end of the hall opened, and a balding, small man in an expensive suit hurried out of the room. He carried a pile of files and was looking sweaty and agitated.

The guard that was escorting them knocked politely on the doors.

"Enter," a deep bass voice echoed through the door, and the guard opened it for Elektra and Vanth. They stepped inside the office, and Vanth wished he had told Galen to fuck himself and had never followed his ridiculous advice.

Azhdaha stood looking out over the city. He wore a white shirt and black pants, everything tailored to fit his seven-foot frame. His hair was long and black except for one wide streak of gold. It matched the golden hoops in his ears and torc around his neck.

Elektra and Vanth bowed deeply because neither one of them was stupid.

"Ah, Princess Elektra, it has been many centuries since I last heard from the Celestial Court. What is so urgent that you have upset my day?" he asked, voice like hot silk.

Elektra's glamor melted until she was in her reaper uniform once more. "Forgive the theatrics, my lord. I'm not here to represent the Celestial Court but the Temple of Magic and Bone. There is a great threat to the city, and it is urgent that you are made aware of it."

Azhdaha's expression didn't change. "What could scare the keepers of the dead so much? And what does it have to do with Inferno's most notorious necromancer?"

"I'm flattered you have heard of me," Vanth said and tried to pretend he wasn't intimidated. "I'm not the problem, but I'm hoping to be the solution."

Vanth and Elektra told the dragon everything Lazarus had done, including taking lesser magical creatures and ghosts to fuel his magic and ambitions. They told him everything with the exception of Vanth being the son of Orcus.

"We will leave the city after this meeting to do our best to stop Lazarus from damaging the Veil further. We only thought you should be advised of the threat," Elektra said finally.

"And why should you think I need to concern myself with any of this?" Azhdaha asked.

"Because you don't want anyone else ruling Inferno but you," Vanth said, his impatience and already agitated magic flaring. "Let's cut the shit,

shall we? I know for a fact that there are certain buildings designed around the city to take the weight of a full-size dragon in case of attack. You won't let some asshole take the city from you, so don't pretend you don't care."

Azhdaha smiled, but there was no humor in it. "I care, but I will not cause a panic in the city with unsubstantiated claims. I wish you luck on your mission. Thank you for the warning."

And with that, they were dismissed. Vanth fought the urge to call the dragon various unsavory names and strode out before he did so.

In the elevator, Elektra's warm hand found his, and the roaring in his head calmed.

"They can't say they were never warned, Tarael," she whispered softly, the use of his name drawing him out of his anger.

Vanth lifted their clasped hands and kissed her knuckles. He could only hope that the dragons wouldn't remain so apathetic if they failed because it would be Inferno that suffered and never their powerful overlords.

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Vanth waited until they were walking out of the building and then he stuck his finger up at the security cameras over his shoulder. What a waste of their fucking time. Galen should have known better than to recommend he go there, and Vanth should have known better than to think a dragon would give half a fuck about anyone or anything that didn't involve them or their fucking horde.

"Fuck them, Vanth. We can do this on our own," Elektra told him, nudging him with her shoulder. "If we fail, then Lazarus will make it their problem anyway."

"We aren't going to fail," Vanth said with a lot more conviction than what he felt. He pinned her up against his van, making her smirk wickedly. "I have too many plans for you, princess. This shit with Lazarus is getting in the way of them, but once he's dealt with..."

Elektra looped her hand over his braid and tugged him closer. "Then what? I find out just how much of a good boy you can be for me?"

Vanth laughed huskily. "Your mating cycle must be leaving if you are starting to talk all dominant again, darling. I like it."

"Don't worry," Elektra leaned in and whispered in his ear, "I will still let you turn me into your whore whenever you like."

"Fuck," he groaned and kissed her.

Her perfect lips took control of the embrace, and she bit and soothed, and every bit of anger he still carried towards the cold-hearted lizard in the tower vanished.

A high-pitched whistle echoed overhead, making Vanth spring back. He had his dagger half free from its sheath when a black and white pegasus landed in the parking lot and reared back on its legs.

"What in the actual fuck..." he said. The rider pulled back their leather hood, and his mouth fell open. "Mom? What... How?"

"I remembered where the tear in the Veil is! My friend here offered to give me a lift because your grandfather shod him free of charge, " Eiline replied. She looked them both over, her brows raised. "What have you been up to, children?"

"The place you remembered was near the temple, wasn't it? In the in between? Galen gave us a map that can lead us to it," Vanth replied, ignoring her question.

"You went to Galen Murphy!"

"He owed me a favor!"

"Tarael Vanth, I would *throttle* you if we weren't in such a hurry. Get your things and get on. Flying will be faster than your van, and we are running out of time," his mother said and waved a hand in Elektra's direction. "Make sure your mate has everything she needs as well. Those suits were never as warm as they should have been. You know, you two really could have waited until after Lazarus was dead before binding yourselves to each other."

Vanth almost tripped on the asphalt. *His what?* He pulled open the door at the back of the van to grab his backpack.

"Did she just say... Have we..." Elektra squeaked, her gray eyes wide.

"I don't know. My fae instinct side isn't really in tune with all of that." Vanth let out a long breath. "You know what? Let's just figure it out later. Sound good?"

"Really, really good. The best idea I've ever heard." Elektra nodded and slid her own bag onto her back.

Vanth leaned over and kissed her once quickly. "Either way, I love you, princess. Now, let's go save the Veil."

"I love you too, but if this pegasus drops me, I will haunt you forever," Elektra replied with a bright smile.

