

**Katie's Hope**  
*Rhyn Trilogy, Book Two*

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Special feature at the conclusion: excerpt from  
*Kissed by Fire*,  
debut novel of rising indie star Shea MacLeod  
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\* \* \* \* \*

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## Chapter One

The dream took shape as it did every night. Even when she knew she was dreaming, she couldn't wake herself up or shake the fear that this time, Rhyn wasn't going to come.

Katie stood between the assassin and the demon. Her choices were plain: Death or Hell. Bad or worse. Screwed or *screwed*. One of them was taking her to his underworld. The other would kill her. As the two stared each other down, she wasn't sure who had the better chance of winning: Gabriel, an Immortal sworn to serve Death, or Darkyn, the leader of all the demons in Hell.

Her hand went to her neck, where the name of her Ancient Immortal mate, Rhyn, had been until he broke their mating bond two days before. Desolation unlike anything she'd ever felt made her want to sink into the ground and stay there.

A shadow blocked the hot Caribbean sun, and she looked up to see Rhyn in his pterodactyl form circling above them. She gasped, hope racing through her as he dove toward the ground, switched to his human form in mid-air, and landed hard on the stony island's ground. He met her gaze, and her body bloomed with warmth in response to the possessive gaze that swept over her from head to foot before his eyes settled on the demon. Evaluating each other, the three creatures stood in tight silence before Rhyn spoke at last.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Darkyn?"

"Half-breed," the demon leader sneered. "Negotiating with Gabriel over who gets your former mate."

"Death ordered her dead-dead," Gabriel said. "And Death always wins."

"Brother, I'll kill you both if either of you tries to take her," Rhyn replied. "You have a contract on her, Gabe?" The assassin nodded. "Let me guess, Darkyn, the Dark One, ordered this."

"We'll just say he doesn't disagree with me."

"All right." Rhyn drew a knife from his boot. Katie watched, her optimism fading. "I'm challenging you, assassin, demon. You can have her when I'm dead."

"Rhyn, no!" she cried.

"I can handle it," he said.

"Rhyn—" She started forward, and Gabriel held out an arm to block her. Furious and terrified, Katie planted both her hands on his arm to push it away with no success. "Back off, Gabriel. It's not like I can run anywhere!"

"Two minutes," he warned. "By Immortal Code, Darkyn and I are obligated to accept his challenge."

She hurried to Rhyn and stood looking up at him. His silver gaze was on his foes then dropped to her.

"This is the stupidest thing you've ever done," she said.

"Letting you go was the stupidest thing. I'm doing something right for once." The resolution in his face was unmistakable. He wasn't backing down. His eyes returned to the demon.

"They'll kill you," she whispered.

"If they do, go with Gabriel. Death's a bitch, but she's better than Hell."

Her eyes watered. She'd barely known what to do when he un-claimed her two days ago, but at least he was alive. If he left forever ...

"This isn't right," she said, her throat tightening. He looked down at her again, his gaze taking in her face. He cupped one cheek with his roughened hand and rubbed away a tear with his thumb.

"I'm not dead yet," he said, amused. She wrapped her arms around him, comforted by his scent and tormented it was the last time she'd smell him.

"Can't we just run away, right now? Turn into a bird and carry me with you?" she asked.

"Even if we did, they'd both come after us."

"You can go. I'd rather know you're safe than live without you."

"No, Katie," he said softly. "I know where I belong, and it's right here with you. I have to make things right. I couldn't live if I lost you."

"Katie," Gabriel called.

"Rhyn, I love you," she said.

"I know." He pulled away from her and pushed her hair from her face. With a tender kiss on her forehead, Rhyn stepped away. Gabriel drew a long sword, and Darkyn pulled two free. She felt cold from the inside out. The assassin motioned her over. She went woodenly, her stomach in turmoil.

"Break the bond, and Death will save you both. Rhyn will die-dead otherwise," Gabriel whispered then left her standing by a group of boulders. The words struck her as odd, but she had trouble concentrating when the men launched into a three-way battle.

*Break the bond, and Death will free you both.* She tried to decipher his meaning as she watched them fight, terrified to take her eyes off Rhyn. Rhyn already broke their bond, unless ... she had to break it, too.

Death would free them. *Her* death. She was the only one who had the power to end this before he died. Her attention turned to a different direction, the way she'd walked half an hour ago from the beach. She hesitated only a second more before she started running. She ran hard and left the sounds of the battle behind her, her thoughts on Rhyn and nothing else.

The distance to the beach was short in her dream, her body full of fear and adrenaline. She made it to the sand before being forced to slow to a walk by the ankle-deep, loose sand. Agonizing over how much time Rhyn had, she finally reached the water's edge and sucked in ragged breaths as she knelt for a moment of rest.

"Death will free us both." Heart hammering, she rose, took a deep breath, and waded into the warm water.

*Trust my Gabriel, human,* a woman's voice whispered into her mind. *This is the only way.*

Katie awoke sweating in her bed in the cavernous room to which she'd been exiled upon arriving to the Immortals' castle in the French Alps. The fire had died down, and someone had turned off the light to her bathroom, rendering the room completely dark. The dream had seemed so real. In it she had even recognized where they were: the Caribbean Sanctuary, where she'd been before coming here.

A movement from the balcony caught her attention.

"Another nightmare?" The voice of Gabriel was as dark as the room. He stood in front of the glass French doors of the balcony, taking up the whole space with his massive frame and heavy trench coat.

"Yeah," she whispered. "Every night." Her hand went to her neck, and she threw off the covers, crossing the cold stone floor to the bathroom. Flipping on the light, she confirmed the tattoos and Rhyn's name still circled her neck. He hadn't left her. She looked tiny and frightened in the large bathroom's mirror, and her gaze was drawn to the lumpy scar marring one arm. She rubbed it as she'd begun to do whenever she was upset.

"You okay?" Gabriel asked.

"Just making sure ..." *he's still alive.* She couldn't finish her thought in front of him, partly because it made no sense and partly because she didn't want to admit her soul felt Rhyn's absence like the draft from a cracked window on a winter's night.

"You ever find it odd you feel comfortable waking up to find *me* here?" Gabriel asked.

She rolled her eyes at his twisted sense of humor, which normally teetered on lethal. As Death's best assassin, Gabriel wasn't the type of person anyone ever wanted to run into, let alone when awaking in a dark room after a nightmare.

"I want the light on, Gabriel," she said.

He shook his head. "I don't like it, and you'll have bad dreams either way," he reasoned.

"Makes me feel safer."

"Nothing safer than hanging out with someone who can't be killed."

"Gabriel," she chastised. She left the bathroom light on and returned to her bed, chilled by the drafty chamber that was now hers. It had the combined square footage of every apartment she'd ever rented. It was cold and large, not the kind of place she'd ever choose to live.

"Mama!" Toby's grumpy voice drew her gaze toward the small bedroom whose door was near the bathroom. She'd stopped gritting her teeth whenever he called her that and—God help her!—she'd even started responding.

The five-year-old angel, whose appearance in her life several weeks ago plunged her into the Immortal underworld, squeezed through the cracked door. He trudged across the bedroom, climbing into bed with her without asking.

"Toby, you're too old to be sleeping in my bed," she said. He ignored her and snuggled deep beneath the covers. If not for the nightmares, she'd carry him back to his bed, whether or not he liked it, but she found some comfort in having the angel so close. Despite her efforts to stay awake, she fell into restless sleep again.

Her alarm clock woke her at dawn, reminding her it was time for her morning run. She turned it off and eased out of bed, stopping to gaze out the French doors. Verdant forests stretched to the steely sky, a swath of green, brown, and grey. Uneasy after her dream, she dressed in running clothes and padded out of the room. Gabriel was gone and Toby still sleeping.

She walked through the castle quickly, not liking the quiet, and emerged into a courtyard leading to an expansive cobblestone driveway. The courtyard bordered a small grassy park off which several trails ran from the grassy area into the still dark woods.

Her running partner, Uly, wasn't there. She shook out her arms and stretched, cold in the early morning air. The trails appeared muddy even from the distance and the air smelled of snow.

She heard the soft step of someone approaching and turned, surprised. Her mate, Rhyn, stood in heavy boots, running pants, and a tank top. Relief trickled through her to see him alive. His snow cloud-colored eyes were piercing, his muscular frame making her warm from the inside out. The tank top displayed his thick biceps and shapely shoulders. If she stepped just an inch closer, she'd feel his body heat.

"Uly's not coming," he said.

"Why not?" she asked, disappointed. Her morning run was the only moment of peace she would have during the day.

"I saw your dream."

"You're not supposed to be in my head."

He said nothing.

"Are *you* running with me?" she asked.

"Yeah."

Her gaze went to the sky again as she recalled the nightmare. She'd been avoiding him for the same reason her dream revealed: she might just care too much about him to leave when the time came for her to go. The sense of loss from her dream returned, and she was embarrassed to feel her throat tightening.

"I haven't seen you since we arrived," she said. "Are you in the dungeon with the rest of the warriors?"

"Do you wanna run or not?" he asked.

"Are you really running in boots?"

"I can run naked."

She turned away before he saw the flair of interest accompany her irritation. Her face felt hot as she recalled the one night they'd spent together. How could she forget the experience that had effectively doomed her, branded her as his forever?

Rhyn growled low in his chest. Suddenly, a massive black jaguar leapt past her toward the nearest trail. Its back reached her shoulder, and it moved with restrained, lethal power. She'd seen a couple of Rhyn's shapes, but she'd never get used to the fact he could shapeshift.

Rhyn turned to peer at her through silvery eyes, flicking his tail in impatience. She started forward with a sigh and joined him at the beginning of the muddy trail. She picked her way through the first few steps, startled when he launched himself at a tree, clawed his way up, and bypassed the muddy section by leaping to the next tree.

"Stupid cat," she muttered. Rhyn leapt down from the tree a few meters in front of her and sat to await her as she slid and maneuvered the muddy trail. When she reached the other side, he trotted forward. She followed, expecting him to disappear into the trees at any point and reappear with a herd of deer clenched in his jaws.

They ran through the forest toward the cliff, then ducked deeper into the forest before the trees gave way at the cliff. She stopped at the edge, where the trail was nothing but mud. Puffing and energized, she paused for a breath when cold fingers brushed her neck.

*Darkyn.* He spoke to her, and his cold presence was close. She jerked away, surprised, and slid in the mud toward the cliff edge. Rhyn snatched her and wrapped his arm around her, lifting her out of the mud and farther back onto the trail. Almost immediately she wished he'd let her fall off the cliff. She'd rarely seen him—and never touched him—since arriving a few weeks ago. The warmth of their bodies pressed together made her forget Darkyn, the cold, and the nightmare. The silence was thick and awkward. She sensed him waiting to see what she'd do.

"Thank you," she managed. "For coming with me today." His warm breath on her neck made her shiver, and she instinctively tilted her head. His grip tightened around her, but he didn't bite her.

"Did you mean what you said?" he asked in a husky tone.

"About thanking you? Yes," she said.

"You know that's not what I mean," he growled. "In your dream, you said—"

"I don't know, Rhyn. I've got a lot to figure out."

"Fine. Then tell me you *don't*."

She sighed. She belonged here in his arms, and yet she feared what that meant. She'd lose her sister, her only family, and Rhyn hadn't yet proven he could keep her safe.

"You can't say it," he said, satisfaction in his voice. He turned her to face him, and she gazed up at him, once again awed by his size, heat, and intensity. His silver eyes were molten, his rugged jaw line shaded by two days' growth. His hands were hot on her hips and his body blocked the cold wind whipping up the cliff.

"Can you?" she challenged.

"Don't need to."

"Rhyn—"

"I've done almost everything you asked me to the past few weeks. I need a reward, before the demons in the forest attack us."

"Demons?" she echoed. Any fear she might have felt disappeared when he rested his hand on her neck and brushed her cheek, then her lips, with his thumb. Her blood was already on fire from their bodies being pressed together, and heat pooled in the base of her belly.

"I watch them watch you," he said. "You draw them out on your runs, and I kill them. We're a good team."

"Until the day you're not there." Her words escaped before she thought to filter them. The sense of loss returned. Warmth passed through his gaze, and the skin around his eyes softened as he took in her expression.

"I win," he said. He withdrew, and the cold wind swept over her. She started after him, senses scattered.

"You didn't get your kiss," she objected, her blood humming with need and frustration. She followed him back to the trail. Her eyes swept over his muscular form, from his shapely shoulders and wide back to the thick thighs outlined by the sweats. He whipped out a curved knife from the small of his back and tossed it in the air, catching it easily.

"You better start running. They're coming," he said.

"You weren't joking." She eyed the forest around them. It was quiet and cold.

"I don't do much right, but I can kill things," he said. She turned to see him gazing at her again. His eyes traveled to her neck and lingered. "Hate demon blood."

Fear made the wind seem colder. She wasn't about to stick around for this one. She started past him. He gripped her arm and pulled her against him once more. His kiss was hot, demanding, and quick, his lips warm and soft. Just as her body melded against his, he pushed her away. Stunned, she stared up at him. His gaze was on some point in the forest. She heard them coming, the sound of creatures crashing through the forest.

"Go, now," he ordered. "Don't stop running until you're back at the castle."

Lust turned to adrenaline. He slapped her backside to jar her into gear, and she bolted forward. The sound of fighting erupted behind her, and she stopped before the trail curved out of sight to see Rhyn standing over his first victim, a demon in a jaguar form. He wiped the bloodied knife on its pelt and straightened, meeting her gaze.

She wasn't sure if she should thank him for protecting her or curse him for the kiss. He lifted his chin in dismissal. Intent on fleeing him as well as the demons, she ran as hard as she could back to the castle before doubling over to catch her breath. Her eyes went to the number she wrote on her hand each morning.

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She had exactly five weeks left in her bargain with Kris, the Immortal's leader. She squeezed her hand closed to hide the number and faced the forest, waiting for him to reappear.

"What're you doing out here?" Kris's cool voice made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

"Finishing up my morning run," she answered.

"You were told to take Uly with you."

"I went with Rhyn."

"You don't have much longer here, if all goes according to plan," Kris said and moved beside her, his eyes the color of tanzanite, his white hair the color of snow.

"I know, Kris."

"You're better off without him. That may be the only good thing that comes of returning you to the mortal world."

She looked up at him, anger heating her blood again. She'd never understand how Kris could treat his own half-brother as he did. Rhyn was all she would take away from the twisted Immortal world.

"Go inside. Ully's waiting for you in the lab."

"I'm nothing but a means to an end to you," she muttered. "So tired of all this." *At least I have Rhyn.*

She didn't wait for Kris's response but trotted inside.

Rhyn lopped the head off the last demon and wiped his knife again. He'd fed on the first one and was full but not satisfied. No blood could sate him as his mate's could, and he hadn't tasted her in weeks. Gabriel said she needed space. Kris said she needed anyone but him in her life. She had no idea what he wanted. For once, Rhyn was the only one who made any sense. His blood still raged from their kiss. If not for the demons' interruption, he and Katie would be doing a different kind of mud wrestling.

He growled, irritated as much by demons as he was with the cold weather. Snow fell in lazy, fat flakes, sticking to his clothes and hair. He swiped at the flakes then braced himself to change into his jaguar shape. Hot pain slid through him as his body contorted into the new form. He released a sigh when he'd transformed and shook snowflakes from his thick coat. He loped along the trail through the forest and trotted into the park around the castle, where the person he least wanted to see awaited him with a glower and crossed arms.

"You had somewhere to be half an hour ago," Kris said.

His tone reminded Rhyn that coming here had been Katie's idea and no one else's. He'd come to keep an eye on her and, allegedly, to help his brothers on the Council, though not even he believed he had a decent bone in his body.

"I thought it important for you to see our father's crypt," Kris continued. "He's been interred here since he became dead-dead at the hands of your demon-mother."

Kris waited for him to change forms. Rhyn breezed by him, much warmer in his jaguar shape than he'd been in his human shape.

Hell was a bitch, but at least it was warm, he thought darkly.

Kris strode past him and led him through the castle's ground floor, whose wide, carpeted halls felt nice on his paws. The massive halls were chilly, with ugly stone walls and wooden beams far above. Kris's décor was similar to his ever-changing eyes: jewel-toned drapes, pillows, and tapestries, edged with gold.

Several people stopped to stare or skirt them as Rhyn padded through, and one startled gasp drew his attention briefly to a stairwell. A child-angel—the first he'd seen in hundreds of years—gazed at him with large brown eyes before darting up the stairs. He wondered what poor fool was stuck babysitting the high-maintenance angel as he followed Kris.

"I'd prefer you didn't act like such an ass around here," Kris muttered as one of the servants dropped a tray of dishes at the sight of the massive cat.

Rhyn stayed in his form until they reached a narrow, winding set of stairs. He changed shape before descending behind Kris. They walked down and through an unused part of the



dungeons. Their path dead-ended at a large wooden door. Kris produced a key chain from his pocket and unlocked the five locks before pulling the heavy door open.

"You afraid Pop's gonna escape?" Rhyn asked, amused by the security.

"The magic lingering in our father's blood renders the ground here sacred. I've sealed off the crypt with magic to keep Immortals from entering through the shadow world, and installed locks for those who wander where they shouldn't be," Kris said.

"We should just toss him in the deepest hole in Hell."

"I don't expect *you* to understand what it is to care about someone else."

Rhyn said nothing. His brother had no idea the depth of emotion even a half-demon could feel. When he'd looked into Katie's eyes and dared her to admit she didn't love him, he'd seen everything he needed to know. He didn't feel like the half-demon bastard he was when he was with her.

"Pay your respects, brother, while I allow it," Kris said, and pushed the door open. The chamber beyond was dark, lit by the soft glow of a single torch beside a clear sarcophagus. Rhyn's eyes lingered on the body on the altar before he took in the seven statues of descending size surrounding the altar.

Kris lit another torch to shed light on the murals on the floor. There was one beneath each statue representing a continent. The largest statue was Andre, their eldest brother who had recently become dead-dead, standing over Europe. Kris was next in size, standing on a mural of North America.

The smallest statue was Rhyn as a child of five or six, standing on Antarctica. He circled his statue, barely recalling his life growing up. Each of the Council That Was Seven was represented, dutifully overlooking their father's corpse. Rhyn faced the sarcophagus, surprised to see his father looked as he had when he last saw him thousands of years before. Their father had Andre's dark skin, and his hair was grey at the temples. His features were most like Rhyn's: heavy and roughly hewn, while his body was lean like Kris's.

"This might interest you more," Kris said in a cold voice.

Rhyn bristled and turned. Kris lit another torch to display a darkened case on the wall. Rhyn's fists clenched as he took in the beheaded, dismembered body hung for spite on the wall.

"My father's killer," Kris said, taking in the demoness's body.

"You kill my mother," Rhyn snarled. "Yet you've never come after me."

"Andre killed your mother and kept me from destroying you as I should have," Kris replied. "You're a cancer on everyone around you. Andre was too kind to kill you. Even Katie is better off without you."

Rhyn heard without listening, instead taking in the tortured features of his mother's face. He'd gone from being tormented by his own mother to the *affection* of an abusive father who regretted ever having him. What small maternal instincts a demon could have had led her to destroy the man who took her son; then she in turn was killed by Andre.

Andre had taken Rhyn in when he was five and he fled his bullying brothers when he was ten. Andre, however, unanimously approved Rhyn's petition to be recognized as a son of their father when he was old enough, despite his brothers' objections.

"They both deserve what they got," Rhyn said. "Andre alone has ever shown me any kindness."

"And look where that got us all. If he'd killed you, he'd be alive and Katie would be safe."

"Safe?" Rhyn echoed. "You'd force her to become your mate."

"I wouldn't force a human to do anything."

"But you'd hold her down and take her blood." Rhyn's voice lowered dangerously and he faced his brother. Kris fell silent. "Did you think I didn't know?"

"She told you."

"She didn't have to."

"I didn't intend for it to happen," Kris said.

"You're no better than Sasha," Rhyn said.

"And she's better off with you? You have nothing to offer her."

Rhyn faced his mother again. The words were too familiar. Katie had said the same. He hadn't even been able to keep her safe when they were together, and he had nothing—not even a home—to give her.

"Don't destroy anything while you're here," Kris said and left.

Rhyn ignored him, turning from the mother who'd never wanted him to the father who'd wanted him dead-dead. He'd had one friend in his life, Gabriel, and his mate, a woman tough in spirit but vulnerable in flesh. He didn't belong here with Kris's kind, yet she was safe. People around him had a way of dying horribly, and he wasn't entirely sure what to do about it, now that it mattered. He wished Andre had stuck around a little longer, so he could've asked him what to do.

He sensed the entrance of another before his companion spoke.

"She looks like the Council, dismembered beyond recognition."

Rhyn snorted and faced Sasha, the brother charged with governing Australia, and the first to abandon the Council in favor of serving the Dark One. Sasha was lean and pale, his gaze turquoise.

"You're not surprised to see me," Sasha surmised.

"If Kris let me in, he'd let anyone in," Rhyn replied.

"Miss Hell, brother?"

"Warmer than this place."

Sasha chuckled, his gaze taking in the sarcophagus. He neared it with a small frown. Rhyn stayed where he was, wary yet unafraid of Sasha, who'd been the zookeeper among the animals with him in Hell.

"I wonder if he were still alive if things would be the same," Sasha mused, his eyes on their father.

"I'm glad the asshole's gone," Rhyn said.

"I suppose."

"What're you doing here, Sasha?"

"I'm here to see Kris, of all people."

"You can't manipulate him like you do everyone else," Rhyn said, well aware of his brother's ability to twist the minds of others.

"No? Wanna bet?"

"People like us don't pay up."

"True. We are more alike than the others. How's your little human treat?"

Rhyn eyed him. Sasha gave a faint smile.

"I'm not here for her," he said. "Wouldn't you like to have Kris out of the way, so you and your human treat can live in peace somewhere?"

"I wouldn't trust anything you offered."

"Very well, then, how about we make a deal for you to come back with me as my personal bodyguard, and I'll make sure she's safe and happy the rest of her life? I learned in Hell how you can un-mate her. She'd be better off without you, Rhyn."

*She'd be better off without you.* He'd heard these words more than once over the past few days and couldn't help the small part of him that agreed. The rest of him didn't give a shit what anyone said: Katie was his.

"You know Kris'll kill her when he's done with her. One human is nothing to him in his version of the big picture," Sasha continued. "Not sure which of us is more twisted."

"Fuck off, Sasha. You did me no favors in Hell, and you'll do me no favors here."

"Think about it. I'm off to see Kris."

Rhyn watched him go, wondering just what his brother was planning, and how he'd figure it out before Katie was hung on the wall next to his mother. Agitated and chilled by the chamber, he transformed into his jaguar form to terrorize more Immortals on his way to hunt the demons in the forest.

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From the shadows of the crypt, Gabriel waited until the half-brothers were gone to dump the contents of the velvet dice pouch into his palm. Two small green gems—holding the dust of human souls—glittered in the torchlight of the dead-dead Immortal's chamber. Kris had given them to him weeks ago as payment for two assassinations. Wanting to give his friend, Rhyn, a moment of peace with his dead-dead parents, he waited until Rhyn was gone before withdrawing from the shadows.

"He looks so un-dead-dead," Death said, a rare trace of interest in her sweet voice.

Gabriel put the gems away and looked up to see her slight frame standing beside the sarcophagus. Her white hair and snowy skin glowed in the dim chamber.

"I wondered where you'd been going," she said.

"You always know where I'm going," he replied. "You can read my mind."

"You come here a lot."

"I do."

She turned and raised an eyebrow at him, her rainbow eyes flashing with every color between white and black. "I want to hear you say why," she ordered.

"To see my friend and protect his mate."

"You're not independent anymore, Gabriel. I own you now," she reminded him. "The other assassins go nowhere without my permission."

"You know where to find me when you need me," he said.

"You can't influence destiny, Gabe," she said. "You shouldn't be here at all."

"I have one friend in the universe. There's nothing wrong with—"

"You sacrificed your immortal soul for him. You've done enough."

He clamped his jaw shut.

"And he's still not doing what he should be," she continued. "I think you wasted your freedom. Poor choice, but you were a human once. Maybe your human compassion led you astray."

"I thought you appreciated my *human* perspective."

"I *did*. But I think you've become a liability to me, Gabriel."

He'd heard the speech before, though this time, it was different. Three weeks ago, he'd bargained his soul in exchange for her taking Rhyn off her list of those to be made dead-dead. In all the years he'd served her, she'd never owned him until three weeks ago. He still didn't doubt his friend or his decision, but he was the only one.

"I'll stay away," he said. "If it pleases you."

"Stay today, Gabriel, but know that the next time you return, you will take the lives of two of them," she said. "Kris paid for Katie's death and the death of another, whose name he did not mention, but I will."

Heaviness settled into the pit of his stomach. He wondered if Death would've been more lenient if he stayed home with her and played nice instead of spending half his day in the mortal world.

It was too late for him to know.

"Who else would you have me take?" he asked in a monotone. Death smiled, and when she spoke, he looked away. "You would ask this?"

"You're lucky this is all I ask. Normally, when an assassin goes soft, I make him dead-dead. You've been my lover for ages, and I am doing you a favor."

"Next you'll say you've kicked me out of your bed."

She said nothing, and he met her gaze once more, genuinely surprised.

"I guess you no longer interest me, since you're just another of my slaves. You're no longer exciting and different to me," she said with a shrug. "I am sorry for this of all things, Gabriel. You are still my top assassin, assuming you don't fail in your executions."

"I wonder why you agreed to my deal, if it rendered me boring!" he snapped.

"Everything comes at a cost, Gabriel, which you know. I broke Immortal Code to grant your favor of not killing Rhyn. You had to pay the price for it, and so did I."

Her words did nothing to quell the anger boiling within him. It'd been too long since he'd felt such strong emotion, and it caught him off guard. At his silence, Death went on.

"Today's your last day here. Next time, you make them dead-dead."

"I understand, mistress."

"Very well."

At his tone, she softened. "Gabriel, you know there are things I cannot tell you. You must understand there is a reason behind what I ask of you that will not become clear for some time. Trust me. This is the only way."

"As you wish, mistress."

She left him alone in the dark with his thoughts, and he began to understand more how his friend Rhyn felt in a world that was pitted against him. He'd expected things to change once he pledged his soul to Death, but he hadn't expected anything so drastic, so soon. He clenched the pouch with its gems.

Instead of going to see the Immortal leader, Gabriel crossed through the shadow world, squinting as he emerged into the bright mid-morning sunlight. He put on his sunglasses, which did little to alleviate the headache sunlight gave him. The lush Scottish Highlands around him were covered in a blanket of snow that stretched for miles, the white world interrupted only by a few narrow roads snaking in different directions.

It was rarely sunny in this part of the world, and he chalked the irritation up to his sudden plunge in luck. He breathed in deeply of the scent of snow. The chances of him ever returning were slim to none. He was early this year, but he'd rather visit now than risk he'd be grounded during winter solstice in a month.

He'd miss the smell and sight of his homeland and yearned already to stay here rather than return to his dark corner of the Immortal underworld! He began to think Death was right—he was going soft. Before he gave his Immortal soul to death, he'd never noticed how sweet the air was or how the grass sang as the wind whipped through it. He missed the smells and sounds in winter.

He walked a familiar path to a graveyard so old, not even legends remained about its location or the importance of those buried there. A stone cottage up the road was the only sign of inhabitation, and a herd of sheep raised their heads as he neared. He ignored them and went to a place only he knew, stopping when he was atop the graves he sought.

"Mother, Father," he said quietly, "I may not be able to come back again."

He never expected his long dead parents to respond but waited anyway. When only the winter wind greeted him, he continued.

"Father, I did as you told me not to do long ago. I gave Death my Immortal soul. It was for a worthy cause, and I don't regret what I've done," he said.

His gaze lifted, and he recalled vividly the last time he'd seen his parents in this very spot, when they were cut down by bloodthirsty demons during the only period in Immortal history when demons attacked humans. They'd been led by the demon leader Darkyn, whom the Dark One had punished when Death discovered what the demons had done. He didn't know what happened to Darkyn, but Death adopted him, raised him, and trained him to be the most ruthless of all assassins.

Rhyn had become like a brother to him, and the idea of killing his mate reopened wounds that hadn't bled since he stood in this place thousands of years before. He tried not to think of that sad time, instead blinking away dark memories and focusing on the snow at his feet.

"I'll come back whenever I'm allowed," he said with resignation. He gazed around once more and then turned and walked away, back into the shadow world.

\* \* \*

Still in her jogging clothes, Katie made her way to the super-lab on one of the castle's upper floors. She knocked and waited.

"You stood me up this morning. Kris yelled at me for it," Katie said, leveling a glare on Ully as he opened the door. His bright features turned pink beneath his wire-rimmed glasses and straw-colored hair. At barely above her height and slender, the mad scientist was very unlike the Immortal warriors that filled the castle.

"You know, I just ... well, Rhyn ..."

"You can say he scared you shitless," she said.

"Yeah, he did," he said, then brightened. "But I have good news for you!"

"You figured out how to make an immunity injection?"

He whirled away from the door and strode into the lab. She followed, uninterested in the sterile glass and stainless steel landscape. As she did every day, she went to the table near his cluttered desk to await her blood draw and any other experiments he wanted to do. He scampered across the lab to a fridge that held cold tools and bottles of mysterious serums, everything except what a normal person put in a fridge.

"Nowhere close." He retrieved a small bottle of what looked like perfume and brought it back, holding it out to her. She took it skeptically.

"I was hanging upside down this morning with Rhyn snarling at me and I thought, this doesn't just suck, but it's gotta suck even more for a little human like Katie," Uly said. "Kris said the normal Immortals aren't allowed around you, because they tend to attack you. This will help. Try it."

She sprayed the perfume on her wrist and coughed.

"Oh, god, Uly, this smells like a skunk crawled into my clothes!"

"I know!" Uly said, excited. "I created a pheromone repellant. It should cause temporary blindness in Immortals as well as mask your pheromones."

"I can't wear this."

"You don't have to. Just spray any Immortal that gets too close."

She looked at the bottle anew, thoughts going to the long list of Immortals she could've used it on instead of bearing their attacks.

"This is the first useful thing I've seen you do," she said. "You have more of this?"

"I have travel-sized, too. Sit down. Time for some blood."

She sighed and held out her arm, setting the perfume on the table as she sat. She still couldn't watch Uly draw her blood and covered her eyes with one hand. He was quick about it and placed a Hello Kitty Band-Aid over the small puncture before dropping the vials into his coat pocket.

"And you're no closer at all?" she asked, holding her breath for the answer.

"Nope. I had to start over yesterday. I told Kris I don't think it's possible to duplicate the antigen that makes you immune to Immortals. I can probably get close with a few years of research, but not in two months."

She suspected Kris might override his promise to let her go in five weeks, if Uly couldn't figure it out. She released her breath, satisfied on more than one level to postpone her return to the human world.

The wind chime above the door tinkled. Kris entered, followed by someone whose appearance made her gasp. Sasha looked over her, uninterested, and both her hands went to her throat at the memory of what he'd done to her in Hell. Fear fluttered through her, and her gaze flew to Kris, whom she trusted little more than his sadistic brother. Kris's gaze was amber, a visual indicator of his anger despite his calm features.

"Uly," he said in a clipped tone. "Test this." He tossed a vial whose contents were the color of blood. Uly caught it and held it up.

Katie snagged the perfume off the table as the two brothers neared and eased off the chair, placing it between her and them. Sasha seemed to be ignoring her, though a small smile of amusement was on his face.

"What is it?" Uly asked curiously.

"The solution to our problem," Kris answered.

"My lab in Hell didn't have the ethical reservations you do in using Immortal or demon test subjects," Sasha said.

"How could you let him in here?" she demanded of Kris, unnerved by his sudden appearance in a place where she was allegedly safe.

"I came bearing gifts, namely the immunity blood you all need to fight the Dark One's army. I seek an alliance against my former employer and to regain my place at the Council," Sasha answered.

"Cut the shit, Sasha," Kris snapped. "I haven't decided what to do with you yet, and you may end up with an assassination contract on your head."

"As you wish," Sasha said in a voice so calm it drew the gazes of everyone in the room.

"Uly, test that now," Kris ordered. "Sasha, you'll follow me to your room."

