

A movie poster for "Shadow Hunt" featuring two young men. The man in the foreground has dark hair and blue eyes, looking directly at the camera. The man in the background has reddish-brown hair and is looking down. The background is a warm, golden-yellow, textured surface with some foliage. The text "Loose Id" is in the top right corner. The names "L.M. PRIETO & JAYSON TAYLOR" are in the middle right. The title "SHADOW HUNT" is at the bottom right in a large, stylized font.

Loose Id

L.M. PRIETO &  
JAYSON TAYLOR

# SHADOW HUNT

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L. M. Prieto & Jayson Taylor

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L. M. Prieto & Jayson Taylor

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## Chapter One

Winter stepped over the body of the royal bastard he'd just killed and fed another log onto the fire.

Red-orange flames licked at the alder wood. Warmth snaked out of the stone hearth, teasing him. At another time, there would be no cooling body behind him. No conniving human witch waiting for him, no human world wrapped tightly around him. It would just be Winter, the cool air in the north, and the flames whispering secrets. For demons, they told tales.

In the fireplace, flames rose and twined, creating a map of the city.

Winter lowered himself to the ground and studied the map of flames. His master, Kenth, had allowed him to taste his blood, but the binding spells around Winter were too strong. He could use the sanguine taste to hunt, but not hurt the man.

His lips drew back, exposing a hint of sharp teeth. Vile, brilliant witch. Winter might not be able to kill Kenth for this insult, but that didn't mean he'd forget. By tonight, all of his master's kin would be dead, and when the spells holding Winter were gone, Kenth would join them.

Buildings and streets flickered in the flames. They shifted, the forms as brief as human life, and then returned, creating familiar locations.

There.

Near the edge of the Delvore Commons.

Winter smiled. He reached past the noble's body and plucked his feathered black mask off the floor.

Rising, he slipped the cool shape over his face and headed for the door.

Voices rustled near the entrance, a quiet reminder that this shadowed place was a respite and that the human world waited outside. As much as he relished the quiet and the fire, his master had plans. Winter opened the door.

Bright summer light stabbed his eyes. Frowning, he stepped into the crowd.

Ahead, a harlequin and a blue jay passed each other near the glassblower's stall and bowed. Today the Delvore Commons flowed with brightly costumed and masked people buying jewelry and spiced cakes, expensive silks and small animals. The summer market drew people from all over the kingdom in Delvore. They paid their respects to their king, thankful for the bounty his reign created, and celebrated. It was the best and worst that humans had to offer one another, spread out over three days.

For his part, Winter wore a costume composed entirely of black feathers and pieces of silk in shades of black, blue, and silver. The mask hid his eyes, and the rich fabric allowed him to pass through the crowd without question.

A shoulder smacked into his. Winter turned and found a peasant, dressed in something that looked like it had been dug out of an onion patch, scowling at him.

"Watch yourself."

Winter raised a gloved hand. His claws were sheathed in the soft black leather, but they could easily tear through the fabric binding them. A quick flick across the human's throat –

Would attract attention.

Snarling softly, Winter pushed past the man. Demonkind had attacked this land once, forty years before. They'd been driven back, but Winter knew they'd one day return. When they did, he would peel the flesh away from that man.

A sigh crept through the air, sharpening into a scream.

Winter stilled. He knew where it came from and what it meant better than anyone in the city. He looked toward the keep, toward the center of Delvore.

The scream spilled into the streets and rose like a wave. Winter watched people stop and lift masked faces to the sky.

The wretched sound tore off on the edge of a sob, and the city paused for a moment. People held their breath and looked at each other. They searched for confirmation in the eyes of those around them. That was the banshee, wasn't it? The spirit that howled the death of the monarch?

Yes.

And even as the people stood there, Winter knew the spirit was appearing before the king's heir.

Despite his feelings towards Delvore, Winter found the banshee's tale fascinating. She had been a young maid in the days before the ruling family had come to power and Delvore was a loose alliance of farming families. Where the keep now stood had been fields of poppy flowers, untended for years until a family of winemakers bought the land and began to supply poppy milk to distant cities. Wine and poppies, on those were the fortunes of the king's family built.

And on death as well, a death in the meadow upon which the keep itself had eventually been built.



The eldest son of that merchant family had fallen in love with a miller's daughter. She was a witch, and in her love she'd given him a gift, a strength that would adapt with his heirs to help them succeed.

Her status was far below his, though. Fearing a secret marriage, the boy's father ordered her hanged.

Soon she stood at the gallows with the noose around her neck, the sea of poppies nodding in the breeze. Too late she realized that her lover would not raise a hand against his father. Furious, she cursed the family, and to this day she heralded the deaths of her killer's descendants.

And, bitter irony, continued to give her dead lover's heirs a gift. The newly deceased king had sired several bastards before coming into power, so the banshee made his new bride infertile so that there would be fewer children fighting for the throne. His father before him enjoyed card games, so she gave him luck, ensuring that no one would ever play with him more than once.

Winter smiled. Clever witch. She had the soul of a demon.

In the demon lands of the north, Winter had heard many tales about the banshee and wondered why the people of Delvore allowed themselves to be ruled by a ghost-tainted line.

Then the demons attacked and they learned that, as unpleasant as the curse was, the blessing that went with it was worth it.

The late king's father might not have found many joyful card players, but his enemies had also regretted going against him. He always won, whether gambling or fighting demons. The late king could not sire an official heir, but the bastards he had were given extraordinary health. No sickness would touch them, no poison wound them. Why, it was joked, nothing less than a demon could hurt them.

The tower bells at the end of the street tolled, breaking the silence that had settled over the summer market.

Nearby, guards fell to their knees. It began with the commander, almost as though his legs had given out. The rest of the contingent followed in a fan of movement as man after man lowered himself, head bowed.

Winter shrugged and continued on his way. His master had killed the king, of course. Just as one betrayal led to death, Kenth was quietly avenging his past. Magic would hide the blood, and neither the banshee nor Winter would ever tell.

\* \* \* \* \*

An evening breeze whispered along the oaks lining the narrow cobblestone road as Peregrine ushered out his last client of the day. It had been a fairly easy reading for the innkeeper's wife, a spread of five cards, with his fingertips whispering over the paper, learning their secrets.

At the corner, the wife turned, offered him a smile, and then disappeared around a gray stone building. Peregrine returned to his tower.

The reading had gone well until the banshee's scream traveled the city and broke his concentration. Grief coiled inside him. The king was dead. Peregrine would never see his father again.

Despite the early hour, this first night of festival would be quiet. The creature waiting in the shadows behind the reading table had seen to that.

"Thank you for waiting," he said, closing the door behind him. Peregrine had sensed the spirit gathering shape behind him and had whispered an incantation to cloak it in his client's presence.

The creature was older than he, and anger gave her power. Legend said that she would appear before only one person, and if there were others present, they would die. If she wanted, she could have broken his spell and taken the wife.

A sigh stirred the shadows in the corner. The sound grew louder, forming words.

*Simpler to pluck her eyes*, the spirit whispered in his mind. It was a hauntingly sepulcher sound, intimate in its softness and distant in its coolness.

Peregrine's grief sharpened. There was nothing he could do for the king, but the innkeeper's wife lived in the Delvore Commons. He might not be nobility, but he wanted to watch over the people there. "She didn't deserve it."

The sigh faded, and the shadows pulsed. Peregrine approached, watching as the creature – the banshee – pulled herself into being.

A form he sometimes saw in nightmares gathered shape before him. In the course of his studies, Peregrine had seen a picture of something from far south called a monkey, and in the hunched, scowling form before him, he was reminded of it. Her misshapen gray head was filled with hundreds of small, sharp teeth.

The banshee turned to Peregrine. Her misty flesh wrinkled and spasmed, stretching taut over the dead memory of bone.

"Was it quick?" Peregrine hadn't seen his father in a few days. The man had been sick and missed the witch council's last meeting. Peregrine had stopped by the castle the day before to bring him a tisane, and though he hadn't seen the king, he'd hoped...

Gods, he was gone.

Byron had never been certain if Peregrine was his, but the king had always been kind to him. Peregrine never wished him ill.

*Yes, your majesty.*

What?

No. She couldn't mean –

The ghost shape reached toward him, its abnormally long right arm ending in a pointed finger, the other fingers clenched shut.

A slight pain traced over Peregrine's eyes.

He blinked, and the pain faded. He touched the corners of his eyes. Nothing. No lingering spells, no ache, no...

No enchantment.

The banshee smiled his father's charming smile, and Peregrine knew that the spell his mother had long ago cast over his eyes had been broken. People would now see their royal color.

The banshee tipped her head forward. *No human enchantment will ever touch you again, your majesty.*

Her flesh unwove, fading into the shadows.

Peregrine searched the room, looking for the banshee.

Nothing. Just a book-lined room, a faded blue rug over a hardwood floor, a round table, and the small bags of spices he'd hung at every window and doorway. This was a quiet place, a stone tower at the corner of Calper's Street. Strange to think that the new king of Delvore lived here.

Peregrine slumped against a wall. Her gift was kinder than the one she'd given his father. He might never be able to obscure the color of his eyes or be healed magically, but spells wouldn't wound him, either.

Human spells, he remembered. He was still vulnerable to demons, and though the barriers between their realm and Delvore were strong, it would be dangerous to presume he was safe.

Peregrine pushed himself away from the wall.

In the morning, he would need to go to the castle and announce himself. Then, he would ask about the spells that had been set to bind the demons to the north. It would be good to familiarize himself with the city's defenses, as well as be aware of his own weaknesses. His father would have done that.

Peregrine returned to the table and cleaned up the cards. His left sleeve slipped down his arm and brushed a card. He pushed the sleeve back up. The material was expensive, but the weekly council gathering had fallen that day, and he was never one to dress badly for such occasions. With the summer festival beginning today, though, he'd had no time to change.

Now, he was amused to note that the rich twilight color went with his eyes. The color was his favorite, a deep blue that bordered on black. In the commons, he had no need to dress so finely, but this taste was a trait he'd shared with his mother, and he enjoyed indulging in it.

The paper *sshhed* softly against his skin, whispering secrets. Despite his interest in expensive cloth, he'd never fancied himself nobility. His mother had been a witch, advisor to the greatest king Delvore had known. She'd left or – depending on the rumor – been cast out after the king married.

*Noble blood over noble intent* had been his mother's last words to the king. *My lady, we are all trapped by our decisions* had been his.

It was an unpleasant end, but neither had ever moved to hurt the other.

His mother never spoke of his father to others, and thankfully, the strength of Peregrine's magical talent tended to make people forget that he was a bastard. When Peregrine's mother had died three years ago, the king had come to this tower to speak privately with Peregrine.

*She was a great witch. I see her in your eyes.*

Peregrine laughed now. *The color of my eyes was apparently an enchantment, sire.*

The bitter amusement shook him, making his thin body tremble. How ironic that he, the youngest member of the council and guardian of the commons, was king. For the first time in Delvore history, a bastard had ascended to the throne.

After a moment, the laughter faded. This wasn't supposed to happen. When last he'd heard, he had two elder half-brothers who were raised to rule. Had they murdered one another?

No, he thought. Ambition aside, the late king's curse had given his children great health. Neither poison nor ague would take them. Their flesh would heal, their bones reform.

The banshee's magic would not strengthen their spirits, though. Magic could wound them; tragedy could break them. In the morning, Peregrine would find them. They might not have the strength to be king, but he would ensure that nothing else hurt them. There were shelters in the commons they could recover in, or places in the country where they could live in anonymity. He could ask whichever witch replaced him on the council –

Peregrine made a face. He'd worked very hard to get onto the council. He would dislike leaving it.

Still, the situation had possibilities. He had no ties to the nobility, and his fellow witches tended to want little more than privacy to pursue their work. The ones on the council were torn between their arcane arts, the academy, and protecting their human kin, and would relish having someone who wasn't bound by stagnant noble blood.

He smiled. The commons would continue to flourish. There would be enough food this winter, and wood to burn, and candles to study by.

Unfortunately, marriage and children would be a problem.

His smile faded. In order to strengthen their ties to magic, witches sacrificed something in their lives. The greater the sacrifice, the stronger the gift. Some, like the king's current witch, gave their blood to fuel spells. Others, like his mother, gathered and burned precious herbs. Some, like the forgotten king who'd been written out of the Delvore history books, used others' blood and had to be watched lest they grow cruel.

Peregrine had chosen chastity. A simple sacrifice, it offered him greater power. But if he ever broke it, his magic would fracture. It might kill him, or simply leave him mundane. A rare few survived with their magic intact, but those were stories told to awe apprentices, not something to aspire to.

Thankfully, he wouldn't have to worry about siring an heir. His elder brothers had been childless, but King Byron had been handsome, and in his youth bedded many women. Even if his brothers were dead, Peregrine might have a younger half-brother or -sister somewhere in Delvore. Since he would not be having a child, perhaps the banshee would allow one of them to succeed him.

Peregrine shivered in his darkening house. *Foolish witch, kindle some light.*

He moved around the room, lighting candles. Fire flowed through him easily tonight, and he was enjoying the spark and shiver of it in his blood when he heard the tap at the door.

He jostled the censer he was lighting but caught it before it could do more than rain a slow shower of gray ash onto the floor.

"Who is it?"

"One who seeks the services of a witch, sir." The man's voice was cool and held a trace of an accent.

"I'm closed. Come back tomorrow."

"It is of great importance," said the voice, "and I have money."

Peregrine heard the muffled jingle of a full purse. He turned back to the door and looked at it. Money, such a dreadful and needed commodity. As king he would want for nothing, but he'd been the guardian of the commons too long to be able to walk away from this opportunity.

One final reading, he decided. He could leave the money with the innkeeper on his way to the castle in the morning and ask him to feed the people until the coin ran out. "Please, come in."

The door to his house opened, and the wind lapped at him, stealing his warmth.

"Thank you, sir." A tall man stepped into the house and gently shut the door.

He was a summer market reveler, by the look of him. A black costume hid all but the general outlines of his form. The man had a beautiful body. Wiry, with a hint of muscle in his arms and long legs. Thick black hair tumbled out from beneath his mask and fell about his shoulders.

His clothes were simple but elegant. Black breeches, leather boots, and a black silk shirt that fell to mid-thigh. Tightly interwoven silver and blue threads darted across the shirt's hem. Subtle spellwork there, quieting the wearer's presence. A thief Peregrine knew wore something similar. So did the Delvore guard.