"I'll put you in the middle so you don't go anywhere." Vanth looked at the huge creature before them. His mother made a soft clicking sound, and it lowered down on its forelegs for them. Vanth took Elektra by the waist and lifted her up behind Eiline before scrambling on behind her.

"I suppose this is a really bad time to tell you I'm scared of heights?" Elektra whispered.

Vanth put his arms around her. "Me too. We will just have to scream together."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Elektra said with a grin.

"I'm sitting right here. Please don't be disgusting. There are some things a parent shouldn't know," Eiline complained. "And don't insult our dear friend here by suggesting that he will drop you. A pegasus's back is the safest ride you will ever have."

"Mom, you should know we didn't figure out the spell to mend the Veil from your books. We have no plan," Vanth warned her.

Eiline smiled at him over her shoulder. "Oh, my darling boy, don't you understand? You are the spell."

And the pegasus launched itself into the air, drowning out Vanth's flurry of swear words.

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The Rhodope Mountains stood in the distance, shrouded in clouds. Elektra could feel them getting closer to the entrance to the in-between. It hummed against her skin like a whisper of welcome.

In the past, the feeling had always comforted her because she knew she was going home and would be there soon. Vanth pressed his lips to the back of her neck, the warm touch comforting her, just like the feel of his strong arms around her kept her from feeling like she was about to spiral off into the ether.

Eliene seemed to remember exactly where they were going, and the pegasus took instruction from her. Elektra didn't know what dialect of the fae she was using, and she was too scared to open her eyes long enough to ask.

They flew through the opening, and Vanth's fingers tightened around her. Of course he could feel it. He should have been raised at the temple amongst people who would have understood him. *Her mate.*

Elektra shut the thought down before she could give it room to grow. She wasn't sure what to do with that information. At the Celestial Court, there were always special ceremonies, like weddings, to mark that a mating was taking place. There had been no intention on either her or Vanth's part. It had just happened.

Talk to him about it later, she prompted herself. He loved her, and that was the best of starts.

"There it is!" Eiline called over the roar of the wind. Elektra opened her eyes to see the temple rising up underneath them. It was a blend of Greco-Roman architecture with Corinthian columns and overflowing terraced gardens. The founders had been part fae, and something of their preference for organic architecture had melded with it. The stone was the same lavender, blue-gray color of the Veil itself.

The pegasus landed in the courtyard, and Vanth slid off with a groan. "Oh, gods, that was wild," he complained before reaching up to help Elektra down.

Her knees wobbled, and she wanted to kiss the ground. She would have except for what was on it. There were splashes of rust-colored blood staining the paving stones.

"Eiline, you might not want to go in there. I didn't have time...the high priestess sent me—" Elektra began.

Vanth's mother slid gracefully from the pegasus and whispered something to it before turning back to them.

"We need to check that none of Lazarus's spies are still lingering about, and then I need to set the security protocols. With any luck, Maria never changed the spell," Eiline said, her face grim. Her magic threaded out of her as she walked, and corpses began to appear next to the courtyard, one at a time. "We will bury them, but last rites will have to wait."

Elektra nodded, numbness spreading over her. "Vanth can help me search the buildings," she said, and straightening her spine, she headed inside.

"The attack was awful, but this place is amazing. It feels—I don't know how to describe it," he said as he followed her.

The walls were painted with scenes from different mythologies of Afterlives, and statues of psychopomps lined the halls. Elektra stopped by Charon and lit an incense cone. Vanth surprised her by doing the same.

"I don't have any god to pray to for luck, so I'll light something for him because he is your favorite," Vanth said and offered her a small smile. "You're mine, so maybe he will look after you."

The heaviness that had been choking her eased a little. "You sap," she replied, and he winked at her.

They kept walking through the common areas, and there wasn't a whisper of anything living or dead.

"The ghosts are gone from here too," Elektra whispered, her eyes going wide. "There are always ones lingering about. The lost souls often turn up here to get assistance crossing the Veil."

"Then it proves my theory that Lazarus was behind the ghost stealing in Inferno. This fucker needs to die, and soon," Vanth growled, his expression darkening.

Elektra opened the double doors to the library, and Vanth made a surprised and happy sound. She quickly closed them again.

"No distractions. There's no one there," she said and kissed his pout. "We can come back, I promise. If there are no reapers left, we might have to become its guardian."

That was a worrying thought. There had to be others left out in the world. Elektra hadn't been the only one who was out on a job when the temple was attacked.

Magic pulsed through the temple, and Vanth squeezed her hand. "Mom wants us. She must have all the bodies together."

Outside, Eiline was weaving earth magic in the gardens. Elektra wondered if there was anything the fae female couldn't do. She had to have been so powerful before the curse if this was what she was like when hindered by it. The star iron hanging around her neck was different from the one Elektra had seen Flynt give her, so maybe he had found another one for her.

And this is the family you have mated into. The thought warmed her because, for the first time, she was going to be with a family that was like her. They would understand her magic and wouldn't be afraid of it.

The gardens rumbled under their feet, and the earth slowly swallowed the bodies of the reapers one at a time. There were twenty altogether, and Elektra forced herself to look at their faces. She would make Lazarus pay if it was the last thing she did.

"We need to keep moving. I can feel something growing like a thunderstorm building," Vanth said, rubbing at his arms. He nodded towards the forest behind them. "It's coming from that way. Mom? Are you sure you're up for this fight? I don't want you putting yourself at risk and having your curse knock you on your ass in the middle of a battle."