Sasha bowed his head in a mocking show of respect. Katie watched him go, her nightmares in her thoughts and her heart pounding. When the door closed, she looked at the vial of blood.

Suddenly, she feared a new fate. At least before, Kris had a reason to keep her around, because he wanted something from her. What happened if he got what he wanted elsewhere, before she knew what she wanted?

"Uly, how long will that take you?" she asked.

"A few days, maybe a week."

She gripped the perfume bottle more tightly. She couldn't help but think Sasha's sudden appearance was related to the demons in the forest and her dreams. Her thoughts went to Rhyn.

"I'll see you later," she heard herself say.

Uly nodded, already seated and scribbling at his desk. She exited the brightly lit room into the hallway, crossing to look out the nearest window at the falling snow. A dark figure in the snow-covered park area caught her attention. Gabriel was sitting alone on top of one of the half dozen picnic tables. She made her way to the back entrance to the castle and stepped into the quiet, chilly day. The snow fell straight from the sky without the wind and was soft and fluffy beneath her feet.

"Gabriel?" she called, crossing her arms at the chill. He didn't face her. "You okay?"

"Better than you."

She paused a short distance from him, sensing something wrong. He didn't speak much. She knew nothing about him, except he'd been a friend to Rhyn.

"You're early today," she said.

"I can't stay tonight."

"Oh. You've got, um, work?"

"Yes."

"You'll be back tomorrow?" she asked at the ominous note in his voice.

"No, Katie. I'm not coming back."

"Ever?"

"For your sake, not if I can help it."

"So when you come back, you'll be back for me for good?" she asked.

"Yes."

She was struck by his words, feeling as if the one person she relied upon was not only running out on her but would chop her into pieces the next time she saw him. Her hand went to her neck. He looked away as his words sank in.

"Take care of Toby and Rhyn," he said, and stood. "And ... take care of yourself."

"Gabriel, maybe you should just take me with you now and save us all some grief," she said.

"Humans have free will," he reminded her. "You have some other decisions to make first."

"But if I choose Rhyn and you come back for me tomorrow, it doesn't seem very fair to him."

"You're not making this easier on either of us!" he said, a flare of emotion in his voice for the first time since she'd met him. Taken aback by his anger, she watched him run a hand through his hair in an unusual sign of agitation.

"Guess I don't understand the rules," she said quietly.

"I'll stay away as long as I can. I may not have a choice, though."

"What do I do, Gabriel?"

"I can't tell you that."

"But you can tell me you're coming back to kill me," she said, anger rising.

He looked up at the sky. Dressed all in black with his dark eyes and hair, he looked like a living shadow in the snow-covered world.

"Rhyn is my friend," he said after a long pause. "He cares about you. I've never thought twice about any life I've taken until now."

"I understand but I'm having a hard time sympathizing, considering it's me you're gonna kill."

"It's not just you. The next time I visit the human world, I'll be leaving with two souls."

"Okay, so you're taking me and someone else, but this still doesn't help me figure out what to do!" she said.

"I can't tell you that."

She drew a deep breath. Her hands shook as she stood there discussing her own death with a creature that resembled the Grim Reaper.

"It's not Toby or Rhyn, is it?" she ventured.

"No."

"Good. They're both growing on me."

"I have to go, Katie," Gabriel said.

"First the nightmares, now this. Why do I feel like something really bad is happening?"

"Sometimes things get worse before they get better. Most of the times, things just never get better. Doesn't help that I got demoted. No alcohol," he reminded her.

"Kris tossed it all out after he found me knocked out on the bathroom floor last week," she admitted, rolling her eyes.

"Good. You're going to need your head clear."

She searched his face. The snow began falling harder, and he met her gaze again finally. The regret in his dark eyes made her want to beg him not to kill her and comfort him for the pain he'd surely feel hurting his own friend. Her throat tightened, and in the end, no words came out.



She wondered how accurate her dream had been, if her only way to save Rhyn was to sacrifice herself.

"Farewell, Katie," Gabriel said in a hushed voice.

"Farewell, Gabriel."

Death's assassin turned and walked away, disappearing into the shadow world. The coldness of fear within her grew stronger. She rubbed the lumpy scar on her arm, her attention caught by the sight of a jaguar dropping from a tree branch to the edge of the park and the forest a short distance away. It was not all black but had a white patch around one eye. It stared at her through green eyes, and she frowned, uncertain why the sight of the creature bothered her.

A gust of wind flung snow into her face. She retreated to the castle, up the back stairwell off limits to everyone but her, and to the warmth of her chamber. Toby's giggles reached her before she opened the door. She walked in to see Rhyn's jaguar form sprawled across the bed, shredding a down pillow. Her bed looked as if a flock of geese had combusted over it, and she counted at least ten dead pillows.

Toby laughed and tossed Rhyn another pillow, delighted when he snatched it from midair and shredded it in an explosion of white feathers. Reining in her emotions, she tried to distract her dark thoughts by focusing on Toby.

"Toby!" she exclaimed. "Where did you get all these pillows?"

The baby angel and half-demon turned toward the door.

"From our neighbors," Toby said. "I had two and you had three and the fat lady down the hall had four, so then I got hers and that mean man's pillows."

"Just what I need," she grumbled, wondering what other insults the castle's Immortals' mates would fling at her after this incident. She didn't fit in; they made it clear every chance they could, just as their leader did. "Wash up for dinner."

"Okay, Mama!" he sang and sprang away. She bent down to pick up a yet unscathed pillow, startled to stand and see Rhyn had changed to his human form.

"*You* got stuck with the baby-angel?"

"Maybe that should be *we* got stuck with the baby-angel!" she shot back.

"He's all yours. What smells like shit?"

"I think I like you better as a jaguar. Much easier to get along with," she said with a shake of her head, unable to help the warmth that spread through her whenever she saw him. "Gabriel left for good today."

"He always comes back."

"Not this time."

He was quiet, digesting the news. Still shaken from her discussion with Gabriel, she couldn't decide if she wanted to run to the comfort of Rhyn's arms or send him away for good, before Gabriel took her away.

"Mama, I'm ready!" Toby said, reappearing.

"Okay, come on," she said. She held out a hand. He took it and tugged her to the door. Rhyn gazed at her, and her whole body responded despite her fear. The memory of his kiss made her insides warm. "If you want, you can come by later."

His gaze flared with heated interest.

"For tea," she clarified. "And to talk or whatever."

"I like whatever," he said.

"I'll get more pillows," Toby said.

"You're not invited," Rhyn growled.

"But how can we play?"

"You'll be in bed."

"*That*, no, Rhyn," she corrected him. "I mean tea. Daylight tea."

"Breakfast tea."

Toby giggled, and she glanced at him, afraid Rhyn was going to dive headfirst into a discussion Toby shouldn't hear.

"Afternoon tea. C'mon, Toby," Katie said and turned away, allowing Toby to pull her down the hall to the dining chamber, which had yet to fill up. She braced herself for the resentful looks and whispered insults she was glad Toby was too young to understand. They made their way unscathed through the dining room to their own little corner, where Toby's favorite food combination of mac-n-cheese and French toast waited for him on the table.

She couldn't eat, feeling more stressed than she had in the past three weeks. Sasha was somewhere in the castle, and Gabriel was gone. She'd cracked the door to her heart for Rhyn to shove his foot in the door and now needed to close, lock, and deadbolt it closed again.

*I do love him*, she admitted silently.

## Chapter Two

In Hell, the Immortal Jade, formerly the most trusted lieutenant to the leader of the Council That Was Seven, looked around his new bedchamber with a shiver. It was a posh room for Hell, carved of smooth ebony stone that was characteristic of all the buildings in Hell. The room consisted of a massive bed with black bedding and white pillows, a wardrobe and trunks, and yawning windows to the sky that light never touched.

"This was Sasha's bedchamber," a demon said from the doorway. "You will be comfortable here. It has many Immortal comforts we care nothing for."

*I care nothing for this either*, Jade thought. The demon closed the door—one of the Immortal comforts, for there were no doors in Hell—and left him to wonder how many men and women Sasha had in the bed before him. He'd only spent one night there last month before Sasha flung him to the side in favor of a demoness.

Like Kris had flung him aside to make way for a mortal. His sense of loss was so deep, he thought it'd kill him some nights. He'd done what anyone would do: he'd found a way to get even with one of the men who hurt him. He might even get rid of both of them!

A sound from a trunk in the corner drew Jade's attention. Surprised, he crossed to it and opened it. The woman's face was hidden behind a mass of blonde hair, but he recognized the hot pink fingernails instantly.

"Iliana?" he asked. She stilled. He pulled her gently from the trunk and untied her. She was shaking and bloodied, and the bindings left deep marks around her wrists. She pulled off the gag.

"Did Kris send you for me?" she whispered, her gaze darting around. "Did the demons see you?"

"I didn't know you were gone," he admitted. "What happened?"

"They caught me when I went through the shadow world and brought me here, to Sasha." He didn't have to ask what Sasha did to her when her pretty blue eyes flared with white rage and then filled with tears. "Where is he? I want to kill him!"

"He's not—"

"No matter, we need to escape. Come on, Jade!"

He watched her stride to the door without following, heart heavy at what Kris's lieutenant and his colleague of a few decades would soon discover. She stopped at the door and turned to him.

"Jade, come on!"

"I can't go with you, Iliana," he whispered. "I'm here by choice."

Surprise, then disbelief, crossed her features. "Oh, God, Jade, what did you do?"

"I took care of Sasha," he said somewhat defensively. "I deserve better than how he treated me. How Kris treated me."

"You betrayed us."

"No, I didn't cross that line! I'm just here ... there's just two people who I want to avenge myself on!" he said. "I'm not going to hurt anyone else!"

"Anyone else? You can't destroy Kris. It's like beheading the Council!"

"You don't understand. You wouldn't understand."

She crossed to him, furious. "You are a traitor of the worst kind. I will kill you now, before you hurt anyone!"

He blocked her first punch but not her second. Light exploded into his thoughts. He'd tried to reason with her, to tell her what happened. She didn't listen. She was as cold as Kris! Maybe she wanted Kris, too. He'd seen the way Kris looked at her and had long suspected the Council leader had two lovers, not one.

"No!" he roared and picked her up. He threw her against the wall, blinded by pain and rage. She hit the wall hard and landed on the ground, unconscious. "Iliana!" He knelt beside her, horrified at what he'd done. She was alive, though the back of her head bled.

Jade looked around in case someone else saw what he'd done. He picked her up and replaced her in the trunk, and then locked it. No one had to know, not even the demons. At least this way, she'd never have Kris. That left him with one less body to bury.

None of this would've happened at all if not for the Ancient's mate, Katie. Kris never would've sent him away, Sasha wouldn't have stumbled upon the immunity blood, and the demons wouldn't be amassing an army to send to the human world. Darkyn, the most powerful of all demons, wouldn't have returned from the pits of Hell, where the Dark One banished him to lead the army to the Immortals' front door and wipe out the Council.

Without Katie, Jade's world would be perfect.

\* \* \*

Katie hid a smile. Rhyn, whose large hands all but swallowed the tea cup, had made an attempt to be civilized. He'd spilled it twice already. Despite his irritation, he'd been as patient

with Toby as a half-demon could be. Toby had fallen asleep in front of the fireplace. Rhyn set the cup down and sat back, gazing at her hard. Well aware afternoon had faded into night, she kept her cup in her lap to keep from fidgeting under his intensity.

"You'll tell me to go, won't you," he said.

"I think so," she replied and cleared her throat.

"I'll behave, but I'm staying." He rose and crossed to Toby, looping his arm around the baby angel and resting him on his hip. She cringed as he disappeared into Toby's room, hoping Rhyn didn't waken him.

True to his word, he stripped off his boots and shirt and lay on top of the covers. She hesitated, her blood burning and her confused thoughts terrified of what might happen. Katie crawled under the comforter. Rhyn made no moves on her, simply rolled to tuck her against his warm body.

"Maybe you'll keep the nightmares away," she whispered drowsily.

"If I knew how, I would."

"Is Darkyn stronger than you?"

"Yeah."

"If you and the Council worked together, you could take out anything," she said.

"If I could protect you alone, I'd take you somewhere safe from the demons and the Council."

"I don't think you can. Kris is your brother, and family should stick together."

"You have no idea how my *family* works."

"You'll need your family when I'm gone," she said, thoughts drifting to her impending death. His body and scent felt too nice. She'd enjoy this tonight and then do what she must the next day. She'd spent the day in thought after her talk with Gabriel, and there was only one solution that might drive Rhyn away before she and Gabriel hurt him.

"You're not leaving."

"I know I am, Rhyn."

At the dangerous note in his voice, she said nothing else. She'd seen the acrimonious relationship between him and Kris and understood some of what made them enemies. As she fell asleep, she couldn't help thinking Rhyn was the only Immortal on the Council she'd trust to keep humans safe.

Her nightmares that night involved her sister, Hannah, being eaten by the jaguar with the white patch over his eye. She awoke long before dawn, and her eyes went to the corner where Gabriel no longer sat.

"Rhyn?"

He, too, was gone. Toby's snores drifted into the bedchamber from his room. She tossed the covers off, crossing to the French doors. The half moon's light made the snow-covered forest glow eerily. Checking the time, she counted backwards. It was afternoon in Maryland, where Hannah was.

Visions of her sister's death fresh in her mind, she changed into warm clothes and her running shoes, tucked the perfume bottle into a pocket, then sat on the edge of the bed. She closed her eyes to concentrate hard on summoning the portal to the shadow place. Rhyn's warm power filled her as she drew on their bond as mates, and the portal opened. She stepped

into the clammy, wet world of fog and darkness, pausing to focus on the portal that would lead to her sister's house. Several portals glowed, and one grew more intense as she thought hard.

Katie walked through the shadow place and through the portal, wondering how she'd explain to her sister how she suddenly appeared out of nowhere and expecting a lecture about disappearing three weeks ago.

Hannah's fiancé, an Immortal, owned a swarthy mansion in Maryland. Katie cringed at his over the top décor of gilded everything and oriented herself. She'd emerged from the shadow world into a sitting room. She walked into the hall and up a wide stairwell to the second floor.

Hannah's bedroom was quiet, the bed neatly made and her closet door open to reveal a large empty space. For once, she wished she'd paid attention when her sister told her about travel plans. Still disturbed by the nightmare, she rifled through Hannah's vanity to see if her sister left her appointment book in a drawer.

"They were in a hurry."

She whirled to see a woman in a servant's uniform Hannah insisted her household employees wear. The woman was small and pale with eyes so dull, she seemed almost lifeless.

"I think they were going to visit you in France," the woman added. "A man named Kris invited them."

Kris! What was his plan? "When did they leave?" Katie managed.

"They had a flight out yesterday afternoon. Ms. Hannah hates to travel in the morning."

"Do you know when they were coming back?"

The woman shrugged. Katie looked around, unable to tell if her sister's empty closet was indicative of a weekend trip or something more permanent. Hannah never traveled light, and there was no way of knowing what Kris was doing.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" the servant asked. "I was just preparing one for myself in the kitchen."

"I should probably get going."

"Very well, miss. If you want to wait for a few minutes, I can pull up their itinerary."

"Sure, thanks."

"Come. Have some tea while you wait."

A sense of foreboding passed through her as she reluctantly followed the servant from the bedroom into a wide hall with gaudy gilded furniture and picture frames. She paused at the top of the sweeping stairwell to look around her. The house was too quiet for her comfort, and she felt the familiar sense of being watched.

There was no one but the maid, who was halfway down the stairs. She trailed with a shiver, wanting to make sure her sister was truly safe before leaving. If the maid gave her the airline info, she could call to confirm her sister was on board.

The spacious kitchen reminded her of Ullý's lab with its landscape of stainless steel. A tea kettle was already whistling when they entered, and the maid rushed across the kitchen to grab it.

Katie sat on a barstool at the breakfast bar, watching the maid pour tea into two mugs sitting beside the stove. Two mugs, as if she were expecting company or someone else was already there. Katie eased off the chair and reached into her pocket for the perfume. She needed a

quiet, safe place where she could channel Rhyn's power to call forth a portal. Her mind went to the bathroom in the hall.

"I've got to run to the restroom. I'll be right back for the tea."

The maid turned, looking past her, and Katie spun away. The lanky form standing between her and the door made her gasp.

"Hello, Lunchmeat," the demon Jared said, smiling slowly. "I see you're having tea with my blood monkey."

"Who let you out of Hell?" she whispered.

"More than one way out of that place, as you discovered."

"Rhyn's here."

"If he were, I'd sense him."

He took a step closer, his blond hair and green eyes highlighting a slender face. His frame was thin to the point of gaunt. She didn't remember him being so tall in Hell, but she'd been afraid to look too hard at him when she passed his cell.

"You look well," he said, looking her up and down. He moved closer and she skirted the breakfast bar until it was between them. "Not so brave without those bars between us, are you, Lunchmeat?"

"You don't want to do this!" she exclaimed.

"Pretty sure I do. The taste of your sweet nectar before I tear you apart?" He smacked his lips, his eyes glowing. He started around the breakfast bar, and she kept pace with him on the opposite side. If she could make a break for the door ... she gripped the perfume bottle harder.

"Sasha sent you," she said, willing him to talk rather than attack.

"Hell no. He'd never let me out of the zoo. The demons released us after Sasha fled."

"What'd he do?"

"Eh, Sasha killed a couple of demons he really shouldn't have. Pissed off the Dark One and the demon-leader, who freed us all to hunt him. It's coming back to bite him now."

"And my sister? Where is she?" she asked, bracing herself for the answer.

"I don't give a shit. She can't be as sweet tasting as you," he said, his gaze darkening.

"I have to warn you, I've learned some things since you saw me. I'm not the defenseless little human you saw in Hell."

"I like my dinner to fight me. Makes the final surrender so much sweeter."

She inched away, her back now to the kitchen door. The maid had set down the tea and retrieved a butcher knife from a drawer.

"Why not make this fair?" Katie asked, her gaze going to the maid. "Why don't you let me fight her? She can keep what she's got, and I'll face her barehanded."

Jared turned to see the woman on the other side of the kitchen, and Katie bolted. Panic churned within her, and she was about to cry out for Rhyn when Jared snagged her arm. She whirled and sprayed him with the perfume, wildly aiming for his face and almost gagging at the scent.

"What the hell ... smells like shit!" he snapped and released her to knock the bottle away. She ran with one glance over her shoulder as she reached the bathroom. He stood in the hallway smiling, his predatory look assuring her he had no plans of letting his dinner escape him.

Katie locked herself in the bathroom, cursing Uly for the skunk perfume that clearly didn't work. She looked around for something to brace the door and ended up leaning against it. There was a moment of silence before the door buckled beneath a blow that sent her sprawling. The door held, and she scrambled back to brace it.

"Rhyn, any time!" she muttered. The door cracked in the middle beneath the second blow, and she went sailing once again. Jared kicked the fractured pieces of door out of the way. Katie pushed herself to her feet, remembering what pain a pissed-off Hell-creature could cause. She recalled the scent of her blood, what hot agony felt like as an otherworldly creature tore her apart.

She'd rather die than go through that again. God help her, she couldn't even try to off herself while trapped in the bathroom!

"Long time, no see, demon." Rhyn's voice made her heart skip a beat, and she craned her neck to see past Jared, who whirled. Jared moved away from the door into the hall to face his opponent.

"Half-breed," he hissed. "You dare challenge a full demon?"

"Unless you wanna leave my blood monkey alone."

Jared's form contorted then grew twice his size as he shifted into a creature unlike any she'd ever seen. Wings, short fur, fangs the size of her forearm ... she moved farther into the bathroom, lest she draw his attention. Suddenly, a blur of brown streaked past the bathroom, tackling the demon. She heard the sounds of fighting, grunts, growls, and gnashing of teeth. Katie inched forward, peeking out as the two creatures smashed into furniture and porcelain figurines on display in the wide foyer.

Her first instinct was to run back to the shadow world, but she had a hard time looking away from the two hideous creatures battling it out in Hannah's home. The sound of footsteps running down the hall drew her attention, and she flung herself backwards as the maid with the butcher knife tried to cut her. A piece of the broken door slashed her as she fell, and she scrambled away as the maid slashed at her again. The maid lost her balance and toppled over.

Katie scrambled up into the hall and maneuvered her bloodied arm to see the damage, suddenly aware the two demons had stopped fighting. She looked up to find both hideous beasts staring at her, drooling. Their gazes followed the drops of blood as they fell from her arm to the marble flooring. Both inched toward her, the inhuman growling filling the hall.

"Winner takes all," she said, backing away.

The maid lunged at her again, and she darted for the kitchen, followed by Jared's blood monkey, who was wailing with frustration. One of the demons launched itself down the hall after her, only for the other to tackle it and the two of them to roll down the hall in a furry mass of wings, legs, and snapping teeth.

Katie whipped around the breakfast bar, eyes roving the kitchen for the knife block or something with which to defend herself. She snatched a wooden cutting board as the maid rounded a counter with the knife raised. Katie ducked again then twisted her hips in a perfect baseball batter's swing and smacked her hard in the face. The maid dropped silently, her nose busted and blood splattered across her features.

"I have enough problems with psycho Immortal demon jackasses. You really think some stupid human with a knife scares me?" she said, furious. "Now I understand why Kris is such an ass to humans."

She shook her head to clear her anger and sat with her back to the counter, forcing herself to concentrate on the shadow world and tapping into Rhyn's power despite the sounds of demons fighting so near the kitchen. The portal opened, and she bounded through it, running to the brightest portal and through it to emerge on the snowy park behind the castle.

It was dawn, and she breathed a sigh of relief at being safe. Uly emerged from the castle, hair mussed and dressed as if for a run. From behind him, Toby tore out of the castle in a snowsuit. He dove into the snow while she stood and waited for Rhyn. Guilt made her resolve to drive him away waver.

"You've been using the repellant," Uly said. His nose crinkled as he drew near. "You ready to run?"

"Not today, Uly," she said. "Your repellant doesn't work!"

"I tested it on one of the warriors. I know it works."

She held up her bloody arm. "I just got out of a fight with a demon. It didn't work."

"It doesn't work on demons," he said. "Only on Immortals."

"What's the difference?"

"Demons are ... demons, and Immortals are more closely related to angels. Completely different genealogical make-up. I can make you a demon repellant, if you want."

She gritted her teeth and wished she'd brought the cutting board with her to knock some sense into Uly. The bloodied arm was making her unusually lightheaded. She lowered it to her side and took a few deep breaths.

"Here, kitty, kitty!" Toby said in excitement. He barreled toward the forest, and she turned in time to see the black jaguar with the white eye patch seated at the edge of the park, tail flicking and intense green eyes on the approaching child.

"Toby," she called. He continued running. Alarm reignited her adrenaline. "Toby! Stop!"

Uly looked over at the child and jaguar curiously. Katie bolted for Toby, knowing the kid was too young to recognize Rhyn from any other demon-jaguar.

"Toby, if you don't stop, you're grounded for all eternity!" she shouted, running hard.

The child slowed as he neared the jaguar and turned, finally paying attention. The beast crouched, and she ran harder.

"Mama, I wanna play with Rhyn!" Toby whined. He looked at the jaguar again and took another two tiny steps, as if testing her resolve to ground him.

The jaguar launched itself at the child, and Toby's scream shattered the quiet morning as its jaw clamped on his arm. Toby began to panic and pull, and the jaguar lowered itself farther to the ground, planting its back legs and jerking the boy towards the forest. Katie's dormant maternal instinct roared to life, and she dived at Toby, snatching his legs to keep the jaguar from dragging him fully into the forest.

With his scream echoing in her head, she staggered up and started pummeling the jaguar's face, shouting for it to let the sobbing baby angel go. The jaguar winced but kept its grip, and Toby's blood turned the snow beneath them red.



A blast of energy whipped by her, knocking her back, and the jaguar was sent flying. It smashed into a tree. Toby sagged. She looked up, shocked to see Sasha standing over them, his sharp gaze on the creature preparing itself for a second attack.

"Go back to the grass! Demons can't cross onto sacred grounds!" Sasha shouted, snatching her arm and hauling her up.

She dropped on one knee beside Toby, who was unconscious. Tears in her eyes, she whispered to him as she lifted him, tormented by the sound of his whimper. She half-stumbled, half-ran to the park area before tripping and falling flat. Toby rolled from her arms.

"I went as fast ... as I could ..." Uly gasped, reaching them. Following him was Kris, dressed in nothing but judo pants, as if Uly had dragged him straight out of bed. She crawled on her knees to Toby, heart hammering and hands shaking as she rolled him onto his back. The slash in his arm was deep, and maroon blood bubbled into the snow.

"Kris ..." she whispered, a different kind of panic rising within her.

He swept the baby angel into his arms with one quick motion and trotted back into the castle. Katie was slower to follow, feeling lightheaded once again. Uly helped her up, and they both eyed Sasha as the Dark One's servant approached.

"I hate demons," he said with another look over his shoulder. She recognized the crazed look from when he'd attacked her in Hell and inched closer to Uly.

He motioned to the castle. Uly looked at her, even more pale than usual, and she retreated to the castle, worried sick about Toby and Rhyn, even knowing the half-demon could take out half the demons in Hell if he felt like it. The only two people she cared about in this godforsaken world were both fighting for their lives.

\* \* \*

Rhyn tossed the demon against the wall with enough power to break its back. The full-blooded demon was slow to rise, and he waited. Jared changed to his human form and held up one hand, holding his back with the other.

"Truce," he said. Rhyn growled in response but switched to his human form as well. "You know, you're not too bad for a half-breed."

"I'm half Immortal, half demon. Means I can play in both worlds, unlike you."

"I see that now. Your monkey is safe. Why don't we call it a draw for now, half-brother?"

"Only if you tell me what you're doing here," Rhyn replied.

He sensed the demon's pain behind its attempt at a chipper tone. Most who challenged him soon learned just how wild and deep his power ran. As both a demon and Immortal, he possessed the ability to wield both sources of power but not control them. At least, he hadn't been able to control them before meeting Katie. If this had been a pre-Katie battle, he'd have wiped out the state. He couldn't help but feel satisfied at besting a full demon *and* controlling his powers.

"I'm sure we'll be able to beat each other to a pulp again sometime," Jared continued. "Every demon on this mortal planet is hunting Sasha."

"Sasha? What do the demons want with Sasha?"

"The demons want revenge. We were both inmates in his zoo in Hell long enough to know how charming he was. He pissed off the wrong people."

"Not good enough," Rhyn said and started toward the injured demon. "I don't give a shit about Sasha."

"And ... AND," Jared rushed on, holding up both hands, "he stole something from the Dark One, something that makes demons immune to Immortal powers. It has something to do with your blood monkey. I'm too lowly a demon to know what, but I overheard them talking about it when they came to free us from our cell block."

"The Dark One unleashed *all* of Sasha's pets?" Rhyn asked, the feeling of doom making him jittery.

"All of us."

"The demons and were-things and the Dark One's personal creations."

"Oh, my," Jared said.

"Then I've got a long list of creatures to kill, starting with you."

"Now, wait, half-brother," Jared said. "I'll admit you have the advantage here. I'm not interested in revenge like the rest of my brethren. Those demons Sasha killed really deserved it. I just wanted to eat your blood monkey because she smelled so good, I figured she'd taste even better. That's all I wanted. But I don't have to do that. I can just walk away. Or I can help you. You're going to need some allies to face what's coming your way."

Rhyn considered the words born of desperation. There was truth in everything Jared said. He knew Jared well enough after all their years in Hell together to understand the creature was too narcissistic to care about another's issues. If anything, Jared wanted just what he said: a good snack on his way to find more good snacks.

Brute force usually won any battle he fought. Recently, he'd begun thinking he'd need more if he were taking on demons, Immortals, and anything else the Dark One would throw at him. All he needed was to figure out how to win a game of strategy he didn't know how to play, before his time was up and he lost the only thing that mattered.

"Well?" Jared asked, the confidence in his voice replaced by unease.

"If you betray me, Sasha will seem like an angel," Rhyn said, straightening out of his fighting stance. "There are demons in the forest surrounding the Immortals' winter stronghold. Have you any aversion to killing your own kind?"

"None."

"I'll take you there to hunt. You'll go nowhere near my blood monkey, and if any of our demon brethren attack her, you'll defend her. Remember, you'll be the first I come for if you betray me."

"Deal."

Rhyn studied the demon, aware he could never trust such a creature fully. But, if he could get some use out of him before it came time to kill him, he might have a better chance of protecting Katie.

"Follow me."

Rhyn opened the portal to the shadow world and walked through the damp fog to the forest outside the castle. Jared limped after him and appeared beside him on the cliff edge, taking in the morning view of grey skies and green forest with a look of distaste.

"I smell two demons, and blood," the demon said, raising his head to the wind. "Angel? You have an angel here? Their blood reeks!"

Rhyn's mind went to Toby, the baby angel he'd amused by shredding pillows. Jared's senses were more acute than his, and he turned to face the direction of the castle. Something had happened while he was gone.

"Go and hunt," he said. Fire slid through his body as he contorted and changed shapes. Jared stepped back as Rhyn launched himself into the air as a hellish bird reminiscent of a pterodactyl. His long wings beat the air as he rose, and it took him a short two minutes to soar over the castle.

The stark red of blood against white snow caught his attention, and he circled the park behind the castle. There were two splashes of blood, one at the tree line and another nearer the castle. He changed forms in midair and dropped the half dozen feet to the ground, smelling Toby's blood as he landed near it. He smelled Katie's, too, and was unable to quell the surge of lust that ran through him. He entered the castle, following the scents up the back stairwell that Katie alone used to avoid the other Immortals.

The trail led him to Kris's large chamber, and he strode in without knocking. Toby was in Kris's bed, the pale baby angel stripped down to his waist and unconscious. Uly and Kris carefully wrapped one of his arms in gauze. Katie sat on Kris's couch, glassy-eyed while her own wound went untreated. Rhyn's anger stirred at the sight of her bleeding alone, and he crossed to her, snatching the first aid kit off the bed.

Kris's gaze went from emerald to amber, and he strode across the room to meet him. Rhyn nearly decked him when the blond brother shoved him back.

"Get the fuck out, Rhyn!" Kris snapped. "And don't try to tell me that black cat wasn't you! You're one twisted—"

"Kris!" Katie interjected, standing unsteadily. "It wasn't him. He was off fighting some demon that attacked me."

"You stay out of this!"

"No, Kris, I won't! You're too quick to blame everyone else! It's my fault Toby was wandering around without someone watching him, but really, Kris, who assigns a woman an Immortal kid that's not even her own and expects her to know what to do with it?"

"I'm up to here with your lip. Sit down and shut up, Katie!"

Rhyn was content to let them fight when he thought she was winning, like she normally did. He sensed Kris's agitation was increased by the ensnaring scent of Katie's blood, which was heavy in the air. At Kris's angry response, Rhyn shoved his brother out of his path.

"Talk to my mate like that again, *brother*, and I'll fuck up this castle and everyone in it before you can think of stopping me." He crossed to Katie and sat on the ottoman in front of her. She sat, dazed. Kris's gaze burned a hole in his back, but Rhyn ignored him. Instead, he focused hard on cleaning up her blood and bandaging her arm before the scent drove him too wild to control himself.

"I want you gone, Rhyn. Be out of here by nightfall," Kris said at last, his voice quiet and hard.

"You all won't live long if I go, Kris. The forest is full of demons out for Sasha's head, and the Dark One may be sending more of its creatures. At this point, I'm the only thing capable of standing between you and the monsters in the forest," Rhyn replied with calmness he didn't feel.

He felt Katie's gaze on him and looked up from the bandage, his eyes lingering on her face. Her surprise echoed what he felt from Kris. He was trying not to let the feel of Katie's skin heat his blood, but her nearness and direct gaze lit him afire.

A half-demon outcast didn't deserve anything so delicate or beautiful, but Death help him, he wanted her more than anything else in his life. He didn't even know yet if he could protect anyone's ass, except his own. He dropped his gaze to the bandage, and he finished it in a hurry. If he didn't leave soon, and she kept looking at him like that, he'd make love to her right there.

"Toby needs a healer," Uly said from the bedside.

"I know where to find one," Rhyn said, his thoughts going to the Ancient healer that had been a prisoner in Sasha's zoo in Hell across the hall from his own cell. He stood without looking at Katie. "I'll be back. Keep everyone out of the forest, Kris."