A feathered mask, also done in black, hid his eyes. The beak of the mask seemed to be that of a predator, and Peregrine felt unease settle somewhere low in his stomach.

"Greetings, sir," the man said. Without a door between them, his accent was clearer. Smooth, with a honeyed drawl.

Something from the north, Peregrine decided. A dangerous place, where a line of enchanted stones protected Delvore from the demon lands. After the war, some Delvorians had chosen to remain there and keep watch.

The speaker was a brave man, if he came from there. Peregrine would charge him half of his usual cost.

"Greetings," Peregrine said. "May I have your name, sir?"

"Winter."

Lovely name. "I'm Peregrine." He returned to his card table. "I must ask that you take your mask off. In order to read for you, I need to see your eyes."



Winter approached him. “Did you hear the banshee earlier?” he asked, his hands rising to his mask.

“Yes.”

“I find the timing of the king’s death interesting.” Winter unhooked the straps that kept the mask on his face. “The summer solstice marks the beginning of light fading from the world, and this is the day he died. Ominous, wouldn’t you say?”

Unfortunately.

Peregrine frowned. Officially, no Delvore king had ever died on that day. It was whispered, though, that the forgotten one had. “The timing is a coincidence. Nothing more.”

“Strange words, coming from a witch.”

Perhaps, perhaps not. Peregrine hadn’t thought about the timing earlier. Later, after Winter left, he would consider it.

Winter bent his head, placing his hand across the front of the mask to keep it from falling.

For a moment, Peregrine thought the man was bowing, acknowledging something he couldn’t know.

Then Winter’s head came up, free of its avian confines.

Peregrine’s breath stumbled and caught. Winter was handsome, with a narrow face and wide lips. Wisps of black hair fell about gray eyes.

So pale, those eyes. Like a cloudy sky devoid of rain, simply there to hide the sun.

Winter smiled, and then the blackness in the centers of his eyes bled out, devouring the irises.

“Demon,” Peregrine whispered and took a step backward. He raised his hands, palms outward, and called on the fire he had been using to light the candles.

Flame blossomed from his fingers and curled toward the demon in a serpentine flash. Tongues and coils of fire burned Winter's clothes, searching for his flesh.

The demon stepped through the sudden fire as if it wasn't there.

"Greetings, your majesty. Kenth has sent me to kill you."

## Chapter Two

Kenth tapped his long fingers on the balcony's railing, studying the town before him. At this height, the buildings looked like children's blocks. Tall, short, thin, fat, the stone and wood structures looked strong, but one careless blow would destroy them.

He frowned. His thoughts were dark tonight. It wasn't too surprising – his actions had been quite dark the last few weeks.

Kenth had hoped that after tonight he could walk away from that path, but his studies had shown him it would take time. He would begin by giving the king he'd murdered a good funeral. However Kenth felt about Byron's line, they were kin, and Kenth had respected him.

In Kenth's mind, the line of succession began with his great-grandfather, King Anton. Anton begat the Delvore Shadow, the Blood Lord, the Forgotten; his son was known by many names, but few had the courage to say it aloud.

Kenth would. Anton sired Nolan, one of the greatest blood witches Delvore had ever known. Nolan, in turn, sired Savon, kind, magicless Savon, who one day would sire Kenth.

Unfortunately, Anton also begat Nolan's half-brother, Ren. Ren the Benevolent. Ren the Auspicious.

Ren the Usurper, who killed his brother and his brother's family. Ren, whose rule led to Byron, Byron's passion and generosity, and Byron's bastards. The Drunk. The Gambler. And the Mystery.

Nothing of value was lost when his demon killed the first two bastards. Through the magic connecting them, Kenth sensed that there was only one heir left. Knowing the usurper's seed, that one probably ran to prostitutes.

The thought, however mean-spirited, eased a little of Kenth's annoyance. He focused on his plans.

After the funeral, Kenth would honor his promise to the demon by returning him home. Then, when the banshee appeared and cursed Kenth, he would hopefully accept it with the same grace his grandfather had. Nolan may not have been given the luck his usurping half-brother had, but the refined senses had enabled him to further his magic.

It had also drawn him to take more care with the kinds of people he took blood from, though. That had led to the usurper thinking Nolan was a danger.

Perhaps he was; perhaps he wasn't. The bastard hadn't needed to murder everyone in Nolan's line to stop the bleeding. If it hadn't been for a kind guard, five-year-old Savon would have been killed, and Kenth wouldn't be there today.

Thankfully, his father had lived a good life. Not as well as he should have, but Savon had been human and had thought that he would never be able to acquire the power to regain the throne, so he'd settled.

He'd been happy, too. Kenth occasionally envied him his simple pleasures. All he'd wanted was to be buried in the royal tomb.

At Kenth's age, his father had had a family. A small one, for it was all he could afford, but it pleased him. At thirty-eight, Kenth felt like he'd been thirty-eight forever; his earliest memories were of studying Delvore history and how his line had shaped the country. Even with his grandfather's indiscretions, it was still a proud line. They were insightful. Brilliant.

Ghost-tainted or gifted, depending on who one asked, but didn't that still say something? That centuries after her lover betrayed her, the banshee was still so enamored she could not stop giving them gifts?

Egotistical, yes, but also practical. In politics and magic, one had to accept truths, however unpleasant or charming they were. And so Kenth studied himself, worked on his strengths and weaknesses, and waited. One day he would be king. One day he would find a bride. With his looks, he imagined it wouldn't be so difficult. He was tall, with short-cropped blond hair atop a narrow, though well-shaped, face. His lips were thin, and his fingers were workman-short, but the nails were always trimmed and clean.

Like his father, his eyes were brown. The change from the line's usual violet was ominous, and Kenth hoped that once his line was back on the throne his children would have twilight eyes. Until then, Kenth kept his romantic encounters to men. The occasional lover was comforting, and he could lose himself in momentary intimacy. One day he wouldn't have to murder a leader he'd respected. One day he would be able to share secrets with another. One day the land would be his, and he, the land's.

While Kenth doubted he had his cousin Byron's charm, he liked to think he would be a good king. Summoning a demon, while dark, spared the land from civil war. He would offer his hand in a treaty marriage with whoever would best benefit Delvore, and would name one of his children after Byron.

Like any Delvore king, Kenth would strive to build upon his predecessor's legacy. Byron had built alms houses throughout the country. Ren had personally funded the rebuilding of the city after the demon war. And however dark his grandfather had been, Kenth could not forget that Nolan had been the first to help the ones who'd lost their magic.

Before his grandfather's time, witches who survived breaking their sacrifices with their minds intact either killed themselves or quietly left Delvore. Kenth wasn't certain which they were more encouraged to do.

What he did know was that his grandfather, for all of his darkness, instituted programs to aid broken ones. The very guard who would one day hide his son was one of the beneficiaries.

Sadly, the effects of a violated oath were severe. Two generations later, no one in the guard's line could touch magic. According to the myths, they never would again.

"My lord?"

Kenth turned. The captain of the guard, the grandson of the man who had saved Kenth's father, stood in the doorway. "Yes?"

"We've found the king's sons," the captain, Dallion, said. "They're dead."

"What?" Kenth closed the distance between them. Usually he cultivated calm, a challenging trait that invited others to confide in him. Tonight, though, Kenth allowed a bit of his apprehension to bleed through. He'd covered his spells so the demon wouldn't be traced back to him, but if Winter failed, then the last twenty years would have been for nothing.

"We found them in their homes," Dallion said. "The witch that examined them sensed traces of a demon."

"Bloody hell." That part of the plan was working better than Kenth had thought it would.

"Sir." Dallion's gaze dropped. "I've been asked to ask if you could... That is to say..."

"Please, ask me."

"No one wants to insult the king's memory, but if a demon is hunting his line..." Dallion looked up and met Kenth's eyes. "Can you draw his blood and find other members of his line?"

"I cannot use anyone else's blood." Kenth had known the temptation that following his grandfather's sacrifice offered, but the versatility of the foci was unbelievable. In the end, he'd chosen to use his own blood.

Blood was blood, though. He was strong, and perhaps if he let a drop of his own blood touch Byron's, he would be able to find Byron's bastards.

The attempt would be a small thing, not likely to threaten his magic. If he didn't try, and one member of the usurper's line escaped –

"We know no one else to ask, sir," Dallion said.

His tone was regretful, and even if Kenth didn't need to find Byron's heirs, he would've given in to the request then. This was one of the things he loved about this country, that a human would respect a witch's abilities and limits, and a witch would honor and protect them in return. In other countries, magic was feared. Here, while not always understood, it was a part of life. Kenth would give his life to protect this world.

"Please. We're running out of time."

"I understand," Kenth said, wondering how many potential heirs were left.

Officially, the king had two bastards. Unofficially, the man had been charming and had many lovers in his youth. Half the witch council could be Byron's children, for all Kenth knew.

A smile tugged at his lips. He grimaced, forcing the mirth into a thin line. It would be a relief to get rid of some of them, actually. The damned council had looked the other way when his grandfather was assassinated. It would be fitting if, as king, Kenth didn't notice their number being decimated.

Later, he decided. One plan at a time, lest he become distracted and make a mistake.

"Take me to his body," Kenth said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peregrine cast another burst of fire at Winter. Kenth had sent a demon after him?

Madness!

Kenth would do no such thing. He knew Kenth. The man was a brilliant witch who could balance court life and the council. Gods, the man had been the first to welcome him to the council when he joined. The only ill thing he'd ever said to Peregrine had happened fifteen years before, when Peregrine was admitted early into the academy. *Pretty thing. Who brought the catamite?*

Demons didn't lie, though. It was a paradox that was uncovered during the war. They were strange creatures, loving physical pleasures and knowledge, and they always told the truth. *It cuts deeper*, their king was known to have said.

Winter approached him, leaving dying flames in his wake.

Peregrine moved back. His spells wouldn't protect him for long. If he summoned the night watch –

No. If they faced Winter, they would die. He was going to need other witches.

The flames still licking Winter's summer market finery went out with a sigh.

Peregrine gathered to him all the stored power in his house. Scrolls and parchments, rings and staffs all sprang to incandescent life as he drew power from them.

He let the thread of fire vanish, redirecting the immense flow of magic into a series of protection wards around him.

Winter motioned at him, a careless gesture that sent a cool breeze over him.

The air circled around him, pricking at Peregrine's shields. The quick, cold movement sent loose strands of red-brown hair falling around his eyes.

He tossed his hair back. The demon's spell whispered over his skin, chilling it, and then faded.

Winter smiled. "The strength of your talent charms me."

He'd pleased the demon. Lovely.



He rubbed at his skin, warming it. He might not care for the demon's amusement, but if his shields could block the demon's attacks for a few minutes longer, he could summon the council. He didn't have the strength to bind a demon, but together they would.

He simply needed to draw his time out.

"You killed the king," Peregrine said. He let his hands fall to his sides, hiding his fingers in the generous folds of his shirtsleeves. He didn't dare lower his shields as he subtly began the summoning spell.

"No, your majesty. He and I never met." Winter traced his fingers through the air, drawing magic out before him. "Shortly after I arrived, though, I did discover that your kind made it so that we would need permission to enter any dwelling in the city."

Surprise threaded through Peregrine, making his fingers stumble. His elders had cast the spells after the demons had been forced behind the stone border in the north. No one had known if the spells on the city would hold, but the knowledge that they were there comforted people. The council would want to know that as well.

Peregrine retraced his fingers' movements and then continued his spell.

Winter stepped towards Peregrine. "Silly things, the spells. They keep us separate."

"Before the spells, you hunted us."

"Not all of you." Another step. Winter's shadow preceded him, bleeding over Peregrine's left foot. "We tend to find most of humanity boring."

Peregrine moved back. "Do the other demons know about the spell?"

Winter's hand shot out, spilling its shadow over Peregrine's shoulder.

Peregrine's shield trembled.

*Bugger*, he thought, moving back. If he didn't finish his summoning spell –

Magic slammed into Peregrine, sending him flying across the room.

He hit the ground a moment later, skidding back, and then crashed into his reading table.

The round surface shook, sending cards scattering around him onto the green and black rug.

"We are very selective in who we pursue," Winter said. "Under normal circumstances, we probably would never have met, your majesty."

*Bugger you, too.* Peregrine gathered the remnants of his shield around him. No use. He was tiring, and whatever spell he cast wouldn't withstand another attack.

He inched back. His fingers brushed over the carpet, some cards, a button. Had this brief fight drawn attention? It was illegal to duel in the city proper, but if their spells set off any warnings, the city guards would come.

Hope surged through him, and then died. The guards would be busy looking for the king's known sons. No one would bother with him until it was too late.

The tips of black boots stepped into Peregrine's sight. He looked up.

Winter removed his gloves. Beneath the soft-looking leather, his fingertips ended in wickedly curved claws. "Tiring already?" the demon asked sweetly.

"No." Peregrine forced himself to be still. The card beneath his fingers pulsed, sending a quiet thread of magic up his arm.

Peregrine stole a glance down. Now? The cards chose *now* to tell a story?

Despite himself, his fingers twitched, picking up the edge of the card. At academy, he'd been taught that once a card had been turned, the others had to follow. To ignore the reading was to insult the gift, and in time that magic might fade. Demon or no demon, Peregrine needed to look at the cards.

He cast his lingering strength into another shield. The paper beneath his fingers felt thick, and when he turned it he discovered why: it wasn't one card, but two.

A chill darted through him, leaving him aware of the rips in his clothes, of the fragility of his final shield, and the paper beneath him. They'd drawn an entwined reading.

The coupling was unbelievable. The only times he'd ever seen it happen before were when he was reading for lovers. If one card was drawn as the focus, the pair was temporarily fused in passion and wouldn't last.

Two, though, meant that their spirits were entwined and only death would separate them.

The cards themselves were colorful, painted in shades of red, black, and violet. They were also ironically familiar; in one, a pale man reclined over a stone, smiling seductively at the viewer. Bones, scrolls, and ink bottles lay scattered around him.

In the other, a dark-skinned woman stood at the entrance of a labyrinthine library. Shadows curled around the edge of one of the rows, but she seemed only curious. In one hand she held a small lamp, in the other an athame, or witch blade.