Eiline gave her son a long look down her nose, and Vanth flinched. "I am not sitting on the sidelines like some invalid. This medallion is very powerful. It is the most powerful your grandfather could get his hands on in

the time we had. It will be enough for another three hours. If we need more time than that, it won't matter because we will all be dead."

"Fair enough," Vanth said and kissed her cheek. "You're my mother. I'm allowed to worry."

Eiline's expression softened. "I'm hoping that after today, you won't have to."

"You want to tell me what you meant by I am the spell?" he asked.

Eiline shook her head. "Wait a little while longer. It will be easier to show you once we are there. We had best get moving."

Vanth tilted his head back and sighed in frustration. "If you are wondering, Elektra, yes, she is always this stubborn."

"So that's where you get it from?"

Eiline laughed. "Wait until you meet his father."

They followed a trail through the gardens and into the forest. Elektra knew it well because it used to be a part of the course she used to run every day she was at the temple. At the edge of the border, Eiline re-activated the wards, and a silvery dome of light covered the temple.

"Good luck to any of Lazarus's cronies wanting to break that," Eiline said smugly.

Elektra stared up at them in awe. "You are going to have to show me how to do that one day."

With every step they took, Elektra could feel a pressure building in the air, and Vanth's power began to leak from his skin in wispy tendrils. They hiked up a small hill, and Elektra's breath caught. The lush valley of trees that used to be beneath them had been stripped to bare earth. The Veil rose up behind it, its lavender-gray wall of light shimmering.

"Holy fucking shit," Vanth gasped, his eyes staring up at it. "How come we can see it?"

"It's because we aren't in the real world anymore. Things present literally here," Eiline explained. She squatted down on her heels and stared at the cleared trees. Figures in black and red robes were walking about like industrious ants. Two glass and copper constructs caught the light, and a shiver swept up Elektra's spine. They were the size of concrete trucks and hummed with an aura that made Elektra's mouth go dry as dust.

"Those are the batteries. They are a fuck ton bigger than the ones I found at the ghost trappers months ago," Vanth said, tearing his eyes away

from the Veil. "I'm assuming one was charged with ghosts, and the other was from magic stolen from people and creatures."

Elektra studied the lines of the camp and spotted cages. "Look! They have prisoners. I can't see their faces, but I would bet any money they are reapers. Lazarus could have been using the temple as bait, so when they returned, he had people to capture them."

"Then why wasn't anyone at the temple when we were just there?" Vanth asked.

Eiline made a hissing sound. "Because the bastard has the power he needs."

There were shouts of orders from below, and people began to move around one of the batteries. A flash of gold, and Lazarus himself appeared. They were too far away to see what he did, but suddenly, the battery exploded, and icy cold power hit them like a shock wave.

"That was what was left of the ghosts," Vanth growled. "I'd recognize that energy anywhere."

Elektra cried out as her connection to the Veil inside of her was yanked hard. She clutched at her chest, winded by the assault.

"Elektra!" Vanth was beside her in a second, catching her before she could hit the dirt. "What is it?"

"Look!" she gasped, pointing.

Where the battery had been, there was now a tear in the Veil, like curtains had been parted, and there was only darkness beyond.

"He did it," Eiline said, her voice trembling. She held a handkerchief to her nose, catching the blood dripping from it. "He tore off the patch holding the Veil together."

Figures began to move out of the darkness towards Lazarus. Ghouls and skeletons tore themselves free of the earth and began to form around their high priest. Fear gripped Elektra as they kept coming, an army assembling between their general and the forest.

Lazarus's living followers moved to the other battery. It was the biggest of the two, and Elektra could make out the black lines of a blood sigil on the earth around it.

"We need to do something," she said, pulling her sickles free. "Whatever he's about to do with that other battery, we can't let him."

Vanth pulled his sword free and stared at the army of the dead beneath them. "I'm with you. How do you want to approach this? I can try to wrestle

some of those undead out of his control if you two want to rescue any of the reapers and stop Lazarus from charging his spell."

A roar shook the world above them, making the three of them hit the earth as something big swooped over them. A gold and black dragon landed among the army of the dead and roared again, fire spewing out of its fanged maw.

Vanth cringed. Maybe he shouldn't have flipped Azhdaha off.

"Well," he said with a terrified laugh. "I guess that's one way to start a fight."

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Vanth rolled out his neck and shoulders and tried to prepare himself mentally. The dragon was rampaging, and they would get no better distraction than that.

"Tarael, I want you to listen to me," Eiline said, taking him by the hand. "All your life, I told you and taught you to hide your power. Now is not the time to do that, my boy. *Release* what's inside of you. Don't be afraid of it. It's part of you, and it won't hurt you."

Vanth kissed the top of her head. "I'm not afraid of it, Mama, but everyone else is about to be."

"Good," Elektra said, her eyes already glowing with magic and speckled with stars. "I want them to shit themselves in fear just thinking what we are going to do to them."

Vanth shot her a wink. "That's my girl."

Vanth couldn't do goodbyes, so after their final plans, he wended his way down the uneven terrain to where the fighting was. He dropped deep into his power and let magic roll out along the sword his grandfather had forged for him. His mother and mate were together, sneaking in from the other side of the cleared stretch of forest to where the reapers were being held.

Lazarus's magic was all around him, and Vanth ensured his protective shields were tightly in place. The last thing he needed was to get set on fire by accident. The followers of Lazarus were fighting with the ghouls, throwing any magic they could at the dragon that was swatting them about

like flies. Unless Vanth could wrench some of the control back from the dead, it wouldn't matter how many times Azhdaha stomped and burned them, the dead would keep coming for him.