He stalked to the door, sexual frustration and anger in his blood again. He jogged through the castle and ran out into the snow, launching himself into the cold air as he changed into the bird form. For once, he was grateful for the coldness chilling his fevered skin.

For the second time in as many days, Rhyn surprised her. She wasn't expecting his ministrations—however rough and sloppy they were—or his mouthing off to Kris.

And neither was Kris. The Immortals' leader cursed and paced for a few minutes after Rhyn left before disappearing into the hallway. She rose, still wobbly, and crossed to the bed, perching on it beside Uly. The sight of Toby's near lifeless features made her feel sick to her stomach. She brushed hair away from the child's face. His sweet smell and the feel of his soft skin lingered in her senses after she'd carried him from the forest. She'd never noticed how a kid smelled, like fresh sunshine.

"You think he'll be okay?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"I don't know," Uly answered. "I think a healer can fix him. I think he's just sleeping for now."

She touched the baby angel's hand. She'd never known the type of terror that tore through her when she saw the jaguar snatch him. The image replayed itself in her mind, and guilt flooded her. It shouldn't have taken almost losing him for her to realize how vulnerable he was. He was hundreds of thousands of mortal years old, but less than half a dozen in angel years. Without Gabriel, Toby had no one but her.

"How is he?" At Sasha's voice, they both turned. A tremor of fear went through her, and Uly crept closer, as if she had half a chance of defending them. She wrapped a hand around her throat protectively.

"Fine," Uly whispered. "Sleeping."

Sasha's gaze took them both in, his eyes settling on her bandaged arm before he forced himself to look at Toby.

"I didn't know we had a baby angel in our midst. Demons don't normally attack them, unless they were trying to draw you outside the sacred grounds, Katie," he said. "They taste awful."

"I don't think you should be here," Katie said, anger rising at his considering look at Toby.

"Very well. I'm in the chamber beside yours if you need anything." While quiet, his words were meant as the threat she took them to be. She was still staring at the doorway when Kris walked through. He strode to his walk-in closet and snatched a sweater and boots.

"What the hell is going on, Kris?" she demanded.

"Later."

"No, Kris, now. Toby and I have been attacked by demons, and Sasha's wandering around the castle like he owns the place."

"I don't expect you to understand. What's clear is that your *mate* is still out of control. Sasha can help me break the bond so you don't have to deal with that anymore."

"What bond?" she asked.

"The bond between you and Rhyn. You wanted your life back, didn't you?" he asked pointedly.

"Yes, but—"

"I need Sasha's help. He's a deviant. He knows how to do things no Immortal has ever done. He brought us a vial of blood to replace you as a test subject, and he knows where we can find the information to break your bond to Rhyn."

She was silent, surprised as much by his information as she was by the turning of her stomach at the thought of losing Rhyn.

*I have to do it before Gabriel comes for me.*

"It won't hurt him or me, will it?" she asked.

"I don't know yet, but if it must hurt one of you, it'll be my dear little brother, who is a blight to Immortals and humans alike." His words were spoken with an unusual amount of venom. "Besides, the bond between angel and human cannot be broken, so you'll have to take care of Toby until you die."

"Why do you hate Rhyn so much?" She watched him stop lacing his boots. A haunted look crossed his face.

"I want what he took from me," he said quietly. "I can't have it, and so neither shall he."

The look on his face made her bite her tongue to keep from saying anything else. Weeks ago, when she'd been at the Sanctuary, Gabriel entrusted her with the secret of what had caused Kris to turn on Rhyn. It involved a woman, Kris's intended mate. She was working with the Dark One, and Rhyn had killed for that reason. And no one had ever told Kris. She ached to, but she doubted he'd believe her.

Kris finished tying his boots and crossed to the door, slamming it on his way out. Ully jumped beside her.

"Do you think Toby is okay to move?" she asked, afraid to be there when Kris returned. "I want to put him in my bed so he doesn't wake up scared."

"We can try it," Ully said. "I don't like being around Kris when he's in a mood."

"Me neither," she agreed.

They carefully lifted the sleeping angel and carried him up a flight of stairs to her large chamber. Katie arranged the bedding and pillows around his still form and then retrieved his stuffed animals out of his bedroom.

"Next Thursday is Thanksgiving," Ully started as they settled on either side of the bed. "Kris does a big feast here every year, and Andre used to arrange the December holiday celebration. All the Immortals who are someone are here by mid-December."

She recalled what sent her outside the castle, and her anger at Kris ratcheted up another notch. He was planning something, if he invited Hannah to the castle.

“Ully, is there any way to see if my sister is coming here? Her fiancé is an Immortal.”

“Kris keeps a roster. We can have his private secretary check it. Write down the names, and I’ll take it down,” he offered. “I need to grab some grub, too. I can bring you dinner, if you want.”

“Yes, thanks,” she said and stretched for the pen and paper she kept in the nightstand drawer next to the bed. She scribbled down Hannah and Gio’s names then sat back, frowning. “I guess it really is Thanksgiving next week. Doesn’t seem like it’s been that long since ...” She trailed off, pensive.

“Time passes fast for Immortals. I guess when you stop counting hours and days and just count months or years—”

“I need to grab something. I can take this down,” she said suddenly, standing. He looked surprised. “What do you want me to bring you?”

He listed a few items, none of which she heard as she continued to stare at the paper. When he finished, she nodded and hurried away. She dropped a note into the absent secretary’s inbox then went to the first basement level, which housed supplies, clothing, and other essentials in the form of small department stores whose wares were free to all Immortals. She visited the small café and dropped three boxed lunches into a tote bag along with extra cocoa and marshmallows in case Toby woke up soon. She continued to the small women’s boutique that stocked every kind of facial and body care product she’d ever heard of—and many she hadn’t.

Two other Immortals lingered in the aisle of interest to her, and she browsed the small selection of feminine hygiene products, aware they only stocked a few brands for the few Immortal mates who were human. She made a show of reading the back of a box of tampons until the Immortals left. Only then did she venture closer to where they’d been and snag a small box smoothly from the shelf, pushing it under everything else to the bottom of the bag.

On her way back to her room, she poked her head into Kris’s secretary’s office. The slender Immortal glanced up from his computer.

“Saw your note,” he said with a quick smile. He pulled a printout from beneath his computer and scanned it. “They should be here ... tonight. I’m sending a car to the airport at about two. It’s a three-hour trek, so you can expect them between five and six.”

“Thanks,” she said and left, feeling as if the timing couldn’t be worse for her sister to show up. She wondered if Hannah knew yet about the Immortals and how Katie’s tattoo hadn’t been the result of a fling in Ireland as she led her sister to believe. She tucked the small box into her jeans pocket and covered the bulge with her sweater, ducking into the bathroom to hide it before rejoining Ully for their small lunch.

\* \* \*

“So this is where you’re hiding out.”

Gabriel whipped around at the voice, lowering the weapon that emerged instinctively at the sound of a stranger in his home. Rhyn kept his distance, knowing just how jumpy an assassin could be. Gabriel was at his place in the underworld, a small cottage tucked into Death’s realm, in the Everdark forest of Immortal trees whose hissing, fanlike leaves and snake-like branches moved to catch the quiet wind. Gabriel’s small cottage was lit by a single candle that cast light on a collection of weapons along one wall and a few books on a bookshelf on another.

"I didn't think you could come here," the assassin said.

"The Code says I shouldn't, not that I can't. Important distinction," Rhyn replied and pulled out a chair from the table on which the candle was placed. He straddled the chair and rested his forearms on its back. "You left without saying good-bye."

Gabriel rubbed his face, and Rhyn saw the shadow of stubble the assassin never allowed to grow. Something was really wrong if Gabriel's thousands-year-old habit changed suddenly.

"I didn't have a choice," Gabriel said with some difficulty. "Death owns me now."

Rhyn understood without asking. Gabriel had always been a free man; now the human-turned Immortal was a slave.

"Welcome to my world," he said with a chuckle. "You'll find making friends is hard when everyone hates you."

"I'm beginning to see that. Didn't realize I liked having some sort of free will."

"You still have choices. Just none of them are good."

Gabriel snorted in response.

"Since I know I can drop in on you whenever I want, I promise to come back," Rhyn continued. "I need a hand finding an Ancient healer named Lankha."

"Your girl hurt again?"

"I suppose you'll be the latest to tell me she's better off without me," Rhyn said. "But no, it's not her this time. It's Toby."

Gabriel frowned and ran a hand through his hair. Rhyn watched him, concerned at finding his sole friend so affected by the recent change in his life. He sensed much more amiss than Gabriel would ever admit.

"The healers moved to the other side of the Immortal world, past Elisia and closer to Hell. I can't take you, but here." He held out his hand. Rhyn stretched to tap fists with him, and the portal information lit up his thoughts. He'd spent most his life in Hell and remembered little of the Immortal world.

"I'll come back," Rhyn promised, rising.

"Rhyn," Gabriel said quietly. "I don't think our friendship will survive what comes."

"We are both bound to our destinies, Gabriel, something you taught me. Whatever that brings, you've been my only brother and friend," Rhyn replied in the same tone.

When the assassin turned away, Rhyn stepped into the living forest. He opened the portal and stepped into the shadow world, envisioning the place Gabriel had passed to him. One of the portals glowed in response, and he strode through it, stepping into a world as sunny as Gabriel's was dark. He smelled the ocean and stood on a beach of red sand edged with small shrubs. He walked up the beach and into the shrubs, finding a path that led to a small village of red cottages. Far across the sea, he saw the black walls of Hell stretching from water to sky.

The healers' village consisted of several dozen cottages around a central square, in which many of the village's people gathered and talked or cooked meals over red flames. They grew silent when he appeared, and those nearest him scattered. He'd thought Lankha skittish when he met the healer but soon found all the healers quaking and hiding.

"Lankha!" he belted, unable to distinguish one healer from the other. They all had Lankha's flat face, no nose, bug eyes, and scrawny little bodies with feathery hands. The healers

scattered like roaches in daylight. Rhyn snagged the clothing of one, and the healer yelped. "Come out, Lankha, or I eat everyone in your village, starting with this one!"

He heard whispers traded behind doors and cottages and waited.

"I'll count to three. One!"

"I'm heeeeere," one timid voice said. "What bringsss a demon to my hoooooome?"

He recognized the healer by the amount of bands winding around his arm. Each one represented a millennium, and this creature had been around longer than Rhyn's deceased brother, Andre. He released the healer whose arm he held.

"Come with me," Rhyn ordered, opening a portal. Lankha hesitated but moved forward with a look over his shoulder at the village. Rhyn waited until the healer passed him and then stepped into the shadow world behind him.

Lankha's head hung, as if he walked to his death. He trailed as Rhyn led him toward the brightest portal, and Rhyn took the healer's arm to hurry him along. They stepped into the snowy yard outside the castle. He all but dragged the healer to Kris's room, found it empty, then went to Katie's chamber. He flung the door open and shoved the healer into the room, ignoring the two surprised occupants of the chamber as he closed the door without entering.

The whiff of Katie's blood nearly undid him. He hadn't eaten in too long, and to have his mate so close ... Rhyn took the stairs two at a time until he reached the roof. He launched himself off the rooftop, hungry and determined to find a demon to bleed dry. He flew to the forest and shape shifted into a jaguar as he dropped to the ground, taking off through the forest. The exercise felt good, and he ran and leapt and clambered up trees until he was panting. It was after his adrenaline tapered off that he smelled blood, and he trotted down a path in the direction of the scent.

What he found didn't surprise him. Jared, wounded and vulnerable, had been cornered by another demon in its monster shape with drool dripping off its teeth. Jared was pale and propped against a rock. Happy the demon could draw his lunch out of the forest, Rhyn pounced on the demon, cracking its neck before it could fight. He tossed the creature to the side for later and shifted into his human form.

"Nature's not so kind to the weak," Jared said with a grimace as he pushed himself up.

"You're not of any use to me like this."

"Here's where you're wrong, half-breed. The reason I'm lying here in pain has to do with my accidental ambush of Darkyn's demons," the demon replied. "Are you going to eat all of him?" He motioned to the demon's carcass a short distance from them.

"Depends on if what you have to say is worthwhile."

"Fair enough. In any case, Darkyn's demons are planning to invade the castle, where your sweet little morsel is, so they can slaughter every last annoying Immortal."

"Demons can't cross the sacred grounds."

"They have an insider. And apparently, he alone knows how to render the grounds no longer sacred."

Rhyn's thoughts went to Katie. "Did they say when?"

"They noticed me then, so no. Help a brother out, Rhyn. I'm no good to you here in this shape. I need to go to Hell for a demon healer. I'll promise to return."



“Fine.” He no longer felt hungry despite the scent of blood. While he didn’t care what happened to Kris, he did care about Katie and when the demons would choose to attack. He’d suspected Sasha was there for more than one reason and didn’t doubt his brother had a plan.

Kris would never listen to him. The only other brother ever to extend a hand to help him was Kiki, the pragmatic half-brother who protected Asia. Rumor had it the Council hadn’t agreed on anything in a few hundred years, and Rhyn began to think the brothers he hated might be the solution to the demons.

Or he could take Katie, disappear, and leave Kris and the Immortals to their fate. He preferred this idea, except that it would mean he’d be defending her from Dark One’s minions and demons every minute of the rest of their lives together. Reluctantly, he accepted the fact that he needed the protection of the Immortals to keep Katie safe. If Kris didn’t call the Council together, Rhyn would drag his bastard brothers kicking and screaming to the castle, dangle them over the forest of demons, and offer them a choice: him or the demons. Cynically, he suspected all but Kiki would choose the demons.

\* \* \*

“Lankha?” Katie asked, startled to see the cowering healer in her room. She’d last seen him in Hell, where they shared a cell together. “Are you okay?”

The healer was huddled against the door, looking around with visible horror. His gaze settled on her, and he ventured forward.

“What is it?” Uly whispered.

“He’s the oldest of the healers,” she replied. She stood and crossed to the scared creature and took one of his soft hands. He went without resistance. She led him to the bed. “Rhyn brought you here to help our friend, Lankha.”

The healer sank next to her on the bed, large eyes darting around the room as if he expected the furniture to grow fangs and chase him. His gaze finally fell to Toby, and he inched forward. Uly watched with alarm as the healer unwrapped the angel’s bandage. She felt like petting the healer to calm him as she might Toby’s cat but suspected it wouldn’t be welcome. She grimaced when he peeled back the final layer of bandages to reveal the gouge and broken bones beneath.

The healer clucked to himself, growing more comfortable as he concentrated on his trade. Katie moved out of his way. A tap at the door made Lankha pause, and she hurried to answer it to keep the healer from being distracted.

“Madame, your sister’s car has just entered the property,” Kris’s personal secretary said. “I thought you might wish to greet her.”

Katie could think of nothing she wanted less, but she nodded. She changed quickly into dry clothing before hurrying down the back stairwell. With her arm bleeding, she couldn’t risk drawing the attention of the Immortals by taking the front stairwell even to meet her sister. She went the back way—the servant’s route, as Kris had so kindly informed her—to the front door.

The white Hummer limo made it up the snowy slope and slowed as it crossed the cleared cobblestone drive in front of the castle. It stopped, and two footmen went to the doors while two others opened the trunk.

Appearing refreshed and thrilled, beautiful, blond Hannah stepped from the Hummer and looked up, awe crossing her features. She was dressed in a long, white fur coat that Katie had no doubt cost more than a small house. Hannah's boots were white, her cream slacks and camel turtleneck completing her flawless look.

As usual, Katie felt a twinge of jealousy at the sight of her sister that only grew when Giovanni—Hannah's handsome fiancé—circled the car to take her arm and lead her to the stairs to the castle. Rhyn was about as uncivilized as Gio was civilized. Katie despised Gio most days, but sometimes, she wondered what a normal relationship was like. She didn't hear Kris draw abreast until the man stood at her side, staring at the gorgeous woman approaching.

"*That's* your sister?" he asked in clear astonishment. "What's this guy's name?"

"Giovanni de Medici, descendent of the Italian de Medici," his secretary answered from behind them.

"Oh. I think I've heard his name before. How did *he* get an invite here?" Both of them looked at Katie, and Kris pursed his lips.

"I was going to ask you the same about Hannah," she said with a glare. "Another of your tricks, Kris?"

"It's customary," Henri said. "Social propriety states that the immediate family of an Ancient's mate or high level Immortal—"

"You can't tell me this was an accident!"

The smallest of smiles crossed Kris's face, but he refused to answer.

"You are the biggest jackass in the world," she hissed. "You drag my sister here? Why, to keep me here?"

"You forced me to bring Rhyn here," he reminded her. "I say we're even."

"Aren't you sworn not to interfere with mortals?"

"I'm not interfering," he said with a sharp look. "Even if I don't need your blood, I'd be a fool to let you go."

"You swore an oath!"

"I take my oaths seriously, but I can't let you go for the demons to get you. They developed immunity blood the last time they had you. Consider your sister—"

"A hostage!"

"—a guest for an indefinite period of time. Besides, she's an Immortal's mate. She belongs to me anyway."

Before she could respond, Kris strode from the doorway down the path, stopping in front of the two approaching. Gio bowed deeply, but Hannah gazed up at Kris with a look of such admiration that Katie suddenly realized Hannah wasn't likely to object to staying in such a place. Kris greeted Gio, stepping aside to walk them up the path. Hannah's gaze strayed beyond Kris to catch sight of Katie. She gave an excited wave and quickened her step. For her sake, Katie tried not to look as pissed as she felt and trotted down the stairs to meet her sister. Hannah enveloped her in a warm hug that smelled of expensive perfume.

"Is this your home now?" Hannah asked, her glowing gaze going to the castle again. Well aware of Hannah's social ladder climbing aspirations, Katie couldn't help her retort.

"Don't act so surprised your little sis did something right for once."

"Who is that handsome man with Gio?" Hannah asked, gaze on Kris once again.

"The world's biggest dick," Katie replied.

"Katherine!" Hannah exclaimed. "You don't want him to hear you. Come, show me around."

Katie hesitated, then strode through the main hallways, suspecting Hannah would be too star struck to notice the looks they'd certainly receive from others.

"Where's that wonderful man of yours?" Hannah asked.

"Wonderful?" she repeated. "You mean Rhyn?"

Hannah chuckled, soon distracted as her gaze took in the entertaining parlor Katie led her to. She vaguely remembered it from her tour of the castle and was relieved to see several small groups congregated around all but one of the five fireplaces in the room. She went to the unoccupied fireplace and sat with her back to the wall, afraid of any Immortal who felt her draw enough to approach. Hannah removed her fur coat with a graceful flourish to reveal her snug clothing and perfect body. One of the servants darted forward to take her coat, and she gave a large smile before seating herself.

"So, tell me about this place," Hannah said, eyes bright.

"Where should I start?" Katie asked, uncertain what her sister knew.

"Gio told me about the Immortals. I'm still puzzling through that part. Who was the man who greeted us?"

"His name is Kris. He's sort of the leader of the Immortals. He's a manipulative, lying jackass."

"He seemed nice to me," Hannah said. Her familiar way of dismissing her opinion made Katie bite her tongue to keep from saying what she wanted.

"You staying here long?" she asked instead.

"Through the winter. I planned on going to Seychelles to escape the east coast cold, but Gio said being invited here was an honor. Then he told me about the Immortals. You landed yourself a good one, Katherine."

"I didn't *land* anything," Katie said impatiently. "We're destined to be Immortals' mates, and it's been as far from a pleasant experience as I could imagine. You just wait to see what Kris has in store for you. He'll make your life a living hell."

"You've always been a little melodramatic, Katherine. How can you still seem so negative when you're surrounded by all *this*!"

Katie clenched her jaw, realizing just how sugar-coated the Immortals' world around her would look to her sister. Gio appeared in the doorway. He caught sight of them and crossed to Hannah. He appeared more unsettled than Katie had ever seen him. His gaze was roving, and his air distracted even as he bent to give Hannah a kiss on the cheek.

"I'll catch up with you later, love," he said. "I've got some business to attend to with the other Immortals."

"Of course, my Gio," Hannah said sweetly. "I'll be with Katherine, if you need to find me."

Gio's tight smile was fleeting. Katie wondered what had called him away—news of the demons in the forest or some other awful plan by Kris? She watched him go, frowning when he turned left down the hall toward the front door rather than right to the stairwell or interior of the castle.

"Excuse me, sis," she said, rising. "Just tell one of the waiters what you want to drink."

Hannah was happy to marvel over her surroundings. Katie moved quickly through the room, refusing to meet the gaze of any of the Immortals. She emerged into the hallway in time to see a butler open the main door for Gio.

She trotted after him and stepped into the evening chill. The hidden sun was setting, and the white snow clouds glowed eerily, lit by the last rays of light. Hannah's fiancé hurried to the waiting Hummer. Hannah's Louis Vuitton luggage was lined up neatly along the path, and Katie skirted it.

"Gio!" she called. "Where are you going?"

"Katherine," he replied, turning. "You will have to forgive me. Assure Hannah this was not my idea."

"What wasn't your idea?"

"Kris asked me to bring her here. He thought she might be an Ancient's mate like you."

"Okay, so why are you leaving her?"

Gio hesitated before sighing. "He asked me to. He granted me a position directly supporting the Council, if I walked away from her forever."

"So you traded her for your ego," Katie said and crossed her arms.

"The Immortal society is not like a human's, Katherine," he scolded. "You cannot marry into a higher rung on the ladder. You can only be granted special status by someone in a caste far above you."

"Don't you care about hurting her feelings?"

"Hannah used me to climb the social ladder, and I did not mind, because she is a beautiful, sweet girl," he said. "I, in turn, used her to climb the Immortal ladder."

Speechless, Katie couldn't help thinking Gio was as shallow as her sister. That didn't stop her from being angry at the man who would dump her sister off to deal with the hell she'd gone through.

"Leave this be, Katie." Kris's voice came from the doorway behind her. "Gio, go. Your service is eternally appreciated."

Gio bowed and got into the Hummer. The door closed, and the long vehicle pulled away. Katie faced Kris with a glare.

"What the hell are you doing, Kris?" she demanded. "Isn't it enough that I'm here?"

"I expected your sister to be as rough around the edges as you are," he said. "I'm glad she's not, and she seems to understand trading personal happiness for a social status. She's an Ancient's mate, Katie, like you. How there were two of you born into one family, I don't know."

"You can't make her stay."

"From what Gio says, she'll *want* to stay, and I doubt she'd consider mating with someone like me abhorrent."

"If you'll remember, I didn't choose which Ancient to become my mate. What if she chooses one of your brothers?" she challenged.

"We'll know soon who she chooses," he said. His gaze went to her throat. "Two Ancients' mates in the same family. Maybe you are more like Rhyn than I gave you credit for. Both of you are blemishes on your family."

He walked back into the castle, leaving her with burning cheeks. She looked up at the glowing clouds, from which snow had begun to fall again. Tears stung her cheeks. As she

thought of Toby, she wondered how much of what Kris said was true. He wouldn't have been hurt if not for her, and Hannah may not have been dragged into the Immortal world if she hadn't hit the radar of Kris.

She wiped her face, determined not to abandon her sister as Gio had. She walked the short distance into the house and down the hallway, stopping when she reached the doorway. Kris wore a rare, charming smile as he sat across from Hannah, talking. Hannah's face glowed as she gazed at Kris's handsome features. Kris caught Katie's gaze and shook his head ever so slightly, warning her against coming in.

She watched for a long moment and then left, defeated and frustrated. She returned to her chamber, where Lankha still worked his magic on an unconscious Toby under Ully's watchful gaze.

The sight of Toby's blood made her feel sick, and her own blood loss made her dizzy. It was her fault he was hurt. She was an awful foster mom. Maybe Gabriel taking her to Death would make the lives of those around her easier.

Rather than join them, she paced the hall before following it to its end and ascending to the roof. The night was cold and the wind nonexistent. Snow soon covered her arms as she crossed the roof to gaze into the well-lit courtyard. Too tired to fight her tears anymore, she let them fall and stood shaking on the rooftop.

"What're you doing up here?"

She turned in time to see Rhyn drop with an audible crunch from the air to the snowy roof. Her misery increased at the physical reminder that she hadn't figured out what to do about him yet.

"Thinking," she replied.

"Dangerous."

"For you, maybe."

He drew near but stopped just out of arms' reach, alerted by her sharp tone. Embarrassed by her tears, she turned away. Mercifully, he said nothing, only stood close to her and stared into the same sky. Even at the safe distance, his body heat made her uncomfortably warm.

"You think we'll all survive this?" she asked at last.

"Probably not. As long as I take Kris down with me, I don't give a shit."

She stifled a laugh, and he gave her a sidelong glance.

"I got time if you do," he added. "You can't fuck a man once when he's outta prison and never again."

"You're on probation," she reminded him. "And your time is running short."

"Got it covered."

"Do you?"

"More or less."

"I'm not convinced."

"Seems stupid for us to stand here when we both want each other so bad," he said. "I thought we were making progress. I was good last night."

"I feel like your life and Toby's and Hannah's would be better without me in it," she said and faced him.

"I think you're afraid. Your life is shitty and you have one good thing going for you. You're the only good part of my life. I assume it's the same for you."

She said nothing at his words, surprised as always by his backhanded compliments and tormented by the knowledge that she had to do something that would hurt them both. He stepped closer until they were toe-to-toe. She craned her head back to hold his silver gaze, a tremor of desire working its way through her.

Maybe tomorrow she'd break it off. She didn't want to lose him just yet.

"I thought I made your life more difficult," she said to keep from falling into a dangerous silence.

"That, too. You're as tough as an egg dropped from a ten-story building. Really hard to rescue. Gets annoying."

"I didn't ask for this!" Her face burned at his bluntness. She was frustrated to feel more tears rise. "I'm tired of all this shit. I have no say in anything, and in the end, we're all screwed! Go back to killing things, Rhyn." She turned her back to him, hoping he'd fly off in his pterodactyl form or disappear into the depths of the forest as a jaguar.

She felt his warmth at her back instead. He draped his arms around her and pulled her against him, resting his chin on her head. She wiped her face, afraid to let herself feel pleasure in the warm body pressed against hers on such a cold night. Every time he touched her, her resolve melted. He smelled of his own musk and darkness, an alluring mix that made her blood burn.

She missed him. The sense of yearning was deep. She barely knew the man at her back, but she'd felt his absence even during the few hours in the day they weren't together. Gabriel's words and her nightmare haunted her, reminded her she couldn't let herself fall in love with him now.

"Rhyn ..." She trailed off, not at all sure what she wanted to say. "Do you ever think we're better off not being together?"

"No," he said, though he shifted behind her. "Do you?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

"I think we make a good pair."

"Why?" she asked.

"No one else could put up with either of us."

She wanted to be offended by his comment but suspected he spoke the truth.

"We will make things work," he said.

"I really don't know, Rhyn."

"It doesn't matter what you think. You're already mine."

She forced herself to pull away from him. "I want to like you, Rhyn, I really do, but sometimes I don't think you know how bad things are."

"You more than like me, but you're too scared to admit it. Say whatever you want, Katie, but this is happening."

"Now you'll tell me you know how I feel because you read my mind." She leveled a glare on him.

"If I feel like it, I see every thought that crosses your mind. Like Kris saying he'd break the mating bond between us. Kris can't do it, by the way. You're stuck with me."

She stared at him, surprised. He was unfazed by the idea that traumatized her. Another thought occurred to her about her trip to the boutique earlier that day.

"What else have you read?" she asked cautiously.

"I haven't since yesterday morning. Trying to be *good*."

"Thank you," she said, relieved.

"Kiss? Breakfast tea? It ain't easy being a *good* demon."

Her emotions felt too raw to deal with him: anger, desire, regret. She didn't have the strength this night to tell him to go.

"I can't, Rhyn. I have to check on Toby," she said and moved past him before she changed her mind. "I've failed miserably in my role as a foster mom, and he nearly died because of it."

"What happened to Toby wasn't your fault." She paused at his words and turned to look at him again. "None of you knew about the demons in the forest, and you were right about what you said to Kris."

"I think I like it better when you're hard to get along with," she said with some frustration. "You're not making things easier."

"Life is anything but easy." For the first time that night, she realized he was disturbed about something. Rhyn gazed at her, considering. "I don't want to lose you, Katie."

She looked down. If she didn't find a way to push him away, she risked messing up both of their lives. She loved him, but she couldn't let him love her.

"Don't you have a checklist or something I can follow so I know what I'm supposed to be doing?" he asked.

"If there were a checklist for relationships, everyone would have a happy ending," she responded. "Do I feel whatever it is between us? Do I miss you even when I know I can call you and you'd come without question? Yes, but I don't trust you, Rhyn. It takes more than killing things, and I'm done being chewed on, mauled, and treated like crap by you Immortal idiots."

He said nothing.

"What we have is not enough for me. Do you get that?" she asked.

"What happened between last night and tonight?" His gaze had turned predatory again.

"Nothing. I just realized I can't be with someone I can't rely on, Rhyn." Her words sounded cheap, even to her ears. She turned and all but fled the rooftop, cursing herself for her weakness and the tears in her eyes.

She pushed the door open to her room and gazed at Toby. Color had returned to his face, and Lankha was curled up in a ball at the end of the bed with Ullly snoring in a chair. She sat at the edge of the bed and touched Toby's soft face, not sure what to do or think about anything anymore, especially now that Hannah had been dragged into this world.

\* \* \*

Kris watched the door to the guest bedchamber close, unusually hopeful about his discovery. He padded down the hall to his room, where Sasha awaited him.

"So I was right," Sasha said as he entered. "One more feather in my cap."

"And a trail of dead bodies you'll never make up for," Kris replied. Sasha shrugged, unconcerned. "How did you know?"

"When I tasted the sister, I saw her mind. I saw what they both were."

Kris poured himself chilled whiskey from the small refrigerator tucked in a corner. He took a sip, gaze going to the snow falling outside the window. Sasha's words reminded him that he, too, had *tasted* Katie. She'd tasted so sweet, and he prayed her sister tasted the same. She had a reason to hate him after what he'd done, and he'd been unable to apologize. He'd hoped to use Sasha's knowledge to break her bond to Rhyn and mate with her himself, despite their hostile relationship. Now, he may not have to. There was more than one Ancient's mate. For the first time since Andre's death, things were looking better for him.

He felt the weight of his brother's death on his shoulders again. Andre had been his confidante and mentor whose guidance had helped him navigate his role as the Immortals' leader. Without him, Kris felt as if he were alone trying to solve the world's problems.

"Tell me why the forest is crawling with demons," he said and turned to Sasha. "And why their leader is demanding an audience with me to discuss you."

The smile faded from his half-brother's face, and Sasha's gaze went to the fire. "My people figured out the right mix of Rhyn's girl's blood to give immunity to whoever has it. I was under some ... pressure from the demons after some stupid misunderstanding regarding Darkyn's daughter and a few others, so I took it and came here," he said.

"Knowing your older brother would have to protect you from the most powerful demon Hell ever spat out," Kris said, anger flaring within him.

"You're sworn never to harm one who comes in good faith."

"I need to ask you something, and if you lie to me, we're done."

"Whatever you like, brother," Sasha said with too much ease.

"Were you responsible for killing Andre?"

"You forget, Kris, he was my brother, too, and I considered him a friend. He was the only neutral party among our father's sons. What he considered me, I won't even try to guess, but no, I didn't. It was rumored in Hell that Darkyn was trying to get your precious Katie. Andre was collateral damage."

Sometimes Kris hated being his father's son and resented Andre's insistence that he choose duty over all else. He'd lost his lover, Jade, that way, a sacrifice that still stung. He seemed to be the only one on the Council who truly cared about upholding the balance between good and evil, no matter what the cost. That *Rhyn* of all his brothers would be granted such an honor as an Ancient's mate made a mockery of everything. He saw firsthand how Rhyn's destructive nature took its toll on those closest to him, and the half-breed had no sense of loyalty or duty to the Council.

Even so, Rhyn's flaws stemmed from his nature of being a half-demon. Sasha had *chosen* to serve the Dark One and betray the Council and their father. Sasha may not have pulled the trigger on Andre, but someone he knew where to find their oldest brother, who had been protecting Katie when he was rendered dead-dead.