The first card, the Demon, was reversed. Winter was stronger than he.

The second card, the Witch, faced up. The placement offered little advice, simply reminding him of the duality inside every witch. Chaos and order, creativity and practicality. There was power and life in stepping into the unknown.

Peregrine's gaze flittered around the cards lying around him. The cards wouldn't have offered a reading if there wasn't more to tell.

"Seeing if you'll live longer in your next life?" Winter asked.

"No."

His shield shook...and then broke. Magic embers fluttered around him, fading into the air.

Peregrine snatched the cards and held them up. "The cards have accepted your desire for a reading."

Winter took them. His skin brushed over Peregrine's, stealing his warmth. "I sense blood."

"It's my shadow deck." Every witch enchanted something important to them with their blood. Peregrine had chosen the cards and spent most of his time at academy creating them.

Winter tossed the cards. They landed upright, the Demon facing Peregrine, and the Witch facing Winter.

"You expect me to listen to a collection of paper stock and paint?" Winter asked.

Peregrine smiled. It felt bitter to him, thin and sharp and unlike him at all. "It doesn't matter to me. I wouldn't mind taking your future with me to my grave."

Winter stared at him, his obsidian eyes glowing softly.

The words were a gamble, Peregrine knew. The demon's initial request may have simply been a ruse to gain entry.

Despite that, Peregrine hoped the words had been an accidental gift and that the demon wanted a hint of his future as badly as Peregrine wanted to escape.

Winter crouched before Peregrine. "If this is your little way of stalling for time in hope that help will come, I will kill you quickly but take my time with them. Demon bards will sing of their suffering for centuries."

"Depending on what the cards say, your bards may also be singing of you."

Winter's lips twitched. "We'll see."

## Chapter Three

Peregrine dared a glance away. The rest of the cards for this reading lay within reach, partially surrounding and binding him and Winter in a half circle.

“Have you ever had a reading before?” Peregrine asked.

“No. When I last visited your fine city, the witches were more interested in banishing me than in telling me my fortune.”

Peregrine tapped the first two cards. “This is the focus. Your beginning and end start here.”

Winter’s eyes flicked down. “There are two cards.”

“Our lives are entwined.”

“Death will part us.”

Peregrine hoped so.

“Which am I, the Demon or the Witch?”

“Demon, reversed.” The card often frightened people who drew it. They stared at the almost human figure, fearing the claws hidden beneath the gloves. They didn’t pay attention to the inks and scrolls scattered among the bones. This was a card of passion, creativity. It whispered of the courage to fight for things that, while wicked-seeming, were right.

And when reversed, it twisted the caster's desires into nightmares.

"You're a slave to desires not of your choosing," Peregrine said.

Claws tapped the Witch card, tearing rips in the drawing's throat. "Tell me something I don't know."

Peregrine traced a fingertip over the Demon card. Images flicked through his mind: sloping green hills, a circle of stones, a fire... "You were alone."

"Pardon?"

"You..."

*...made this trek once every ten years.*

*The others never spoke of it; they all had their own rituals to remember the fallen. The remnants of his unit held a feast. His uncle avoided all company and stared into a fire.*

*Winter went to the border and watched the evening mist dance in and out of the hills.*

*It was just a fog caught in the green slopes, he knew that, but demons still whispered that it was the spirits of the dead trying to find their kin.*

*So Winter watched and burned a fire. He told himself that it was to keep him warm, but sometimes, when the mist pulsed and the wind whispered, he knew, and he felt foolish and terribly hopeful. Let the mist come. Let the fallen demons find their way home. He would keep the fire burning for all eternity if it helped them.*

"You were alone when Kenth's spell found you," Peregrine said. One moment the demon was feeding sticks to the fire, and the next the fire was alone. "You and your fire."

Peregrine reached for the next card. He felt raw, as if those lives had been torn from him. A sister. A lover. A friend. It had been seventy years since the demon war, but he could not forget –

Winter's long fingers closed around Peregrine's wrist. The grip was light and his claws pressed gently against Peregrine's skin.

Despite himself, despite the moment, the touch centered Peregrine. The loss was not his; it was Winter's. While Peregrine could usually see a bit into a seeker's life, he had never lost himself in the other's life.

"How do you know?" Winter asked. "About the fire?"

"I saw it."

Winter's hand trembled.

"It's still burning. It will wait for you."

Winter's fingers slipped away, leaving a ghost of his touch on Peregrine's skin.

Peregrine stared after the demon's hand. There was a paradox, there in the card, and in the figure across from him. The Demon, for all of its mystery, passion, and danger, was a part of people's lives. Sometimes, it was a seeker's only friend.

"Your present," Peregrine said, reaching for the next card. Although the deck was scattered, the ones for this reading had landed – or moved – into their place. The next card he needed was to his right.

Peregrine turned the card. Lightning lanced through a stone tower, sending stones falling into the shadow below.

"The Tower," Peregrine said. The card was at once subtle and obvious. Something – in this case, a demon assassin – would break into someone's life. Lives would be altered, beliefs reassessed. Nothing would be the same again.

For Winter, the card whispered similar things. His previous life was dead. "You're powerful, but it wasn't enough. Your life has been shattered, and you will never return to what you once were."

The blackness faded from Winter's eyes, leaving the gray irises blade-sharp. "I'll remain Kenth's forever?"

“No. You may break free or remain with him; I don’t know that yet. What I do know is that these days will forever mark you. Change you. If you study what’s happening around you –”

*Winter traced over the glyphs in the stone. So this was what the witches had done to keep the demons out of this area before. Charming.*

*He pricked a claw into his arm and then used the blood to draw the mark onto his skin. When it was complete, he blew across it.*

*The scar trembled and then faded into his skin.*

*Winter continued on to the next heir. When he returned to the demons, he would share what he’d learned. Some day they would return to Delvore, and when they did, blood would paint the streets again.*

Peregrine shook off the images. The thoughts, though, remained.

He couldn’t say he was surprised that the demon was using this opportunity to study the city’s defenses. Kenth had to have considered that he would. Still, Peregrine was horrified. Winter could destroy this place. If Kenth wanted him dead so badly, Peregrine wished the man had faced him personally instead of calling a demon.

“I should study what’s around me, hmm?” Winter asked.

“We both know you already have been.” Peregrine should warn Kenth about the danger he’d brought to the city.

Wait.

No.

The man was on the council. He’d studied the same private scrolls about the demon war that Peregrine had, and still he’d summoned Winter. Kenth wanted a secret assassin, and he didn’t care about the danger to the land.

Winter’s lips eased into a smile. “It seems the witch does not care for what his own cards tell him. What would you do if you were trapped in my land?”



“Leave it.”

“The border stones would stop you.”

“I wouldn’t care.” Better to die trying than remain. He wondered if Winter felt the same.

Peregrine reached for the next card. “This is what is against you.”

“It’s against both of us.”

Yes.

Peregrine turned the card. Justice, reversed. He traced a fingertip over the card. A sense of...righteousness crept over him. “Kenth feels justified.”

“Yes.”

The feeling shifted, growing stronger. It stole his breath, making him lightheaded. Kenth was smiling. Kenth...

*Dropped a single bead of his blood into Byron’s drink. Despite himself, he cared for this man. He would give him a painless death.*

Peregrine tore his finger away from the card. “He killed the king.”

“Yes.”

Peregrine touched the card.

The paper was cold. The moment was gone, he realized, taking with it the traces of Kenth’s desires.

He remembered the intensity of Kenth’s feelings, though. This had been building up in him for ages. “He’s obsessed. It could destroy him.”

“Really?” Winter sounded pleased.

Peregrine frowned. If Kenth died before disposing of Winter, the demon would be free. Whatever happened to him, Peregrine hoped Kenth destroyed Winter.

An image of the fire flickered through Peregrine’s mind.

Winter wasn't human, and he would never look upon a Delvorian with compassion, but he cared about his kind. Loved them, mourned them. It was more than Kenth seemed capable of.

Peregrine turned the next card. It was reversed, so Peregrine turned it slightly to better read it. "Your ally, Ten of..."

He stared at the card. He felt cold.

The picture was of ten swords skewering a man. Blood trailed from his body. Although the card wasn't a major arcana, it still had a lot of power. Violence followed that card. The last time one of the king's witches had drawn it, the demons attacked, beginning the war.

"Who's dying?" Winter asked.

"No one."

"Kenth wants you dead. I want Kenth dead. Someone's dying."

"This isn't death." Peregrine touched the card. There was violence here. Terrible grief and resurrection.

Winter frowned. "The man in that picture is dying."

"He's wounded. He's still alive, though. Beneath the destruction, there is a great opportunity to rebuild." Delvore had, after the demon war. It had been difficult, but the land had recovered and grown stronger.

And, if the land – and Winter – could survive this, then perhaps so could he.

"It won't be easy," Peregrine added, and in that moment he wasn't certain who he was talking to, himself or the demon. "You are trapped and will feel helpless. You will be tested. You will lose everything before you'll be able to start over."

"Start over where?"

"Where do you want? Whatever held you back before won't have power over you anymore."

Winter picked up the card. “It’s difficult to believe that hope could grow from such a frightening image.” He set the card down. “I suppose it’s rather like how your kind rebuilt the city.”

The demon had noticed? Peregrine would’ve thought he’d be more focused on the wards of protection than the city landscape.

Then again, where the wards went, the architecture followed. It would behoove Winter to study it, and Peregrine to study him.

Peregrine picked up the final card. “The future is placed over the focus,” he said. “An end entwined with a beginning, and a beginning borne of an end.”

He turned the card.

And stilled.

On the card, a dark-haired man stood beside a fair-haired man on a grassy hillside. They each reached for the other’s hand, their faces smiling.

Peregrine slumped back on his heels. The Lovers stared up at him.

He’d drawn this card shortly before taking his oath. It had been his own farewell to any possibility of sharing his life with another, and so he had put every thought and desire into its design. Others would depict a man and a woman, signifying the marriage of masculine and feminine. He’d chosen two men, a human and a witch.

The men themselves were handsome, their clothing fine, if a bit rumpled. Their marriage was of practicality and magic, the everyday world and the things that could not always be seen.

The two men in the card needed each other. It didn’t matter who the other was – a friend, a lover, an enemy. Each one added to their life, making them more alive, more human. Each could challenge the reader, strengthening them.

Each could also break them. Kill them.

Peregrine had seen the card hundreds of times since its creation but, with his oath of chastity, had never drawn it for himself.

Now, here, he *knew*. There would be a wedding, but between a witch and demon. It would destroy him. He would lose his magic.

The Tower. He was destined to lose everything.

Ten of Swords. Destruction...only by losing everything did he stand a chance of survival.

Winter studied the card. "What does this mean? Do I need to bed Kenth in order to break free? Or do I need to bed you?"

"Bedding someone is only one aspect of the card."

*Winter's fingers entwined through Peregrine's, gently pressing his hands to the bed.*

"There's also a choice, between what you know and what could be."

*Warm lips traced over his ear, and then Winter's oiled fingers caressed his opening. The touch sent pleasure pulses through Peregrine, making his breath skip.*

"You would find me a dull lover."

One whose magic would fracture moments after consummation, leaving him mindless, dying, or, as a few stories whispered, stronger.

Peregrine frowned. He would rather believe in what he knew could happen than a storyteller's fancy.

Winter's gaze crept up from the card, studying Peregrine. His lips curved into a smile. "From what I have seen of you so far, your majesty, you are not dull. Or are you afraid that your choice in this is in fact no choice at all?"

He had a choice. Death or life at any cost.

"My dear sir," Peregrine said, "we are all trapped by our decisions."

Winter's smile faded. "Perhaps," the demon said. "Perhaps some of us will be freed once a little blood is spilled."

Peregrine doubted it. The cards promised destruction, not death.

Winter rose. Magic pulsed across his long fingers, making the air around them flicker with power.

Peregrine drew his legs under him. The final card was right; he did have a choice. He could stand there and let the demon kill him. Winter would probably make it quick, and then the banshee would find the next in line for the throne.

Who Winter – and Kenth – would then murder.

Magic lanced out of Winter's hands.

Peregrine threw himself out of its way, rolling across the carpet and then rising.

Damn them!

He was a council member and a witch. Those things might mean nothing to Kenth, but Peregrine would not let him or Winter kill anyone else.

Behind him, a bookshelf and a portion of his tower wall smoldered. The spells threaded between the stones shimmered, obscuring the damage.

Peregrine frowned. The wards would resist a mortal flame and hide what little damage escaped them, but they would be vulnerable to a demon's magic. His tower could burn, and the spells would hide the damage from the commons as long as any of the circular walls remained standing.

Magic twined around Winter's fingers. "Thank you for the reading, your majesty. I regret that I cannot follow your card's suggestion and bed you."

"That's all right. Considering how many men you've been with today, I doubt your energies would last long."

Bloody hell, he'd said that aloud.

Among friends, the words would have drawn chuckles. Many had assumed over the years that a vow of chastity meant a naive mind. More fools they; Peregrine may not have ever had a lover, but he was well read.

Winter's brows rose. "Demons can last hours. Can you?"

No. In this duel, he'd probably only last moments.

Peregrine drew back. Paper crunched under his foot. *Ten of Swords. Pain and blood and ink.*

He'd poured hours of blood and magic into those cards. He hadn't touched them when he'd torn magic out of the other items in his home. They were precious, perhaps the greatest artifacts he'd created. Removing their energy would destroy them.

Peregrine tore the magic out of the cards.

Power roared into him, spreading in an instant like vines of lightning up his calves, arching along his thighs, into his mouth and the tips of his fingers. The remains of the cards, now only bits of colored paper, burst upward into the air around him.

Images darted through his mind. Winter's fire. Kenth's smile. His hand, reaching for Winter's.

Magic pulsed out of Winter, slamming into the power surging around Peregrine.

The fluttering paper brushed it aside, sending it into the walls around them.

Tower. Destruction.

*I will lose everything.*

The stones exploded around them.

To Peregrine, whose senses were saturated by magic, the chaos seemed to dance in slow elliptical orbits around the two of them. Falling stones gracefully tore themselves from the walls. The wood beams above their heads erupted into leisurely flame, and books sprouted delicate blooms of fire.

It was silent, though whether through magic or shock he knew naught. He moved as if in a dream, turning, feeling bits of stone and fire brush over him.

Through the chaos, Winter stalked toward him.