Let go of your power, his mother's voice whispered. He wasn't afraid of letting it all go. It was pulling it all back in that he didn't know if he was capable of doing.

Vanth looked about at the burning, screaming chaos around him and reached deep inside of himself. With a sharp mental tug, he tore at the wall he always kept up between him and the vortex of his power. Magic poured out of him like vines, and the undead lit up in his mind like stars. Through the roar, he felt Elektra's heady dark magic like a siren song, giving him a path to follow back if he got too deep. His heart warmed. *My love that I didn't expect and don't deserve*.

Vanth wrapped his magic around the connections of the dead, leading to Lazarus and the other necromancers amongst his followers. Vanth gave the connections a subtle tug, and by the time the necromancers had realized what he had done, their own dead were turning on them and attacking them.

Vanth's sword sang with power as he cut his way through Lazarus's followers. A shout went up through from the other side of the field, and Elektra and a group of pissed-off reapers joined the fray. Vanth couldn't see his mother, but he could feel her magic, and that was enough.

He caught glimpses of Lazarus. There was a shield up around him and the battery, and the necromancer hadn't stopped his chanting. Between fighting, Vanth tried to probe the shields with his power to figure out what Lazarus was doing.

It's the spell to summon Orcus. It had to be. The Veil was ripped, and wild magic was flying from the opening. Any idiot mage could grab onto it and try to wield it.

Vanth couldn't let Lazarus trap Orcus. He might not know his father, but he was still family, and Vanth wouldn't let Lazarus fuck with them a second longer. He cut and slashed with blades and magic, tearing a bloody path towards his enemy. He took command of more of the ghouls and sent them to help protect Elektra and the others.

Vanth only needed to get closer. He was only ten meters from Lazarus's shield when the battery exploded with magic. Vanth's vision whited out, his hearing went, and he fought not to stumble forward into the bloody mud.

Lazarus let out a cry of triumph, and when the smoke behind the shields cleared, Vanth could make out a broad figure on his knees. The battle seemed to stop in surprise, every creature on the field, living or dead, unable to look away. Vanth pushed his way around a clutch of ghouls.

"Why do you summon me, feckless human? Are you back to try and do more damage than you did last time?" a voice as deep as the earth rumbled.

The god stood, and Vanth's heart leaped to his throat. He was as tall as Vanth, with a beard and cropped black curly hair. He wore a black toga, a short black cloak, and leather vambraces on his forearms. He was broad, with a powerful, solid build. And he was pissed. He glared at Lazarus with pitiless black eyes that matched Vanth's own.

Lazarus's smile widened in victory. "For over seventy years, I have fought for this moment. You and that bitch ruined my work last time, and now I will ensure you don't interfere. The spell that's currently wrapped around you is a slave bond. You will address me as 'master' from now on. You are bound to me, god of the Veil, and you will do as I command," he demanded.

"Master?" Orcus smiled slowly.

Vanth knew it to be a threat because he smiled in exactly the same way. Eiline had made her way through the crowd and came to stand beside Vanth. She was carrying her sickles and was splattered with blood and rot from the ghouls.

"We have to do something," he whispered.

Eiline didn't look away from Orcus. "We can't do anything just yet."

"Bow to me, slave!" Lazarus shouted.

A low snarl rose from Vanth as Orcus dropped into an elegant dip. The hand behind his back disappeared under the fold of his cloak, pulled a dagger free, and before anyone could make a move, the god drove the dagger into Lazarus's gloating body and tore the blade from his naval to his neck. The necromancer's face went white with shock as his guts spilled out of him, and he collapsed dead.

"Pathetic," the god of the dead spat.

Orcus's power shattered the shield, and the connections to the ghouls and the undead broke with it. Vanth flinched as all the strings were cut at once, and the undead ran back into the Veil. The necromancers went screaming after them, pulled by invisible hands of power.

Orcus finally turned back to them and smiled at Eiline. "Hello, love. Who are your friends?" he asked. Eiline ran to him, and he picked her up in an easy embrace. He brushed the black marks of the curse creeping along her neck. "Oh baby, what did you do to yourself? What is this awful thing on you?"

"I had to do it. I had to protect him," Eiline said, tears falling down her cheeks.

Orcus didn't put her down. He just turned his attention to Vanth. He fought the urge to touch his hair and wipe some of the blood from his face.

"He took after your side. Probably a good thing," Orcus said, and his magic brushed against Vanth's. It curled against his father's like an embrace. "Power is mine, though. Good. It means it worked, and he can deal with the Veil while I take you home."

"You're not taking my mother anywhere," Vanth said, stepping towards them.

Orcus raised a brow. "I need to take her to Aita in order to remove this curse she has put on herself. You have your own woman to take care of, son."

Elektra had come up behind him, and her filthy hand closed around his.

Vanth moved towards them and kissed his mother's forehead. "Come back soon, okay?"

"I will. But not too soon," his mother replied, staring up at Orcus with all kinds of feelings in her eyes. For the first time in his life, Vanth got to experience the horror of the thought of his parents having sex. He pulled a face.

"Before you both abandon me, you mind telling me how to close this tear once and for all," he asked, his eyes turning to the gaping hole in front of them.

"You are the spell, Tarael. We thought we could heal the rift, me being from one side of reality and Eiline being the other. But we couldn't. We could only patch it until you were ready to heal it. Don't you understand? You're a part of the world on both sides of the Veil. You are a *living* Veil," Orcus explained patiently. "Don't think too hard about it. Just let your power guide you."