Sasha also knew the Code Kris was bound by: those who came in good faith would be given the chance to prove it. Then there were the rules their father had created about none of the brothers being permitted to kill the others, with the exception of Andre, whose sole purpose in life was to keep the Council on track and protect them. Unless Sasha posed a direct threat to the Council, Kris was forbidden from buying an assassination, despite suspecting his brother wasn't as innocent as he proclaimed.



Sasha disgusted him, but he couldn't just kill him like he wanted to.

"She looks like Lilith," Sasha said.

"I hadn't noticed," Kris said and took another sip, aware his brother was always on the prowl for some weakness to exploit. In truth, he *had* noticed that Hannah looked like the first Ancient's mate ever found, Lilith. Lilith had been intended for Kris and was pregnant with his son when Rhyn killed her and the baby both.

He took another sip. After all his sacrifices, after losing Lilith and Katie to Rhyn, he wasn't sure what he'd do if Hannah chose someone other than him as her mate.

"We aren't too different," Sasha voiced quietly. "Sometimes it only takes a small nudge to push you over the edge."

"What pushed you to the Dark One, brother?"

"A loss too great for me to bear."

Kris looked at him sharply, suspecting his brother was trying to play on his emotions. Sasha still stared into the fire.

"What did you lose?" he demanded.

"My soul mate. You stole him from me, just as Rhyn stole Lilith from you."

Surprised at the raw, bitter note in Sasha's voice, Kris studied him. "Jade?" he asked. "You were in love with Jade?"

"I was, until he became enamored with you. You don't give a shit who you fuck, but I did then. There was only one for me."

"You can have him."

"Too late. I think I burned that bridge. The demons brought Jade and Iliana to Hell."

Jade had disappeared after Kris sent him away in hopes that Katie would become his mate. He'd last seen his other trusted lieutenant, Iliana, two days ago, when he'd sent her to represent him in North America while he was away.

"Are they alive?" he asked.

"They are. The demons treat their guests well. Iliana has been a favorite among them."

Anger made Kris's face warm. Iliana was a relatively young Immortal who had been at his side for only a few decades, having caught his attention with her fighting skill and fierce loyalty. He'd promoted her to one of his lieutenants. She was tough, loyal, and beautiful.

"Our family is prone to ongoing disappointment and treason. I think we are worse to each other than the Dark One is to his enemies," Kris said, white rage buried deep within him to keep Sasha from seeing it.

"Without a doubt, brother, which is why I hope your meeting with Darkyn goes well. He's not the kind of demon you want to piss off."

Kris glanced at the clock, aware it was time for him to meet with the demon leader. He set his glass down and looked again at Sasha, who had yet to glance away from the fire. He wasn't fooled by any of his brothers, especially Sasha and Rhyn, whose treachery had been too personal for him to forget or forgive.

He threw on a jacket and left, aware Sasha couldn't leave the castle grounds without forfeiting his life and wouldn't dare disrupt the Immortals for fear of Kris's wrath. Kris could kill or have him killed in retribution for any life he took while inside the walls. Sasha wasn't that stupid, though Kris wondered what game his brother played.

The night was cold and dark as he strode across the park to the edge of the castle's grounds. A single figure already awaited him at the edge of the invisible wall that kept the demons out of the sacred grounds. More dark shadows lingered deep within the forest, watching over their leader. Darkyn was a head shorter than Kris and wider, his steady gaze and roughly hewn features reminding him of Rhyn.

Kris stopped a safe distance away on the sacred grounds, taking in the underwhelming demon leader with some surprise. He'd expected some towering monstrosity from the legendary demon who challenged the Dark One.

"You have something I want," Darkyn said with Rhyn's bluntness.

"Good evening to you, Darkyn," Kris replied. "I'm afraid my brother stays with me. I am bound to protect him."

"By Immortal Code, you must turn him over to me. He has slain a family member."

"I find it funny you demons spend your days looking for ways to break the Code then dare quote it to me. No, Darkyn, you will not have Sasha. Now, Rhyn, you can have."

"The half-breed?" Darkyn sneered. "I would rather fry myself on sacred ground. Sasha took something from the Dark One. If you will not return your brother as you are obligated, then you must return this."

Kris was quiet, pretending to consider. His opinion of Darkyn tanked. The demon was an idiot, too unaccustomed to politics or negotiating to understand how to get what it wanted without revealing what that was. There was no way in Hell Kris would give this creature the key to defeating his warriors! But then, he needed some way to keep his Immortals safe until he could determine how many demons were in the forest so he could wipe them out.

"This I will think about," he said at last. "I will speak to Sasha to determine what it is he stole, and if it is rightfully owned by the Dark One, which it must be in order for you to reclaim it."

The demon eyed him.

"If it is so, then I'll return it to you. I'll convene the Council That Was Seven for an impartial vote. This might take me a few days. I ask that, in the meantime, you refrain from attacking any Immortal traveling the road to the castle."

It was the demon's turn to consider. Kris waited.

"On the main road only," the demon agreed. "And if Sasha steps outside of sacred grounds, we will take him. No appeal of yours will work in his favor."

*I hope not*, Kris thought but said aloud, "I'll warn him."

Darkyn's features were too shuttered to read, and Kris didn't wait for him to second-guess anything. He returned to the castle, stopping at the sound of commotion from the direction of the forest before he reached the entrance. Rhyn's pterodactyl shape hovered over the demons at the edge of the forest, one of the creatures dangling in his talons. Kris heard the sickening sound of the demon's body breaking from the distance and watched the other demons shapeshift to charge the half-demon. Hoping they'd fix his Rhyn problem for him, he entered the castle and headed straight to the office of his personal secretary.

"Henri, summon Kiki and the others here immediately. If Tamer gives you any resistance, let me know, and I'll drag him here myself," he instructed. "And find out if Iliana made it to her destination."

Henri nodded, his fingers flying over the keyboard in front of him. Of all the thoughts on Kris's mind, Hannah and Jade were foremost. He didn't know whose mate Hannah was intended to be but hoped fate revealed it soon, or he'd help it along and claim her as his as he should've done to Katie when they met.

He'd been too good of a person a mere month before. Andre's death and Rhyn's reappearance changed everything, and Kris found himself considering alternatives he'd never have thought twice about before, like ordering Rhyn and Sasha killed despite his oath to protect his brothers and making an oath to Katie he had no intentions of keeping.

Another idea emerged from his dark thoughts, and he trotted out of the secretary's office and to Katie's chamber. Uly was sleeping soundly in his seat beside Toby's bed. Katie was huddled in a blanket before the fire, and what looked like a healer curled on the bed. Kris nudged Uly awake, motioning for the scientist to follow him out of the chamber. Uly did so sleepily.

"I have a project for you," Kris said as he walked toward the stairs. He looked back to see Uly leaning against the wall to fix his shoes. "Uly, walk!" The scientist obeyed. "Have you had a chance to test the immunity blood Sasha brought?"

"No. I was distracted by Toby. The poor little—"

"The vial is your concern now. I need confirmation before the Council meets, and I need to know if you can alter whatever it is Sasha's people did," Kris said.

"Alter it how?"

"The demons are demanding I return it to them. I want to oblige, only I want the mix to kill them. Slowly, if at all possible."

"Slowly?" Uly asked, puzzled. "Is quickly an option, if it's all I can do?"

"You're both the brightest and dumbest man I've ever met."

Uly fell silent. Kris opened the door to his lab, pushed him in, and closed it. He wiped his face with one hand and ascended, surprised to see Hannah in the hall. He forced his anger and frustration away to keep his eyes from flaring amber, then approached. She looked up at him, her sweet face glowing.

"I hope it's okay if I wander around for awhile. I'm too excited to sleep," she admitted. "And the snow makes this place look so magical!"

"It would be my pleasure to show you around," he said and held out his arm. She accepted it, and they walked down the hall. Her bouncy blond curls brushed his arm as she turned her head to take in the tapestries and look up at the murals on the ceilings.

Her draw was not as consuming as Katie's, which meant she'd have a much better chance of surviving if not every demon and Immortal was drawn to her.

"May I ask you a few questions about your family?" he asked, puzzled again as to how two Ancient's mates were born into one family.

"Of course."

"Do you have any other siblings?"

"Not at all. Katie was born about seven years after me. Our parents thought two was enough."

"Your parents, are they still alive?"

"A car accident killed them both. I basically raised Katie from the time she was ten," she said, a sad look crossing her features. "Not sure I did a good job."

"You did a wonderful job. She's a ... charming woman," he forced himself to say.

Hannah laughed. "You can say it—she turned out a little rough around the edges!"

"I have to agree with you there. You two couldn't be more different."

She beamed.

"I wonder how there came to be two women destined to be Immortal mates in one family. It's unheard of. Did you ever come to know of your parents being different in any way?"

"Not at all."

Disappointed, he wasn't sure what else to ask. Uly would run blood tests on Hannah, but he doubted they'd reveal much more than Katie's had. He took in her delicate features and felt a familiar warmth stir his blood. She met his gaze and held it, her pupils dilating and a faint flush spreading across her features. He stopped walking and stood close enough for their chests to brush when she breathed in. Waiting for some sign of rejection, he lowered his head until his lips brushed hers.

"What about Gio?" she breathed.

"Do you prefer a prince or his servant?" he asked.

She hesitated only a second more and leaned into him, parting her warm lips to receive his kiss.

\* \* \*

Jade waited for Darkyn to return from his meeting with Kris. He gazed into the black flames of the fire in the hearth. This had been Sasha's study less than a few days ago. He clenched his fists, not wanting to think about Sasha or Kris or how quickly he, too, could have the tables turned on him as he had done to Sasha.

He'd decided to sleep in here last night, unable to sleep in his bedchamber with the thought of Iliana's body in the trunk beside the bed. He'd accidentally hurt someone innocent, and he didn't want the reminder. He wouldn't do it again.

"It went exactly as expected," Darkyn said as he walked into the study. "Kris refused to turn over Sasha or the vial. He underestimates me."

"Kris values the Code and his duty more than he does anything," Jade said with some bitterness.

"You said there is a weakness to the castle that will render the ground no longer sacred."

"There is."

At his silence, Darkyn moved closer, his dark eyes piercing and the growl in his chest audible. Jade looked away. Until now, he'd always thought he could turn back. No one but Iliana had died, and the only person he'd betrayed was Sasha, whose death Kris might eventually reward him for by welcoming Jade back into his life and his bed.

"I will have it from you!" Darkyn said and struck him hard enough to knock his breath out as he slammed into the wall. Jade gasped for a moment and steadied himself.

"I ... can make it happen," he said. "You cannot. You have to be in the castle to make it work."

"You seek to betray me as your predecessor did."

"No, Darkyn. I want my revenge against Sasha and Kris both, but there are innocent people there."

"No Immortal is innocent."

"Let me go to Sasha. I will make him our tool," Jade said, his mind working fast to find a way to keep Darkyn from destroying everyone. Darkyn studied him and then withdrew a thin collar and approached. Jade flinched as it snapped into place around his neck.

"If you do not return by dawn, this will bring you back to me, and I will show you no mercy," Darkyn warned.

"Will you consider sparing the rest of the Immortals, master?"

"You came to me to destroy those who have wronged you. I want revenge for my daughter's treatment at Sasha's hands, and I want the vial or the girl. I own you now, Jade. Do not question me again."

Darkyn strode out, and Jade watched him, torn. Sasha and Kris were his enemies, not the rest of the Immortals! He had come to Darkyn in desperation, after Sasha had invited him to his bed and then dumped him off with the demons. He'd been spared for what he knew of the Immortals, and Darkyn had taken a personal liking to him.

A violent liking to him. Jade shuddered. Demons knew no other way.

*It's better to reign in Hell ...*

As Kris's confidante of several hundred years, he knew most of the Immortal's secrets. He'd been unable to shake the empty hole in his heart resulting from Kris flinging him to the side to pursue a human female. Even as he thought of his last moments with Kris, he felt his anger turn to resolve.

The Immortals deserved neither mercy nor peace, especially their leader. He was doing Kris's next lover a favor. He'd use the tricks of manipulation he'd learned from Kris and Sasha both to get Sasha to do what he wanted. And then, the both of them would be gone. Forever. His revenge was all that would make him whole again.

Determined, he went to the one spot in Hell where he could cross into the shadow world. A demon guarded the tiny spot, no larger than a meter square. He opened a portal and crossed through. Long ago, before Sasha broke from the Council, he had stayed in a corner chamber overlooking the forest. Jade emerged from the shadow world into the chamber's spacious closet and stood silently, listening.

He heard movement outside the closet and eased the door open far enough to peek into the well-lit room. Sasha sat before the hearth as if deep in thought. Jade couldn't help the flash of anger he felt at the sight of such a creature comfortable and content.

"Sasha," he said, flinging open the closet door. Sasha turned to face him, covering his surprise with a smile that made Jade's skin crawl.

"Jade, my friend. How are you?" he purred.

"Seems I'm not as well off as you are. How quickly you found a safe place," Jade replied.

"My brother Kris is too good, as you know."

"He can't protect you forever, Sasha."

"I think he can and will. The fool doesn't have the backbone to kill me as he probably should."

More anger stirred as Jade bit his lip to keep from defending Kris. No matter how badly Kris had hurt him, it hadn't been for a selfish cause like Sasha's.

"That's your plan?" Jade asked. "Stay here in this room forever?"

"Simple and effective."

"You won't get tired of it here or bored? I know your appetite for women and men, Sasha. Kris won't tolerate what you do to them."

"My ... ways can be sated quietly."

Jade crossed to the window and looked out, formulating a plan to let the demons into the castle using Sasha. He debated with himself again. Once he crossed this line, he could never return.

"You're troubled," Sasha said and rose. "I can ease that tension."

"Darkyn sent me, Sasha."

"I see the collar. I assumed as much. I'd be a bigger fool than Kris to return with you, Jade."

"That's not why I'm here. He is offering you a deal," he said slowly. "If you can help him get to Kris, he'll call it even and leave you alone."

"And the Dark One?"

"Might help get you back in the Dark One's favor, but I'm here for Darkyn only."

"So, hand over Kris on a silver platter, and I'm free of those pesky demons," Sasha mused.

"You can use the vial to blackmail your way back," Jade added.

"It'll be hard to get my brother alone outside the castle where Darkyn can snatch him."

"Or you can bring the demons here."

Sasha was quiet, and Jade faced him. He expected Sasha to sense his betrayal, but Sasha's gaze glowed for a different reason.

"I'm impressed, Jade," Sasha said. "I thought you too weak to think like I do."

"You and Kris toughened me up."

"We did. Unfortunate, but I like the result. I only know of one way to let the demons in. You are certain Darkyn will consider this repayment for his whore-daughter?"

"Absolutely," Jade said without hesitation. "I haven't even changed your apartment in Hell."

Sasha considered him long and hard. Jade waited, hoping Sasha's desire to return to Hell or take out Kris overwhelmed any suspicion he had.

"Speaking of my ways ..." Sasha said, his gaze turning lustful. Jade swallowed hard, still hurt from his last night with Darkyn. If this was what it took to seal the deal with Sasha ...

"I have to be back by dawn," he said.

"I'll be done with you by then."

Resigned, Jade peeled off his shirt, the sense of triumph making him feel sick to his stomach.

\* \* \*

Katie awoke to the healer's cool touch on her arm. She struggled into a sitting position, her neck achy from her spot sleeping on the floor before the fire. Lankha worked his magic with his micro suede-covered hands and gentle touch. He was almost done when the burst of coolness awoke her, and she looked down to see him smoothing the skin around her faded wound.

"How's Toby?" she asked, gaze going to the bed.

"Angel is well. Must resssst," Lankha said. "And you must ressssst."

"This is the least bad wound I've had yet."

"Not for wound. For..." and he pointed to her stomach. She froze then looked around to ensure no one was there to overhear them.

"You're certain?" she whispered.

"Yesss."

"If you tell anyone, Rhyn will pull your arms and legs off like you're a grasshopper!"

He gasped. She felt bad for scaring him but knew the alternative—people like Kris or Sasha finding out—would doom her. She'd have to pray Rhyn didn't drop by her mind when she thought of it, or when she was trying to figure out what to do.

Her eyes went to Toby. She couldn't raise a kid in a place of demons and psychos! She stood abruptly and crossed to the bathroom, wanting to be alone. She had no luck in life!

*The next time I visit the human world, I'll be leaving with two souls.* Gabriel's ominous warning suddenly made sense. Her body trembling, she sat on the edge of the Jacuzzi tub, staring into space. Urgency surged within her. There was nowhere she could run from Gabriel, who had orders to bring her and the life within her to Death. Was all truly lost?

Rhyn could never know. Tears began to spill down her face as she understood the depth of Gabriel's pain. She sat in the bathroom and ran the shower to cover the sound of her crying, completely lost as to what to do.

"Katherine?" Hannah called with a loud knock.

"Just a sec! Almost done!" she belted and scrambled up to lock the door. She looked in the mirror, distraught, then scrubbed her face and turned off the shower. When she emerged, it was to the sight of a glowing, ecstatic Hannah, who sat on the edge of her bed talking to a sleepy Toby. The healer was huddled next to the fireplace, afraid to move with the presence of the newcomer. Katie's jealousy stirred again.

"Toby," Katie said, crossing to the bed. The baby angel gave a small smile that filled her with relief. He looked exhausted. "You okay?"

"I'm fine, Mama," he said with a noisy sigh. "Hungry."

"I'll get you some soup and cocoa," she said and rose. Her gaze went to Hannah, who looked so sunny, she wondered what had happened. "You wanna come, Hannah?"

"I'd love to!"

Her gush made Katie feel old and crotchety. Hannah had been a kept woman with no problems since meeting Gio, whereas Katie had always struggled to find her path. Hannah would be a basket case if she only knew the extent of Katie's issues!

She walked to the door and pulled it open for Hannah in her straw-colored pants and light pink sweater. Hannah no longer wore her engagement ring, and Katie wondered why she was so happy when she must know by now Gio wasn't coming back for her.

They entered the dining room, which was filled for brunch. Katie ignored the looks of those nearest her, and Hannah looked around, happy.

"Just need some soup to go," Katie told the host, who snapped his fingers at a servant. "And whatever you want, Hannah."

"Master Kris has ordered us to respect any wish you have, Miss Hannah. You'll find our chefs the best in the world," the host said, ignoring Katie to address her sister.

Hannah blushed, and Katie looked at her anew.

"You *slept* with him?" she asked. "That's quick even by your standards."

"Not so loud," Hannah replied with an apologetic look at the host.

"Didn't you just get dumped by one Immortal?"

"Kris explained everything to me last night, Katherine."

"Explained what? That he manipulated Gio and now you?"

Hannah looked again to the host, who pretended not to hear despite being less than two feet away. Furious, Katie left before she made more of a scene that would embarrass her sister. She was pacing the hall in front of the dining area when Hannah emerged a short time later carrying a large tote.

"I suppose he explained what he did to me, too," Katie snapped. "Or did he leave that part out?"

"He explained he's tried to do his best but doesn't always succeed, like anyone, Katherine," Hannah said. "You're making a big deal out of this. I'm an adult, and so is he."

"You're my sister. Don't you find it odd he was so quick to come on to you?"

"He believes we're meant to be."

"And what do you believe?"

"I believe ..." Hannah drifted off, looking around her. "I believe I could be very comfortable living here." She smiled. Katie watched her walk down the hall toward her chambers, stunned. Hannah saw nothing but the gilded world around her; she had no idea about the dark underside to the Immortal world.

Katie had hoped to make her sister a confidante but knew it was impossible so long as Kris's claws were wrapped securely around Hannah. Gabriel, Rhyn, Hannah. Those who might've been her friends were gone. Gabriel didn't have a choice, Rhyn she was trying to protect, but Hannah ... the sense of betrayal within her made her feel ill again. Of all the Immortals and creatures in the world, she felt even closer to the outcast that was her mate.

The answer became clear. She and Toby had to leave. There had to be somewhere she could go where they'd leave her alone, at least until Gabriel came for her. Her thoughts drifted to the Sanctuary, the only place she'd felt safe. When Toby was better, she'd take him and go. The convent would do a better job raising him than the Immortals. But now, she wanted a word with a certain Ancient.

Katie walked to Kris's chamber on the floor below. She heard a muffled response to her knock and walked in, not caring if he bid her enter or get lost. Kris wasn't there, but Sasha was.

She stopped in place. The door swung closed behind her, and fear trickled through her. She reminded herself she wasn't defenseless with him this time. If she called for Rhyn, he would come.

"I'm looking for Kris," she said, unable to help covering her neck with one hand.

"That makes two of us," Sasha said and rose from his seat beside the fire. He looked her up and down in approval, his gaze lingering on her neck. She silently thanked Lankha for healing her without her asking him. "You look well."

"Better than the last time we met."



"You're in one piece," he agreed and circled her with predatory slowness. She tried to keep her breathing steady even as she wanted to run screaming and hide behind Rhyn. "Something is different about you, though."

Her breath caught as she considered more Immortals than Rhyn might be able to read her mind. Sasha snatched her neck with one hand, his movement too fast for her to defend herself against.

"Don't!" she cried, squeezing her eyes closed as she waited for the pain of him tearing into her neck as he had once before. He didn't attack, simply let his cold power loose into her for a long moment before releasing her.

She opened her eyes, breathing hard. Sasha stepped back, a smile tugging up one side of his mouth.

"So simple," he said. "They can find you on the Sanctuary, too. They can find you everywhere, except Hell."

"Never going back there."

"Unless ..." He drifted off and crossed to the window, clasping his hands behind him.

"Unless what?"

"There's one way to break your bond with Rhyn."

"I don't believe you."

"You know no one can force the bond to break," he continued. "But if you and Rhyn voluntarily break it, you're free."

"There's nothing you say I'd ever trust. Where's Kris?" she demanded.

"You aren't worried I'll tell him your little secret?" His gaze went to her stomach.

"You'll do what you will," she said and took a step toward the door. "You almost ruined my life once. I won't stick around for you to do it again."

"Just remember, there's nowhere you can run where we can't eventually find you."

She stormed out, blood pulsing and headache growing. She wiped sweat from her brow with a shaking hand. Sasha's words echoed in her thoughts, and she tried hard to give them no credence. She didn't know what he was doing there, but he couldn't be trusted.

Even if he had one of her secrets. She felt like crying again. Now more than ever, she had to leave, before Kris and Rhyn discovered her secret and brought down what fragile supports were holding up her world. She retreated to her floor and saw Uly in the hall.

"Kris has me slaving away," Uly whispered, looking around as if Kris was around the corner. "I just wanted to check on Toby. He looks better."

"He is," she agreed. "Is Kris with you in the lab?"

"He was, but he's prepping for the Council meeting. I'm getting ready to test the immunity blood. I'm also making a special poisoned batch to give back to the demons."

She shook her head, not sharing his excitement about his experiments. She entered the bedroom quietly to see Toby awake and trying to get an uncertain Lankha to play with his stuffed animals. Toby would make an awesome older brother, she realized, unlike her flaky sister. He'd need to be if she turned out to be much worse of a mother.

Grimly, she realized he may never have the chance, if Gabriel was ordered back for her.

\* \* \*

Rhyn watched Uly inject one of the Immortals with some concoction derived from the immunity blood Sasha brought and lowered himself into a fighting stance. The Immortal rubbed the injection spot with a grimace, stretched, and climbed inside the ring in the lowermost basement in the castle.

Rhyn didn't wait for him to settle himself but struck first with his long, oak bo, a blow that caught the Immortal by surprise. He struck again, this time drawing blood. Uly, looking exhausted, moved closer, and Rhyn waited as well.

The wound healed itself quickly. Uly nodded in approval and scribbled notes on his iPad. The Immortal launched himself at Rhyn, and the two sparred as the scientist watched intently. Rhyn enjoyed the feel of a weapon in his hand and facing a decent opponent. He restrained himself as much as possible to keep from injuring Uly's test subject. Uly blew a whistle at last and motioned the Immortal over to check his wounds.

Rhyn looked around, agitated again by the sense that something else was wrong. He left the sparring level without saying a word to Uly and followed his instincts up a flight of stairs and down a narrow hall he recognized from his visit to their father's catacombs with Kris. The door leading to his father's corpse was locked, and he tested it. Kris had managed to create a barrier around the chamber to keep Immortals from trespassing via the shadow world.

"Rhyn, the rest of the Council is meeting now in the conference room off my chambers."

He turned at Kris's voice. His eldest brother appeared less frustrated than normal.

"You're inviting me to attend?" he asked, amused.

"Unfortunately, you are a Council member."

Kris disappeared into the portal behind him. Rhyn followed. They emerged in a small conference room with one wall made of windows. Their brothers were already there, three of them sitting across the table from Sasha. Sensing the level of tension in the room, Rhyn didn't sit but leaned with his back against the wall, ready to launch across the table at whoever snapped first.

"I can guess what this is about," Kiki said. His turquoise eyes stood out against his caramel-colored Oriental features.

"Yes, tell us, brother," Tamer echoed in his husky tone. The largest of them all by half a foot, the giant was based out of Africa. "You have never once invited us here, maybe because we never agree on anything?"

"Maybe he thinks we'll steal his things," Erik, the blond Viking who watched over South America, said with a smile. "I saw a painting I may walk off with."

"I had hoped to bring everyone together to discuss the baggage Sasha has brought with him, if you'll all be reasonable," Kris said. Everyone's gaze fell to Sasha. For once, Rhyn was not the sore point.

"Hell that overcrowded they're letting murderers walk?" Tamer asked.

"They're still accepting prisoners, my dear Tamer," Sasha purred.

"Enough. Every meeting we've had has been a failure and we've not had one since Andre became dead-dead," Kris demanded.

"Our last one was about guarding your little meat-cicle, right, Rhyn?" Erik demanded. "She need more help with someone like you as a mate?"

"Why I called you all here was to finish the discussion we started at our last meeting about the immunity of two certain humans to Immortal powers," Kris interjected. "Katie, Rhyn's mate, and her sister."

"I seem to have stolen the formula that will grant Immortal or demon this same immunity. I turned it over to Kris, and now the Dark One wants me dead-dead," Sasha said.

"You have it?" Tamer sat up with interest. "I've heard the rumors through the demons in my territory. It works?"

"It appears to work. Uly is still working with it to verify," Kris replied.

"You'll grant us access to it?"

Rhyn smiled mercilessly at Kris's uneasy look. He took in his predatory brothers, well aware they were as dangerous as any of the creatures he'd spent time in Hell with. He crossed his arms, interested to know Katie's sister was as special as she was and wondering if Kris had already claimed her.

She looked like Lilith, the woman Rhyn killed when he discovered she'd plotted with the Dark One to kill the Council. His reward had been being sent to Hell, for what his brothers hoped was eternity.

"In exchange for your assistance, yes," Kris said at last. "Sasha's enemies are here in the forest. I don't know how far the Dark One will go to get Sasha or his vial of blood back, but I imagine our time is short."

"And you want us to do what exactly?" Erik asked. "I'm content to feed Sasha to the Dark One piece by piece if that means we keep the peace."

"As am I," Tamer seconded.

"Me, too," Kiki said.

"Seems practically unanimous," Sasha said, unaffected. "Except for you, Rhyn. Would you care to feed me to the Dark One in pieces?"

"I'd feed each one of you to the Dark One," Rhyn replied. "Starting with Kris."

Everyone chuckled but Kris, who levied a glare at him. He wasn't sure what they expected of him; he'd never been included in any Council meeting.

"You're no Andre, Kris," Sasha said.

Kris's eyes flared copper, then amber. "I have no intention of trying to be Andre. What I want is what Andre always tried to get us to do: to work together like the brothers we are."

"Andre lost that battle when Sasha defected and Rhyn went to Hell," Kiki stated. "We're not a team, Kris. We're barely allies."

"I don't answer to anyone," Tamer added. "I respected Andre, but now that he's gone, you're lucky I agreed to come at all. I don't need any of you, especially the headache Sasha is."

"If you want the immunity solution, then you'll work with me to protect our brother," Kris said.

No one spoke. Rhyn observed each of his brothers, sensing a silent rebellion that seemed to elude Kris, the only of them to value duty over their own interests. Kiki and Tamer exchanged a look while Sasha seemed to be the only one pleased by the arrangement.

"No deal," Erik said. "My part of the world is quiet. I don't need the solution, and I don't need the headaches."

"You took an oath to serve the Immortals, their cause, and be a member of this Council," Kris grated. "All of you, save Rhyn, who was never intended to set foot outside of Hell."

"I took an oath to my father and then to Andre," Erik retorted. "You are neither of them. In fact, I say we vote you out."

"You can't vote me out. I'm firstborn after Andre. Our father was second born, as was his father before him. It's the way things have been for millions of years!"

"What are you going to do if we refuse to follow you? You don't have it in you to kill any of us. You're sworn not to, if I remember correctly," Erik said. He rose. "Andre at least had that authority. Andre's gone, and I need none of this shit. I vote the Council split. Anyone second me?"

"I will," Tamer said.

"Very well. The Council is no more. Farewell, brothers, and stay the hell out of my part of the world."

Erik disappeared, followed by Tamer. Kris was frozen in place, as if not yet registering what had happened. Kiki rose as well, his gaze going to Sasha.

"You know they don't speak for me," Kiki said. "But I'll have to agree, Kris. You can have Sasha or you can have the Council. You're too good a man to see that on your own, so I'm telling you."

He left as well. Rhyn looked to Kris, then to Sasha, whose smile had faded.

"If I were you, I'd beat the shit out of each one of them till they did what you said," Rhyn suggested.

"I prefer a more civilized approach," Kris replied.

"Look where that got you. No one but Sasha and me left in your Council, and I doubt I was ever really a part of it."

"My own brothers want me to break the Code to feed Sasha to the wolves," Kris muttered. "Does no one take it seriously?"

"They know you don't have it in you," Rhyn said. "You can't be respected without kicking some ass. I learned that lesson when Sasha tossed me in a pit with full-blooded demons and were-things."

"Respect isn't enough for someone in your position," Sasha agreed. "They need to fear you, Kris, and thus far, none of them do."

"Except Katie. Treat them as you did her, and you'll find they fall into line."

Kris looked up at Rhyn's low voice, his gaze lingering. "I don't condone the kind of brute violence you and Sasha do, Rhyn," he said. "I won't use force against my brothers. They'll eventually remember their duty to the Code. Or they'll soon realize the threat affects us all and be back."

Rhyn pushed himself away from the wall. Kris was crushed, and Rhyn wasn't sure how his eldest surviving brother hadn't expected the rest of them to walk away. That Kris could attack his brother's mate but refuse to strong-arm his brothers into fighting demons made his anger boil.

"Keep telling yourself that. The demons are planning something, Kris, and *hoping* someone comes to your rescue is stupid," he returned.

"You're one to talk, Rhyn. I wonder if Katie *hopes* you'll rescue her every time something happens. You aren't capable of caring for someone else or keeping her safe. But, if you do as Sasha says and break the bond, I will keep her safe, I swear it," Kris said. "She'll be—"

Rhyn walked out of the room, furious at his brother. It was all he heard anymore, that Katie would be safe and happy only if he wasn't around. He forced himself to focus on something else.

The Council meeting was a bust, and there was more tension in the air than he could understand. For the first time in his life, he felt something akin to pity for Kris. The world needed a man focused on maintaining the balance between good and evil, and none of the brothers had the foresight or vision that Kris did. He was a dick, but Rhyn never wanted to be put in the position Kris was in.

Agitated, he jogged up the stairs to the level where Katie was. He'd paced in front of her chamber at some point every day for three weeks, wanting to tell her something, anything, to make her want to stay. The words never came, and he'd left frustrated each time. Hell toughened him up, yet this was one challenge he couldn't figure out. Despite telling her he wouldn't, he dropped into her thoughts to feel a little closer to her and was surprised to find she was packing to leave.

Without knocking, he strode into the chamber. She whirled to face him, moving too slow to hide the suitcase laid out on the trunk at the end of the bed in which Toby slept.

"You're leaving," he stated. "Plan on telling me?"

"You made it clear you read my mind. I didn't think I needed to tell you anything," she shot back.

"You still have five weeks."

"Four weeks and five days," she replied.

"I don't give a shit. Your time here isn't up."