Cold hands grasped at him, not quite touching him, but reaching, always reaching. Peregrine could feel Winter's claws, feel the muscles in the demon's arms bunching, straining to reach him.

Peregrine crept back until he felt a wall against his back.

Winter crept closer, legs trembling with the strain. He was finally an arm's length away, and it felt as though the demon's whole body was lying on top of Peregrine. Holding him. Smothering him.

Winter reached through the last inches of Peregrine's shield.

And touched him.

Cold knifed through Peregrine, stealing his breath.

The chill burned him, searing away his shirt until Winter's hand lay over his heart, holding him as though a sliver of ice pinned him in place.

No.

Peregrine kicked against the ground, his hands clenching into fists. He beat them against the wall, struggling to take a breath. His cards had warned him. Tower. Destruction. Loss.

And rebirth.

"You've done it," Peregrine whispered.

Winter's breath ghosted over his cheek, teasing him with a hint of warmth. "Pardon?"

"The tower wasn't just my home. It's my place here." His heart strained to pump blood against the ice. "My life."

The last of Peregrine's cards fluttered away into the air.

Winter released him.

Coughing, Peregrine stumbled away. The deadly cold still hung on him, but Winter's touch had gone.

The sound of his tower shredding itself to rubble erupted around them. The spells containing the fire's damage were gone, he realized. Soon others would notice the growing fire.

At this moment, Peregrine didn't care. He fell to the ground and fought for breath.

It was gone. His tower, his books, his artifacts. Everything he'd spent the last ten years working for.

Footsteps.

Quick. Angry. Behind him.

Peregrine fell on his side, turned.

Winter stepped out of the smoke. His eyes smoldered, making him look so terribly handsome in this destructive light.

"Your little spell helped destroy it. It wasn't just me."

Yes. That was his choice, wasn't it? He'd had a hand in his own destruction.

"My life to this point is still gone," Peregrine said. The Tower had promised destruction, and destruction it got.

Winter's lips twitched. Behind the demon, the fire grew, magically aided to devour stone. In moments, someone from the night watch would arrive and start working to put it out. He and Winter had a minute, perhaps two, to settle this.

Winter laughed softly. The sound was a sweet baritone, echoing down the street.

Behind the demon, fire fed on the remnants of Peregrine's house and all his belongings. The flames reached briefly into the sky, lighting the buildings all around, but touching none.



“Clever witch,” Winter said. “You know more about the ties that bind a demon than you would have others believe. Reinterpreting Kenth’s words to save your life buys you little time, though. When he realizes how loose his wording was, he’ll send me after you again.”

“I know.” And Peregrine would look for weaknesses in his words then, too. What else would he give up next? His freedom? His magic? His life? His friends? The lives of those on the council?

No, Peregrine would rather die than draw them into this.

“If anyone sees you,” Winter said, “if anyone recognizes you at all, your majesty, I will kill them and bring you their eyes.”

Banshee take him.

And, remembering her gift, perhaps take him as well. How long would his own illusion over his eyes last? A day? An hour? A moment?

Let it be enough for him to get to the castle. Find Kenth, expose him to the council, and force him to destroy – no, return – Winter.

The demon mourned his dead. He had been enslaved when he was honoring their memories, and Peregrine would be damned if he didn’t acknowledge their shared humanity.

Winter flicked a hand toward Peregrine. A cool breeze brushed over the witch, nudging him back. “Run, Peregrine. Run while Kenth’s words remain flexible.”

Peregrine stood, gathering the shreds of his shirt around his shivering shoulders. The brittle cold that had run through his body had finally receded to a band of ice around his chest.

“I like your new mark.” Winter’s smile now showed the ends of pointed teeth, bright spots in the light of the fire.

Glancing down at the slope of his chest, Peregrine saw an alabaster mark where Winter’s hand had been. The skin above his left nipple had turned white in an oval, palm-sized patch. Peregrine ran his hand over the mark. It was tender. His own touch shivered

along the length of his body. Coldness, as though from frost, had settled below his skin, inches from his heart.

He looked up. "What have you –"

The demon had gone.

Pulling the tatters of his shirt closer around himself, Peregrine turned and hurried down the street. Not quite running, for that would attract attention, but a swift walk. His mind was as fractured as the tower behind him.

*Why?* he wondered. Why would Kenth murder the king and send a demon after him?

Power? Kenth already had that. Revenge? The king had done nothing to him. Jealousy? He had gifts the king hadn't possessed, and the king had been respectful and curious about the magical craft.

And as much as Peregrine wanted to know why Kenth had murdered the king, he also wanted to know how long Winter was bound to him. A day? A month? For eternity?

Peregrine frowned. At academy, he'd learned that demons were strong and almost impossible to capture.

Problem was, Kenth was a brilliant witch. His spells would hold Winter tightly, and only when Kenth was satisfied would he release the demon.

Or not. Peregrine found the idea of entrapping anyone repulsive, but even he had to grant a certain respect to having a will strong enough to overcome a demon's.

Further down the street, the tower fire's whisper faded.

Other sounds, equally quiet, equally desperate, tugged at him: a hungry child behind this door, a man arguing with himself behind another.

Peregrine's step faltered. Normally he cast a loop of magic out at night to sense for disturbances, and if he encountered anything, he investigated. Most things could be taken care of with a few coins, while others required shelter.

He'd never walked away from any of it, though. Not until tonight. Not until there was something hunting him. Peregrine wondered if that meant he could only find it in himself to care when it was convenient for him.

Behind him, someone screamed, "Fire!"

Peregrine hated the quiet sounds his well-soled shoes made as he continued on his way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Winter hurried down the narrow street. People were stumbling out of their homes, and after realizing that the fire was away from them, they hurried toward it. Some carried buckets of water, others sand.

How charming. Their witch protected them, and they would protect their witch.

After a few stared at him and stumbled in their haste, and he realized he'd lost his mask.

No matter. In the chaos of sound and movement, it was easy to borrow elements from the people around him to hide his form. The sweat of a man fresh from a lover's bed. The breath of a woman who'd eaten chocolate. A soldier's shadow. A dancer's step. Snippets of a dozen borrowed lives, and Winter wished it would be enough to twist his master's plans.

No matter. That lovely, demon-clever witch would probably be visiting him soon.

## Chapter Four

Kenth stared into the fire.

His attempt to work with the king's blood had failed, leaving him feeling like a first-year apprentice. His sacrifice was his own blood. He was lucky the attempt had just left him feeling ill, not dead or without power.

The temptation had been too strong to resist, though. If he'd succeeded, he would know who the heirs were. The demon could be dispatched and Kenth's future assured.

The only solace he now had was the knowledge that, in his failing, no one would believe he was capable of finding – let alone killing – Byron's progeny. No spell would trace him to the dead; no blood prints would mark him as a murderer. Winter would destroy the heirs, and in his weakness Kenth could do nothing to stop him.

Bittersweet amusement teased a smile out of Kenth. His irony was that even after summoning a demon, he still needed to look like he was trying to stop him. Endangering his oath was risky, but a grieving man who wished he'd done more for his king was likely to do anything.

Kenth considered and decided against contacting the council member who could work with other people's blood. She might be able to find any living heirs, but last Kenth heard,

she was busy using the blood of Byron's sons to trace their killer. Her attempt was noble, if doomed to fail. Demon magic was subtle, and while it would be sensed in the area it occurred, away from the bodies it faded into the magic woven into the city itself.

A whisper of magic touched Kenth's shoulder. He turned.

Across from him, shadows moved in a scrying glass. Details formed: a long face, a narrow mouth, glasses.

"Randolph," Kenth said. It was rare for a council member to contact him like this; they generally preferred to come see him, the king's witch, in person.

This man had been a child when the demons last attacked the city, though. Kenth understood his hesitancy in not leaving his tower.

"Have you heard from any of his other children?" Kenth asked.

"No. Were you able to use the king's blood to find them?"

"No. I couldn't work around my sacrifice."

"Bugger." Silence. "Pardon my language."

Kenth shook his head. "If I had the energy, I'd curse as well."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Just a touch ill. It'll pass in a bit. Would you please contact the rest of the council and have them join me here tomorrow morning?"

"With a demon loose in the city, they might not cherish the thought of leaving their towers."

Annoyance crept through Kenth. He understood the concern, but if Randolph bothered to study the demon's tactics, he would realize they weren't in danger. "Unless they have the king's blood, the creature won't touch them."

"It might change tactics, Kenth. They're mercurial creatures."

Kenth considered and dismissed the idea. Alone, Winter might decide to pursue a different course. But he was under Kenth's control. Kenth would not let the demon hurt anyone outside of the king's heirs.

He was not surprised Randolph was worried, though. The man was one of three on the council who'd been alive during the demon war. While the rest only had scrolls to tell them what had happened, Randolph and the other two remembered.

"The city needs us," Kenth said. Simple words, echoing the oaths they'd taken when they joined the council. "The king needs us."

Randolph sighed. The sound sent ripples across the glass, shattering his image. When the water stilled, his image returned.

"I'll contact them," Randolph said.

"Thank you."

"Be careful, my friend."

Friend?

"And you as well."

The scrying glass shimmered and then grew still.

Kenth returned to the fire.

By appearance, he was very social. He went to the weekly council meetings, talked with the nobles twice a week, and practiced fighting with Dallion, the captain of guards. When they were children, Dallion had usually put Kenth on his ass. As adults, he could still do the same, but Kenth had improved a bit and could now give a better showing before being bested.

Kenth considered none of them friends, though. He liked some of them, and knew many of them considered him a friend, but he could not reciprocate. It was one of his few regrets; in his quest to reinstate his line back into power, he'd never trusted himself or them enough to share his secrets.

He shared his thoughts occasionally with his father's ashes. Savon had known that his own father was dark, but he'd been proud of Kenth's abilities. One day, Kenth would place his father's remains in the royal tomb.

Something thumped quietly on his door.

Kenth turned in his seat. "Yes?"

The door opened, and Dallion stepped in. "I regret interrupting your rest, sir, but a fire in the commons destroyed the witch's tower."

The witch's tower? Who watched over –?

Peregrine.

Kenth rose from his chair. Peregrine was thirty, too young for a council member, but that was his style. Beautiful, young, brilliant. If the man hadn't chosen chastity as his sacrifice, Kenth would have been tempted to court him.

"Have the flames been controlled?" Kenth asked. Ten years ago Kenth would've thought a fire would cleanse the commons, but the area had flourished under Peregrine's control. Kenth was loath to see another witch's work destroyed.

"Yes. The night watch, one of the council, and a few of the locals were able to quell it. The council member sensed demonic traces in the fire."

"Bloody hell." One of the council left the safety of their tower for Peregrine? That was impressive. Kenth would have thought –

Wait.

Winter went after Peregrine?

The man was a bastard, but he couldn't be one of Byron's. His mother would've used the blood tie to further her ambitions if he was.

Except... Winter would not have bothered with Peregrine unless the tracking spells led to him.

Kenth considered it. Perhaps Peregrine's mother hid his parentage in hopes of giving her child more freedom. He could've been anything: a teacher, an artist, a soldier.

Peregrine, though, had chosen the council. Despite his age, he had slipped in where few witches ever ventured and been given a sector of Delvore to guard. Leading and politics were in his blood.

Kenth hoped the demon had splayed that blood all over the commons.

"Sir?"

"Has Peregrine been found?" Kenth asked.

"No, sir."

"Any blood?"

"No."

"Damn." Kenth might not have been able to study it, but they could have found someone who could read it. A single drop would have told Kenth if Peregrine was dying or simply wounded.

"Pardon?" Dallion asked.

Bugger. Kenth had said that aloud. "The council could have used the blood to find him."

"Forgive me, sir. I shouldn't have questioned you."

Guilt coiled inside Kenth. The guard was a good man. Kenth wished he didn't have to play false with him. "Always question," he said. "Perhaps you'll see something I miss."

Dallion's head tipped forward in a quiet mix of gratitude and surprise.

"I need you to dedicate a unit to finding Peregrine," Kenth added. This was a safe request. Winter had an advantage over the guard in that he would not tire. By the time any of the guard found Peregrine, he would be dead. "The demon has already murdered two people. Find Peregrine and bring him to the castle."



After the captain left, Kenth considered his scrying glass. His strength was returning, and he should be able to contact one of the council. As much as he wanted Peregrine dead, he still needed to go through the motions of trying to protect him.

Kenth picked up his kirfane from his desk and approached the glass. The white-hilted blade was similar to his athame. But while the athame could be used to cut herbs and candles, the kirfane was used to draw blood.

A quick pinprick across a finger, a single red tear falling upon the clear glass, and then shadows danced across the surface.

The sight of the blood, the faint copper smell, strengthened Kenth. This was magic at its greatest, raw and alive and powerful.

More importantly, this was the future of his land. This blood. This hope.

“Ladies,” he said, summoning the council to their glass. “Gentlemen. The demon is after Peregrine. Find him. Protect him.”

*Lead the demon to him. And then get out of its way.*

Once the message was given, Kenth brushed his blood off the glass. The shadows faded, leaving him and his reflection gazing at one another.

There was no hint of silver in his blond hair yet. That surprised Kenth. On nights like this, he felt ancient.

A chill whispered over his back. The demon had returned.

Kenth turned, one hand still holding his kirfane.

Across the room, the balcony doors stood open. Winter stood in their shadows, his eyes glowing an ethereal silver.

“You failed,” Kenth said.

Winter approached. The air grew cold. “No, master. I took his life.”

“You took his tower.”

“It was everything he’d worked for. It was his world.”

Bloody hell. It was.

Kenth folded his arms around himself, using the motion to draw in his anger. The demon might be able to dispatch two wastrel nobles, but a witch a tenth his age was obviously a challenge. “What exactly happened?”

“We fought, and he used his cards to deflect my attack. My spells destroyed his home. Everything he’d worked for was gone, the last few years of his life reduced to cinder and ash.”

“Banshee take him.” *Very clever, Peregrine.* Kenth would have to be careful with him.

Winter laughed. The sound was quiet, like the rattle of dry twigs in the wind. “I would not be surprised if she was tempted. He seemed very interesting.”

The demon’s mirth surprised Kenth. Until now the creature had been fairly silent.

“Peregrine amuses you?” Kenth asked.

“Quite.”

“Why?” Kenth would have thought the demon would want to dispose of Peregrine as quickly as possible.