Orcus walked towards the darkness with Eiline in his arms. He paused and said over his shoulder. "For what it's worth, I'm proud of you." Eiline leaned up and was kissing Orcus as the darkness closed around them.

Vanth put his hands on his hips. "That's not fucking helpful at all! Get back here, the both of you!"

But only the cold darkness remained.

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After it was made clear that they weren't coming back, Vanth cursed under his breath.

"Parents. They are all the same," Elektra huffed from beside him. "What was the point of giving us all those books to figure out a spell if we couldn't use it?"

Vanth pinched the bridge of his nose, and then the answer occurred to him. "When I was young, my mother used to have this game where she would give me half a spell and get me to figure out the other half and what its purpose was. As I got older, the game worked less and less because my magic became more intuitive."

Elektra frowned. "Maybe the spell was for me, not for you. I can weave it to a point, but I don't have the power to activate it. You do. Maybe we are meant to do it together."

"You two idiots are mates as well, which means you can channel each other's magic," Azhdaha said, making them both jump. He was back in his human form and was dressed in a sleeveless leather shirt and pants, edged in gold. "You forgot I was here? How rude."

"Not everything is about you, dragon," Vanth replied, forgetting his manners altogether.

Azhdaha gave him a long, long look. "It should be. Now, will you get on with it? I have a city to run."

"What are you even doing here? You said you weren't interested in any 'unsubstantiated claims' about the city being in danger."

The dragon looked bored. "I substantiated them. Now, hurry up and serve your purpose."

Vanth growled at him, and the dragon only smiled and made a small 'get on with it' gesture at him.

"Vanth? Let's do this, and then we can go back to the library at the temple, and you can look for as long as you like," Elektra coaxed him. "After a long shower, of course."

Vanth liked the way she said 'shower' with her little come-fuck-me smile. Right. He had things to do.

"Can we help in any way?" a reaper asked. She was built like a Valkyrie with pale white hair. There were less than twenty of them still upright.

"Thank you for the offer, but we have got this. Maybe keep watch on the tear to make sure nothing tries to come through at the last minute?" Vanth replied, knowing that they needed to feel useful in some way.

Vanth and Elektra walked where the tear became darkness. All the hairs on Vanth's arms and neck were electrified. He could feel the storm of magic just begging for him to play with. It felt bigger, but it still felt like his own.

A child of both worlds. A living Veil, Vanth thought. He had been called worse. He only hoped that the faith his parents had in his abilities paid off and they didn't end up making the tear worse.

"You ready?" Elektra asked, her hair whipping about in the currents of power.

Vanth kissed her, hot and brief. "Now I am. Let me know when you want me, princess."

"I always want you." Elektra took a dagger from her boot and began to draw the sigil she had been studying from Eiline's book.

Vanth closed his eyes while she worked, letting the magic of the Veil mix with his. It felt like belonging. Like he could just disappear and become a part of it...

"Tarael! Don't get lost in it," Elektra called, and his eyes snapped open. She was standing in the center of the circle she had drawn, her magic a living cloak of starlight around her. It looked like she had cut a swathe of night sky, and it moved around her with life as she began to chant. The lines of the sigil lit up as if silver starlight had been poured into them. The Veil shuddered around them, and she turned her glowing eyes to him.

"Give me your magic, Tarael," she commanded, her voice lost in the magical working. Vanth stepped into the working and took her outstretched

hands.

"Together," she said.

"Together," he replied, and let his power loose. It wrapped around them, the gray of it turning to the more lavender color of the Veil itself. Vanth held onto her as the currents around them turned into an angry gale.

In his mind's eye, he reached for the top of the tear and began to tug it down like a great zipper. As the sides drew close enough together, the threads of power that made the barrier wove into each other and sealed.

They could have been there for seconds or for a lifetime, but Vanth didn't stop until the final threads had been attached. The wind died down around them, and the Veil lit up in a pale silvery blue.

"We... We did it," Elektra whispered and collapsed into his arms, her head pressing against his chest. "Oh, gods, we actually did it."

"Never a doubt in my mind," Vanth said, and neither one of them mentioned how much he was shaking as he held her close to him.

Azhdaha gave them a slow clap. "Well done. Perhaps now that you have taken control of your birthright, you'll do something more useful with your abilities than clean up other people's messes, godling."

"Get the citadel to drop their bounties on me, and I'll think about it."

"Aim higher than a cleaning service, and I will," the dragon replied. A golden light began to swirl around him, the change coming.

Vanth couldn't resist asking, "I don't suppose you will give us a ride back to Inferno?"

"Absolutely not." Azhdaha shifted back into his dragon form and launched himself in the air, sending chunks of dirt and fuck knew what all over them.

"Dragons are such dicks," Vanth complained.

Elektra only laughed and pulled his mouth to hers.

Two days later, Vanth and Elektra were sitting in one of the library's alcoves with a pot of steaming tea beside them. Elektra was sitting between his legs, her back resting against his chest as they both read. Vanth knew he had to go back to Inferno, but he was enjoying the unexpected time off.

"I don't know what to do," Elektra said, drawing him out of his thoughts.

"About what?" he asked, closing his book and drawing her closer.

Elektra turned to look at him with her stormy gray eyes. "The temple needs rebuilding. There are only thirty left that we know of, and I don't know where that leaves us. I didn't expect you."

"I didn't expect you either. You should know I'm not a good team player. I don't think I could permanently fit in a place like this," Vanth said, his stomach bottoming out. He didn't like where this conversation was going.