"I'm not doing this anymore, Rhyn. I've got Toby to think about, and raising him where he's attacked by demons and subjected to the stupidity of the Immortal world—it's not happening. I'm fed up with aaaaaall of this!"

"And you really think there's somewhere safe for you to go?" he challenged. "Where demons and Immortals can't find you?"

"The Sanctuary. I'll become a nun or whatever those women are who live there."

"A *nun*?" he echoed, horrified. "You'd go that far?"

"Is sex all you think about?"

"I only get one mate. If she becomes a nun, I'll have to start fucking—"

"Stop there. God, Rhyn. There's so much at stake, and you just ..." She sighed.

"What's at stake?" he asked, sensing again there was something important she was keeping from him. A haunted look crossed her face. "Kris doesn't need your blood anymore. What makes you think he won't leave you alone?"

"He told me so. Whatever issue is between you two, it's too personal for him to forget, and he takes it out on me when you're not around," she said. "I realized he has no intention of letting me go even though he promised it. And with Hannah here, I can't leave the Immortal world with her still in it. I'm leaving *you*, Rhyn."

The words were forced, and he knew she was in love with him as much as she did. He watched as she tossed more clothing into her suitcase, certain what he wanted to say would only make her pack faster. So he stopped to think and pace. Lankha was huddled in a corner with his hands over his head. Katie had been crying earlier. Her eyes were red-rimmed.

Something was really wrong, and he couldn't help but think it was more than him this time. She'd been acting squirrely the past two days. No matter what, she'd be safer at the Sanctuary than at the castle, now that the Council was in disarray and the demons were plotting in the forest.

"I'll take you there," he said at last.

She paused and looked at him hard. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"If you feel safer there ..."

"And you'll just let me go," she said, anger sparkling in her eyes. He couldn't figure out what the hell the puny human in front of him wanted.

"Things here are about to go to shit," he said.

"How?"

"The Council disbanded. Sasha's plotting something, and the demons are going to flood this place soon."

"Are you serious?" She paled at his words.

"You better go soon," he advised. "I'll follow."

"Rhyn, if you're serious, then I can't leave without Hannah."

"She treats you like shit, along with that Gio ass."

"She's with Kris now," she said. "But she's my sister. That may mean nothing to you Immortals—"

"It doesn't."

"—but to us lesser beings, family means something!"

"Which is why you're doing your damndest to convince us both you're leaving me," he said and crossed his arms.

"Can't you tell the Council not to disband?" she asked, visibly flustered.

"Me? Not the way it works, blood monkey."

"Then what're you going to do?"

"I'm going to watch the world fall apart."

Her features darkened, and she turned away, saying, "I thought you had some level of honor or decency."

"You're the only one."

"I'm taking my sister and going to the Sanctuary, where I'll raise our child without you."

"I told you, I don't claim Toby. That little thing is yours."

"You're such a jackass! What was I thinking ... it never would've worked anyway!" she snapped. Fury turned her face bright red. She flung a shoe at him hard, then a second. He deflected the first, but the second slapped his cheek. A knock at the door distracted his response, which wouldn't bode well for either of them. She breezed by him and paused at the door to say, "Rhyn, I'm not talking about Toby," before she wrenched it open.

Her meaning didn't click, and he turned to see who had interrupted them.

"We have to find Sasha," Kris said, ignoring her to push his way into the chamber. "Katie, take Toby and the healer to the basement with the warriors."

"What's wrong?" Rhyn asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Where's Hannah?" Katie demanded.

"I'll send her down. Go."

Katie motioned to the healer, who scampered from his corner to the bed. She hurried to Toby and lifted the sleeping angel carefully before she and Lankha left. Rhyn joined Kris in the hallway and waited until Katie was out of earshot.

"Let me guess. The demons have crossed sacred ground," he said dryly.

"And how do you know this?"

"I heard them plotting. You really think Sasha came here to throw himself on your mercy without some sort of back-up plan?"

"I'm doing what I'm obligated to do. Of course I suspected him of something," Kris snapped. "I didn't know what."

Rhyn trotted to a window. The peaceful, snowy park was now swarmed with Immortals and demons fighting. Sasha hadn't lost time in acting after the ill-fated Council meeting!

"How can he make something unsacred?" he puzzled aloud.

"The ground is sacred because our father is buried here. Even in death, he holds power."

"He moved our father's body?" Rhyn asked with a laugh. "Hope he chucked it off a cliff."

"I've sent Immortals after it. Laugh all you will, Rhyn, but this is my home, and the refuge of our Immortal brethren. I don't intend to lose it. If you give a shit about anything, you'll get your ass out there and fight."

Furious, Kris stalked away. Rhyn watched him, aware he was much more useful in another way. Kris's Immortals appeared to outnumber the demons two to one for now, and Katie would call for him if she needed help. He opened a portal and crossed into the shadow world and then through a portal into a Japanese-style palatial estate overlooking Tokyo.

"Kiki!" he called, ignoring the startled servants scampering away from him.

"You just can't give me a break, Rhyn," Kiki grumbled. He trotted down a set of black lacquered stairs, an iPad tucked under one arm. "Did Kris send you?"

"Not exactly."

"Then get out of my house."

Rhyn snatched his brother by the front of his shirt and slammed him into the ground. The iPad skittered across the floor.

"I'm not Kris, Kiki. If there's any part of you that thinks I won't snap your neck like a twig in a hurricane—"

"Fuck, Rhyn! What're you doing?"

Rhyn planted one foot at the base of Kiki's neck and wrenched his head back. Kiki strained to breathe.

"I'm doing what Kris won't. I'm not bound by those rules of his. Sasha needs to fry, and the Council needs to remain intact, or all Immortals die. I don't particularly want the world to go to shit before I get a chance to enjoy my time away from Hell," Rhyn said calmly. "Now, you can

send your soldiers to the castle where the demons are staging an attack, and rejoin the Council, or I can bury you here in your front yard. Make your choice."

Kiki wheezed for a long moment, then said, "Yes, fine. Let me go, you dick."

Rhyn obliged and stepped back. Kiki glared at him, but Rhyn knew this brother to be the easiest of the three to sway. He was about to address Kiki again when Katie's angry words hit him.

She hadn't been talking about Toby.

"What?" Kiki eyed him warily. "I already agreed. Don't look at me like I'm your dinner. I take it you're going to see Erik next."

"Yeah," he managed. "Erik."

Holy fuck. There was a hatchling growing within her.

\* \* \*

The demons couldn't get near Sasha so long as he had the coffin holding his father. Jade watched from the brush nearby. Sasha sat on top of the sarcophagus and looked around, smug in how safe he was sitting on top of the coffin. The forest was full of demons. Most had attacked the castle while Darkyn's personal guard went after Sasha. Jade hadn't wanted to come; he'd asked a personal favor of Darkyn not to come. Darkyn had laughed and dragged him.

Jade's insides still churned at the sight of the demons and Immortals fighting. Technically, this was Sasha's doing, for he had dragged the coffin out of the protected crypt and left the Immortals exposed. This fact did little to assuage Jade's guilt when he saw the slaughter around the place he'd once called home.

"Where's your master, fools?" Sasha shouted to the forest.

"I'm here," Darkyn's voice boomed from a good hundred meters away, the nearest the demon could come.

"What of our deal?" Sasha demanded. "I gave you Kris and the Immortals."

Darkyn's chuckle filled the air around them, and Jade watched Sasha's face turn from expectant to furious.

"So that bitch Jade betrayed me," Sasha muttered. "No matter. I can sit here all day, Darkyn, and you can't come near me."

The sounds of fighting from the direction of the castle made Jade sweat. He hadn't wanted all the Immortals to die, just the ones that hurt him. He shifted in the brush, wishing he could've found a better way to draw out Kris and Sasha than by sacrificing everyone.

"I can't, but Jade can," Darkyn said, unconcerned.

"Jade's a coward and a fool!"

"He tricked you, didn't he?"

Sasha sneered in response. He rose and began to pace, the first sign of his anxiety. Jade's hands were sweaty as he drew a machete. He'd crossed the line. There was no going back.

"Jade, kill him and bring me the vial," Darkyn ordered.

Jade closed his eyes, drew a deep breath, and stepped from the forest. Sasha was armed with two daggers and lowered himself into a fighting stance. Jade had trained under Kris, the greatest of the Immortal warriors, and knew Sasha to be a lazy fighter. His first few blows were deflected, but the third slashed Sasha's arm.



"Wait, Jade," Sasha said, surprised. "We can make a deal, you and I."

"You have nothing I want."

"I am still an Ancient. I will make you my mate."

"I saw how Ancients' mates work. You get no choice, Sasha!" Jade snapped, the hurt caused by Kris's rejection renewed. He slashed again. Sasha's guard fell quickly, and Jade hacked at the Ancient with all his fury until Sasha lay in a bloodied heap.

His whole body shaking, he tried to calm himself and withdrew, wanting to wipe away the taint of Sasha's blood from his clothing and skin.

"The vial, Jade!" Darkyn barked. "We are watching. If you try to take it, your death will be the most horrible I devise yet."

Jade hesitated, not wanting to go near Sasha's body. He knelt beside the Ancient and set the machete on top of the sarcophagus. Sasha was far too chopped up to be alive. Jade rifled through his pockets, part of him praying he didn't find the vial. He'd been responsible for enough Immortal deaths this night; he couldn't stomach more.

Jade's hand brushed the glass in Sasha's pocket. Sasha had the vial. The fool had really believed he could bargain with Darkyn and the Dark One! Or maybe he was desperate to return to the only place that would accept him and all his sick ways.

Jade pretended to continue to search, mind racing. It was one thing to feed Kris and the Immortals here to the demons, another thing to give the demons a tool they could use to destroy all Immortals, if not humanity, too. He'd thought he crossed the only line that mattered by selling out the Immortals but found there was another he wasn't ready for.

He left the vial in Sasha's pocket and rose.

"It's not here," he said.

"Not there," Darkyn repeated. Jade bristled for an attack, even knowing the demons couldn't draw near. "Where else would it be?"

"Kris has a scientist named Ullly who would've likely been given the vial. Maybe this..." he kicked Sasha's body, "wasn't as stupid as we thought."

"Or Kris locked it away because he knew better than to trust that piece of shit," the demon leader added. "Take the bodies and throw them into the sea, where no one will find them. We will find this Ullly and take him to Hell for interrogation."

"Yes, master."

"And Jade?"

Tensing, Jade turned to face the direction of the demon's voice.

"Welcome to Hell, your new home."

Jade said nothing, conflicted. He heard the demons withdraw from the forest around them toward the castle. Suspecting some of them remained, he gave no indication he'd found the vial as he carefully lifted Sasha's body and laid it on the sarcophagus. He stepped back to look at father and son, dead-dead together.

*Very fitting.*

He opened a portal, mind racing with how to keep the demons from getting the vial. Darkyn had said to dump them in the sea. He lugged the coffin through the portal into the shadow world and then paused to think.

Sanctuary. All of them were located in the middle of a sea. If he tossed Sasha's body close enough to one of them, the vial would be safe.

He concentrated on which Sanctuary he wanted, the farthest from the castle, and lifted Sasha's body. He crossed to the glowing portal and threw Sasha's body through it, satisfied when he heard a splash. He turned back to the coffin, not nearly as concerned about the dead-dead Immortal he'd never met but who'd fathered at least two fucked-up sons—three, if he counted Rhyn.

The Immortal should've died in Hell, where he probably belonged. Jade focused on another part of the ocean, Challenger Deep, the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean. Maybe the depth of the sea would crush this Immortal's perfectly preserved body. If nothing else, the father of the Council would never again be found.

He lugged the coffin to the new portal and shoved it through. He didn't stay to hear the splash this time but walked through the shadow world toward the only portal that glowed black, the portal to Hell.

While feeling vindicated that Kris might already be dead, he couldn't help the growing guilt at hurting so many other Immortals. Nursing a cratered heart, he stepped into Hell, well aware he had  
nowhere  
else  
to  
go.

\* \* \*

Katie paced her corner of the gymnasium, where she had been herded with the rest of the Immortal mates. Toby was awake and sitting, fascinated by Lankha's soft hands. She glanced at them again and looked toward the door.

It had been an hour, and Hannah hadn't appeared. She didn't know if there was a second gym where other Immortal mates were, but Kris had said Hannah would be down. She waited another few minutes and then headed to the bathrooms. Women were packed even in the luxurious bathrooms with their sitting areas decorated with couches and a gilded fountain. She crossed to a stall and closed the door, focusing on a portal to the shadow world. She envisioned Kris's chamber on one of the upper floors and emerged from the shadow world into the chamber.

The door was open, and she ducked down as a furry shape rushed by.

Some of the demons had made it into the castle. She drew a deep breath, terrified of running into one of those creatures alone, then crept to the door. When she heard nothing in the hallway, she eased out of the safety of his room.

Hannah hadn't been there long enough to learn the castle. She knew Kris's chamber, the guest chamber, Katie's chamber, and the dining hall. Katie trotted to the chamber next to Kris's, knowing the guest chambers were near but not sure which was which. She pushed the door open to the next chamber and ducked inside.

"Hannah?"

Silence from the room, footsteps from the hallway. She darted to the other side of the bed and dropped to her stomach, peering under the bed through the door. A massive creature with black fur and fangs paused in front of the open door, sniffing the air. She held her breath. Her heart pounded as it swung its head to face the room.

It jerked suddenly and bolted down the hallway with a snarl. She heard the clash of bodies and waited for the sound to fade before rising again. She peeked out to see two creatures at each other's throats and frowned, wondering why demons were fighting one another. With the creatures too distracted to notice her, Katie drew a breath and darted across the hall, shoving the door of the guest bedroom open.

"Hannah!" she hissed.

"Katie?"

The sound of her sister's voice brought a waterfall of relief. Hannah peeked from the bathroom door, her normally neat hair mussed and her eyes red from crying. Katie closed the door to the bedroom behind her. She'd barely left it when it slammed open, and two furry forms barreled into the room, snarling and fighting. Hannah screamed. Katie covered her head as they trounced over her and rolled to the other side of the chamber, fighting.

She rose and ran into the bathroom, jostling Hannah out of the way as she slammed and locked the door.

"Katie!" Hannah exclaimed, her face a mask of terror. "I was taking a bath earlier and I heard sounds in the hallway. When I—"

"Hannah!" she snapped. "Look for anything to brace the door!"

Hannah looked around, lost. Katie's gaze swept over her, and she was grateful to see her sister unharmed. She closed her eyes to summon the portal when the door bucked. Hannah cried out and scampered to the far side of the bathroom. Katie rushed to the door, trying to brace it. The sound of snarling came from the other side, and she closed her eyes as the demon struck the door again. She sailed across the bathroom and landed on Hannah. The demon crouched in the door, then roared in pain and whirled.

The other demon had clamped its teeth around its leg and dragged it out of the doorway. Katie hauled Hannah to her feet and pulled her through the doorway, across the bedroom, and into the hall. Another demon down the hall caught sight of them and charged. She led them into Kris's room again and slammed the door, vaguely pissed at the Ancient for having the only door that locked in the whole castle. The door bucked but held.

Her gaze went around the chamber and settled on the alcohol in the corner. She crossed to it, took a deep swig, then flung it against the door. The glass carafe exploded. She threw another and pulled the final from the fridge. As if reading her intentions, Hannah forced herself out of her shock and hurried to the low-burning hearth. She snatched the lighter on the mantle and ran to the door, standing close until the alcohol lit and spread.

Fire licked across the wooden door. The door bucked again before all went quiet. Hannah stood close to her, and Katie stared at the door, willing their fire to keep the demons at bay. For a long moment, she thought their simple plan worked, and she closed her eyes to concentrate on the portal.

The door exploded open in flames, wood, and black fur. Hannah dragged her down as fiery splinters sailed over them. The two fanged figures battled until one lifted the other and cracked its back over its knee. It slammed the creature onto a broken piece of burning wood. The dying creature let out an otherworldly roar of pain as it burned. It went limp.

The remaining creature turned to them. It contorted into a human form, and Katie cursed.

"Lunchmeat," Jared said with a toothy smile. "You brought a snack to our little party."

"Hannah, you have to trust me when I tell you jumping out that window is a better death than what this thing will do to you!" Katie said, dragging her sister toward the window.

"Easy, Lunchmeat. I came to help, at your half-breed's request," Jared said, holding up his hands. "I smelled you from outside the castle. Oh, the sweet smell of—"

A roar in the hallway made him whirl.

"Come with me, morsels," he said. "I'm your only ticket out of here."

Katie hesitated. Jared morphed again into a massive creature. It beckoned for them to follow with one paw and knocked the burning door out of the way. She trailed it, wanting nothing more than two minutes of relative peace so she could summon a portal. Hannah clung to her arm as they entered the hallway.

Jared launched himself at the demon barreling toward them. Katie gasped and flattened herself against the wall as they soared past them. She grabbed Hannah's hand and bolted for the back stairwell at the far end of the hall. Steadying herself against the walls of the winding stairs, she ran as fast as she could without stumbling, aware of what likely followed them. Barks and roars from further down the stairs made her stop and grip the railing.

"This way!" Hannah cried, pointing to the doorway they'd just passed to one of the mid-level floors. Katie followed her into another hallway on the floor where the castle's serving staff lived. This hall was smaller and narrower. Hannah stopped at an intersection, and Katie took her hand again, continuing down the hall toward the second stairwell.

Her breathing as loud and ragged as Hannah's, Katie paused for a deep breath inside the larger stairwell. Hannah draped an arm over her, gasping for breath. Katie heard nothing pursuing them and closed her eyes, focusing hard. Rhyn's energy filled her. She visualized the portal and the basement. As soon as the portal appeared, she dragged Hannah through it, racing to the glowing door on the other side.

Only when they both emerged into the basement did she stop to catch her breath. Hannah dropped to the floor beside her, and Lankha inched away while Toby smiled.

"Master Kris has ordered an evacuation," Henri, Kris's secretary, said as he approached. "He said you'd know where to go, Katherine."

She nodded, sucking in air.

"How did you do that?" Hannah asked, turning to her. "We were somewhere else ..."

"I'll explain later," Katie promised. "I'm not waiting for any demons to find us. Lankha, pick up Toby."

She closed her eyes and focused again.

They crossed unimpeded through the portal and onto the island Sanctuary, one of four such sites bridging the mortal and immortal worlds. Sanctuaries were managed by a convent of women who cared for the lost and injured. Katie didn't recognize the woman who greeted them and ushered them into the small fortress on an undeclared—hidden by magic— island in the Caribbean. She led them into a courtyard lined on all four sides with lopsided doors.

"Master Kris said you were coming. We have several refugees here already," the woman in the long brown robe said. "We're assigning quarters as soon as they arrive and providing a hot meal afterwards. Ladies, you are in these two rooms." She pointed to two doors. "The healer can stay there, and the angel—"

"With me," Katie said.

"Then you can take the larger of the two rooms. I'll wait while you look around your quarters."

Katie knew from experience there wasn't much to see. Lankha was nearly buckling under the weight of Toby. She opened the door to her tiny room, taking in the two twin beds with sagging metal frames. Lankha set Toby down on one before they joined Hannah in the courtyard.

"Is it normally this ... exciting around here?" Hannah asked as they walked to the cafeteria.

"Seems to be so far," Katie admitted. "Nice of Kris to abandon you upstairs like that."

"I'm sure he didn't mean for that to happen," Hannah said, sounding unconvinced. Katie glanced at her troubled sister, unable to help the guilt she felt at Hannah's look.

"He means well. He said he sent someone to find you," she forced herself to say. "He's kinda got a whole bunch of people to worry about."

"I know, Katherine. I'm not upset at him. I just wasn't expecting to be confronted with ... what were those things?"

"Demons."

"Not what you want to see when you've just taken the most heavenly bath."

"Probably not."

"You did really good back there," Hannah said, turning her winning smile on Katie. "I'm impressed, little sis."

Despite her anger at her sister, Katie felt the warm smile affect her. Hannah used that smile to charm everyone from waiters to potential boyfriends, but it was nice to have her sister smile at her rather than remark about how disappointed she was.

"You think Kris is okay?" Hannah asked, her smile fading. "I feel like we ran off and left him."

"You don't want to be there to see how bad things get," Katie advised.

"You don't worry about Rhyn?"

Katie hesitated, her hand going to the tattoo at her neck. "I do, but I know he's the scariest thing out there. I don't think anything can hurt him."

She found herself hoping Gabriel made it here before Rhyn did. She'd been so pissed at him, she'd told him what she'd planned to keep from him. A sense of desperation almost took her strength away. She dropped to her knee and pretended to retie her shoe.

Gabriel was coming for her and the life growing within her. She could barely fathom what that meant. She didn't understand much of the Immortal world, but she knew Death always won. In Gabriel's mind, he'd already killed her, or he wouldn't have looked at her with regret instead of pity.

"Hannah, I need to lie down," she said and rose unsteadily. "Go eat and I'll see you later."

She turned without waiting for her sister to respond and made her way to her room. Her emotions crippled her, and she flung herself on the bed, sobbing.

\* \* \*

Rhyn slammed Tamer to the ground one last time, too incensed to notice his half-brother was trying desperately to tap out. Kiki grabbed his arm and yanked to get his attention.

"Enough, Rhyn!" he shouted.

Rhyn blinked and stepped back. Tamer was still for a long moment, until Kiki shoved a foot beneath his belly and rolled him over. The large man gasped for air, his eye swollen already.

"Can we count you in?" Kiki asked.

Tamer nodded. Kiki extended a hand and pulled him up. Rhyn paced, eyeing Erik, whose bloodied nose had finally stopped bleeding. His tactics would never earn anything but scorn from Kris, but they worked.

"I'll send my men," Tamer grunted. "Tell Kris—next time he wants something—to call instead of sending this animal."

"Enough from both of you," Kiki said. "I think we need to get a few things straight before we go."

Rhyn ceased pacing, and Erik frowned.

"One, what do we want to do about Sasha?"

"Kill him," Tamer said without hesitation.

"Yep," Erik agreed.

"Let Darkyn have him," Rhyn growled.

"The consensus is that Sasha dug his own grave," Kiki said. "Two, what are we going to do when Kris chooses the Code and his oath over our unanimous vote to kill Sasha?"

Three pairs of eyes went to Rhyn, who stood ready to take on any of them that mentioned leaving the Council.

"We fucking live with it," Tamer said with a scowl. "Even though Sasha is going to kill us all."

"Very well," Kiki said. "Next, how soon can you all have your men to the castle to kill some demons? Mine are on the way."

"As are mine," Erik said.

"I'll send them now," Tamer said.

"Best Council meeting ever," Kiki declared. "Rhyn, to the castle?"

Rhyn gave a nod, hands clenching at the thought of facing off against some demons. Kiki tucked his iPad under his arm and opened a portal through which all three went before Rhyn followed. They emerged into the castle, and he sensed the demons before he'd even set foot into the hallway outside of Kris's conference room. A blow sent him smashing into a wall, and he morphed instantly, diving at the demons chasing his brothers as they retreated through the burnt doorway of Kris's chambers to search for weapons. He tore through the demons and panted as he waited for his brothers.

"I see Kris on the park," Kiki called from the window. "Never seen so many demons!"

Tamer emerged from Kris's chamber into the hallway first, armed with a scythe and a bo, while Erik followed with a long sword. Kiki trailed with nothing more than his iPad and a long knife. Rhyn snorted at him as Kiki strapped the iPad around his body.

They charged through the hall toward the stairs and descended to the main floor. Rhyn was the first to engage any demon in his way while Tamer and Erik beheaded every creature that crossed their paths. Rhyn led them down the main floor and out the front door, slamming into one of Kris's Immortals by accident.

"Rhyn, you idiot!" Tamer shouted.

Rhyn righted himself, unconcerned, and barreled toward the demons. Kris's two-to-one advantage had dwindled, and Darkyn didn't hesitate to unleash every demon he could. Kris and

a few of his Immortals were surrounded in the middle of the park while demons darted from the forest to attack pockets of Immortals. The snow was drenched with blood, like an Immortal snow cone. Kris, he knew, was the best Immortal warrior ever known.

Rhyn tackled one of the demons who took down Kris's wingman and slashed its throat open. He fought with unrestrained fury, not wanting to stop and think of the most ridiculous thought ever to cross his mind. That he, a half-demon, half-Immortal who had spent the better part of his years in Hell, was looking at becoming the first of his brothers to father a hatchling ...

Confusion and rage blinded him, and he threw himself into the battle, not noticing the nicks and bruises his opponents inflicted upon him. He focused on the taste of their warm blood and on tearing them limb from limb.

In his blood-filled haze, he heard one of his brothers shout, and the demons shift their focus from Kris's small group—which Rhyn defended—to the warriors pouring out of portals onto the small battlefield. He fought until the yard was lit only by the castle's outer lighting, then onward to dawn, free after so long restraining himself around the Immortals and humans.

Stability. It was a word Andre had used that Rhyn never understood. For once, Rhyn knew some sort of stability within himself, no doubt because of his bond to Katie.

He tore apart a demon and stood breathless, seeking his next opponent, only to see the body-strewn park was empty of living demons in the early morning light. He panted, agitated by the snowfall and not having anything else to kill. Everywhere around him, the Council's Immortals were finishing off the few demons remaining.

"Rhyn?" Kiki asked uneasily as the half-demon approached.

"You'll have a sword to the throat if you don't transform," Kris snapped.

Rhyn growled but shifted to his human shape. His skin and clothing was soaked with demon blood, and Kiki gave him a long look.

"Where's Katie?" Rhyn demanded.

"They're fine. I evacuated the castle," Kris said. His white hair was streaked red with blood, his roving gaze tired. "Kiki, I owe you. Whatever you said to bring the others back, thank you."

"You can thank Rhyn for beating some sense into us," Kiki replied.

Rhyn met his eldest brother's gaze, not expecting any words of appreciation and not disappointed. Kris turned away and maneuvered through the piles of dead-dead Immortals and demons toward Tamer.

"Kiki, I need a count of living and dead-dead Immortals!" he ordered.

Irritation flashed across Kiki's face, and Rhyn raised an eyebrow in warning.

"Fine," he grated.

"The Council needs to come with me," Kris added. "That includes you, Rhyn."

"You can leave Rhyn out," Erik said.

"I'll sit outside the door to make sure no one leaves," Rhyn suggested. The dangerous note in his voice drew Kris's attention. Kris looked at each of the brothers then back at him, as if forced to acknowledge what—or who—had compelled them back. He said nothing of his thoughts but strode into the castle.

Rhyn didn't want to follow. He wanted to track any remaining demons in the forest and kill them, too. He trailed his brothers. Kris didn't go far, just far enough to be out of earshot of the Immortals.

"We need to find Sasha," he said grimly.

"And kill him," Erik added, earning a sharp look.

"He took the vial of blood he brought with him," Kris said. "The next time the demons attack, they may be immune to death by our hands. Kiki, Rhyn, check our father's crypt. You two come with me."

Tamer grumbled but obeyed, and Rhyn shook out his tense body.

"The last thing I want to do is go down there," Kiki said. "You're not pissed about the display, are you?"

Rhyn eyed him and started down the hall, not caring what his brother thought of anything at the moment. He trotted through the body-littered floor to the back stairwell. Kiki followed him through to the basements, and Rhyn stopped in front of the door to his father's crypt. The door hung by a single hinge. He saw before entering that the sarcophagus was gone.

He explored the crypt, gaze going to the display of his mother on one wall. He felt the sense of foreboding again, the unseen danger toward Katie. His eyes traveled to where his father had lain.

The son of a demon and an Immortal had turned out too fucked up for anyone to tolerate. He doubted Katie would be anything like a demon mother, and yet, he could see the both of them ending up as his father and mother did: dead-dead before their child was six. He wondered what a half-human son would be like, and his thoughts went to Gabriel, who started out human before turning Immortal. Bitterly, he realized he didn't know who had the best chance of killing them: the Dark One, the demons, or one of his brothers.

*She'd be better off without you.* He'd wanted to continue denying the words of his brothers. Gazing at his dismembered mother, he couldn't help thinking they were right. Everyone who had ever been close to him died horribly. His chest grew tight at the thought of Katie's fate if she stayed with him. Now, there was something else to consider. His gaze went to the statue of him.

"There's nothing here," Kiki said with a frown. "C'mon."

\* \* \*

And still Darkyn pursued her in her nightmares. Katie jerked awake from the latest one where she and Toby were running from the unseen demon down a sandy beach. The first light of day filtered in through the small square window above her bed. The creaky bed protested as she sat, and she tried hard not to make more noise and wake Toby. She slid her feet into plain sandals provided by the convent along with her plain sweats and T-shirt. The Caribbean air was heavy, the ocean chill warmer than the weather at the castle. She wasn't hungry but walked toward the cafeteria so she wouldn't be alone with her thoughts.

A breakfast buffet lined one end of the cafeteria, with brown-robed women moving in between the food and the kitchen. Two Immortal mates were already eating, and she looked over the food with disinterest. The makeshift bar in the corner, however, drew her attention.

"Excuse me."

She turned to see Helga, the woman who had greeted them when they arrived.

"We had an Immortal wash up on our shores last night. He's alive but a frightful mess, and we haven't been able to identify him. I thought I'd ask before you sat down for breakfast."

"I doubt I'll be much help," she said. "I'm rather new to this world."



"The ladies eating didn't know him either. I have to keep checking though," the woman said with a level of determination that made Katie smile.

"I'll come with you," she said. "I take it this guy is unconscious?"

"Yes. Our healer did what we could. We think he might be an Ancient, but he's so weak and his face has been so damaged, we can't tell."

Katie stopped in place, her chest growing tight. Helga turned to look at her curiously, and she forced herself forward.

"You don't normally allow Ancients inside the walls," she said. "You made an exception?"

"He was mostly dead when we fished him out of the bay. When he's strong enough, we can send him outside the walls."

Katie couldn't help the sense of panic growing within her. She rubbed her scarred arm and glanced up at the sky, which had begun to lighten. Helga led her to the men's wing of the Sanctuary and opened a door to a room smaller than Katie's.

Sasha's face was a mottled mess that made him resemble Frankenstein's monster, with newly sewn stitches holding together the edges of swollen red gashes. She took in the bandages around his chest and arms. He looked as if he'd survived a run-in with a blender.

"He is an Ancient," she said. "Sasha."

Helga gasped. "The first to betray the Council and serve the Dark One?"

"The *only* to betray the council and serve the Dark One!" Katie shot back in irritation. Rhyn had done neither of those things, despite the legend he had! The distinction was lost on Helga, whose look of horror made Katie pity the woman.

"He cannot be here," Helga said. "But by the Code, I cannot throw him outside the walls when he is so injured."

Katie hesitated to speak her mind, her gaze taking in Sasha's beat-up body. It wasn't a coincidence he was there. She debated with herself about his intentions. Would he go to this extent to be granted admittance, even though he might not survive long enough to get whatever it was he came for? What had he come for? Her or Hannah? Refuge from the demons?

"Was he carrying anything?" she asked. "Or was there anything in his pockets?"

"I'm not sure. If he was, it would be in the trunk under his bed."

Katie inched forward, terrified he'd leap off the bed to attack her. She eased the small trunk out from under his bed and carried it into the hallway. She set it down and opened it. His shredded clothing had been laundered and folded. Pulling it out, she sucked in a breath and withdrew a familiar vial of blood. She stared at the discovery in her hands. With the castle flooded by demons, she didn't know where she could take the vial to keep it from Sasha when he woke.

Whatever Sasha's plan had been, it must've backfired. He'd never risk losing something so valuable! Without replacing the clothing, she tucked the vial into her pocket and rose.

"Is there an Immortal named Uily here?" she asked.

"Not that I recall," Helga said. "There are four Sanctuaries. The Ancient Kris probably contacted the other three, because we only have about forty Immortal refugees here now. We're the smallest Sanctuary by far."

"You need to toss him outside the walls, fast," Katie said. "Or you're risking the lives of everyone here."

Helga appeared aghast, then torn. Katie strode back to her room, mind racing. Rhyn might come if she called him. Or he might not after her accidental slip-up. Either way, she feared seeing him again before she had her it's-not-me-it's-you speech ready. She opened her door and glanced over at Toby then did a double-take. The youth sitting on Toby's bed wasn't Toby.

"Who are you?" she demanded, startled.