“I have always thought most mortals want to live more than they want their next meal, but I never met one who approached the struggle with such bloodthirsty practicality. He sidestepped my attack and sacrificed his home. That clever manipulation of someone’s words is endearing, suited more to a demon than a human.” Winter smiled. “I look forward to unraveling his mystery.”

Kenth would rather have Peregrine’s mystery follow him to his grave.

“Tell me about him,” Winter said. “I would like to know more about the one I hunt.”

Unease darted through Kenth, making his fingers tighten around his kirfane. It was one thing to send a demon after two worthless nobles. It was another to betray a fellow council member’s secrets.

"You don't need to know more about him to kill him," Kenth said.

"He's not like the others."

"No, he's not." If he were, Kenth thought he would have suspected his bloodline before now. "Find him. Kill him."

Winter retreated to the shadows of the balcony. His head tipped forward in a faint bow, and then he disappeared over the marble railing. The air around Kenth warmed.

He tapped his kirfane against his side. The demon was dangerous, and its interest in a fellow witch unhealthy. At another time, Kenth would have put the silver blade through the demon's heart to protect a fellow witch. Demons could ignore most wounds, but silver was anathema to them.

He needed Winter, though. Winter could slip through the city unnoticed. He could kill silently.

He could also twist Kenth's words.

Kenth stilled his tapping and returned the kirfane to his table. When he'd first summoned the demon, he had intended to return it to its land when it had killed everyone Kenth required dead. Now, Kenth wondered if he should do that. Perhaps it would be better to dispose of Winter once all the heirs were dead. Perhaps it would be best not to allow the demon to return to its kind with the knowledge of what the city now looked like.

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

"A silver for your thoughts," a quiet voice said behind him.

The tone was educated; the cadence, bedroom.

"I'd wondered where you were, Peregrine." Kenth turned.

Peregrine stood against the balcony railing. In the moonlight, he looked both exquisite and broken. His once fine dark blue shirt and black breeches were torn, offering glimpses of pale skin. His thin frame was scratched, his long, elegant fingers ending in ragged tips. His auburn hair, usually pulled into a careful knot, lay limp against his shoulders. His eyes...

His eyes, whose tilt hinted at his mother's eastern blood, were violet.

"I'm sorry you have only me here to greet you," Kenth said. "I currently have all of the castle guards out searching for you."

"So that when I came, there would be no one here between your demon and me."

"No. I had no idea you would come here. To be honest, I doubt either of us wants to involve anyone else. Your entrance is interesting, though. Why not take the stairs?"

Peregrine pushed himself away from the railing and stepped into the room. "I followed your demon."

"That was dangerous."

"So was summoning him."

"Perhaps." Despite himself, Kenth was impressed. It was a perilous tactic, but once on castle grounds, the heavy magic in the wards would mask his presence.

That grace wouldn't last for long, though. Winter had tasted Kenth's blood. He would soon sense where it led.

"I'm surprised you haven't summoned the council," Kenth said.

"I want you to return the demon first."

"It would be charmed you care."

"He's studying the wards around the city. The longer he's here, the more danger you place Delvore in."

Peregrine had discovered that while being attacked?

The witch was gifted, Kenth would grant him that. But he was young. Inexperienced, naïve, and well-meaning.

In a rival, the traits were deadly. They would endear him to the populace, and they would follow him.

Kenth retrieved his kirfane. He was still tired from his attempt to find Byron's bastards, but the blade had tasted his blood recently. It would direct his lingering power.

He drew magic into the cool metal. He couldn't do anything fatal – that could be traced to him – but if he stunned Peregrine, the other witch would then be incapacitated.

*Yes.* When the council tested for spells over Peregrine's body, they'd only sense that. Kenth would tell them that he'd tried to calm Peregrine – yes, only calm him – but the demon had broken through the castle wards and attacked.

Kenth flicked the tip of the kirfane toward Peregrine. *Sleep.*

Peregrine folded his arms over his chest.

*Sleep.*

Kenth sensed his spell ghosting over Peregrine...and fading away.

Peregrine frowned. "You're wasting –"

*Sleep.*

"– both our –"

*Die!*

"– time."

Bloody hell. His magic had no effect on Peregrine.

"The banshee gave you a gift," Kenth said.

"Yes."

Threads of Peregrine's magic looped around Kenth. A strand moved around his neck, his arms, his body.

It was light, telling Kenth that the other witch was also weakened.

"What –"

No. Kenth would not waste time trying to learn about the parameters of the banshee's gift. Peregrine was immune to his lighter spells, so Kenth would have to use his blade.

Kenth slipped the kirfane under the magical loops. When he was younger, he'd imagined dueling with Peregrine. They'd both be at full strength, and each would challenge the other to his limits. Their duel would end in a stalemate, and Peregrine would be so charmed he'd be tempted to break his oath.

Those thoughts were a fancy Kenth could no longer afford. This fight would last a few moments, and afterward he would be cloaked in Peregrine's blood. Winter would have to dispose of the body.

The threads tightened.

Alone, each one was a nuisance, pinching into his flesh and stinging him.

Two loops together had the strength to hold him, though. Three tugged at his breath. Four forced his magic back, and five sent pain pricks through his fingers, making them twitch and drop the kirfane.

Kenth shifted, trying to draw his own power out between the loops.

No use. Peregrine's spell was weak, something a first-year apprentice would cast on a human bully, but his grip was good. Kenth could not dislodge him.

"Call off the demon," Peregrine said.

"No."

The thread tightened around Kenth's neck, stealing his breath.

"If you don't return him, the council –"

"Will destroy him. Delvore will hold a celebration in your honor, and the demon's skull will be the centerpiece at the feast."

"The council will bleed you out, using your life to redo the wards over the castle. It would take you weeks to die. Send him back, and I'll ensure that your execution is quick."

Kenth smiled. Foolish witch. He'd known what could happen if he failed.

With the punishment for treason being a slow death, it amused Kenth that he was being offered a kinder sentence.

"I would gladly give my life and blood to protect this land," Kenth said.

"If that was true, you wouldn't endanger it by inviting a demon into it."

"The demon was a calculated risk."

"Why take it?"

Kenth frowned. His life and blood belonged to the land, but his secrets were his own.

"Why –"

"I have my reasons."

"And I want to know them, you traitorous bastard. The king trusted you."

Kenth's lips twitched. "Outside of your tower, Peregrine, the world is a volatile and bloody place."

The spells around Kenth's neck tightened. "My tower is in the commons. I'm not afraid of a little blood."

"Pity we can't see how far your predilections go."

Peregrine's spell sharpened, stealing the warmth from Kenth's body.

*Fool*, he thought, and in that moment Kenth didn't know who he referred to, himself or Peregrine. The other witch should have killed him. He, meanwhile, should be doing more to draw out his time until the demon returned.

"Ren murdered my grandsire," Kenth said. "If given the chance, he would have killed my father."

Peregrine's spell faded a little, allowing Kenth to breathe easily.

Peregrine's brows crept low, giving him a thoughtful and charming frown. "Outside of the demon war, King Ren never held a weapon. The only person he was even rumored to have raised a hand against was –" Color fled Peregrine's face. "King Nolan," he whispered.

“The Delvore Shadow. The Blood Lord. The Forgotten. I’m impressed, Peregrine. Few people ever say his name.”

“Because when he lived, Nolan spilled so much blood in the streets, he created a magical network that whispered secrets back to him.”

Kenth nodded. He couldn’t imagine how many people his grandfather had needed to kill to create that spell. He feared it was hundreds.

“I’m not denying what my grandfather did,” Kenth said. “I won’t lie and say he was right to do it. I even respect that his half-brother acted against him only because he wanted to protect Delvore. To murder Nolan’s whole line, though? To kill his daughter, his wife, and then go looking for his son? If my grandsire’s line was damned for his sins, then so is yours for the usurper’s.”

“I imagine you never discussed this with King Byron,” Peregrine said.

“The man was kind, but not foolish. He would’ve pitied me, given me a title, and had me watched. I fear a blood debt requires more than a peerage.”

“You should have at least brought it up before council.”

Kenth snorted. “Two of them were there during that time and did nothing.”

“The ones who tried to do something disappeared.”

“And you expect honor from the cowards who remain?”

“Will your demon be visiting them after me?”

Silence.

Peregrine’s spell tightened around him.

The flexing loops caught and released his blood flow.

Kenth’s lips twitched, catching and losing a smile. Peregrine wasn’t descended from Nolan, but it seemed his blood was in him. How delightful.

“Will he?” Peregrine asked.



“I haven’t decided.”

The loops stilled.

Pain flickered over Kenth’s finger, and when it passed, he felt a familiar wet warmth. His wound from earlier had reopened.

“We’re kin,” Peregrine said.

“Nolan and Ren were half-brothers. You and I are barely second cousins. It hardly matters.”

“It matters to me.”

Softhearted fool.

Kenth clenched his fist. The tight pressure ruptured the thin cut over his finger, increasing the blood flow.

His head grew light. Kenth sighed, letting his mind drift as the blood crept over his closed fingers. His power was returning. In a few moments, he would be able to fight.

“I’m going to put you outside of the city,” Peregrine said. “There will be guards there to watch over you. I want you to have a child. When it’s born, it will come to me, and I’ll raise it as my heir.”

And then the right line would be in power, but twisted.

Anger flooded Kenth. It was hot, making his fingers twitch and his magic pulse, brushing the lightheadedness away. His grandfather had lost everything to the usurper – his family, his place, his life. Kenth would be damned if he let Peregrine do the same to him.

“You will never be a part of court life again,” Peregrine added, “but I will allow the child to have monitored visits with you.”

Did he think that was mercy? Taking away his birthright and kin, exiling him outside of the city that his bloodline had founded, and letting him live?

Bastard!

Kenth would take everything from him. His body, his magic, his life.

No. Not his life. Let Peregrine enjoy a house in the country, fearing Kenth's presence. As the king's witch, Kenth would rule until the heir stepped forward. Kenth would rather be king in name, but he longed to hurt Peregrine for a few years before then.

"Call off the demon," Peregrine said.

"You think about him too much." Kenth pushed out with his magic.

Peregrine's spell struggled against his. Across the room, the other witch's hand fell to his side. His spell trembled.

And then snapped open.

Kenth closed the distance between them and slammed Peregrine to the wall.

Peregrine jerked, knifing his elbow into Kenth's side.

Pain flared, and then Kenth grabbed Peregrine's elbow and twisted him, forcing his face to the wall.

Kenth pressed against Peregrine, trapping his body – and his free arm – against the wall.

Peregrine jerked, trying to push him back. Or pull away. Neither mattered; Kenth's magic had returned, and he was stronger.

A ghost of Peregrine's magic lapped at him.

Kenth tsked quietly, transferring the wrist he held from his right hand to his left.

"You've had a long night, pet," he said, snaking an arm around Peregrine. Dueling had never physically thrilled him, but Peregrine's scent – hints of book leather and sandalwood – intrigued him.

"Your magic can't touch me," Peregrine said.

Kenth pressed against him. His imagination hadn't been enough; Peregrine felt unbelievably good against him. Soft and hard and warm. Even his shifting rubbed against Kenth, teasing him.

He ground against Peregrine. His cock hardened.

Peregrine stilled.

"I don't need my magic to touch you," Kenth said.

"I'd rather take your demon to my bed."

Kenth chuckled. "He'd leave you bleeding like a debauched girl. With me, you'd be able to walk afterwards. Unless," Kenth added, making his tone coy, "you would prefer not to."

Peregrine jerked.

Kenth rode out the sudden movement, keeping his body pressed against the witch's, enjoying the quick, rough movement.

The sensations amused Kenth. When he'd first seen Peregrine, he'd thought the man would make a gifted courtesan. Now he was certain of it.

Peregrine's head snapped back, slamming into Kenth's nose.

Pain lanced through Kenth's face. The room stumbled around him. The body against him disappeared, replaced by the languid warmth creeping from his aching nostrils.

Bugger him!

Kenth leached strength from the blood along his hand and his now leaking nose. He forced the dizziness back.

And found himself alone.

Kenth stalked across the room and picked up his kirfane. Peregrine's fight with Winter had left him weak. He might not have the strength to call the council just yet, but he would soon. Kenth had to ensure that he would never have that strength again.

He flicked the kirfane lightly over his fingers. Pain followed the blade's shadow, and then blood escaped his body.

"My intent is your intent," he whispered.

The blood fell and faded into the cool night air. A moment later, he sensed it descend over the demon, altering his commands.

The scent of the blood, the feel of it against his skin, strengthened Kenth. Rewording the demon's commands was dangerous, but if he was careful he could use Winter's own curiosity against him. He wanted to know Peregrine's mystery? Let him find it in his body.

The demon's will brushed against his spell, fighting it.

Kenth cut deeper, spilling more blood. The drops struck the air, burning into it and leaving shadows. The barrier against Kenth's magic faded.

"My intent is your intent," Kenth said. He would destroy that witch. First his magic and then his soul. "Find him. Take him. Bring him back to me."

## Chapter Five

That bastard.

Peregrine ran down the hall. He could not believe Kenth would dare—

Laughter curled up inside Peregrine, sharp and angry. Kenth had summoned a demon to kill Peregrine's brothers. He'd killed the king. Really, attempting to break Peregrine's oath and rape him shouldn't be that much of a surprise.

Peregrine forced the laughter back. He needed to focus on getting out of the castle. Kenth was probably calling the demon now.

He should have gone to the council first.

No. Winter would have killed them. His encounter with Kenth, while unpleasant, at least kept the others safe.

Peregrine forced his mind away from this moment and Kenth, and focused on his surroundings. He'd been down this hall once, when he was six. Run down it, chased by a tutor. He'd found a quiet knot garden and lost himself for hours in its shaded greenery. Back then, the shadows offered places to hide. Now, they reminded him of Winter. And Kenth.

He'd trusted Kenth.

Foolish, really, but his mind kept returning to the witch. Peregrine had known the man since academy. Childish remarks aside, Kenth had always carried himself like a proper witch and council member. Even now, after Kenth had summoned a demon, Peregrine still hoped that there was something in him that still wanted to protect Delvore.

There was. It was just twisted.

Ahead, the corridor broke into two directions. Peregrine paused, saw no one down either end, and then felt a cool breeze from the left.

He headed toward it.