"That's the problem. I don't think I fit in here anymore either. I still want to help the dead. I still feel a duty to protect them, but I feel like I shouldn't be hiding from the world here and only going out when I need to," Elektra said, her fingers toying with the necklace he was still wearing. She still wore the other half, and it felt like an inheritance of sorts.

Vanth ran his fingers over her arm. "Come back to Inferno with me, and we can figure it out. There's always going to be work there for a reaper for hire. I wouldn't be surprised if the city had been filled with ghosts again by

now. It's just that kind of place. We can stay friendly with the temple and do jobs for them if they need it. We will just...freelance?"

"Freelance," Elektra said, turning the word over slowly.

"If you want. I can try this place out if you really want to stay. I'd probably make everyone hate me in less than a month," Vanth mused. "But I would still try for you. Just like we are trying out being mates."

"Trying out?" Elektra said, her eyebrows shooting up.

"Yeah, to see if we both want it," Vanth replied, trying to keep his face straight.

Elektra's eyes narrowed, and she was on him in a blink, pushing him back into the cushions and poking him in the ribs. He loved it when she was laughing and playing, all her usual composure gone.

"You are the one that put the mating bond on me. You can't change your mind!" she said while he laughed harder.

"How do you know it was me? You were the one on some mystical mating cycle," Vanth shot back.

"It's the male fae's role to do the bond," Elektra argued. "It's law and actual fact. I'm sure of it."

Vanth huffed out another laugh. "That sounds like posh fae boy propaganda to me. You're far more dominant than I am, so I think you did it." Vanth caught her attacking hands and tugged her close until their noses were almost touching. "Admit it, darling, you just couldn't let all of this walk away." Elektra shoved him back until she had his hands pinned down on either side of his head. "You see? My point exactly, princess."

"Infuriating male. I *hate* it when you're right," Elektra whispered and kissed him, giving his lip a sharp nip full of the promise of things to come. Whatever happened next, he knew that they would figure it out together.

"I know, but you'll get used to it," Vanth said because he couldn't resist.

He kissed her outrage away until she melted into his arms. Right where she belonged.



THANK you so much for reading! If you enjoyed Vanth and Elektra's adventures, please don't forget to leave them a rating on Amazon.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I believe that all monsters and villains deserve their happy endings. I prefer my clothes black, eyeliner winged, and books full of hot romance.

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1.

Our history is written in the blood of the holy, the stone of beasts, and the curses of gods.

- Kitezh Codex

Zori stood in front of a wall of glass windows and watched the snow fall over Moscow. She looked down at the street, waiting for the black town car to arrive, which would mark the beginning of her two weeks of freedom.

Come on, Maxim, leave already, she thought, hopping from foot to foot.

She needed to get out of the penthouse that she'd been locked into for days. She didn't like the memories of that place, crowding around and constantly trying to drag her under.

Zori's earliest recollection of being there was of Maxim taking her by the shoulders, looking deep into her eyes, and saying, "*Magic is not real, Zoria.*"

It was something he had repeated often, especially after her mother's suicide.

Some people would have told their four-year-old ward that her mother had been turned into an angel and flown to heaven. Not Maxim. He was a scientist who did not believe in anything other than what he could see under a microscope. Instead of an easy, comforting lie, Zori had gotten the truth.

Your mother was my best friend, and I cared for her deeply, but she was sick in her mind, and she killed herself. You carry the same sickness inside of you. Always beware of voices in your head that aren't your own, Zoria.

Like Zori would tell him if she did hear anything. Doctor Maxim Bogrov wasn't exactly God's chattiest person, but he had done his best with raising her and keeping her from dying. He had devoted his life to studying the brain disease that had eaten her mother's sanity away.

Zori had been taking his cure since she was fourteen to make sure it never happened to her. Now at twenty-six years old, she was beating the odds.

That was why whenever she got the chance, she escaped Maxim's security team and went to cause some trouble. She was on borrowed time, and she had to make the most of it in any way that she could.

Maxim had a conference in England for two whole weeks, and Zori was going to escape the building if it was the last thing she did. It was infuriating being locked up like a child.

Zori was planning on celebrating her first night out in months, and fuck, did she need it. A dying girl couldn't live on vibrators alone, and with any luck, she would get a few hours of freedom to find a big Russian boy with long hair and lots of tattoos to fuck her blind before Maxim's men tracked her down.

Zori checked the street beneath them again, impatient to get her night started. Her anxiety was up, and she needed to dance and fuck it out of her system. Still no car.

"Hurry the fuck up and leave already," she grumbled.

Zori fidgeted with the necklace she always kept hidden in her bra. It was a pendant with a woman holding a skull in one hand and a bundle of twigs in the other. She didn't know what it meant. It had belonged to her mother, and she had given it to Zori the night she had died.

Zori had memories of her mother, telling her stories of fairytales and magic and saints, but she couldn't remember who the lady on the pendant was meant to be. She carried it for luck and because it was the only thing Zori had left of her mother. Maxim had gotten rid of everything else. She made sure she kept it out of sight.

Zori sighed and stared out at the city of her birth and her mother's death. They hadn't been back to Moscow since her mother had jumped from the balcony on the other side of the penthouse.

After they had left Moscow, Maxim had promised to look after Zori, and they had lived all over the world. She'd had new teachers and tutors in every country they had lived in. She spoke Russian, English, German, and

French fluently. She had a voracious mind, and Maxim had made sure to keep it busy.

She hadn't been allowed to go to public schools or universities, and with the way they moved, there had been no point. When she suggested that she get a job, it had been shut down immediately. Her job was to stay alive and help Maxim with his research.