"Toby, Mama," he said with a snicker. The kid on the bed was closer to twelve than five, and near her height. She stared at him hard, recognizing the brown eyes but not the lean face and body.

"Today must be your birthday," Helga said from the doorway.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Someone care to explain?" Katie asked.

"Angels jump from age to age. They mature slowest of all Immortals, but when they hit certain points in angel years, they jump to the next human stage of maturity," Helga said. "It's fascinating. We raised an angel here for several hundred millennia. You wake up one day and find he's turned from child to man overnight."

Just when she thought she understood the rules of the Immortals, they changed.

"A hungry man," Toby added.

"I forgot your cocoa and marshmallows in my suitcase at the castle," she said. "I'll bring them back with your toys next time I go there."

"I'm not six anymore, Mama. I'm going to breakfast."

She stood out of his way, barely able to care for a child and at a loss as to what to do with a boy on the verge of becoming a teenager. As if unaccustomed to his longer legs, Toby tripped twice on his way to the door, stabilized himself, then started forward more cautiously.

Katie waited until he was gone then shook her head, tired of Immortal surprises. Her hand went to her pocket, where the vial was.

"I need to get this someplace safe before Sasha wakes up," she said. "Another Sanctuary maybe, so I can find my friend Ully?"

"Your mate can help you, can't he?" Helga asked with a glance at her neck.

"He's sort of busy fighting demons."

"Then I can help you get to the Indian Ocean Sanctuary."

"I feel like I should take my sister and Toby with me. If you throw Sasha out, can you keep him from entering?"

"No, we cannot. It's an informality that the Ancients respect about visiting us," Helga said. "But, we can try to keep him asleep. You came with a healer, didn't you?"

"Yes, Lankha."

"I'll have this Lankha keep the Ancient in a deep sleep until you return."

Katie hesitated again, afraid to leave her sister after the demons invaded the castle. The vial had to go to Ully, though, and at some point, she'd have to face Rhyn. For the first time since meeting him, she almost preferred to deal with Kris.

"If anything happens ..." There was nothing anyone could do, least of all her. She couldn't bring herself to voice the words out loud. Helga gave her a warm smile.

"We've crossed this bridge before," she assured her. "Your family will be safe here. Come, I will show you a picture to where you must take the portal through the shadow world."

An hour later, Katie stood in a similar-looking fortress several times the size of the Caribbean Sanctuary. The courtyard was packed with women in brown robes and Immortals. Large shade trees and bamboo cabanas provided seating and protection from the sun. The Immortals were grouped beneath the trees, and none of them appeared the worse for wear from their escape.

She wandered the courtyard, looking for any sign of Uly or anyone she recognized. The fortress around the courtyard was four stories tall and lined with wooden doors indicating guest rooms. Several were open, and she saw much more comfortable accommodations and beds than at the small Sanctuary. The cafeteria was four times the size of the one she was used to, and she lingered in the doorway, finally catching the attention of a convent member.

"I'm looking for an Immortal named Uly. I don't know his last name or anything," she said as the woman approached.

"You'll have to check the register. We haven't been able to record everyone's names yet, but what we have is in the guestbook in the office, down that hall, last door on the right," the woman replied, pointing to a hallway behind her.

Katie moved quickly in the direction she indicated and found a line in front of the guestbook as Immortals wrote their names. When she reached it, she scanned all the names on each page, disappointed at not finding his anywhere.

She began to wonder if he made it out of the castle.

\* \* \*

Gabriel stared at the portal in front of him. He dreaded stepping through it. The results of his trip to the mortal world would forever alter his life, and that of his only friend. He would've been content to stay in his cottage for another hundred years or never again visit the mortal world. Death, however, had different plans.

*You're going soft.*

He hated those words, because he was the biggest and strongest of all Death's assassins. That he came from the mortal world rather than the Immortal one had left a taint on him that no amount of success could get rid of. He suspected Death always thought him weaker despite service that had been, until now, flawless.

He gathered the tools of the trade, weapons for killing quickly this time, and stepped through the portal to the shadow world. If he tried, he'd be able to locate his target and track her as she moved until she was dead-dead. Instead, he emerged from the shadow world into the center of the Caribbean Sanctuary. He knew she wasn't there, and the longer she stayed away, the more time he had to think about what to do. He went to a dark corner in the cafeteria to wait.

She'd be safe, as long as she stayed away.

\* \* \*

Katie emerged from the shadow world with her heart pounding. Uly's lab was a disaster, with glass covering the floor and counters flipped on end. The door was closed but lopsided in its frame while half the lights overhead were burnt out. She heard no signs of demons fighting from outside the room.

"Ully?" she called, picking her way through the broken glass and fallen instruments. A sound came from the back of the large room, and she made her way there. A small door—possibly leading to a bathroom or closet—was closed and blocked by one of Ully's science toys the size of a copy machine. The sound came from behind it, as if someone were trying to open the door.

Hesitating only a moment, she shoved the machine. It screeched across the floor a few inches. With a deep breath, she shoved again, enough for the door to crack open.

"Ully, is that you?" she called, ready to run if a demon tried to lunge at her.

"Katie!" Ully sounded relieved. "I'm stuck in here!"

"Are you ok, Ully?" she asked, surprised.

"Alive. Did you bring Rhyn?"

"It's just me." Ully sighed in disappointment, and she rolled her eyes. "I can leave you in there!"

"It's probably safer," he agreed.

"You're worse than some damsel in distress. Aren't you supposed to be protecting the weak, puny human?"

He said nothing but pushed at the door. She shoved the machine again until the space was wide enough for him to squeeze through. The scientist's glasses were missing, his expression growing sorrowful as he looked around at his destroyed lab.

"I brought you something to cheer you up," she said and dug the vial of blood out of her pocket. "I found it on Sasha."

"You sure it was Sasha?"

"Pretty sure."

"Let me see something," he said, striding to where his desk was. He pushed the wreckage around and dug his notebook out of the mess. Katie watched as he walked through the lab, collecting undestroyed pieces of equipment and tools. One counter was still standing next to the refrigerator tucked in a corner, and he swept the broken glass from the top to create a little work space. She looked around the area where his desk had been and spotted a perfume bottle similar to the one he'd give her before.

"What do you think is wrong with it?" she asked as she bent to retrieve the bottle. *Demon* was scribbled on the side. She sniffed at it and sneezed at the familiar skunk scent before shoving it in her pocket.

"I don't think anything is wrong with it, but I want to make sure," he explained.

"Good thing Sasha washed up on shore at the Sanctuary or the demons would have this one," she said. "I guess it wouldn't matter if you succeeded in altering it like Kris said."

"Altering it?"

"Did you get hit on the head or something? Kris told you to make a toxic version he could trade back to the demons."

"I do have a headache," he said, distracted. "You say Sasha washed up somewhere?"

"Really weird, Ully. I don't know what he's doing. The women at the Sanctuary said they pulled him out of the water, and he looks awful."

"Which Sanctuary?"

She looked up at the uncharacteristic demand. Ully appeared to be prepping his tools for whatever tests he wanted to run. The vial sat on the counter next to his notebook, and she

watched him pick up a syringe. She'd never noticed how long his nails were or the sinewy strength in his forearms. Suddenly, she wondered just how well demons could shapeshift and why they'd lock Uly in the closet instead of killing him.

"I'm feeling really sick, Uly. Do you have any food?" she asked. She sagged against a counter, hoping he believed her. She reached for the perfume in her pocket. For once, she hoped Uly's oddball experiment didn't let her down.

"Sure," he said, the dark note in his voice gone. "This won't take long. I should have something in the fridge and then we can go get some real food."

Having spent many afternoons with him in the lab, she knew he kept only serums and instruments in the refrigerator. He made his way to the appliance, and she darted for the vial, snatching it off the counter then running through the mess to the door. The demon that was Uly gave a half-bark, half-roar before he smashed through the lab toward her. He snatched one arm and she sprayed him with the perfume.

The demon coughed and batted at his face.

*Thank you, Uly, thank you!*

Uncertain whether or not the battle still waged between demons and Immortals, she braced herself to be attacked as she flew past every doorway towards the back stairwell. Bodies blocked her descent to the basements where the warriors were, and she struck off down a narrow corridor that dead-ended in another set of stairs leading to a door hanging from one hinge.

She heard no signs of the demon pursuing but trotted down the stairs, hoping to find another way into the dungeons where the Immortal warriors lived. It took all her strength to shove the hefty door wide enough for her to enter the dark chamber beyond that was lit by a single torch.

It looked like a crypt. The altar in the center was empty while seven statues kept watch over it. The air was heavy and her attention was drawn to the life-like statues. The tallest looked a great deal like Andre, the deceased Immortal she'd met a short time before he was killed. The second looked like Kris might've in his younger days, when his face still glowed with hope. Sasha's wore a genuine smile. She vaguely recognized the other three and knelt beside the statue of Rhyn, who was no older than Toby had been the day before.

Even at such a young age, Rhyn's features were troubled and somber, as if he knew what kind of a life awaited him. She sat back with a frown, unable to feel anything but pity for the half-demon child who knew no acceptance anywhere in life. She touched her stomach with a flutter of panic. The idea of bringing a new life into such a horrific world made her feel sick. No child of hers would end up like Rhyn—tormented, rejected, and abused!

"What're you doing here?"

She whipped around to see Kris standing in the doorway, holding the door open as if debating whether to enter.

"Is that really you?" she asked suspiciously. She rose to keep the altar between them.

"What kind of stupid question is that?"

"Tell me something only you and I would know," she ordered.

"I slept with your sister."

"God, Kris, did you have to go there?"

"You delusional or do you have a reason to think I'm someone else?" he asked and entered fully.

"I ran into someone I thought was Ullly in the lab. Turned out to be a demon. I didn't know they could shapeshift into someone else's form."

"Only a very few of them can assume the form of another human. Demons are born with predetermined forms that are unique to the demon. A few can assume forms, but they're rare," he said. "You say there was one in Ullly's lab?"

"Yes."

"We'll have to scrub this place from top to bottom to make sure no one else pops up somewhere they shouldn't be. Like you being here."

"I was more concerned with hiding than with where I went," she said, agitated by his accusing look. "What is this place?"

"It was our father's crypt, until yesterday, when Sasha stole our father's body."

Her gaze went to the altar, and she shivered. The Council That Was Seven had been immortalized safeguarding their father in death. It was creepy. Who kept a dead man on a shrine in the basement?

"The statues are beautiful," she managed. "It's hard to imagine Rhyn as a child."

"He was cast out of the Immortal world fairly young. None of us know—or care—where he went, except Andre, who saw something in him that—to this day—never materialized."

Her face grew red at his easy dismissal of his youngest brother. Her gaze settled on the statue of Rhyn, whose large eyes held an ominous look too old for his chubby little face.

"How can you be like this, Kris?" she asked, unable to stop the angry words. "You take great precautions to safeguard Toby, and yet, you rejected your own brother?"

"Someone like you could never understand."

"You're right, Kris, I can't understand how you could turn your back on the person who needed you most and justify it with your shortsighted arrogance. I pray to God Hannah doesn't choose you as a mate!"

"I believe she already has," he said, irritation in his voice. "Rhyn was a lost cause from the beginning. Our own father wanted him dead. I'm sworn to protect Toby, and I've done my duty in protecting Sasha, who is also my brother, according to the Code and the oaths I swore to my father and the Council!"

"You chose the wrong side, Kris. If you had half a brain, you'd have helped Rhyn and killed Sasha."

"I do what I am obligated to do, and that's all that should concern you," he said through gritted teeth. "I won't have some stupid mortal telling me how to do things!"

With all the insults and arrogance, she couldn't take her mind off the statue of Rhyn and her sister being at the mercy of such a man.

"I'm going to tell you a secret someone told me, Kris," she said, facing him. "Do you know why Rhyn killed Lilith?"

He stared at her.

"Yes, I know the story," she said. "It was revealed to me by someone you trust when I was at the Sanctuary a few weeks ago. Lilith was trying to destroy the Council. She was a plant by the Dark One who lured you and probably the rest of your brothers into bed. Rhyn killed her to

protect you, Kris. You owe him your life. He's the most flawed of anyone I've ever met, but he's a more honorable man than you'll ever be!"

He crossed the distance between them in three strides and slapped her hard. Pain flared through her. She touched the blood that bubbled at the side of her mouth.

"Get the fuck out of here," he hissed.

She reached into her pocket and withdrew the vial, shoving it at him.

"I may be a stupid mortal, but I know right from wrong," she said in a trembling voice. "Sasha's at the Caribbean Sanctuary. Go rescue him again, so he can kill more of the Immortals, like those you sacrificed to protect him the first time!"

She fled, her ears ringing and cheek burning from his strike. She'd never understand a man like Kris, who saw the world only in black and white! The image of baby Rhyn and Kris's words distracted her as she hurried through the hall back to the stairs. She couldn't imagine what he'd been through: thrown out at such an age with a father who wanted him dead and brothers who hated him. He wasn't the kind to pity himself. She doubted he saw anything wrong with the treatment he was accustomed to.

Soon enough, nothing would matter, not when Gabriel came for her.

For the first time since arriving over three weeks ago, she missed her cavernous chamber. She wondered if twelve-year-old boys played with stuffed animals. Toby had tons of them in his small bedchamber off hers. She found herself ascending the servants' stairwell at a run, in case the Uly-demon was still stalking her, until she reached her floor, which appeared blessedly free of any signs of battle and death. She pushed her door open and scanned the room before entering and closing it fast.

She'd never liked her room, but she found some comfort in its familiarity. One of Toby's stuffed animals had fallen to the floor when she carried him to the basement before the demon attacks. She retrieved it and hugged it, not at all certain what the new Toby would and wouldn't want that the old Toby had loved. The bag she'd started to pack still gaped open, half-full on the trunk at the base of her bed.

"Hey."

She turned at the familiar voice, pleased and surprised to see Megan, the Immortal warrior who befriended her and showed her around when she arrived to the castle several weeks before. Megan's dark eyes were glowing though her clothing was covered in blood.

"You shouldn't be alone up here yet," Megan warned. "Bad guys in the castle still. We're sweeping the castle now."

"So it's over?"

"Mostly. The Council sent in their warriors to help Kris. We lost quite a few of our friends," she said with a frown. "Defeated the demons, except for a few hiding out here."

"I'm so sorry, Megan," she said softly.

"It's what we train for. Doesn't make it easier but ..." Megan shrugged. "C'mon. We cleared out the basements. You can stay in your old room."

"I'd like that," Katie said. "Let me grab a few more things." She packed hurriedly and grabbed another of Toby's stuffed animals before meeting the female warrior in the hallway. Megan spoke with a gentle British lilt, and her dark eyes took in everything as they walked.

"How many are lost?" Katie asked as they walked.

"About half of Kris's warriors. Not sure about the others. Your mate can fight like a monster. Never seen anything like that before. He was shapeshifting like a maniac and just tearing demons' heads off. He kept up at it all night."

"I imagine." She suspected she knew what made Rhyn fight like a demon. For once, it wasn't his half-demon blood.

"He brought the Council back together," Megan said in a whisper. "At least, that's what some of Ancient Erik's warriors said. Ancient Kris would never admit to that."

"What do you mean, brought the Council together?"

"They split before the demon battle, and Rhyn rounded up all the brothers. The guy I spoke to said he beat the ever-living shit out of them all at once, until they agreed to come back and do what Kris says."

A laugh bubbled up. Katie tried to suppress it, not wanting to offend her friend, but it escaped. Megan looked at her curiously.

"Sorry. I guess I can see him doing that," she explained. She doubted it happened as the rumor mill said, but if Rhyn of all people had brought the Council together ... She was impressed. He'd saved the Immortals that shunned him. She was pleased by the news, despite knowing none of his brothers remotely deserved to be saved.

"They went hunting for Sasha," Megan added. "I hope they find him."

Katie said nothing. She wanted to return to the Sanctuary, though not before she found out what happened to Uly. They descended to the warrior's barracks level of the basements. For the first time in three weeks, she felt safe and relieved as she looked around the tiny room that had been hers when she first arrived. The barracks area was heavily guarded, but she was struck by the lack of activity in the part of the castle that normally hummed with life.

"You know where everything is," Megan said at the doorway. "I gotta keep looking for demons or any other Immortal survivors."

"Have you seen Uly by chance?" Katie asked.

"Not yet. We're trying to get a handle on who went to which Sanctuary and where else Immortals scattered to. We should know by nightfall."

"Thanks."

Megan closed the door behind her, and Katie sank down onto the bed.

\* \* \*

Rhyn finished his task of clearing Kris's floor of dead bodies. He tossed the last one out the window. Kris was glaring up at him, he knew without looking. But he wasn't about to walk up and down the stairwell or traipse through the shadow world a million times to accomplish the same goal.

A pyre had been built in the middle of the cobblestone courtyard to burn the bodies of the demons before nightfall, when they'd come back alive. He wiped his bloodied hands on his shirt and trotted down the hall. He'd sensed Katie's appearance in the castle a short time ago and had avoided going directly to her, for fear he wasn't quite ready to say what he needed to. With nothing left to occupy him, he strode to the familiar room where they'd shared the fateful night weeks before. Katie looked up from her spot seated on the bed as he entered, her face troubled.



"You're a mess," she said in disapproval. He glanced down to see how bad his clothing looked. It was soaked through and dried with blood and his exposed skin was tinted red.

"Rough night," he said, sitting on the bed across from her. "Really rough night."

"So I hear."

They gazed at each other for a long, quiet minute.

"This room has a lot of memories," she spoke at last and looked around.

"Yeah," he agreed, glance going to her stomach. He'd never had a thought more foreign than that of what grew within her.

"Not all good," she said and crossed her arms self-consciously. "Megan said you brought the Council together."

"They just needed a little encouragement," he said with a shrug.

"It was a very good thing for you to do."

"Sometimes I get things right."

"You're a better person than I am. I would've let them all go down in flames for how they treated you," she said.

The awkward quiet fell again. He didn't want her storming out as usual when he said something wrong.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" he asked at last.

"You don't know anything about this do, you?"

"I assume one day it hatches."

"Hatches?" she echoed, astonished.

"Demons hatch."

"I'm not a demon!"

"It'll be a boy."

"It could be a girl."

"It can't be. Girls can't fight and they just make life really difficult," he snapped. He'd never felt like panicking in his life but in that moment, he almost did. He stood and paced.

"Look, I'll make this easy on you," she said. "I'll go live with Hannah, out of your hair, and you can run around killing things and beating up your brothers. We'll both be ... happy."

"We'll see," he said. His thoughts went to his father's crypt.

"We'll see what?"

"I'm thinking," he growled. "You still intend to leave me. I still don't want to lose you, but all I do is cause you trouble." She looked down, and he noticed for the first time one of her cheeks was red. "What happened to your cheek?"

"Nothing. Just pissing people off today. Did you hear I found Sasha?" She hurried to change the subject. "Rather, he magically appeared at the Sanctuary."

"He happen to be carrying a clear coffin?"

"No, but he had the vial of blood. I brought it to Kris."

*That explains her cheek*, he thought darkly, not caring one bit about Sasha or the vial. Katie couldn't stay with her sister if her sister chose Kris, or she'd be subjected to the same treatment he was. His gaze went to her neck, his resolve solidifying at the sight of her exhausted features and red cheek. He had one chance to make a safe life for her and their ... hatchling. He found

himself wishing again that Andre was alive. Instead, he found himself mulling over the advice from another brother.

"What's wrong?" she asked as he paced.

"Maybe you're right. We should split," he forced himself to say. "Sasha told me how to break our mating. I think you have a better chance of being accepted by the Immortals if you're not my mate."

She looked surprised. "Rhyn, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying, I release you of our bond."

"You *what*?"

"I don't know exactly how to do it, but from this day forward, I'll no longer claim you as my mate. You should be safe now."

He couldn't read the look on her face. Her emotions were flying and intense. He started to leave, and she stood.

"Rhyn, wait!" she said. "I didn't want to leave you because of the Immortals or any of that. There's something else I need to—"

"Katie, if I do this, I know you'll survive. If I stay with you, I don't know if you will. And now there's the hatchling to think about," he said. "I'd rather lose you as my mate than lose you forever. So, it's done. I'll always take care of you both, but I won't endanger you anymore."

With regret heavy in his stomach, he left. She didn't try to stop him. He strode through the halls and stairwells until he broke free of the castle. He would go to the Sanctuary and bring Sasha back to Kris. He'd serve on the Council and force it to stay together. He'd rebuild the Immortal empire and use his half-demon skills to protect them all. He'd sacrifice himself to the balance of good and evil by taking on the enforcer role Andre's death had left open.

Most importantly, he'd protect Katie by building a world that was safe for her and watching over her from a distance. Kris had sworn to protect her if Rhyn un-mated her. If Kris were willing to protect a twisted bastard like Sasha because of a stupid oath, he'd do the same for Katie. Maybe then, she'd know peace. No one would hurt her or hunt her just to get to him. He'd find a way to deal with the loss that ate a hole through his body. What mattered was that she was safe, and he no longer caused her pain.

Rage pounded through his body and he threw himself into the air, relishing the pain the shapeshifting brought.

\* \* \*

"We found something while scouting the forest." The Immortal on the other side of his door was too excited to wait until he entered to shout the news.

"Come in," Kris ordered from his spot at the conference table. It was otherwise empty, and he'd escaped for a break from the death burning in the courtyards and any interaction with others, especially a certain mortal who'd managed to reopen an old wound. He looked up as the scout entered. Snow had begun to fall again and clung to the scout's clothing. "What is it?"

"Darkyn's preparing for another attack in the forest."

"How many demons?"

"More than we have Immortals."

Kris rose to find his brothers.

“Kris,” the scout continued. “There’s something else. The demons are heading to the mortal village. We heard them say they have orders to kill everyone.”

Kris was silent, surprised at Darkyn’s audacity. Immortals and demons fought among themselves, for mortals were too weak and temporary to bother with. It was an understanding as old as the Dark One, who had stopped his demons once before when they launched attacks on humans. While Kris would love to sacrifice a certain infuriating mortal to further his cause, he wouldn’t even sacrifice her, let alone allow Darkyn’s to wipe out a village. Any bleed over of their battle into the mortal world was unacceptable.

He strode into the hall, calling, “Kiki!”

His brother poked his head from the burnt-out remains of Kris’s own chamber.

“Scout, tell him. I’m going to find my brothers.”

The scout bobbed his head. Kris opened a portal to the Indian Ocean Sanctuary, where Erik had gone to seek out Uly. The vial was in his pocket, and he strode into the Sanctuary, eyes roving for Erik or Uly.

The largest of the Sanctuaries, it was packed with the majority of the Immortals who had been present in the castle. His eyes took in the different people as he sought out Hannah before realizing she had likely gone to the Caribbean with her sister. Katie’s words stung despite his attempt to ignore them. Someone had lied to her about Lilith, who had died defenseless and alone. Andre never approved of Lilith, either, but he’d never accused her of evil. An unbound Immortal’s mate had no protection from demon or Immortal Code. He’d learned this the hard way when Andre refused to do more than send Rhyn to Hell for killing Lilith. Had she been his mate, Andre would’ve made Rhyn dead-dead.

Kris wasn’t about to lose Hannah the same way. While Lilith’s tattoo—and therefore, her bond to him—had never fully materialized, he’d find a way to ensure Hannah’s did.

Frustrated at not finding either of the men he sought, he created a portal to the Caribbean Sanctuary and emerged outside the walls. He beat on the door then entered unbidden. A small woman in a brown robe rushed to remind him of the rules.

“I know, good lady,” he said. “I will not be here long. By chance, have you seen—”

“Kris?”

He looked up at the sweet voice, his anger melting at the sight of Hannah’s pretty face. She smiled uncertainly. He excused himself to cross to her. She appeared healthy, and her blue eyes were bright.

“I am glad to see you well,” he said. “Did Toby make it safely?”

“Yes, of course. Katherine brought us here.”

“I see. I gave orders that everyone was to rendezvous elsewhere, but I am happy you’re safe.”

“I have something to show you,” she said and took his hand, pulling him toward the guest rooms lining the small courtyard.

“Hannah, I must—”

“It’ll be quick.”

He allowed her to pull him into her small room and close the door behind him. He waited while she rolled up her sleeve in excitement, then displayed the blood-red tattoo there. Inside an intricate pattern of Immortal writing was the word *K R I S*. His throat tightened at the sight of

something he'd waited his whole life to see. No matter what lies Katie had been told, he couldn't believe what was said about Lilith. The evidence Lilith wasn't meant for him was clear. Immortals only had one shot at their mates, and Andre had tried to warn him Lilith was not his intended. His dead-dead brother was right, or Hannah wouldn't bear Kris's name.

He caressed the tattoo with a thumb and smiled, feeling genuine happiness for the first time since Andre's death. Hannah's face glowed, and she threw her arms around him. He held her close and breathed in her scent.

"Katherine was gone before I could show her. She'll be so thrilled to welcome you to our family!" she exclaimed.

Kris knew the opposite to be true but said nothing, enjoying the moment of peace. There was a tap at the door. He pulled loose from her to answer it, not surprised to see another of the convent members there, probably to tell him the same thing the first did.

"Master Kris," the woman said, "we have your brother, Sasha, here. He's in a deep sleep, but his presence here is causing much unease among us."

"Hannah, I promise to come back soon. I must handle this," he said, turning back to give his mate a kiss on the cheek.

"You'll return today?" she asked hopefully. "Or can we go back to the castle?"

"I have to make sure the demons are gone before you come back," he said. "I will visit again soon, my Hannah."

She beamed another brilliant smile, and it took all his willpower to leave her to see one of his least favorite people. He rejoined the awaiting convent member in the courtyard outside Hannah's room and trailed her through the Sanctuary. A familiar shape in the dark corner of the cafeteria caught his attention as he passed, and he paused to raise a hand in greeting.

"Gabriel?"

The death dealer emerged. He looked ... different, though Kris couldn't pinpoint why. His eyes were colder, his face more somber. At Tamer's height and built like a tank, there had never been anything soft about Death's assassin, but he seemed more distant than usual.

"You here for me?" He gave the typical greeting.

"No," Gabriel said.

"For Sasha maybe?"

"No."

"It would ease a lot of my issues if you were," Kris admitted. "Walk with me. You're here to watch over Toby, as usual?"

"Of sorts."

Kris gave him a sidelong look. Gabriel had been a friend to all the Council members, though he suspected the assassin favored Rhyn the most.

"I hadn't seen you in a couple of days. Demons attacked us after Sasha did something with our father's body. I don't know what he intended. He was safe at the castle," Kris said as they walked.

"People are often victims of their own natures."

"Do you ever find it difficult to follow the Code when it seems so wrong to do so?"

"Not until recently."

Gabriel's ominous words made Kris uneasy. The assassin had been an even greater stickler to the Code than he was. Kris had come close to breaking the Immortal rules or his own oaths to his father. To his knowledge, Gabriel never had, and the assassin was not one who would ever allow emotion to cloud his decisions.

"I guess there comes a time where even the best of us are tempted," he reasoned.

"Unfortunately, it seems that way. A good man once told me sometimes all the choices we have are bad."

"Wise words from a wise man," Kris said. They reached Sasha's room, and the convent member pushed the door open to reveal Sasha's torn-up body. "What I can't figure out is why he came here."

"His name isn't on my list. He doesn't have a contract out on him yet," Gabriel said.

Kris took in his mutilated brother's body. He thought of what the Council wanted him to do and of what Sasha had done. Killing in cold blood was forbidden. He'd have to figure out what to do with the wounded man. He could buy an assassination, but part of him preferred the idea of handling family matters within the family.

"When he's well enough, we'll move him," he told the anxious woman in brown. She frowned in response. "I'll post two Immortal guards to ensure he doesn't do anything stupid."

She nodded, relief on her face, and he turned away from his injured brother. He'd send someone to take Hannah to a different sanctuary, unwilling to risk his newfound mate to one as unpredictable as Sasha.

For her sake, he had to find a way to live with Katie, or their differences would turn into a family feud. He couldn't bring himself to include Rhyn in the picture and hoped Katie came to her senses one day and dumped the half-demon before the worst happened, and she ended up extending the bloodline of the loose cannon that was her mate.

"How long are you here for, Gabe?" he asked.

"As long as it takes."

"You're here on business."

"I am."

"Good luck to you," Kris said. "You'd have my eternal gratitude if you could find a place for Rhyn in the underworld."

"Not here for him."

"Maybe next time. I'm returning to the castle. I'll send Immortals to watch over Sasha."

His thoughts on preventing demons from killing innocent humans, he missed the resentful look that crossed Gabriel's face.

\* \* \*

*"You will find him and bring the vial or the girl to me, or I will spend eternity tormenting you!"*

Darkyn's angry words echoed in Jade's mind. His body was bloodied from Darkyn's whip. The cold early winter wind dried the tears on his face and made his cheeks stiff. Limping, Jade returned to the site where he'd killed Sasha. Sasha's blood was hidden beneath fresh snowfall. He stopped to lean against a tree to rest, unable to shake his own surprise at discovering Sasha wasn't dead.

He'd chopped him to pieces; he shouldn't have survived! And the vial never should've found its way back here!

It was Katie again. His fury rose once more. She'd been the reason Kris turned his back on him, and she'd been the one to bring the vial to the demon she thought was Uly. If he found her, he might find the vial.

His mind foggy with pain, Jade began to humor thoughts he'd previously rejected. They appeared more reasonable in his current state. If he killed her, Kris would finally see the folly of his ways. He'd have to deliver the vial to Darkyn first. Maybe there was a chance he could leave Hell and come back to Kris. After all, Kris hadn't died in the attack, and Jade could blame it all on Sasha.

A new idea struck, and he looked down at his bloodied body. He would go to Kris and tell him just that—that Sasha had done this all, and he, Jade, had tried to help but been nearly killed by the demons!

It would work. It *must* work! Darkyn was too cruel a master to betray.

Jade shook his head, feeling as if madness born of desperation were creeping into his mind with the pain. He straightened and limped toward the castle. No one challenged him, for the Immortals had no idea what he'd done. He passed through them tensely, many of them as bloody or bruised as he was. He saw only warriors on the main floor of the castle and ascended with increasing pain to the floor where Kris would be.

Kris's chamber was a burnt-out hull, and he lingered for a moment, regret in his belly. He'd spent many wonderful nights in the now crispy bed. He went next door to the conference room and opened it.

Kris looked up, surprise crossing his face. Kiki, the Ancient from Asia, sat beside Kris at the small conference table and looked him over with a frown. Jade's words stuck in his throat at the sight of Kris's beautiful emerald eyes. Emerald was the color of Kris thinking, and Jade's favorite hue.

"My god, Jade, where have you been?" Kris managed at last, standing.

"I needed some space," Jade replied. "When I came back, the demons were attacking. I chased them into the forest and ended up surrounded. Barely made it back."

"We lost half of Kris's warriors and quite a few of mine," Kiki said. "You're a lucky man."

"Kiki, can you leave us alone?" Kris asked. Kiki obeyed and left, closing the door behind him. Jade's heart started to soar. His one love wanted to be alone with him!

"I would hug you in greeting, but I'm down to one of my last sets of clothing," Kris said somewhat ruefully. He moved to the edge of the table nearest Jade and crossed his arms as he leaned against it. "You need a healer, my friend."

"I've seen better days," Jade agreed. "I am sorry I wasn't here when you needed me."

"We survived. Barely. Waiting to see what Darkyn intends by sending his remaining warriors to the human village."

"He would do that?"

"Seems that way. Kiki's men are at the village now to protect it."

Jade was quiet, struck by the importance of such a move. Darkyn had said nothing of this to him! It was one thing for the demons and Immortals to fight, but to attack the innocent humans was madness. *He* would never go so far.

"I am happy to see you. I was worried," Kris said in a soft voice. Jade's pulse leapt at the words. "A lot has changed in so short a time. The Council is working together for once, and Sasha tricked us into thinking he was returning to the Council, disappeared and washed up at the Caribbean Sanctuary. Our father's body was stolen."

"I saw Sasha take the body into the forest," Jade said carefully. "He was shouting at the demons. Said he'd done what they told him and given them you and the castle so they'd leave him alone."

Kris's gaze darkened, and he stood, pacing to the window. He stared into the dark night, watching the snow fall.

"I guess they changed their mind. They slashed him up good, but he's still alive," Kris said. "I wonder how they got him away from the coffin. He should've known to stay put."