Despite himself, his thoughts kept returning to the man he hoped to escape. Yes, it was vile that Kenth had murdered innocent people. To add to his crimes, he even considered acting against his fellow council members.

Ren had killed people who hadn't deserved to die, though, and the council hadn't stopped him. It was revenge against someone they'd probably all been afraid of and knew they would only get one strike against.

It didn't excuse Kenth; it would never excuse Kenth. But Peregrine understood him. If their places had been reversed, would Peregrine have allowed his family's murderer to reign? And if he couldn't destroy that man, would he have gone after his kin instead?

Perhaps...no. Peregrine was a witch, a creature of life and magic. He would kill in defense, but he would not twist himself like Nolan, or the ancestor that had betrayed the banshee. Their actions were an abomination. *They* were an abomination.

Ahead was a wooden door. Peregrine unlatched it and darted outside.

Pale witch lights dotted the small oaks outside. They gave the garden an ethereal luminance, allowing Peregrine to run past the flowers and herbs.

There was a gate here, somewhere. If he could find it –

A small shape darted past him into a hedge.

Startled, he stumbled, caught himself against an orange tree, and searched for the shape.

Movement stirred the low hedge across from him. The quiet rustle stilled, and then another shape emerged.

It blinked dark eyes at Peregrine and then retreated into the green.

Birds, he realized, and then laughed. There could be hundreds of them in there. All watching with their little black eyes. Waiting.

He ran away from the hedge. The birds reminded him of Winter. It was the eyes, those dark, haunting eyes.

A chill brushed against him. It traced over his skin, lapping at the spot the demon had touched.

Peregrine turned. And found himself facing Winter.

Peregrine stumbled back.

Winter followed him.

“You fool,” Winter hissed. “You had a chance to destroy him, and you let it go.”

Peregrine stilled. If he killed Kenth, he would be completing his grandsire’s dishonorable plot. Kenth might have let himself be twisted by revenge, but Peregrine wouldn’t. “My family dishonored his.”

“And he repaid them in blood. His grandfather, grandmother, and aunt were murdered. Kenth has killed your father and two brothers. You’re even.”

“His line is the rightful heir.”

“Then fuck him and sire a child on him. Or –” Winter smiled. “– ask someone else to do it.”

Peregrine frowned. Even without his oath, that suggestion was despicable. “No.”

“Fine. Do nothing. I assure you, the captain of the guard and the council would each quietly arrange for an accident to befall Kenth.”

“I would protect –”

Winter grabbed his arms and shook him. “They would be doing it to protect you.”

“They – you aren’t attacking me.”

“My master has changed his mind. I sense him trying to alter my commands.”

Oh, gods. Kenth wasn’t teasing when he –

Peregrine couldn’t finish the thought. If Kenth did that, it would shatter his sacrifice and he would die. Or go mad.

Or live. Without his magic.

*I will lose everything.*

“Trying?” Peregrine asked. He knew it was too much to hope that Kenth would keep their fight between them and return the demon, but he wanted it. The longer Winter was there, the more he learned about the city’s vulnerabilities.

“He’s overexerted himself.” Winter tipped his head toward Peregrine in a faint bow. His eyes shimmered, and then the gray darkened into black, and the black swept over his eyes. “This has given me the chance to fight him for control.”

Bloody hell. If the demon broke free, he’d kill more than just Peregrine.

Or, he might leave the city and return to the north.

Peregrine yanked at his hands, but the demon’s grip held him. “And when you break free?”

“I believe your cards said I would start over.”

Yes.

And his future included a lover.

Gods. The cards could not have meant him. They couldn’t have.



“The illusion over your eyes has faded.” Pointless thing to note, but the words escaped Peregrine. It was the only thing that apparently would be escaping tonight; he had neither the magic nor physical strength to defeat a demon. Kenth had won.

*No.*

Peregrine twisted and broke free.

He was not someone’s revenge. He was a witch. A council member. A king.

Winter approached him. “The illusion is a waste of energy at this moment. I’ll recast it after I’ve broken free.”

Peregrine retreated slowly. Winter had to focus on resisting Kenth, so if Peregrine hurried he should be able to escape.

Which way to the gate, though? Left? Right? Straight back? “How long can you hold it?” Peregrine asked. The longer the demon played with words, the more time Peregrine had to break free.

“A week, if I’m not called upon to work other magics. Otherwise, an hour. How long can you hold the spell over your eyes?”

“Twenty minutes.”

Winter’s lips quirked. “I would’ve thought you’d last longer.”

Peregrine crept back. “The banshee – Bugger off.”

Winter followed him.

After a moment, Peregrine realized they had fallen into a parody of a courting dance. He would take a step back and the demon would follow. One to the left, the other to the right to meet him. Then, another step back, followed by a step in pursuit.

“You’re wasting energy on me,” Peregrine said.

“If I lose to Kenth, I’m sure you’ll do something to fluster him again. Eventually, one of you will destroy the other.”

“Kenth might not free you after I’m gone.” If he could not lose the demon with his movements, then perhaps he could do it with words. “There are others he’s considering having you murder.”

“I never harbored any illusions that he’d free me. Either I’ll break free of his bindings and kill him, or you will.”

Peregrine thought over what he knew of binding spells. “If he died by my hand, his bindings would fall to me. I’d control you.”

“You’d also be weakened from your exertions. I’d overpower you.” Winter smiled.

“Can you sense what Kenth is doing now?” Peregrine asked. He feared everything – that Kenth was on his way to meet them, that Kenth was altering Winter’s spells to keep him longer, that he was having an iced drink. Whatever Winter could tell him would hopefully give Peregrine something to prepare for.

“Oh, yes. He’s cutting deeper into his fingers.” Winter stilled. “Bugger...his spells are overwhelming mine.”

Bloody hell.

Peregrine retreated and then darted down a high hedge row. If Kenth was daring to change the demon’s orders and risk Winter fighting his control, Peregrine doubted he would like the new orders.

Ahead, the row ended in a stone gate.

Peregrine drew up the remains of his magic. There wasn’t enough for a long spell, certainly not enough to even create a minor witch light, but if he could put the magic into his legs and use it to power a jump, he would make it over the wall.

He quickened his pace. Once he reached the other side, he would go to the council. He hoped Winter’s orders were altered enough to exclude them.

A chill swept over him, and then the demon was on him, knocking him to the ground.

Images of the night, the garden, and the gate danced around him.

The weight against him faded, and then cool hands turned him. Peregrine was held so gently, so...reverently. There was a whisper of lips over his forehead, there and gone so quickly Peregrine was certain he'd imagined it. Just as he was imagining being laid on a soft sheet, just as he was imagining gentle, clawless fingers brushing his hair away from his face. A lover, like the one he'd drawn ages before. Someone to challenge him. Care for him. The other half of his mystery.

When the sensations stilled, he found himself lying on his back, looking up at Winter.

A collage of emotions jerked through Peregrine. He was relieved to see the demon and not Kenth. He was comfortable, for he was lying on Winter's fine cloak; his own clothes were so torn they did little to keep him warm.

He was also afraid because the demon was close. So close.

"Clever witch." Winter caressed Peregrine's face. His fingers grew edged, and then his claws crept down, tracing over Peregrine's neck, his chest, tearing through his shirt.

"You can retract them," Peregrine said.

"Yes. When the mood strikes me." The claws traced lightly over Peregrine's skin, leaving it whole but sensitive.

A shiver followed after the claws, darting through Peregrine and settling low in his stomach.

"You've twisted my master's desires."

Peregrine half rose and caught Winter's wrists. "I twisted Kenth's *what?*"

Winter chuckled, moving his hands to catch Peregrine in turn.

The sight of their hands holding one another's wrists chilled Peregrine. Usually when two witches bound one another's wrists in moonlight, they were getting married.

An image of the Lovers flickered through his mind. Enemy. Ally. It didn't matter what Winter was. He had the power to help Peregrine or destroy him.

Winter yanked his arms back, pulling Peregrine up against him. "I tried to resist his commands," he said, leaning close to Peregrine's ear.

"Are you still trying?"

"No."

The hint of his breath teased Peregrine, sending a shiver through his body, to places on which he'd once had to cast a chill spell to quiet.

"Until now, he's been so careful with his spells. In altering his commands, he gave me a chance to fight. The longer you resist, the more opportunities I'll have to break free."

"Release me, and I'll find other ways to make him recast his spells."

"But in this moment," Winter whispered, trailing teeth and tongue down the whorls of Peregrine's ear, "his desires are mine."

The soft, stroking sensation stirred something in Peregrine, a heat that erupted from his gut and spread throughout his body. It settled in his throat, tightening the muscles there. It settled in his fingers, making them twitch and taste magic. It settled in his member, stirring it.

Peregrine broke away. "You're giving in to him. If you fight, you'll never break free."

Winter pushed him down, his body sliding between Peregrine's legs.

Peregrine grabbed a fistful of Winter's hair and yanked him back. The demon chuckled, resisting him.

"Fight him!"

"I tried," Winter said, lapping down Peregrine's chest. "I lost."

A pleasurable ache grew in Peregrine's member. Gods, how long had it been since he'd felt that? Too long. Not long enough.

The taut strands of hair grew lax in Peregrine's hand, and the demon's lips crept up Peregrine's body. Winter traced his tongue back up Peregrine's neck and nipped his earlobe.

Peregrine's breath grew ragged. He shoved at Winter, but the movement did nothing.

He pushed again. He had to. He would lose his magic – he was destined to lose his magic – he couldn't –

"You talked to me about honor," Winter said, his tongue teasing Peregrine's ear. "About how your family hurt his. Demons understand that. We believe in honor, in obeying our lord and protecting our kind. When he bound me, he made himself my lord. I must obey his exact words."

"He'll let the council destroy you." Peregrine twisted, trying to push the demon away or slip out from under him.

Clawed fingertips crept beneath his torn clothes and stroked him.

Peregrine's breath caught. His member hardened, tearing him in two directions. He wanted to squirm away from the intimate touch. He also wanted to lean into it.

Winter's fingers cool fingers slid along his length, teasing him.

Peregrine grabbed Winter's wrist, stilling his stroke. "Wait. I can't –"

The demon chuckled and then laved Peregrine's ear. Peregrine's breath grew ragged.

"But you will, my witch. I'm going to make you come. Then I'm going to slide my claws into you. I'll take you while you're slick with blood, until your whole being is overwhelmed by me."

A tremor darted through Peregrine. Yes. No. His magic –

"No."

Winter shifted, sliding his own hard member along Peregrine's and rubbing them together. The demon's skin was cool against his. As it brushed against Peregrine intimately, it sent a shiver through him.

"I am going to own everything about you," Winter said. "Your body. Your soul. Your magic."

“Kenth –”

“Is weakened right now.” Winter shifted, snatching Peregrine’s wrists. “That will cost him.”

Peregrine jerked, trying to buck the demon off.

The movement was useless; he was tired, and the demon heavy.

Winter placed Peregrine’s hands above his head. A whisper of magic, too soft for Peregrine to catch, and then Winter released one hand.

Peregrine moved. And discovered that the demon’s other hand had the strength to hold him.

Winter’s fingers slid down Peregrine’s chest. His stomach. His member.

Peregrine’s breath quickened. Gods help him. It felt good.

An image of his shadow deck flickered through his mind. The Tower, with its falling stones and destroyed life. The Ten of Swords, offering a small, subtle hope among the desolation. Only by losing everything did he stand a chance of survival...with his Lover. His demon.

This coupling would destroy him, though. Did he have the strength to survive without his magic?

Another whisper of magic, and then Winter stroked slickness over their members. The continued contact had warmed the demon’s member, and it slid against Peregrine’s like a shadow.

Peregrine bucked. He didn’t know if he had the strength to survive without his magic, but he did know that the demon would destroy him. Perhaps not immediately – Kenth would probably want a turn with him – but eventually.

“So passionate.” Winter eased back, drawing away from Peregrine. Cool night air teased the witch, making him feel at once alive and vulnerable.

Winter's fingers crept down between Peregrine's legs. The touch was light, with no hint of claw.

"Wait –"

Winter's fingertip stroked into him.

Peregrine arched beneath him.

Winter smiled. The witch was deliciously tight. Winter was tempted to withdraw his finger and take him.

He wanted this to last, though. Kenth's new orders allowed him some flexibility here, and Winter wanted to use that small grace to spite the bastard. He wanted to leave Peregrine trembling in pleasure beneath him, aching for release. He wanted Peregrine to measure every lover he might ever have afterward by him, and find them wanting.

Peregrine was a Delvorian and, worse, the king, but as much as Winter wanted to destroy the kingdom, he felt...something for this witch. Peregrine had looked into Winter and seen something no one else ever had, and he hadn't laughed or tried to use it against him. A fellow demon might've given him that kindness, but they might also have remembered it for later.

And humans, well, the ones Winter remembered from the war were just as likely to betray a friend to protect themselves. They would take advantage of a demon mourning his dead.

A hint of magic pulsed inside of Peregrine.

It was a shadow of his previous strength, telling Winter that the witch was gathering his power.

Good. Winter withdrew his finger and then slid two back into him. After this coupling, Peregrine could frustrate Kenth's plans again. Judging by the emotions leaking from Kenth, it would be some time before his master considered killing Peregrine.

Winter thrust his fingers into Peregrine. Slowly, slowly, and then speeding up. No claws; Peregrine's skin had paled when Winter had mentioned claws, and strangely, that troubled him.

Peregrine's breath tumbled out of his pretty lips, and for a moment Winter was tempted to taste them. Peregrine could bite; Winter enjoyed a bit of play with his couplings.

Another pulse of magic tumbled out of Peregrine, stronger than before.

Did this pleasant teasing strengthen his witch?

Winter twisted his fingers. In demon men there were places that, if touched, could drive them mad with pleasure. Were humans similar?

Peregrine gasped and writhed beneath him. His magic surged up, lapping against Winter.

How charming. The touch did affect the witch's power. Kenth was doubly a fool, then.

"My magic," Peregrine choked out. "It's going to –"

"Sshhh." Winter stroked his fingers out and slid them back in. "We'll draw this out."

His cock ached. The small pain-pleasure asked – no, *demand*ed – attention.

Winter scissored his fingers, preparing Peregrine. "You're so tight. When I push into you, your body will never let me go."

Peregrine trembled. "Oh, gods."