It wasn't that she was ungrateful to him, but God, she was lonely. He was rarely around, and when he was, it was to make sure she was healthy and was studying whatever new thing had caught her interest. They weren't close in the way she had read other families were, but he was all she had.

The building they were now in was Maxim's main research facility in the Tverskoy District. Like all the other places they had resided in, Zori always had her own apartment-sized rooms, like some kind of princess in a tower.

Or a lab rat in a pretty cage, she thought gloomily and pressed her forehead to the cold glass.

It was why Zori made sneaking out of the buildings they lived in an art form.

Outside, snow was falling again over the city in steady drifts. They had spent the last few months in a warm, tropical climate, so seeing snow again was beautiful.

Zori stared out at the night, her heart fluttering strangely in her chest, yearning for something she couldn't name. All she knew was that she wasn't going to find it in her cage.

Down on the street below, Maxim's black Mercedes pulled up, and she saw him climb in. She held her breath as it pulled from the curb to take him to the airport, and a grin spread over Zori's face.

"Finally!" She rushed to her wardrobe and pulled on a black low-cut top, her corset, and harness.

Zori might have been a shut-in, but she had full internet access and a weakness for online shopping and music. She had already found a club three blocks away and was going to make sure she blended in. She pulled on her leather pants and boots and went to check her make-up in the bathroom.

Zori had naturally Nordic silver hair and full lips like her mother's. Her blue eyes she got from a father she had never met. She unraveled her braid, letting the waves fall down to her breasts, and painted her lips red.

Zori pulled on a black fur coat that came to the back of her knees before she cracked open the door to her bedroom. It was almost 11 p.m. when the building's security teams changed over, and the daily cleaners left. If she timed it right, she could blend in with the group of people leaving.

It wasn't like the cleaning staff knew what she looked like, and if anyone asked, she would say that she had been working in the labs or offices on another floor. No one would ask. No one ever did because Maxim's staff was so big, there was always a new face.

The new security guard she had encountered that day certainly hadn't known who she was when she flirted with him and stole his key card off his belt.

Amateur, she thought and grinned. Really, someone should have warned him.

Zori had learned if she wore a tight enough top, she could pick most men's pockets.

Zori took a deep, calming breath, slipped out of her bedroom, swiped the card on the fire escape door at the end of the hall, and stepped inside. It was freezing cold, so she pulled on her leather gloves and hurried as fast as her boots would take her.

She'd learned from Maxim's other buildings that he never installed cameras on the fire escape stairs. Why? She couldn't guess other than he didn't want to pay for them. He might have been a scientist, but dear Uncle Maxim was also a businessman and didn't waste money on things he didn't need.

Zori's legs were jelly by the time she got to the ground level of the building and into the staff room where men and women were pulling on heavy coats and gloves.

Zori pulled the hood of her coat down further before joining the back of a group of women talking loudly about one of their daughter's new babies and how fat and sweet she was.

Zori's heart pounded as they moved through the underground parking lot and out of the staff door. No one stopped her or called her name as she followed the women down the street in calm steps. They rounded a corner, and she was free.

Zori tried not to do a victory dance, but there was a definite skip in her step as she followed the map on her phone. *Almost there, deep breaths.*

Zori heard the club before she spotted the door to it. Two bouncers stood on either side of it, smoking cigarettes. It was still early, so there wasn't a line yet. They both looked her over, and she threw them a flirty smile as they opened the door.

"Have fun, baby," one of them said.

Zori winked at him. "I always do."

The music was loud, and the club was dark, just the way she liked it. Zori left her heavy fur coat with the coat check and let the heady beats draw her down the hallways. There was a bar on either side of the dance floor and shadowy alcoves everywhere. The decor was black and silver with candles melting on tables and along the bar. It was full of people but not so packed that she would have to wait forever for a drink. It was *perfect*.

Zori let out a happy cry and allowed the pull of the dance floor to take her away.

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2.

Zori stamped her feet, trying to push out all her frustrations into the movement. The music was loud enough that when the cry of anguish and helplessness broke free from her, it blurred into all the other sounds.

This was what Zori had needed for months—the physical release of not feeling like the patient, the dead girl in waiting, the burden child of a man who wasn't interested in being a parent but had taken on the task anyway.

She was still panting heavily when a tingle spread down her spine and a hand closed on her hip.

"Are you okay?" a deep voice asked in Russian by her ear. "You look like you were getting crushed in this crowd."

"I'm fine," she replied in English. She swore and repeated herself in Russian. She turned slowly, still moving with the beat, and let out a startled squeak. "Damn, you're tall."

The man's face was sharp in the flickering lights. Straight black hair fell to his shoulders, and blue gray eyes shone in amusement. He was *exactly* what she needed, thank all the saints.

"Thank you. Are you sure you are okay?" He was frowning in concern, and she really couldn't figure out why.

Zori took the chance. "I could use a drink. Can I buy you one..."

"Vladik," he replied, his bulk already parting the crowd to lead her off the dance floor. "And I'll have a vodka."

"Of course," she said, lips twitching into a grin. "I'm Zori."

She headed for the closest bar. With a light touch of his fingers on her back, Vladik made sure he didn't lose her in the throng.

Zori's heart fluttered with adrenaline every time he grazed her bare skin. It had been over a year since her last one-night stand in New York, and the physical contact was jarring her in all the best ways.

Zori squeezed her way in at the end of the bar and gave the guy behind it a little wave.

"What can I get you, beautiful?" he asked, tugging on his lip ring as he stared at her tits.

"Two vodkas on ice," she called over the noise, passing him the cash. The bar tender's smile lost some of its shine when Vladik moved to take one of the vodkas. They moved out of the crush of the bar to one of the shadowy alcoves.