"I don't know. He did say something about the Sanctuary," Jade said, seeking some lie to keep Kris's suspicions from turning to him. "It's all I heard. I was fighting the demons."

"In any case, I'm pleased to see you again, my friend," Kris said. He seemed to shake his dark mood, and Jade relaxed. "I have more good news for you."

"We need good news!"

"I found my mate."

Jade drew a sharp breath. "Katie?"

"No, her sister. There were two Ancient's mates born into her family. I discovered this when her sister arrived here."

Jade saw his chance of returning to his ex-lover's side disappear. The pain returned, and he realized he hadn't noticed its temporary reprieve until it clutched his chest again. His thoughts turned to Katie. He'd give anything for the vial and the feel of her blood on his hands! She'd brought him nothing but pain, and now her family had taken Kris from him. His whole life was in shambles because of her.

"You need some rest and a shower. The guest room is open. Please, go take care of yourself," Kris said, not unkindly.

Jade couldn't bring himself to ask about the vial for fear of giving himself away. His battered body felt heavy, and his emotions grew chaotic. He stared at the ground in front of him, heartsick.

"Is Katie all right?" he forced himself to ask. "Was she pleased to know her sister was joining our ... family?"

"Not exactly. She and her mate have become even larger thorns in my side. I'm sending her back to the Sanctuary in the morning."

Jade looked up again, interested as much in the sudden anger in Kris's voice as he was in the knowledge that Katie was in the castle.

"But, that's for a different time," Kris said with a small smile. "Go and rest."

"Thank you, I will." His voice sounded mechanical to his own ears. Jade opened the door to leave when Kris's voice stopped him.

"Jade, you know I'll always care about you."

"It's too late for that," he said and walked out. He went to the guestroom next door and closed the door. The chamber seemed ... foreign to him. It would be his last night with the

Immortals, for no one would forgive him once he followed through with the plans forming in his mind.

Kris waited until the guest bedroom door closed before he motioned to one of the Immortals posted on either end of the hallway. With a sinking heart, he realized he'd lost the Jade who'd been his friend and lover for a few hundred years. Something was drastically altered about his friend, and the thin collar around his neck told Kris everything he needed to know. What he didn't know was what happened to his other lieutenant, Iliana. If Sasha was telling the truth, the chances of her being alive weren't good.

"Post six guards in this hallway. No one leaves this floor unless it's me. Understood?"

The Immortal nodded and trotted away to gather more. Kris waited until five Immortals were present in the hall before he retreated to his conference room. Once more, he caught himself thinking of Andre and missing his brother's—and best friend's—guidance.

Andre was dead-dead. He had to do what Andre would have done.

Kris crossed to his burnt-out bedchamber and dug through a trunk in the closet. He withdrew a dagger he'd purposely buried there, never intending to follow in the footsteps of Andre's enforcer role. It was the dagger used to kill Rhyn's mother, and the same one Andre would've used to kill Sasha for breaking his sacred oaths and trying to kill his brothers.

It was the same one he'd use to kill Jade and Sasha.

Kris closed his eyes. He didn't want this role. It wasn't in his nature. As much as he didn't want to admit it, this was a role for Rhyn, who had brought the Council back. He gave his youngest brother no credit for understanding either the importance of the Council or the good intentions behind bringing the Council back together, but Rhyn knew how to use brute violence when it was needed.

"You going hunting?"

He whirled to face the man of whom he thought.

"For me?" Rhyn asked with a cunning smile. "You're the best Immortal warrior there is. It'd be an honor to kill you."

"Believe it or not, I was thinking of killing someone else," Kris replied, rising. He tucked the dagger into his belt and shoved Rhyn out of his way as he exited the closet.

"It's gotta be Sasha."

Kris said nothing.

"I came to tell you something else."

"I take it more bad news?" Kris said. "It's my day for that shit."

"I think you'll take this as good news, knowing how much you like to see me suffer."

"Then tell all."

"I let Katie go."

Kris turned, surprised. "I didn't think you were smart enough."

"It's the only way to keep you and the other Immortals from treating her like shit."

"You really did this?"

"I did."

"So you're going back to Hell?"



"No, brother, sorry to disappoint you," Rhyn said dryly. "I'm staying here. With you and the Council. It's where I'm supposed to be, isn't it?"

"I don't understand," Kris said with a frown. "You're leaving her but staying here."

"I'm going to make sure you and the Council do what it must to protect her and everyone else like her."

Kris looked at his condemned brother anew, not sure how to take Rhyn's newfound intent and resolve. Rhyn's gaze fell to the dagger Andre had carried.

"You don't have the heart or stomach for what that entails."

Kris's face felt warm, but he knew Rhyn was right for once.

"Andre and I were more alike than you know," Rhyn added.

"You were nothing alike. What he did was for the good of Immortals and humans alike," Kris said.

"Right, because killing in cold blood isn't something a Council member does."

"It's not something I do," Kris retorted.

"I will. Whomever you want, and whomever you don't want, I won't."

"You'll take orders from me?"

"On this. On everything else, probably not. But, I'll keep the Council together to protect Katie and our hatchling."

Kris stared at him. "Humans don't hatch," he whispered, not sure what else to say.

"I don't give a shit how it works."

"Dear god, Rhyn!" he said and shook his head. Now he understood Rhyn's powerful motivator, and he was both impressed and horrified.

"And she wants to become a nun at a Sanctuary," Rhyn added. "Good place for her, Toby, and the hatchling. I only ask one thing of you, Kris, in exchange for doing your dirty work."

"I'm all ears at this point."

"You take care of her like you said you would after the Council meeting. No more of the shitty treatment you've been giving her. She's no longer my mate. Treat her like she's the sister of your mate."

Kris hesitated. He'd never had a conversation with Rhyn where the two of them didn't behave like testosterone-plagued teenagers. He didn't want to agree to Rhyn's terms, but the side of him willing to take in a creature like Sasha emerged again. At the end of the day, he'd try to do what was right. If Katie wanted to go to the convent, he'd be the last to argue with her. It'd keep her out of his hair, safe, and the powerful force that was Rhyn working for him.

"We have a deal," he said. He withdrew the sheathed dagger and tossed it to Rhyn. "I still can't believe ... I shouldn't be surprised. You fuck up everything."

"I know," Rhyn said, unaffected. "Who do I kill first?"

\* \* \*

Katie stood in the back doorway to the castle, hoping Rhyn returned soon. Snow fell from the sky to be either burned by the pyre or to cover the red mess that was the rest of the park. Immortals lined the perimeter of the park shoulder to shoulder and roved the interior of the castle. Kris had assigned her a babysitter and ordered her to spray herself down with the skunk spray so she wouldn't draw any unwanted attention.

Something tickled her neck, and she looked down to see the first of the letters of her tattoo flutter to the ground. They fell delicately one by one, like feathers. She grabbed at one of them, then let it fall. It was what needed to happen. He had to let her go, but the sense of yearning and pain was too strong for her to sleep.

She sank down with her back to the door, not caring about the cold day or the snow that seeped through her clothes to chill her. She stared at the blood-colored letters as the snow buried them. She'd tried opening a portal soon after Rhyn left to return to the Sanctuary but failed. Though there was a wall of Immortals between her and the forest, she felt the demon watching her, waiting for its opening, now that she was no longer protected. Again she found herself hoping Gabriel took her soon.

*Darkyn.* He wasn't like the other demons. None of them had gotten into her head.

"You're like bait out here." Kris's voice made her tense. "Go to your chamber. I'll have you taken back to the Sanctuary tomorrow."

"I want to go back today," she replied.

"Not until I find Ully and test the vial you brought me. If it's not the immunity blood, then Ully will need you here in his lab."

She rolled her eyes, once again a test subject to the great overlord of the Immortals. She rose and shook out the chill.

"Besides, you should be resting," he said with a forced note of kindness. She looked up at him questioningly. To her surprise, he walked with her toward the stairs. "I understand you want to go to the convent."

"Rhyn told you?"

"He told me many things, such as he'd let you go."

"Convent would be nice," she whispered. Her chest was clenched so tight, she felt physical pain. "Safe place for us."

"I'll arrange it as soon as I can."

"Thanks, Kris." She left him at the base of the stairs and ascended alone. It was as it should be. Rhyn wasn't coming back for her, yet her heart felt as if it'd fall out of her chest. She hadn't been certain about the kind of life she'd have with him, but she was certain she didn't want a life without him. At least she wouldn't be around long enough to find out.

She entered the chilly chamber. Her Immortal guard poked his head in every corner and door and looked under the bed before he left her in peace.

How she hated this room!

Her suitcase was on the trunk. Tears rose as she realized she was about to leave for good. She didn't want to sleep for fear of the demon from her nightmares—or Gabriel—coming for her. Dragging a blanket to the warm fire in the hearth, she wrapped herself in it and sat.

She dozed and awoke to the sound of something bumping her door. The fire was lower but still burning. She hadn't slept too long. The bump sounded again, as if someone ran into it. Frowning, she rose to see if her Immortal guard was nodding off at his post. As she neared the door, she heard the sounds of scuffling.

Her heart slowed, and she stepped back, imagining the Immortal fighting off some demon that had stayed hidden until dark. Before she could search the room for something to use as a weapon or run, the door wrenched open.

Jade stood before her, blood spattered across his otherwise clean clothes. She gasped, not expecting Kris's traitorous lieutenant but knowing his presence was an awful omen. His bloodied knife was out at his side, his dark gaze blazing.

"I will ask you this once," he said. "Where is the vial the demons seek?"

"Good God, Jade, are you working with them?"

He strode to her and snatched her arm, squeezing until it hurt.

"I don't know!" she cried. "I gave it to Kris!"

His face mottled with anger, he released her with a curse and paced. She noticed his limp.

"What happened to you, Jade?" she whispered.

"Shut up! Everything that's gone wrong has been because of you!" he returned. "If you hadn't appeared, Kris ...". He stopped suddenly. "Where's your mating tattoo? Is Rhyn dead?"

"Not hardly," she said and turned away. "Sounds like he did the same to me as Kris did to you."

Jade was silent. She wondered if Kris would check on her then dismissed the idea he'd seek her out for any reason. Her guards changed every eight hours, and this one would've started his shift at midnight. Two hours ago, according to the clock on the mantle. If she called for Rhyn, he wouldn't come. Desolation absorbed her into her thoughts, until Jade spoke again.

"Demons. They'll take more than your soul."

She looked at him to see the haunted look that crossed his face.

*Rhyn.*

Jade was lost in his thoughts for a few minutes, staring without seeing. Rhyn didn't come. Crushed, she realized she had six hours to keep Jade busy in the hopes he didn't kill her. By the wild look in his eyes, she doubted she'd make it one. Jade shook his head, as if tormented by his own thoughts.

"I can ask him for it," she ventured.

"Like I'd trust you."

"If it's what you came for, then what choice do you have?"

"I've got you if I can't get the vial," Jade said. "Darkyn said—"

"Darkyn?"

"You know him?"

"Only from my nightmares. He's been tracking me for weeks."

"So you'll take him from me, too, will you?"

"I've never taken anyone from you!" she said, baffled. Fury she didn't understand crossed his face. He raised the knife, lowered it, raised, lowered. His gaze burned into her, and she held her breath, awaiting his decision of whether or not to leave her alive.

"I've crossed that line," he muttered to himself and moved forward. He snatched her arm and sheathed his knife. Hauling her to the bed, he shook out a pillow from its case and draped the case over her head like a hood.

"What line?" she asked.

"The one where I kill innocents to get what I want."

He opened a portal so fast, the shadow world sucked her breath out. He dragged her through it, and she dug her heels in. It was worthless—he was too strong. She pulled off the hood just as they emerged in a place she'd never thought she'd see again. The black fortress

and dark skies made her heart drop to her feet. There was no Rhyn to rescue her this time. She was going to die.

He made his way through the fortress to a bedroom and slammed the door behind them. She stood in the middle of the chamber, quaking and praying he wasn't the sadistic bastard Sasha was.

Jade ignored her and crossed to a trunk in the corner. She watched in horror as he pulled out a crumpled woman's body, even more shocked to realize she recognized the woman's face when Jade set her on the bed. She had been one of Kris's lieutenants, Iliana. The woman's hair was red with blood, and her face clammy, but she appeared to be alive.

"What're you doing, Jade?" she whispered, inching closer.

"It is called a proof of life," he said and withdrew a knife. "Darkyn wants you alive, if I can't get the vial. Kris will need to be convinced to turn it over to me."

He lifted Iliana's hand, and Katie realized what he intended.

"Jade, no!"

\* \* \*

"I didn't expect to see you here," Rhyn said, taking in Gabriel's muscular form as he fought the sparring dummies behind the Sanctuary. He assumed Gabe brought the dummies with him; he'd never seen them before. Nearby were more of the assassin's belongings: a few books in a large crate full of dark clothes. "You moving in here?"

"Maybe," Gabriel grunted and continued his merciless beating of the dummy. "What're you doing here?"

"Kris gave me one of Andre's old jobs."

Gabriel stopped and looked at him, taking in the dagger at his belt. Sweat coated his exposed chest, and he wiped his brow with his forearm. Considering how much Gabriel couldn't tolerate sunlight, Rhyn was surprised to see him during daylight at all, let alone without his shades.

"Makes sense," he said at last. "You've got the guts to do what he won't."

Again, Rhyn heard the uneven note in Gabriel's voice. His friend was troubled, and he didn't know why.

"You here for Sasha?" Gabe asked.

"Yes, though Kris said I have to wait for him to wake up and give him a chance to defend himself," Rhyn replied. "Fucking rules."

"How's Katie?"

It was midmorning on this side of the world, and Rhyn squinted up at the sky. He purposely didn't think of her, even though she was the reason he'd chosen this path. He felt the loss of their bond like he'd felt the isolation of Hell. He hated it.

"Fine," he said. It was the assassin's turn to give him a hard look. "How long do you think Sasha will be before he wakes up? I don't want to stay long." *And risk seeing her again.*

"I don't think he'll wake up soon. The healer's been working with him constantly. Seems to be in some sort of coma."

"Lucky bastard," Rhyn grumbled.

"Everything okay?"

"As good as it is for you."

Gabriel gave him a ghost of a smile.

"I didn't think you'd be allowed away from your mistress," Rhyn said as he sat on a boulder near Gabriel's crate of clothes.

"She ordered me up for a job, but I'm considering not going back."

"Life's a bitch."

"It's worse than that, Rhyn. I think sometimes I should've moved into the cell beside yours in Hell. At least there you know what kind of shit you'll go through."

Rhyn listened, sensing his friend was more than troubled: he was deeply disturbed. Gabriel began to beat up the dummy again. Rhyn watched, not wanting to leave for fear of being alone. For the first time in his life, he felt and thought too much, and he wanted to keep himself occupied with the world around him rather than the pain within him. He grabbed one of the Immortal books, fingering the soft, leather-like cover and transparent pages.

"You know, Gabe, even though we're no longer bound, I can still control my power. Maybe I just had to reach a certain age," he said.

Gabriel froze mid-strike at his words and lowered the bo. "What did you do, Rhyn?"

"The right thing for once. Sasha told me how to un-mate her, and I did it."

"Are you mad?"

Rhyn looked up from the book. Gabriel looked truly confused.

"I don't want to talk about it. Just found it interesting that I'm not having issues blowing things up," he said. "You know why?"

"No," Gabriel said after a long pause. "Unless ... you gave up your bond but she didn't give up hers."

"Didn't know it worked that way."

"Because no one ever does that, Rhyn. It's madness."

"I don't want to talk about it!" he all but shouted. He dropped the book, anger rising. Gabriel returned to his dummy, beating it with renewed strength. Rhyn rested back on the boulder and closed his eyes to the rhythmic sounds of waves and Gabriel trying to kill the practice dummy. He tried to ignore his thoughts and didn't hear Kris's approach until his eldest brother spoke.

"Rhyn, now."

He twisted his head to see Kris standing outside of a portal. Unconcerned with what his brother might want, he rested back again.

"It's about Katie."

His heart almost stopped at the grim note in Kris's voice. Gabriel turned at the words, and Rhyn rose. Kris gave no explanation, simply strode into the shadow world. Rhyn trailed. They entered Kris's conference room, where Jade paced on the far side. The object sitting in the middle of the table made his blood run cold.

It was a severed hand, a woman's hand by its small size. Fury flooded him, and he started toward Jade. Kris caught him and shoved him back into the wall with his forearm across Rhyn's throat.

"We don't know where she is, brother, and we never will if you kill him!" he hissed.

"I can make him talk!"

"No! You know I will not break my oath to you. Let me handle this."

Rhyn wanted to change into his demon shape and rip Jade's head off. But Kris was right; this was time to think, not act. Gritting his teeth loudly enough for Kris to grimace, he nodded.

"Tell Rhyn what you told me, Jade," Kris said with calmness that made Rhyn's blood boil more.

"You didn't need to bring the half-breed here. Darkyn wants the untainted vial. I will trade you her for the vial."

"You were behind the demons attacking us," Rhyn snarled.

"That was Sasha."

"Fucking liar!"

"Rhyn! Shut it, or you'll wait in the hall!" Kris snapped. "I don't have the vial, Jade."

"Katie gave it to you," Jade said.

"It'll do you no good. Uly modified it."

"We have Uly in Hell."

Rhyn paced furiously. His gaze fell to the hand, and he stopped suddenly, puzzlement easing his anger. Katie didn't have fingernail polish on when he last saw her. He wasn't sure he ever saw her with it on at all.

"I want both of them back," Kris demanded. Jade faltered and wiped his mouth. "Go and talk to whoever you have to and make this happen."

"Darkyn doesn't negotiate, Kris," Jade said.

"Neither do I. You're wasting my time," Kris said coldly. "Go find your master and come back when you have an answer."

Jade's face skewed, and he whipped open a portal, storming out. Rhyn moved to the table.

"It's not hers," he said, relief pouring through him.

"It's Iliana," Kris said. "We hadn't seen her in a few days. I can't imagine Jade would ..."

Rhyn saw the pained look that crossed Kris's face. He wasn't about to comfort a man he tolerated but didn't like. He could, however, pity the woman whose hand was cut off.

"He does have Katie," Kris said. Rhyn looked up, anger stirring again. "He didn't take her hand, which means Darkyn probably wants her alive. If they can't figure out what Sasha did about the vial, they'll need her and Uly."

"I'll go to Hell and get them both."

"You wouldn't survive. Jade said if they don't get what they want, they'd unleash their demons on the human village. Darkyn's smarter than I thought."

"I'm not going to leave her there to the demons!"

"I'm the brain, you're the brawn. You don't think, Rhyn," Kris said. "For now, your former mate is safe. That probably won't last."

*I doomed her.* He couldn't help the thought, and he dwelled on Gabriel's words. He broke her ability to use his power while retaining her calming effect on him. He'd left her defenseless when he meant to leave her in peace. She probably couldn't call forth a portal. How did he undo what he'd done when he wasn't sure how she became his mate in the first place?

"If you don't figure it out in sixty seconds, I'm going to Hell," he said and began pacing again.

\* \* \*

Jade walked into Darkyn's open chamber to find the demon arming himself for battle.

"Master," he said with a bow of his head. "I tried to get the vial from Kris. He's demanding we return Uly."

"If we return the scientist, we won't know if it's tainted."

"Didn't Sasha's lab figure it out?"

"He slaughtered everyone before he left. No one knows but those who are dead-dead."

Jade paced. There had to be a way to get the vial and keep the girl. He wanted her dead, but he couldn't risk Darkyn's anger before he had it. And if Darkyn knew the human was meters down the hall ...

"No doubt, you delivered my message to Kris that if I don't get what I want, I'm taking out the human village," Darkyn said. "I plan on doing it anyway. I want that vial or the girl, Jade."

"I'm not sure how to get it. I've got nothing to offer him."

"Didn't Sasha have one of Kris's Immortals? The demons passed her around. Give her back. And do it quick. I'm losing patience with you, my pet."

Darkyn strode past him, and Jade bowed his head again. He wiped his face and walked slowly down the hall. He didn't even know if Iliana had survived what he did to her. He hadn't thought he'd need her, or he would've taken the hand of someone else. He pushed the door open to his chamber and saw Katie on the bed with an unconscious Iliana. The woman had wrapped Iliana's hand and elevated it, though the blonde's wheezing led him to believe she wouldn't last long.

"You have to get her help, Jade," the human whispered. "Isn't there some part of you that wants to make this right?"

"It's too late for that. I've crossed all the lines."

"What lines? You hurt her, but you can fix it. It'll be like you didn't do anything to her at all."

"She's not the only one I hurt," he said. "The Immortals in the castle."

"Sasha did that."

"I made him."

A look of horror crossed her face, and his anger boiled.

"This is all because of you!" he shouted. "You made me do this! You made me hurt them." He strode toward her, determined to beat some sense into her. She scrambled over Iliana's body.

"I believe you, Jade!" she said as she fled. "Sasha didn't have to do what he did. He had a choice, and he made it. You can still make things right!"

He shoved her against the wall, and she hunkered down.

"You can make this right, Jade. Just get her somewhere safe. Leave me here for the demons to guard, if you want. She's an innocent."

Her words fed at the small piece of him that didn't want to live in Hell forever, that still thought he could go back to the Immortals and his old life. He released her and turned to look at Iliana.

"Take her to a Sanctuary," Katie said softly. "There's an Ancient healer at the Caribbean Sanctuary. I know because I came from there. He could fix her fast."

"I can make things right," he repeated.

"Yes, Jade."

A knock at the door jarred him, and he whirled to see the demon that entered. It froze, looking from him to the woman on the bed before his eyes settled on Katie. Recognition passed over his face. Terror of Darkyn finding out made Jade snap, and he withdrew his machete. The demon was too surprised to react, and Jade hacked him down until the black walls were sprayed with demon blood.

Chest heaving, he dropped the machete from his hand as he realized what he'd done. Darkyn would know he killed a demon. They'd do the same to him that they did to Sasha.

"Sanctuary, Jade."

He turned at her voice and saw the girl shaking with her eyes averted from the mess. He snatched up his machete and crossed to the bed to grab and sling Iliana over his shoulder. He motioned Katie forward with his machete, then stopped her to drape the pillowcase over her head as he had when she entered Hell with him.

Darkyn followed Jade as the madman hauled his two prisoners toward the portal to the shadow world. So far, everything was going as planned. Jade and Sasha would soon be out of his way, and his gamble on the hidden honor of Rhyn had paid off. Feeding Sasha information about the only way to break the bond—without telling him the breakage was only temporary—rendered the girl he'd been tracking for weeks vulnerable. The window of her weakness was short, only a week in mortals' time, but long enough for him to act. If he took down the Council, too, he would be all the more content.

Satisfied he'd outsmarted everyone, he waited for Jade to hack apart the demon warrior guarding the portal and then disappear into the shadow world on his way to where Sasha was, the one piece of information Darkyn didn't have. He'd have the girl soon, and he'd create an army unlike any that preceded him.

He leapt through the portal before it closed in time to see which one Jade chose. Darkyn pursued and peered through it with a slow smile, recognizing the place from Katie's dream.

Katie had never been so relieved to feel the chill of the shadow world! She stumbled but pressed herself to keep up, in case he left her there and she was trapped. When she emerged, she dropped to her knees, crippled once again by the sensation that hadn't bothered her when she was bound to Rhyn.

She whipped the pillowcase off her head and vomited, her insides burning hot then turning cold. Jade had led them onto a beach. She couldn't see the Sanctuary through her blurry eyes, just the blue of water and the tan sand beneath her hands. When her body adjusted, she sat back.

Jade was marching up the beach, Iliana flopping over his shoulder like a ragdoll. He seemed to have forgotten about her, and Katie stood unsteadily, hoping he'd brought them to the Sanctuary—and safety.

She stumbled through the deep sand until her calves ached and her breathing was hard. When she reached the top of the beach, she paused to catch her breath before hurrying after Jade, whose determined walk soon outdistanced her. The Caribbean air was heavy and her body was soon covered with sweat. The outer wall of the Sanctuary appeared over a rise. Jade



stopped and crouched, all but flinging Iliana's body down. She drew near, both hopeful and dreading what he intended to do.

"Stay here," he ordered. "I want to kill Sasha first."

The madman had lost it. She said nothing to dissuade him. He darted up the hill and disappeared from view over the top. Carefully, she rolled Iliana onto her back and propped up her injured arm again. Blood was everywhere, and Katie peeled off her sweater to wrap around Iliana's severed wrist. There were no trees for shade, and Iliana's labored breathing worried her.

She feared leaving the injured woman, in case Jade lurked on the other side of the hill or there were animals that might drag her away. Yet she wasn't sure how else to get help. A group of boulders nearby offered some escape from the sun. Katie rose, hefted Iliana beneath the shoulders, and dragged the woman over to the shade. She lowered her and sagged against the boulder.

"Sasha and Jade will soon be out of the way, leaving just us."

She recognized the familiar voice and froze. Her nightmares returned and for a moment, she wondered if this was one of them. She turned to face the creature who'd been stalking her in her dreams.

He stood a head taller than her and thick, his eyes colder than Gabriel's, and his heavy, lopsided features set off by neatly trimmed dark hair. She'd heard his name before.

"Darkyn," she whispered.

"Katie."

"What do you want?"

"A new breed of demon warrior, one that cannot be defeated by Immortals," he said and glanced at her stomach.

"You want more than my blood?" she asked, confused.

"Much more. I want your daughter."

She stared at him.

"Part demon, part Immortal, part human who's immune to magic? Incredible." He shook his head, and his eyes glowed. "And you, un-mated by the half-breed, are ripe for the picking."

She didn't want to remember she was utterly alone in facing him. He radiated the kind of quiet power Gabriel did. She wanted nothing to do with anything from Hell, especially this creature.

"Who do you think told Sasha how your mating could be undone?" he went on. "Or who let him have the vial or who knew how to use Jade to get to Kris? I knew you were in Hell in Jade's chamber."

"You couldn't have known Rhyn would leave me."

"I took a chance, and it paid off. I helped strip away his chances of staying with you. He's wild, like his mother, with an Immortal's honor."

Coldness slid through her. Rhyn had been as manipulated as poor Jade, who was now crazy with guilt and anger. Rhyn had quit on her in the hopes she'd be safe, only to leave her more vulnerable than ever.

Exactly where Darkyn wanted her.

"Darkyn." Gabriel's voice startled her, and dread settled deeper into her stomach. "She's on my list."

Darkyn looked from her to the assassin. Her tears rose at the sight of both creatures, one who wanted to drag her to Hell and the other who wanted her dead.

"Normally I respect Death's wishes," Darkyn said. "But this time, I cannot, assassin."

"You cannot obstruct Death," Gabriel warned. "This is one Code even a demon can't break."

"If I may interject," Katie voiced. "I understand my fate is either bad or really bad. But Gabriel, can you please help Iliana? Then you can argue all you want over who gets to kill me."

Gabriel glanced at Iliana's still form.

"You can save her or I can kill her," Darkyn offered. Gabriel moved forward and touched his hand briefly to Katie's head. She felt nothing.

"She's marked as Death's," he said. "You cannot take her to Hell."

"My master may disagree," Darkyn said, dark eyes flashing. "I'm certain we can work this out between us, assassin. I have something you want and will trade her for it."

"You have nothing I want."

"The key to your newfound chains."

Gabriel went silent and still, and Katie looked up at him. His face was emotionless, but the impact of Darkyn's words was unmistakable.

"Gabriel, help Iliana," she urged. "Deal with this shit when you get back."

He moved woodenly to lift the body at her feet and walked away, disappearing into a portal.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"He sold his Immortal soul to Death so she wouldn't kill Rhyn."

"How do you know this?"

"Death bragged about her latest acquisition. It wasn't hard to figure out why he did it after so long refusing to become Death's slave," Darkyn answered. His honesty terrified her; he knew he wasn't going to lose and didn't care what she knew before he took her to Hell.

She'd never guessed the depth of Gabriel's friendship with Rhyn. The assassin she'd come to accept as a fixture in her unusual life was suddenly more: he was Rhyn's guardian angel as well as Toby's, and her friend. She felt his pain once more at taking away everything Rhyn had and pitied the assassin, despite her predicament.

Her gaze went to the sky, where the demon bird had appeared in her dream. Rhyn wasn't there. Her soul felt empty, and tears rose. Her fate would be decided by a demon and an assassin, and she'd never see her Rhyn again.

\* \* \*

"He's not coming back," Rhyn warned as they waited for Jade to reappear in the conference room.

"Give him time," Kris said again, though he'd begun to look more concerned.

It'd been an hour. It felt like five hundred years in Hell. He was about to rise and open a portal to Hell—Kris be damned!—when an Immortal knocked and opened the door.

"A lady from the Caribbean Sanctuary has come with news," the Immortal said. "May I show her in?"

"Don't ask, just do it," Rhyn snapped, earning him an irritated look from his oldest brother. He issued a challenging look in return. They'd spent the hour in the conference room without

fighting or threatening to kill each other. He wasn't sure what that meant, but it seemed to be a good thing. For now.

A small woman in convent browns entered and curtsied. Kris pushed him aside to offer her a chair.

"Daniela," he greeted her, and Rhyn recognized the leader of the Sanctuary that had taken care of Katie weeks before.

"Master Kris," she said. Her gaze went to Rhyn. "Master Rhyn. Your Immortals caught a man who claims to be an Immortal as well. He's bloodied and half-mad. He attacked them to get to the Ancient Sasha."

"Jade," Kris muttered. "Is everyone in the convent safe?"

"Yes, but I have to object to Immortal business being carried out in the Sanctuary. Since your castle was attacked, we've had an Ancient wash up on our shores, Death's assassin sitting in our hall, and now this. It is not at all customary to how the Sanctuary is meant to be used," she said sternly.

"My apologies," Kris said. "If you will permit one more intrusion, we will go and retrieve both the madman and the Ancient." She frowned and looked between the two of them before responding.

"I will allow it."

"I am grateful."

Rhyn glared at his brother. Kris was gracious and gentle with this woman, who he could very easily treat like he did his Immortals and brothers. Kris opened a portal. He allowed Daniela to enter first and then followed. Rhyn trailed and emerged again into the balmy, bright island day. The portal opened in the courtyard, and Kris's gaze went immediately to the rooms lining the women's wing. Daniela's little legs moved fast, and she was across the courtyard while Kris stared toward the room where Rhyn assumed his mate was.

"Come on, lover boy," Rhyn said and slapped his brother's arm.

Daniela led them to the men's wing, where one sweaty, bloodied Immortal was standing outside of Sasha's room while the other stood guard over Jade, who was hogtied in the middle of the small courtyard around which the men's wing was situated.

The whites of Jade's eyes were visible before they drew near enough to hear his muffled shouts. Rhyn stood over him, his hand ready to grab the dagger at his belt and plunge it into the traitor's neck. Fury rose within him again as he took in the Immortal who had betrayed them and taken Katie. As if sensing what he intended to do, Kris took his arm.

"Not yet."

Rhyn looked away from Jade and stepped back before he snapped and was banned eternally from the Sanctuary. Daniela's lips were pursed and her frown deep.

"We need to talk to him for a moment before we leave," Kris said. "He's taken a human hostage, and we need to know where she is."

Daniela crossed her arms and gave a stiff nod. Rhyn snorted at her defiant stance and Kris's respectful bow and leaned down to grab the rope binding Jade's ankles. He dragged the Immortal over the grass and concrete into the vacant room beside Sasha's. Kris entered and closed the door. Rhyn planted a knee in Jade's chest and sliced his gag free.

A torrent of nonsense escaped from Jade, a mix of words that made no sense. Rhyn slapped him hard enough for him to fall silent.

"Rhyn, just move," Kris said impatiently. Rhyn knelt on one side of Jade, close enough to reach him when warranted. "Jade, I want you to tell me where Katie is."

"In Hell, dead-dead, I cut off her arm and I brought to Kris—"

Rhyn slapped him.

"I don't know."

Rhyn slapped him again.

"She's outside!" Jade shouted.

"Outside where?" Kris demanded.

"Darkyn said the girl or the vial. He said to trade her for it. I brought her with me."

"Here?"

"Iliana, I have to get her help then everything will be okay. If I get her help, she said everything would be okay, and everyone would understand Sasha killed the Immortals."