His witch was so close. Winter slid his fingers out. Now. He had to sink into this man now.

Another pulse of magic darted out of Peregrine, washing over Winter and leaving him warm.

"So passionate," Winter said, slipping a hand under Peregrine's knee. "I wish Kenth didn't want you afterward."

Magic slammed into him, throwing him back.



The burst of power was frantic, edged with surprise and lust, passion and fear. It followed Winter when he hit and then fell into a hedge.

He tore himself free. Ten feet away, Peregrine had risen on shaky legs. He clutched Winter's cloak around him, and his eyes were bright. Ethereal.

Magic pulsed off of him, its touch caressing and stinging Winter. In this moment, in this moonlight, Peregrine looked like a demon prince.

Winter closed the distance between them. The attack had startled him, leaving his desires in chaos. The witch was his. Kenth wanted him. The witch's cards said that they were spiritually coupled and that only death would part them. The demon snarled. Damn Kenth! He did not want to share his witch.

Pain darted through him, pushing back his instincts. He was his master's assassin. The sooner he brought him Peregrine, the sooner he would go free. His master was human, and humans lied. Peregrine was human, and humans could have a demon's soul.

This land was not his home, though. Winter longed to leave it.

The magic radiating from Peregrine retreated, closing in and hovering about the witch.

Winter stalked toward him. Kenth would never appreciate Peregrine, but he was all that stood between Winter and freedom. He would destroy the witch, break free of Kenth, and return to the north.

The air trembled around Peregrine. His form grew faint.

*No!*

Winter sent a loop of magic out, weaving it around Peregrine. The last time he'd seen such a spell had been during the war. He'd attacked the king's witch, but the woman had disappeared before he could deliver the killing blow.

The spells caught Peregrine. Winter tightened his magic.

Peregrine faded into the night.

Winter stared at the spot where the witch had been a moment before. Bloody hell, that was lovely.

## Chapter Six

The night before, Kenth would have died to protect a fellow witch's secrets. Today, he would share them.

"His mother was a witch," Kenth told Winter. The demon had spent the twilight hours hunting Peregrine throughout the city, but never found him. Now he stood in the shadows of the room, drinking in Kenth's words. "She was the previous king's advisor before me. Peregrine was born during her time at court, but she kept him away. It was believed he wasn't the king's."

"Your king wasn't upset by this?" Winter asked.

"Byron was open about his passions. As long as it hurt no one, he wouldn't deny anyone theirs."

"How long was she his advisor?" Winter asked.

"Ten years. When he married, he dismissed her. She settled near Northgate, advised the council in how to improve their dealings with nobility, and raised her son." Northgate was an affluent neighborhood, and many wealthy merchants and nobles had manors there. "Peregrine was a gifted witch and, with a smile from the king, was admitted to academy two years early."

His tone was pleasantly neutral, betraying none of the jealousy Kenth had once felt. He'd been an exceptional apprentice as well and used to sit outside academy three years before admittance just to catch a whisper of their knowledge. He'd actually learned a bit that way, and when he'd finally been allowed in, he quickly advanced.

When Peregrine was admitted early, Kenth had made one snide comment upon their meeting. Afterward he left the boy alone, though after a couple months Kenth had to admit Peregrine was interesting. He was lovely, certainly. Inquisitive brown eyes, luscious auburn hair, a face and body a courtesan would have killed for.

His mind, though – oh, his mind! Who else had taken the time to create a more diverse deck of shadows? Most apprentices just repeated the drawings they'd seen. But Peregrine wanted diversity, and not for political niceness. He wanted it because it offered his power a more open field. One had to respect that.

"I have a copy of a card he once considered for his deck," Kenth said. He went over to a glass case in the corner and search through a box. He had a collection of objects that once belonged to all of his fellow council there. One never knew when something might be needed.

A moment later he found it, the King of Antiquities.

Kenth knew a little about the deck. There were a series of major arcana cards, and then the four suits: swords, glyphs, chalices, and antiquities.

He'd never had much talent for divination, though, so all he knew of this card was what he could see.

The auburn-haired man in the picture was handsome. He sat on a throne, with only his profile visible to the reader. He reminded Kenth of a professor he'd once had at academy.

"There are traces of his blood woven into the ink," Kenth said, turning.

And finding Winter behind him.

Kenth stilled. He was tempted to move back, forward, something.

Any movement would give the demon a message, though. That he was afraid or felt like he had to prove his control. It would be better to simply stand and wait.

The demon stared at the card in his hand.

Ah. It wasn't a subtle struggle for control. Winter wanted everything he could get on Peregrine, and that included this small object.

"Do you have any other cards of his?" Winter asked.

"No." Kenth offered him the card. The card was lovely, but Winter needed it. He could eat it, burn it, whatever he needed to do to find Peregrine.

Winter slipped the card into a pocket in his shirt. After his fingers slipped away, the material smoothed, hiding the shape.

"What happened next?" Winter asked. "At his school?"

"He graduated early and went to the commons. When it came time to begin considering sacrifices, he chose chastity." And thus ended many people's fantasies. Or, in the case of one of their mentors, increased them.

Winter's lips quirked. "Pardon?"

"He chose –"

"I didn't mean that. Your kind still believes in sacrificing something?"

Kenth frowned. There was strength in challenging oneself, as well as in knowing one's limitations. If the second was known, then they could exercise their abilities and nudge them further. The oaths aided witches in that.

To the demon, he said, "It hones our focus."

"Of course. Demons don't need to sacrifice anything."

Kenth knew. He'd studied them. Their magic was powerful, but it took decades for each one to understand and control their power. Human witches could do that within a few years of apprenticeship.

Demons were longer-lived, though, and as a race could touch magic to varying degrees. Not every human could do magic, and of those, few had the emotional strength necessary to become powerful. In a battle, Kenth feared for Delvore.

Perhaps Peregrine was right about Winter, and Kenth should consider disposing of him instead of freeing him. It meant going back on his word, but...

No. He disliked such tactics. He'd given his word, and unless Winter showed that he was intending to harm Delvore, Kenth would return him once Peregrine was no longer a threat.

And Peregrine would cease being a threat the moment he was dead.

Frustration and anger lanced through Kenth. He wanted to see Peregrine hurt, needed to see it after listening to the man's plans. The longer he lived, though, the more danger he put Kenth's plans into. As much as it hurt, he needed to focus.

And let the demon do it.

Kenth smiled. "Go find Peregrine. He's never had a lover. Find him. Take him. Kill him."

The change in his previous command settled over Winter. The demon frowned, and Kenth sensed his will fighting him.

Kenth increased his power. His will was the demon's. The demon would obey.

His desire overpowered the demon's.

"Go," Kenth said. He would not be able to change his orders again. It was becoming too dangerous, giving the demon too great an insight into how he worked his magic.

The demon left, and took with him the cold.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peregrine stirred.

He ached all over, his head, his sides, his legs. The last time he'd felt this way was when he'd been an apprentice and tried to do a spell that was beyond him. He'd succeeded...and woken a week later.

Peregrine pushed himself up. He was in a small glade. In the distance, he saw the Delvore cityscape. He was partially wrapped in a cloak.

Winter's cloak.

Peregrine's eyes clenched shut. Oh, gods. Kenth had sent the demon to debauch him and...

And he was here. Outside of the city. Aching, but not bleeding. Not sore. A touch sensitive in places he normally did not think about, but otherwise fine.

Taking a deep breath, Peregrine tried to cast a loose thread of magic out.

Dizziness tugged at him, and then magic darted through him, strengthening him.

Relief surged through him. The demon may have touched him, but he still had his magic. It was not a week later, he sensed, but a few hours. In his panic, he'd slipped past the banshee's gift and cast a spell few witches were capable of – and he'd accidentally placed himself twenty miles outside of Delvore.

He'd been lucky.

\* \* \* \* \*

Winter crossed a stone bridge. The blood in the card strengthened his tracking spell, and now a faint thread drew him west, toward someplace outside of town.

Oaks shadowed the road that would take him there. Their entwining branches turned the path into a green tunnel. His pace was quick, his steps angry. He considered what Kenth had told him.

Peregrine was an only child. Born in the third month, under the pregnant moon. He was a virgin.

Gods, Winter could not wait to sink into him. He'd felt tight before, and his quiet, startled moan had delighted Winter.

If Winter took him, that beautiful sound would sharpen and grow hectic. Afraid.

Winter's desire faded.

If breaking an oath really cost a witch their magic, would Peregrine survive? Or was this how Kenth wished for him to die now? Ravishment, the loss of his magic, followed by his life? It would be kinder to simply run Kenth's kirfane across Peregrine's throat.

Bugger, now he was thinking of kindness.

Winter forced his attention to the road.

This path was familiar, and after a moment he remembered; the last time he'd been there, he'd been leading his unit in the opposite direction. They'd made it as far as the castle's inner hall before Ren killed the previous demon king and sent his successor fleeing.

Winter's pace quickened, and his boots made an angry tap-tap against the cobblestones. He'd lost half of his unit – the only people he had ever considered friends – in the flight out of the city. Delvore had earned its freedom; Winter would never deny that. But he still wanted to return and tear the castle walls down, force its king to his knees, and...

The favored image, the image that allowed him to keep sane while carrying out Kenth's orders, stumbled.

He still wanted to kill Kenth, but the Delvore king was no longer a vague face. He was a man with auburn hair and a demon-bright mind. A man who intrigued Winter. A man Winter needed to kill.

Winter entered a small market, his steps beating sharply against the stones.

Today was a different world from yesterday; the people wore no costumes nor played any music. It could have been just another day in just another town.

Except for the whispers.

"The king is dead. Why hasn't his heir stepped forward?"



“I heard the eldest son was found dead.”

“I was there. I heard the witch say a demon killed the second one.”

“Did you hear? The tower in the commons was destroyed last night.”

“I heard it was the banshee.”

“I heard a demon.”

“The king’s witch tried to summon the council last night, but I heard the others refused to leave their towers because they were afraid of encountering a demon.”

“I heard...”

Winter stopped at a witch’s stall and, feigning interest in the cards, drank in their words.

“The council member of the commons is missing.”

“My brothers and I searched the tower ruins. We didn’t find his body.”

“What if he summoned the demon?”

A bark of laughter escaped Winter. He quickly coughed and hid his face behind a stack of books. Peregrine summon him? The witch would sooner bed him than risk his precious Delvore.

When the whispers moved on to discuss the king’s two slain sons, Winter bought a Delvore tarot to compare his card with, and then continued on his way. This was Peregrine’s interest, and Winter would learn about him through this.

The cards were nothing like the witch’s, though. Their design was simple, with pale Delvorians in pale imitations of life. After one circuit through the deck, he slipped them into a pocket.

Near the edge of town, the whispers turned to the demon war. If one demon was loose, then another might be on the way. And another.

Soon their whispers would grow louder and Kenth would have to deal with them.

Sadly, Winter knew Kenth. The man was clever and would calm them. *We will find the king*, he would say. *It's just one demon, and he cannot destroy us.*

And when Peregrine was dead, and the banshee cursed Kenth, the Delvorians would love their new king. Brilliant, thoughtful Kenth.

However the struggle between Kenth and Peregrine played out, Winter wished the Delvorians and Kenth a long life together.

## Chapter Seven

Peregrine reached the two-story, half-timbered inn by early evening. He'd tried to lessen the time by attempting to magically move himself again, but all he'd gotten for the attempt was an aching head. The banshee's gift would allow him to cast small spells over himself, he realized, but anything larger might only happen once, if he did it without thinking.

As he waited for the pain to fade, he considered casting an enchantment to quicken his pace, but decided against it. He didn't know where Winter was. He should conserve his strength for when he needed it.

The fading light played across the inn's roof, turning the wooden shingles honey brown; it looked new to Peregrine. He'd been there once, years before, when he'd gone to a local town to pick up some herbs for his mother.

Then, the thought of being in Delvore in another day's travel pleased him. Today, the scent of cooking rabbits teased him.

Peregrine reached into the demon's cloak and searched his shirt seam. The light and surprisingly warm fabric was a terrible physical memory, but his clothes were little more

than scraps of cloth held together by strongly spelled thread. Until he acquired other clothes, they would have to do.

The cloak held a pleasant scent. Hints of sweetness, of jasmine and firewood. Did Winter smell like that? Peregrine hadn't noticed.

He frowned. He wasn't certain he wanted to.

Peregrine traced his fingers over his shirt seam, finding and unhooking three buttons. As each broke free, the minor illusions over them faded, leaving behind silver coins.

He cast another enchantment over his eyes, darkening the violet to brown. Continuously casting the spell was a bother, but the other side of the banshee's gift was a blessing. Kenth's spells would never harm him. The next time they met, Peregrine would stop him.

If the demon didn't find and stop Peregrine first.

Frowning, he slipped into the inn.

A young woman sat behind a counter. When she saw him, she smiled and rose. Peregrine quickly regretted causing the movement; her belly was heavy with child.

"I need a room," he said, setting two coins in her palm. One silver would have been fine, but his needs, while few, were dangerous. If Winter found him there, he would hurt whoever stood between them. "And some clothes."

The woman, Celia, called her sister. A few moments later Peregrine followed her upstairs. In a pleasant voice, the young woman told him about his room. His coins had bought him a private room overlooking the back garden, a hot bath, a couple meals, and a spare change of clothes.

"Thank you," he said. The hall was lined by windows, and as they passed them, the fading light sent their shadows skipping in and out of darkness.

The woman had a dim shadow.

Peregrine fought not to stare. His eyes kept falling back on it, though. Studying it. Empathizing with it.

Her shadow was transparent as air, barely showing against the faded tapestry on the wall.

He'd seen a shadow like that once before, when an older student at academy broke his oath. He'd survived, but his shadow had been altered. Their professors believed it was a sign of the magic breaking away.

Like that boy, this woman had been a witch once. When she broke her sacrifice, her magic had shattered, leaving deep scars on her soul.

That she'd survived at all was impressive. When the boy at academy lost his magic, he'd begun talking to shadows, grabbing at them, attacking them. He was quickly taken away, out to the country. Peregrine had looked for him when he'd grown older, but never found any word of him.

Peregrine glanced back at his own shadow.

His dark, ghostly twin was a splash of blackness against the wall. No breaks, no hint that anyone had tried to shatter his sacrifice.

He'd been lucky.

"This is your room, sir."