"*Na Zdorovie,*" Zori said, tapping her glass against his before they both took a drink.

"What accent am I hearing in amongst your Russian?" Vladik asked in English. Zori's panties melted a little at his own deep accent.

"All sorts. I've lived in a lot of places. I've only just come back to Moscow from three years in America," she replied and let out a small laugh. "It's the first night out I've had in the city actually."

"First night and all alone?" Vladik smiled, making his stern features soften. "It's just my luck I found you."

"Or mine," Zori said, looking him over from his lace-up leather boots, black jeans, and shirt. He had enough stubble that it would burn deliciously against her skin.

Vladik was staring back at her just as intently. "I like these little straps." He looped one of his fingers under her leather harness, stroking down it and lightly grazing the top of her breast.

Zori's breath stuttered. "You do?"

Vladik's eyes darkened, and he gave the strap a tug. "This harness makes me want to clip a lead to you and make you my little puppy."

Zori's pussy clenched, and she quickly had another mouthful of vodka. "You haven't even kissed me yet. I need to assess whether I *want* you clipping a lead to me."

Vladik tugged on the harness, bringing her closer. "If you wanted to be kissed, puppy, you only needed to ask." He tilted her head up and pressed his full lips to hers. It was a soft, tasting caress that had her rising up on

tiptoes to meet it. She opened her mouth for him, and a deep growl vibrated through his chest.

Zori was suddenly pressed up against the wall, his leg between hers and his tongue sweeping into her mouth. Zori's hands dug into his shirt, and she kissed him harder, her teeth nipping against his lip. She was on fire, her heart pounding in her ears. He smelled crisp like a winter forest with a spice that she didn't know the name of.

"Fuck, puppy, you are delicious," he said, voice husky as he kissed along her jaw line. "I want to kiss you everywhere." His lips sucked against her ear lobe, and she ground herself against his leg. He chuckled softly. "Sensitive ears? Good to know."

His hands dropped to her hips and pulled her up against him as he kissed down her neck. Zori whimpered, her senses overwhelmed and pussy aching. She shouldn't have been this turned on by some making out and light grinding, but damn, she wanted more.

Vladik's hands slid up her corset. "Can I touch your pretty breasts, puppy?"

"Touch me anywhere," Zori stammered, her own hands tightening on his shirt. No one could see them in their shadowy nook unless they were really looking. She was fast becoming too horny to care.

Vladik lifted her up as if she weighed nothing. God, she loved strong men. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her hands moving over his chest. He had some thick muscles under his black T-shirt that she would love to get to know better.

Vladik's mouth took hers again, and Zori gasped as he cupped one breast, his thumb brushing over her nipple. He pulled back from her with a wide grin.

"Your nipples are pierced?" he asked and tugged at the small hoop through her top.

Zori let out an involuntary moan, her legs clenching around him. "Yes. Fuck, that feels good."

"I have to taste them, puppy. Please let me," he said, and the hand still on her ass gripped her tighter.

"Yes, do it," Zori panted, her hands going around his neck and into his silken hair. He lifted her higher with one hand, the other one tugging down the side of her top and bra.

His mouth fixed over her nipple, and the soft, wet heat of it made Zori cry out. Fuck, it felt too damn good.

Her fingers tightened in his hair as he toyed with the piercing, sucking and tugging in a way that sent little shock waves straight to her clit. She was going to come with her pussy untouched if he kept it up. She needed to get him into a bathroom stall and get his dick inside of her before she ran out of time.

Vladik's fingers snagged on a chain, and her mother's necklace came free. He stared at the pendant, curiosity and confusion on his face. "What's this?"

"Nothing. Just a good luck charm from my mother," Zori said, taking the necklace from him and shoving it into the pocket of her pants.

Vladik cupped her cheek, his eyes searching her face. "You are not what you seem, my puppy."

"I'm exactly what I seem, and that's a woman who really needs to be fucked, so if you want to continue this in the bathroom, I'm—"

"Zoria, it is time to go home," a deep voice said behind Vladik. Zori jumped and quickly made sure she was covered. "Sir, please put her down before I make you."

Vladik lowered Zori to her feet but didn't let her go. He moved to reveal Anton, Maxim's head of security.

Vladik's lip curled. "She's not going anywhere that she doesn't want to."

"*Zoria*, you had your fun. It's time to go home. Dr. Bogrov is expecting your call," Anton said firmly.

Vladik went to move, but she grabbed his arm. "Don't. It's fine, Vladik."

Zori gave his hand a squeeze before moving around him and going to Anton. He somehow already had her coat and put it around her shoulders.

Zori swallowed hard and looked back at Vladik. His eyes were troubled, but his face was stone cold. "It was nice to... Nice to meet you."

She turned away, her heart clenching, and let Anton lead her out of the club. There was no point in fighting. She'd learned that long ago.

Outside, the snow was falling heavily. Anton opened the back door of an SUV, and she got in. Vladik came out of the club entrance, and she gave him a small wave, helplessness crashing over her. She just wanted one night of freedom.

"You could have taken longer to find me, Anton. Let me have some fun for once," she said, hating how sad she sounded. In the past, he'd given her

at least three hours.

"I'm sorry, Zoria, but Moscow is a dangerous place, and I couldn't risk it," Anton replied. "Dr. Bogrov has enemies in this city, and he would never forgive himself if he lost you."

Zori doubted Maxim would notice she was gone, but instead of saying it, she leaned her head against the glass and said nothing.



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