Rhyn looked at Kris, puzzled by the nonsense.

"Was she right, Kris? Will everything be okay?" Jade asked imploringly. "I never meant for any of this." At their silence, Jade's face went red and his eyes blazed. He thrashed, knocking Kris back. "The whore lied to me! I should've killed her! She swore this would—"

Rhyn snatched a pillow from the bed and covered Jade's head to drown out the madness.

"I see why he was gagged," Kris said. "Did any of this make sense to you?"

"Fucked-up crazy talk," Rhyn responded. "He's wearing a collar. Can't read his mind with that on."

Jade's shouts turned to screams, and Kris motioned Rhyn out of the room. Daniela stood where they left her, frowning fiercely. Even with the door closed, Jade's madness and the sounds of his body thrashing against the wall were audible in the small courtyard.

"Almost done, good lady," Kris said before she could kick them out. "I promise you."

"I'm going to Hell to get her," Rhyn said and started away.

"No, Rhyn. Just wait a minute. It makes no sense she'd be there, and if she is, the demons have her, or Jade wouldn't be here alone."

"He's not alone." Gabriel's voice was quiet. The death dealer emerged from the hall running between the two wings, the trembling form of Lankha held under one arm like a bag of cement. "He brought them both with him."

"Katie's here?" Rhyn seized on his words.

"For now," Gabriel said and looked away. His reaction fueled the sense of doom that had been growing since Jade appeared with Iliana's hand.

"Where? Is she okay?"

"This..." Gabriel lifted Lankha's trembling body, "is for Iliana. I left her outside the walls because I didn't want Toby to see."

"I'll grab Jade and meet you there," Kris said, striding to the door. "Thank God Iliana is all right!"

The sounds of madness had subsided during their conversation. Rhyn thought nothing of it until Kris opened the door. Jade had freed himself during his thrashing and launched out of the

door, machete in hand as he flung himself on Kris. The weapon fell once, and Kris's blood sprayed them both.

Rhyn reacted out of instinct. He flew to his brother's side, snatched Jade, and snapped his neck. The Immortal crumpled. Kris appeared surprised and furious. The machete had sliced through his collarbone, and blood spurted from the wound into the courtyard's grass. He reached for the weapon with a shaking hand. Rhyn hauled him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

"I want all of you out," Daniela whispered, horrified.

"That shit works on Kris but not on me," Rhyn snapped. "Gabe, give me the healer, and get Iliana. Daniela, go get a room ready for Iliana and send Toby and Hannah to the cafeteria. Keep them busy for a while."

Gabriel crossed to him and held out the healer. Rhyn took the small creature under one arm. He didn't wait for the shocked leader of the Sanctuary to respond but took Kris into one of the empty rooms and laid him out on the bed.

"Never thought you'd defend me," Kris managed through teeth clenched in pain. "Thought you'd be the first to turn on me."

"You're a shitty brother, and you're an even shittier judge of character," Rhyn replied. He set the healer down. "Heal him, or I eat your village."

"You're such a dick," Kris muttered. His face was white with pain, and Rhyn looked over his brother. He'd lost a lot of blood. If anyone could fix him, an Ancient healer could.

"I thought Lankha would be too busy," Gabriel said. "I brought her here."

Rhyn moved to the doorway and watched him set Iliana down gently on the floor beside the healer. The woman was unconscious, her severed wrist wrapped in Katie's sweater.

Katie's sweater. It was her favorite one, and she'd been wearing it when he last saw her. She really was on the island.

"I have to go," Gabriel said. He started toward the courtyard. "I'll come back in a little bit."

"Where are you going, Gabe?" Rhyn asked, following him. Gabriel stiffened, and Rhyn's suspicion ignited.

"I have to go."

Gabriel disappeared, and Rhyn gazed at the spot where he'd been. The assassin had been acting strange for quite a while. That he was troubled was no secret, though Rhyn didn't understand why, aside from being a slave to Death.

*I don't think our friendship will survive what comes.*

*She ordered me up for a job, but I'm considering not going back.*

Katie was the job. Rhyn's realization paralyzed him for a long moment. He whirled and strode into the room, pushing the healer aside to kneel over Iliana. He rested his hand on her head and rifled through the half-dead woman's memories.

*Jade locking her in a trunk, Katie screaming at him not to cut off her hand while she writhed on the bed, Katie sobbing and bandaging her after, blurred memories, the vision of ocean and sand, nothing.*

She was somewhere on the island. With a curse, he rose and ran to the courtyard, changing into his demon bird. Beating his wings so hard they hurt, he rose into the sky and soared around

the small island, finally spotting three lone figures in small valley not too far from the Sanctuary. He dropped fast and changed shapes too soon, landing hard on the ground near them.

All three whirled, and Katie's eyes lit up. It was the demon leader, Darkyn, who caught his initial attention. He didn't expect to see Darkyn here.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he asked before his eyes went to Gabriel.

"Half-breed," Darkyn sneered. "Negotiating with Gabriel over who gets your former mate."

"There's no negotiation," Gabriel said in a hard voice. "She's on the list. She goes with me."

"No, Gabriel," Rhyn said. "She can't be on your list and if she is, the hatchling isn't."

"Death ordered both dead-dead."

"Brother, I'll kill you both if either of you tries to take her," he said. "You have a contract on her, Gabe?" The assassin nodded. "Let me guess, Darkyn, the Dark One ordered this."

"We'll just say he doesn't disagree with me."

Rhyn's heart dropped to his feet, and he looked at Katie. He'd meant to make her safe and left her to the worst fate imaginable. He'd never wanted to lose her, and he wasn't about to back down now. He leveled his gaze on Gabriel.

"All right." He drew a knife from his boot. "I'm challenging you, assassin, demon. You can have her when I'm dead."

"Rhyn, no!" she cried.

"I can handle it," he said.

"Rhyn—" She started forward, and Gabriel held out an arm to block her. Katie planted both her hands on his arm to push it away. Gabriel resisted, and she glared up at him. "Back off, Gabriel. It's not like I can run anywhere!"

"Two minutes," Gabriel warned. "By Immortal Code, Darkyn and I are obligated to accept his challenge."

Rhyn watched her approach, his gaze dropping from his foes to her sweet face. Her eyes glowed with emotions he'd been waiting for weeks to see. He wanted to sweep her away for one last intimate moment before his death but doubted the assassin and demon would wait.

"This is the stupidest thing you've ever done," she said.

"Letting you go was the stupidest thing. I'm doing something right for once," he replied, glancing at Darkyn as the demon shifted.

"They'll kill you," she whispered.

"If they do, go with Gabriel. Death's a bitch, but she's better than Hell."

"This isn't right," she whispered. Her eyes watered, and he marveled once again at how a half-demon fuck-up had almost ended up with such a beautiful creature. He cupped one soft cheek and rubbed away a hot tear with his thumb.

"I'm not dead yet," he said, amused and touched by her tears. She wrapped her arms around him, and he pulled her close. Her small body molded against his.

"Can't we just run away, right now? Turn into a bird and carry me with you?" she asked, desperation in her voice.

"Even if we did, they'd both come after us."

"You can go. I'd rather know you're safe than live without you."

"No, Katie," he said, his world clear for the first time in his life. "I know where I belong, and it's right here with you. I have to make things right. I couldn't live if I lost you."

"Katie," Gabriel called.

"Rhyn, I love you," she said.

"I know." He forced himself to withdraw. He gave her one last, long look and pushed her hair from her face. With a kiss on her forehead, he stepped away. Gabriel drew a long sword, and Darkyn pulled two free. Gabriel motioned her over to the rocky area.

"Bring it, my friends," Rhyn replied. He moved a short distance away to more level ground and lowered himself into a fighting stance. He'd never faced a full-blooded demon and assassin at the same time before. Gabriel bent to whisper something to Katie and then moved in front of him. Rhyn lowered his machete and held his hand out. The assassin took it, and Rhyn gave him a quick hug.

"To our destinies, brother," he said for Gabriel's ears only.

"Forgive me, Rhyn."

"Sometimes all we have are shitty choices. I don't fault you," he replied. A tormented look crossed Gabriel's face, but he nodded once. Rhyn shook his arms out and looked at Darkyn. "See you in Hell, demon."

"Look forward to it," Darkyn said.

Rhyn lowered himself into a fighting stance and faced off against the two.

\* \* \*

Horried, Katie watched the battle from her dreams as it began. Unlike the nightmares, this time it was real and agonizingly slow. She'd cheered Rhyn's sudden appearance but then quickly understood what it meant: only one of them was going to walk away from this. She wasn't sure what she expected, but it wasn't for him to fight for her, especially when she was already damned.

*I love you, you fool!*

The men battled with speed and agility that left her breathless. Her eyes stayed on Rhyn, and she'd never been as awed as she was watching him fight a flawless battle against the full-blooded demon and the assassin. The scary, confusing world she'd entered weeks before crystallized and grew clear as she watched the lethal battle. She belonged with Rhyn. Nothing else mattered

*Break the bond, and Death will save you both. Rhyn will die-dead otherwise.* Gabriel had whispered the words from her dream before facing off against Rhyn. She tried to decipher his meaning as she watched them fight, terrified to take her eyes off Rhyn.

Rhyn landed a blow on the demon, who snarled in response. She gasped. *He can do this! He can beat them!* A few minutes later, Rhyn went down under Gabriel's blow, rolled, then bounded up, but not before Darkyn slashed his side.

"Rhyn!" she cried. Rhyn gave a throaty chuckle and launched himself back into the battle. Though his side was soaked with blood, he showed no sign of slowing. He couldn't outlast them. He'd landed one blow on Darkyn and none on Gabriel.

*Break the bond, and Death will free you both.* She knew what it meant in her dream but was terrified of following her footsteps. Katie tried to concentrate on the words, wanting to help Rhyn before it was too late. She forced herself to close her eyes to the battle and repeated the phrase over and over, searching for another meaning.

"Not the time for riddles, Gabriel!" she muttered. Rhyn had broken their bond. Unless, like her dream ...*I have to break it, too.* Her eyes flew open, and she stared at the men battling. What words had Rhyn used? "I release you of our bond, Rhyn."

She opened her eyes, expecting a miracle to occur and the battle to be won. Nothing happened. "I release you of our bond, Rhyn."

Nothing. Darkyn turned on Gabriel and slashed his back. Rhyn blocked a second blow that might've taken the assassin's head off and shoved Darkyn before whirling to meet Gabriel's blow. Darkyn changed into his demon form and tackled Rhyn, who threw him off.

He wasn't going to make it. If he died, it was because of her, and either Death or Hell would claim her.

"I can't live with that, Rhyn," she whispered.

Death would free them. *Her* death, as in her dream. There was no other choice. Her attention turned to a different direction, the way they'd come from the beach. She hesitated only a second more before she started running. She left the sounds of the battle behind her, her thoughts on Rhyn and nothing else.

The distance back to the beach seemed much longer than it had in her dream. Terror drove her to ignore the pain in her lungs and legs. She made it to the sand before forced to slow to a walk by the ankle-deep, loose sand. Agonizing over how much time Rhyn had, she finally reached the water-soaked sand and sucked in ragged breaths as she knelt for a moment of rest.

"Death will free us both." Her hand went to her stomach, and her eyes watered.

*Trust my Gabriel, human,* a woman's voice whispered into her mind. *This is the only way.*

Heart hammering, she rose, took a deep breath, and waded into the warm water. Waves licked at her ankles, her thighs, her chest. She started to chicken out when one went over her head and filled her mouth with salt water. Katie stood on her tiptoes and looked up, taking one last look at the blue sky before she held her breath and ducked beneath the water. She swam as far from the beach as she could, expelled her breath, then drew in a mouthful of water.

Rhyn's power rippled through him, the shockwave knocking down Gabriel before he could deliver the death blow. Darkyn fell as well, and the walls around the Sanctuary tumbled in the distance. He sat up, bloodied and lightheaded, unable to quell the power roiling through him. He spit blood and pushed himself to his feet. Gabriel and Darkyn rose, their attention going west toward the ocean. He didn't remember his power being so strong. He couldn't catch his balance and steadied himself against a rock.

"Ready when you are," he called to his opponents.

Darkyn growled from deep within his chest before returning to his human form. Gabriel sheathed his weapon. Confused, Rhyn joined them and followed their gazes. He saw nothing but a distant beach and the ocean. He glanced to the rocks where Katie had been, only to find she was gone. He looked back at the beach without seeing her.

His heart felt as if it stopped. His powers were back in full force, without her to steady his control. She'd broken their bond. He didn't have to ask how.

"Gabriel," he said.



Gabriel turned to him. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small black pouch, pouring its contents—two green gems holding the dust of human souls—into his palm. He dropped them onto the ground and crushed them with his heel. His job was done.

“Gabriel!” Rhyn’s voice turned raw with emotion.

“Next time,” Darkyn said, agitated. “I kill you both.” He opened a portal and disappeared.

Rhyn’s head spun with power and emotion. He dropped to his knees, unable to battle both influences for his balance. Pain rippled through him and another wave of power radiated off him, turning the boulders nearby into powder. Gabriel knelt beside him.

“You have to trust me, Rhyn,” the assassin said. “I have to go, before she comes. Don’t do anything stupid.”

The words registered slowly. Rhyn sagged to the ground and watched Gabriel walk away and then disappear. Sorrow and rage pierced him to the core. He could think of nothing but Katie and his ultimate failure.

“Not looking so good, half-breed.” Another form knelt beside him, this one with blond hair. “I had no idea you were *that* half-breed, the brother of the Ancients.” The demon righted him and tried to heft him but stopped.

Rhyn blinked himself out of his stupor enough to steady himself. Jared squatted in front of him, looking more bruised than the last time he saw him.

“Now that we’re friends, I thought you might let me have a taste of your monkey.”

“She’s dead,” Rhyn whispered. He felt as if he stood outside his body, watching the world around him.

“And the body ...”

Rhyn grabbed him and smashed him to the ground. He staggered back, unable to control the power within him. Jared lay still for a moment before sitting up.

“That’s some serious power,” he said. His eyes began to glow again. “We make a good team, don’t you think? We could do a lot together.”

“Leave me be.”

“For now, I will, but I’ll be back to talk. I still owe you a favor. I overheard something you might want to know.”

Rhyn flopped onto his back and covered his eyes with one arm. He was alone, roasting in the sun for a long moment before he sensed Kris approach. He lowered his arm enough to see his determined brother, unsteady on his feet with one arm in a sling.

“What happened, Rhyn?” Kris asked, sitting heavily on the ground beside him.

“You’re alive.”

“I owe you one.”

“Kill me,” Rhyn said.

“What?”

“You owe me. Kill me!” Rhyn snapped.

“I can hardly walk let alone lift a weapon. At one time, I would’ve probably agreed,” Kris admitted. “What happened here? Where’s Gabriel?”

“Took Katie to Death.”

Kris was quiet for a moment. Then he said, “Not sure how to break it to Hannah. That would explain why the walls around the Sanctuary are in ruins.”

Rhyn saw enough to see that what his brother said was true. He could look straight into the courtyard of the men's wing, and the furious Daniela standing in the middle staring at him.

"I can't control it, Kris. Stuff just happens."

"I see. And Gabriel won't come back."

"Better not." Even as he spoke the words, he knew he'd never completely disregard his friend. He had one, now that Katie was gone. Even thinking of her made him feel as though his insides were burning and dying.

"Come to the Sanctuary. I'll figure something out," Kris said. He struggled to rise.

"I'm staying here."

"Fine. I'll send Toby out to check on you. He's yours now, Rhyn."

"I don't want a fucking angel dogging me everywhere."

"No choice. You were her mate, and Toby was hers."

Rhyn said nothing more, aware it was all he might ever have to remind him of the mortal intended to be his mate. If he had it to do over again, he never would've un-bound her. He would've taken her and run away somewhere safe where no one would ever find them, as he initially wanted to do. In all his years in Hell, he'd never known this kind of pain.

It was too late. He'd failed. He'd lost the only thing that'd ever mattered, and the only person who ever truly loved him. He threw his head back and roared with fury and pain until his throat was raw.

\* \* \*

The waves had pulled her under before darkness took her. She awoke with a jerk and looked around at the tiny cottage, lit only by a candle. The bookshelf was empty and weapons lined the opposite wall. Her heart beat like a hummingbird's wings as she took in the one-room cabin. The windows were open and the sky beyond the trees dark. She didn't notice Gabriel in the corner until he spoke.

"Took you long enough."

She jumped at the sound of his voice.

"What happened?" she asked. "I don't think I like this place."

"Welcome to my home."

"Your home? I'm in ... Deathland or whatever you call it?"

"Sort of."

"Is Rhyn okay?" she ventured and braced herself for the answer.

"He is."

"Oh, thank God!" she said with a deep sigh.

"Are you well enough to travel?"

"Travel where?"

"At any time, I expect a furious Death to knock on my door. I told you about the loophole, and she won't like that."

"What loophole?" she asked uneasily.

"When someone sacrifices himself for someone else, the assassination contract is void."

"But I'm still dead, aren't I?"

"Eh, tough to say," he said.

"What the hell does that mean, Gabriel?"

"It means, if Death finds you, probably. But if I can get you to the mortal world and back to a Sanctuary, then she'll have to reissue the contract," he explained.

"And then you come to kill me again?" she asked with a frown.

"Nope. Consider not killing you my resignation."

She gazed at him, sensing the importance of what he'd done. Gabriel rose and began pulling weapons from the wall and planting them on his body.

"You sacrificed your soul for Rhyn and your life for me," she said. "You're incredible, Gabriel."

"No offense, but I did both for Rhyn. I barely know you, but he's all I've got."

"Me, too."

"She's okay, too," he said. "Rhyn's gonna flip out when he finds out it's a girl." He glanced at her, his face softening. His eyes went to her stomach.

"Does he know we're okay?"

"No one does or can until I get you back. Death and Darkyn will have every assassin they own roaming the shadow world. We'll take the back way."

"I hope you're good at what you do," she said with some discomfort as he continued to load his body with weapons. She doubted *the back way* was more dangerous than a short cut.

"The best."

"What happens to you after we get to the Sanctuary?"

"Don't know and don't care."

She rose and tested her legs. She felt weak, but she was alive. *Sorta*. Her heart ached for Rhyn. Even though she stood in Death's realm with a slim chance of ever seeing the blue sky again, her life had never seemed so clear to her. She'd faced Hell, and now Death. There was nothing else to fear.

"C'mon," Gabriel said and whipped the door open. "This won't be easy."

"I'm ready, Gabriel," she said, in awe of his determination and dedication. At the quiet resolution in her voice, he turned to face her. "Take me back to Rhyn."

"I will. I swear it."

*I'm coming, Rhyn.*

## **The Rhyn Trilogy**

*Katie's Hellion* (May 2011)

*Katie's Hope* (September 2011)

*Rhyn's Redemption* (March 2012)

Rhyn Trilogy: Origins (October 2011),

available exclusively as part of the Indie Eclective's Halloween short story collection.

<http://www.indie-eclective.com>

Exclusive excerpt from *Kissed by Darkness*! I'm thrilled to introduce to you, Shéa MacLeod, the up-and-coming indie star and urban fantasy/paranormal romance author of the Sunwalker Saga!

Show this indie some support! *Kissed by Darkness* and its sequel, *Kissed by Fire*, are available from Amazon!

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## ***Kissed by Darkness***

### **Chapter One**

"You're dripping blood on my carpet. Again." The voice was as expressionless as the face. Only a slight glint behind deep brown eyes betrayed the fact that Kabita Jones, my boss and best friend, was *extremely* peeved.

I could sort of see her point. Last time she'd had to replace the carpet. This time the blood only went up to my elbows and it was mostly dry already. There were just a couple of drips. It wasn't like she couldn't get the place steam cleaned.

"That's what you get for calling me in right after a hunt." I dropped into one of the two chairs in front of her massive mahogany desk. She scowled at me. She didn't like me getting blood all over her fake leather chairs, either. Bad for business, having a client sit down in a pool of vampire blood.

"Here." She tossed me a box of wet wipes, only semi-effective for cleaning blood off things, but certainly better than nothing. I grabbed a wipe and scrubbed at my arm. That's when I noticed a few drops of blood in my cleavage. Gross.

Kabita leaned back in her chair. "How do you like weird?"

As though killing vampires and demon spawn and other creepy crawlies for a living was normal. I tried to raise an eyebrow at her, but I was no Mr. Spock; both went up. "Define weird."

"Weird. As in: 'up your alley' weird."

Ah, she meant blood suckers. Nightwalkers. Minions of Darkness. Otherwise known as vampires. Right.

Except for Kabita and me, vampires weren't weird. They're normal, everyday stuff. Or maybe I should say every-night stuff. It was like saying that baking bread was a weird job for a baker.

Kabita ran a private investigation firm which specialized in hunting down things the government liked to pretend didn't exist. Creatures that would give most normal people nightmares. The government paid us decent money to track and kill the monsters while maintaining a cover as private investigators that did nothing more exciting than investigate cheating spouses. We got excitement and fortune, if not fame. The government got plausible deniability. We all went home happy.

"And how is this weirder than any other 'up my alley' case?" I asked as I cleaned off the last of the blood.

She pushed a file gingerly across the desk. Despite being one of the best demon spawn hunters in the business, Kabita found vampires extremely distasteful, not to mention creepy. Go figure. "It's not an ordinary vamp," she said. "It's a Sunwalker."

I checked to make sure my jaw wasn't lying on her desk. Nope, still attached to my face. "A Sunwalker? You're kidding, right?"

"Our new client wants us to hunt this Sunwalker and kill him, but more importantly, he wants us to retrieve something the Sunwalker stole from his family. He'll fill you in on the details. You're to meet him at this address." She shoved a piece of paper across at me while carefully tucking a strand of long, ink black hair behind her ear.

Despite edging on forty, she didn't have a single strand of gray. I hadn't quite hit thirty yet, twenty-nine to be exact, but I hoped I looked half as good as she did at forty. I had my doubts. My job wasn't exactly the kind that kept one young.

I shook my head. "This is insane. A Sunwalker? As in vampires who can walk in sunlight? You do know they're not real, right? Sunwalkers are just a myth."

She gave me a look. She was good at "the look." "Excuse me, oh Great Slayer of Vampires, but you don't have a choice. Not if you want to keep your job."

Which I did, and she knew it. There's something so immensely satisfying about going to work and hacking someone or something's head off. They didn't usually let you do that at, say, the pharmaceutical company or the post office, even if that someone really deserved it. They kind of frowned on it, actually. I also got to wear jeans and really cool kick-ass boots every day.

Truth was, though, Kabita knew I loved a good challenge. She wasn't just my boss, she was also my friend and would never give me anything I couldn't handle, no matter how much I bitched and moaned about an assignment. I was damn good at killing vamps. A Sunwalker would just be a little more ... tricky. Not only were they not supposed to exist, but how were you supposed to find a vampire that could walk around in daylight? Heck, he probably even had a nice tan.

"Jesus, Kabita. What have you gotten me into this time?" It was rhetorical and accompanied by an eye roll. I snatched the paper off the desk. "Fine. I'll meet him after I take a shower."

"Good idea."

I just glared at her. Sarcastic witch.

Her return smile was annoyingly beatific.

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I crossed my legs and leaned back in my chair, trying desperately not to look like I wanted to crawl out of my skin. Kabita must not have met our new client in person. He was giving me the heebie-jeebies big time. Granted, when it came to humans, my Spidey senses weren't so accurate, but seriously, there was something a little off with this guy.

The room we were meeting in was all dark wood paneling and big leather chairs, plush wine-red carpet and even plusher drapes. All very manly. All very overbearing. And the client? Well, he was just as bad.

Sure he was good looking and suave. Definitely suave, but in a creepy Julian Sands kind of way. Like you wouldn't be surprised to see this guy hanging out with royals or schmoozing with

the rest of the rich and powerful, but you sure wouldn't want to meet him in a dark alley. He made my skin itch.

Then again, maybe I was wrong. After all, Kabita had vetted the guy and Kabita was never wrong. If she met him in person. Dear gods, I *hoped* she met him in person.

So, Mr. ah ..." Not Sands. Bloody hell, what was it? I snuck a glance at the file. "Mr. Darroch. How can I help you exactly?"

He gave me what I could only interpret as a smarmy smile. I hated smarmy. Made me feel like I needed a shower. "Please, Ms. Bailey, call me Brent." I tried not to wince. Ever since my brief flirtation with college, I'd hated the name Brent. Long story, but let's just say ... ew.

"Right." I forced a smile. "Brent. How can I help you? I hear you have a slight problem with a Sunwalker?" I couldn't quite keep the disbelief out of my voice.

He quirked a smile at that. Not so smarmy this time. In fact, he seemed genuinely amused. "I know. Sounds insane, doesn't it? Rich businessman chasing after a mythical Sunwalker." He leaned forward earnestly. I was surprised. He did earnest pretty well. "Then again, until a few years ago, you believed vampires and lycanthropes and demons were pure fiction."

He had a point. Once upon a time, we'd all thought the monsters that dwelt among us were just a myth, but that had changed, at least for those of us who'd been sworn to protect the rest of our kind. No one knew that better than me.

"Sunwalkers *are* real, Ms. Bailey. Or at least *one* of them is real." He leaned back and steepled his fingers together in an excellent Dr. Evil impression.

"Excuse me? Did you say one? As in there is one Sunwalker?" Images of the Highlander flooded my mind. *There can be only one*. I really had to stop watching so much TV. My mother was right; it was rotting my brain.

Darroch nodded. "Yes. According to legend, there were more, once upon a time. Dozens of Sunwalkers lived among us, if not hundreds. Now there is just one left."

How did he know that? "And what does this Sunwalker have to do with this object you want us to retrieve?"

"The object is a family heirloom. A necklace. Not particularly valuable except, perhaps, to collectors of the arcane."

My ears perked up. "The arcane?" Oh, juicy. I did love a good magical twist. Kept things interesting.

He nodded. "According to family legend, the necklace was created by an ancestor of mine who dabbled in the magic arts. He created the necklace, a simple amulet on a chain, as a sort of ward with magical symbols and so on. I don't know if it ever held any real magic, but it certainly doesn't now. However, it might be of interest to a collector or a museum as a curiosity more than anything."

I always found it interesting when a client was willing to kill to get back an object he claimed had no value. Frankly, that's just not normal. In my experience, the object usually had a great deal of value to someone, somewhere, otherwise killing someone for it wasn't worth the risk. Granted, in this case, it was a Sunwalker he wanted me to kill, so there wasn't exactly any risk involved. At least not to Brent Darroch.

"About 20 years ago," Darroch continued, "this particular Sunwalker stole the necklace. I believe he thought it would give him some sort of power." He laughed, but the laugh sounded

forced. "I'll bet he was surprised to find it a useless hunk of metal. In any case, it has sentimental value and I want it back."

His eyes bored into me like twin icicles. I forced back a shiver. "I also want you to destroy this Sunwalker. He is extremely dangerous. One is bad enough, but should he begin to perpetuate his kind again, the world as we know it will be destroyed as it almost was once before."

I'd no doubt he was right about that. I could just imagine the havoc an army of Sunwalkers could wreak on humanity. Humanity wreaked enough havoc on itself; it didn't need any help from the undead. Besides which, part of our purview was to hunt and kill any and all supernatural creatures who posed a threat to humanity. Vampires were certainly in that category and, I imagined, so were Sunwalkers, being of the same ilk and all that.

"All right, Mr. ... Brent. I'll see what I can do. Have you any idea where the Sunwalker is now? How I can find him?"

He wrote something on a sticky note and handed it to me. It was a name: Cordelia Nightwing. "You can find this woman in a night club called Fringe. Maybe she can help you. Go carefully, Ms. Bailey." He leaned back gracefully, his leather chair creaking slightly, and steepled his fingers together again. Boy, he had the Doctor Evil thing down pat.

"I always do." I glanced down at the name on the note. *Please don't let her be another nutter.*

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Since nightclubs in Portland didn't open until late, I decided to call it a day and head home for some much deserved sleep. First, I wanted to drop in on Kabita's cousin, Inigo Jones.

Inigo's a clairvoyant, or something of that nature, and into all kinds of weird stuff. Well, I was sure it wasn't because of his clairvoyance that he was into weird stuff, but more because he was just, well, weird. Not to mention hot. But I tried not to think about that. After all, he was Kabita's cousin and I was pretty sure there was something in the Best Friend Rules that stated that best friends couldn't date each other's cousins. Even if there wasn't, the guy was like twenty or something. Practically a kid. A really hot kid, but a kid none the less.

Granted, twenty was only a few years younger than my own twenty-nine, but I felt a lot older than my years most of the time. The job sort of did that to you.

"Get your hormones under control, girl," I muttered under my breath before pressing the button for the doorbell. It had obviously been way too long since I'd had a boyfriend.

Three rings later, Inigo stood in the open doorway wearing a pair of red silk pajama bottoms and nothing else. His shoulder length gold and taffy hair was artfully tousled (damn him) and his usually brilliant blue eyes were heavy lidded with sleep.

He bared his teeth at me, and not in a nice way. "Whaddya want?" came out more a growl than a question. The growl did things to my libido that I'd rather not think about. I barely refrained from clenching my thighs together.

"Sorry to wake you, Sleeping Beauty." I stepped past him into the dim living room which was just a touch too warm for my taste. "But I need your help with a little project."

"At," he hesitated and squinted at the wall clock hanging above the television, its arms glowing faintly in the darkness, "ten in the morning?"

“Sorry, but Kabita’s got me working for this new client. He wants me to kill a Sunwalker.”

Inigo blinked. “Uh-huh.”

“You see anything?” I didn’t mean in the physical sense.

He shook his head. “Nah. Not before coffee. And I’m not drinking any ‘cause I’m going back to bed the minute you leave. Which will be ... ?”

“Soon,” I assured him. I crossed my arms under my chest and gave my already impressive cleavage a subtle boost. Oh, I was such a bad girl. “I just need your help tonight. There’s this woman, Cordelia Nightwing. She works at some club called Fringe. You know it?”

He grinned, his eyes on my chest. He knew exactly what I was doing. “Yeah, I know it.”

“I take it that this is one of those weirdo clubs with mermaids swimming in fish tanks or something like that.”

He tilted his head as he laughed and the sun streaming through the open door picked out the gold in his hair. “Yeah, something like that.”

Down, libido, down. “Well, this Cordelia is supposed to know something. Something that will help me track the Sunwalker I’m hunting. So, can you help me out? Go to the club with me, find this Cordelia chick and find out what she knows?”

“Yeah, sure, if you promise to leave me in peace and let me sleep. Unless you want to join me?” His grin was pure naughtiness.

I rolled my eyes at him. “As if. OK, I’ll pick you up at ten tonight. I’ve got another hunt. I’ll try and get it done before then.” I headed for the door.

“Make it midnight,” he called. “The weirdos never come out before then.”

I tossed him a look over my shoulder. “Obviously.”

*Kissed by Darkness*, available now from Amazon.com: <http://www.amazon.com/Kissed-Darkness-Sunwalker-Saga-ebook/dp/B0058PIWJ8/>

## About Shéa

Shéa MacLeod has dreamed of writing novels since before she could hold a crayon. She totally blames her mother.



Her love affair with books began at a very young age when her mom would load her and her brothers into the red Radio Flyer wagon and haul them down to the local library. For Shéa, the library was a magical place, each book opening up a new world. Her favorite poem as a child was 'Jabberwocky', and her favorite authors were Agatha Christie and Edgar Allan Poe. Which probably explains a lot.

After living in Portland, Oregon most of her life, she now makes her home in an Edwardian town house in London just a stone's throw from the local cemetery. Which also explains a lot. Fortunately, the neighbors are quiet.

*Check out Shéa's website at: <http://sheamacleod.wordpress.com/>*

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P.J. Jones, parody author, *Melvin the Dry Cleaning Zombie and Vampire Shoe Warehouse*

Shéa MacLeod, paranormal/urban fantasy author, *Kissed by Darkness (Sunwalker Saga)*

M. Edward McNally, fantasy author, *The Sable City (The Norothian Cycle)*

Alan Naves, paranormal romance and fantasy author, *Gargoyles (Resurrection Trilogy)*

Jack Wallen, zombie and thriller author, *I, Zombie I (I, Zombie Trilogy)*



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