"Thank you." Peregrine turned toward her. He reached into the hem of his shirt and broke off a lining button. Magic faded, leaving a copper. His funds were desperately low – once he was out of coins, he would have to find a way to earn more – but she'd survived losing her magic. Peregrine could not ignore her strength.

He slipped the copper into her hand.

She smiled, said, "Thank you, sir," and stepped past him.

He watched her retreating form. He'd always imagined that, if something happened and he broke his sacrifice, he would die. His mother had a cousin who'd broken his oath, and as his magic bled away, it had taken his insides with it, leaving him a grisly and empty shell.

Peregrine had never considered that he'd survive. He'd go mad or die, two ends that seemed quite reasonable for a council member. He'd never thought he'd live –

No. That was a lie. He had never thought he would have the courage to live.

"Madame, wait." She had survived something he had never thought he could. Perhaps, if he knew a bit more about what had happened to her, he would understand what had almost happened to him. The heightened sensations that could have been simple arousal or his powers feeling threatened. The feel of magic growing within him, growing stronger, headier, and then surging out. Protecting itself and him.

Had she felt that? Had his magic returned after he'd exhausted it because it sensed the danger, or...or was this something different?

The woman turned and looked at him.

"When you – when your magic –" Ask plainly or don't bother. "Before you lost your magic, did its strength briefly increase?"

"How –" Her eyes darted past Peregrine to the wall behind him.

"It happened to me last night," he said. The words, the memories, made him feel vulnerable, but he was asking her to share a part of her life with him. It would be hypocritical not to share in return.

"You were able to stop," she said.

Yes and no. Peregrine felt haunted by the demon's touch. Winter had been alternately gentle and rough, and Peregrine was still surprised Winter had taken the time to prepare him.

"I was fortunate," he said.

She looked back at him. "I felt something like that. A burst. When it faded, everything faded. I woke a week later without magic."

Similar experiences. What was different? The time they took in waking, certainly.

"How old were you?" he asked.

"Twenty-seven."

Seven years out of academy, and three years younger than he. "What was your focus?"

"Enchantment, with a minor talent for divination. I always thought if I'd been better at it, I would have been able to avoid it."

Peregrine opened his mouth to tell her that she might not have, and then stopped. Let her keep that small, aching wish. She did not need to know that sometimes seeing destruction coming was worse.

"Did someone else push you?" he asked. "Maybe force –"

"No. It was me." She looked away, and Peregrine knew she couldn't answer any more questions.

"I need to be going, sir," she said. "Someone will bring your bathwater in a few minutes."

"Thank you."

He stepped into his room. A cool, jasmine-scented breeze crept over him. A scan of the room revealed a low bed, an open window, and a desk. A green rug hugged the wooden floor. A door to his right led to a private washroom.

Peregrine cast a light trace of magic out, searching for any hint of spells. Nothing. Pleased, he closed the door behind him.

He was alone, and though he was tempted to strip the demon's cloak off, he waited. Someone would be there soon with clothes and bathwater. It would take but a few moments. Until then, he could walk through this pleasant, quiet room, with Winter's somber, earthy scent around him.

The breeze returned, whispering past gauzy black curtains. The light outside had faded to twilight, that beautiful in-between color he loved.

Peregrine's fingers twitched. He wished he had his shadow deck.

It would have been wonderful to shuffle the cards and try to anticipate Winter's movements. Or Kenth's. The demon might be the one hunting him, but Winter acted on Kenth's orders.

Sadly, it would take weeks to create a new deck.

Someone knocked quietly. Peregrine crossed the room. He cast a light thread of magic out, found the pregnant woman's husband, and opened the door.

The man was pleasant and brought buckets of hot water and fresh clothes. He could have been terse, though, and in this moment Peregrine would have forgiven him anything, as long as he didn't have to wear the demon's scent any longer.

The man set the clothes on a chair inside the washroom and poured the water into a wide, claw-foot tub. A few minutes later the bath was full of steaming water and the man was gone.

Peregrine locked the door and then approached the water. He slipped the cloak off halfway across the room and followed it with the remnants of his shirt and breeches.

The enchantment over his eyes faded.

He cast another, realized that it was pointless to waste energy when no one was around to see him, and then sighed. Until he found a spell that would resist the banshee's, or he destroyed Kenth's command over the demon, he should get into the habit of keeping up the obfuscation.

He followed the spell with another, creating a light ward around himself. If he needed to, he could push it further and envelop the room. He could probably protect the inn for a small amount of time, but considering how well he was able to protect himself when Winter



first attacked, he would be better off running and making the demon pursue him than staying.

In the washroom, his path took him past a looking glass. He paused, scanned himself for bruises or cuts, found a couple, and then headed for the water.

And stopped.

He had never actually looked at himself unclothed. It seemed improper, and he'd preferred to focus on his mind and magic, not his body.

And yet...he no longer felt like he knew himself. When Winter had touched him, it seemed like the demon understood his body better than he. Worse, the creature's touch felt imprinted on him. Peregrine wanted his body back.

He played a round of glance-and-look-away, and then he turned, studying his reflection.

Despite the demon's touch, his skin was not torn. There was a thin scar over the back of his right shoulder, created sometime when he was a child learning to walk.

The skin that Winter had touched during that first encounter was still ghost-pale, but it felt warm.

Peregrine turned, and he learned that he had a dimple on the back of his left thigh. His legs were shapely, and should hose ever come back in fashion, he would be all right.

Amusement chased his discovery. He laughed softly, then headed for the bath. He was being foolish. This exercise was so that he could understand his body, not develop airs.

The water was cradled in a wide tub. As Peregrine approached, the sweet, subtle smell of chamomile crept into the air.

Interesting scent. The flower was good for teething babies. Remembering the pregnant woman downstairs, he was not surprised to find the plant close at hand.

He checked his ward again, found it steady, and then sank into the water.

Warmth lapped against him, comforting and steady. Peregrine sighed. It'd been a long, though surprisingly quiet, day. After the travel, and the night before, it felt good to rest for a moment.

The tub was large, allowing him room to stretch. A quiet thought occurred to him: another person would fit quite easily there with him.

Peregrine frowned. Normally such things did *not* cross his mind.

The moment, the hunt, made him consider it, though. If he hadn't been alone, perhaps he would have been able to face Kenth better. If he hadn't been alone, the other man might have been able to contact the council while he fought Winter.

Peregrine slumped lower in the water. He was loath to admit it, but sometimes his sacrifice was a difficult thing to live with.

He imagined everyone's focus must give them a problem from time to time. Magic was a gift, and to hone it one had to make a sacrifice. His mother had spent a small fortune acquiring the herbs she'd needed to burn, and that didn't include the amount she spent playing with different varieties of plants to see if any of them would work. A friend at academy chose to write his spells on slips of paper and then tear them when he wanted to cast something. While it allowed him to create some delightfully complex spells, it took time to write them down, and a careless spelling or comma would ruin it.

They could have a deeper closeness with another, though. They might choose not to – like his mother – and focus on their magic. Or they could marry and forever be trying to balance magic, a lover, and a child, all with a tired smile and few funds.

Peregrine's frown faded. He might not have ever had a lover, but he had a few friends – a couple of witches, a thief, a city guard. Over the last few years they had married and had less time for gatherings. Peregrine was no different. Between the council and the commons, he barely had time to sleep, let alone spend an evening with friends.

Tonight, as the cool, jasmine-scented night crept into the room, he wished... he wished he had someone who would care for him. Someone who understood how much time and energy magic and politics took, and wouldn't be jealous of either. Someone who would be looking for him after his tower was destroyed.

The demon was looking for him.

Peregrine shook off the bothersome thoughts. Even if he'd chosen a different sacrifice and hadn't been tempted by the same things that had drawn his mother into sharing her body, he would not have wanted to endanger a lover.

He rose. He considered letting the water remain and then decided against it. As he dressed, he cast a light spell into the tub, dissolving the liquid into mist and sending it out a small window.

The clothes were folded and set over a chair in the corner. The fabric was soft, the type worn by merchants, and dark. It would never draw attention.

Peregrine retrieved his torn shirt from the floor in the other room and began releasing the buttons. It would take a few moments to hide his funds in his new –

A chill darted over him, making his chest grow cold.

Peregrine forced his shielding out. The demon was close. Not close enough to touch him yet, but nearby.

Movement stirred near the window, and then the demon was there.

Sitting on his bed.

Peregrine stepped back. He hadn't enjoyed getting that mark, but now, when it warned him of the demon's presence before the demon himself could, he was glad it was there.

Cold-edged magic circled Peregrine, testing his ward. It pushed his protection in, trying to weave into his magic.

Peregrine set his hands on the doorframe and strengthened his spell. His nails sank into the wood, bleeding magic into the surface. This place was not his, but in his tower he'd done

this to cement protection into the stones; he'd weakened them when he'd invited Winter in. He hoped the lack of the powerful but subtle invitation would weaken the demon's spells here.

Winter rose. His magic stabbed at Peregrine's.

Peregrine sent a sharp pulse of power out. No. He would not let Kenth destroy him.

*I will lose everything.*

No.

Their magic tumbled into one another, and when it faded, his ward was set.

Peregrine stepped back. The window behind him was small, but –

His ward stopped him.

Bloody hell.

He set magic-sensitive fingers in the air behind him. The spells in the air were strong, circling and protecting him completely. Too completely; they'd trapped him.

Winter chuckled and relaxed back on the bed. The graceful movement unnerved Peregrine. He was trapped behind his shielding, and Winter, he feared, would wait forever outside of it.

Stalemate.

## Chapter Eight

Peregrine slumped to the floor. He was trapped. Fine. He was trapped with the demon who'd tried to violate his oath the night before. *Lovely*. He would not waste energy pacing. At some point Winter would make a mistake. When he did, Peregrine would escape.

Winter grew comfortable on the bed. The movement sent a tassel of black hair over his eyes, allowing only a hint of the blade-gray irises to show.

"Kenth told me about your oath," he said, sliding two fingers down the linsey-woolsey sheets. An echo of his touch pulsed out of the barrier, caressing Peregrine's skin.

Peregrine jerked back. He began to strengthen the ward.

And then stopped.

If he altered a single spell, it would briefly weaken it, and then Winter would break through. It was, quite simply, the same tactic the demon was attempting on Kenth.

No. It would be better to let that hint of a touch through. It was certainly kinder than what either Winter or Kenth intended.

"Kenth gave me something of yours," Winter said, reaching into his shirt. The shadow-silk twined around his fingers, and then the demon pulled out a card. He turned it toward Peregrine.

Peregrine caught a glimpse of an auburn-haired man on a throne. It was his original sketch for the King of Antiquities, he realized. The Antiquities King had auburn hair, the Sword King had black, the Glyph King was bald, and the Cups King blond.

How had Kenth gotten it? Peregrine had set it into a bin to burn when he was done with it.

“What does it mean?” Winter asked.

That he should’ve kept a better eye on the council he allowed into his private chambers. “It represents a man who is both creative and practical.”

“He sounds like a demon.” Winter held out the card. “Would you like it back?”

*Yes.* “No. Consider it my gift.”

“You’re kind.” Winter returned the card into his shirt. “I remember a time when witches were so powerful they didn’t need sacrifices to hone their abilities. Don’t you have faith in your own abilities to try?”

“I’ve heard tales that demons were so powerful, no spell could hold them, no spell bind them. Why is it that you are the exception?”

The air leached warmth from his skin. His escaping breath coalesced into an ethereal cloud, fading, reappearing, and then fading away. His exposed skin grew sensitive, as if he were being touched.

“We are not exceptions,” Peregrine said. “You can be caught. I can lose my magic.”

“You didn’t seem to be losing anything last night.” Winter’s honeyed accent played with the words, turning them thoughtful. Seductive.

“I. Was. Fortunate.”

“Yes. It could have been Kenth instead.”

It almost had been Kenth.

“Why chastity?”

Kenth had told him? Bastard.

Annoyance chased his anger. Why was he surprised? Kenth wanted to kill him. It would suit his purposes to aid the demon however he could.

“Why chastity?” Winter repeated.

Because Kenth hadn’t been the only one at academy who thought that Peregrine would make a fine courtesan. His mother wasn’t the only witch who’d ever used a combination of clever talent and attractive form to get power, but beauty faded, and with it, power. Peregrine didn’t want that life.

To Winter, Peregrine said, “It offered the strongest focus.”

Winter looked thoughtful. “I would have thought blood would do that.”

“A witch can run out of their own blood too quickly in a battle. The loss of it can also make them unsteady, perhaps even pass out.”

“Pity Kenth is careful.”

Yes. And no. One slip, and Winter would be free. Peregrine didn’t know if the demon would continue to hunt him, or return to the north and tell his brethren about the city’s defenses.

“Does your oath ever grow bothersome?” Winter asked.

“No.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not –”

“Your left hand made a brief fist. Very subtle, but demons are taught to look for these things. At one time, your kind wanted us around to guide them in political intrigue.” Winter traced his fingers over the sheet. A moment later, the echo of the touch moved down Peregrine’s face. “There’s much we can teach you.”

Peregrine kept still. Better to look unaffected than admit that the memory of the touch lingered. “I think our politics are eclectic enough as they are,” he said.

“Perhaps.” Winter’s hand crept down the sheet. The echo of it followed, moving down Peregrine’s side.

A shiver chased the shadow touch. Peregrine looked for a distraction and found one in Kenth. “How much has he told you?”

“About you?”

“About what he’s doing.”

Winter’s hand paused. “A fair amount. I think he doesn’t have anyone else to talk to about it.”

Rather like him, Peregrine realized. Ironical, that he and Kenth could only talk to someone who would much rather kill them than listen to them.

Unfortunately for the demon, Peregrine wanted to discuss this, and a trapped audience suited his dark mood.

“Do you think the council looked the other way as Ren killed his brother’s family?” Peregrine asked.

Winter shrugged. “Perhaps. They might also have enchanted his blade to be especially deadly to anyone with that specific blood. They had their futures to think of, after all. Leave one of his line alive to come back and challenge the king for the throne? It could tear the land apart in civil war. Personally, I would rather Kenth had done that. It would’ve hurt a lot of these prettily warded buildings and weakened the spells in the north.”

“And then the demons would attack.”

Winter chuckled. “Oh, no. We’d study first. We’d find what we like, and then we’d swarm and take it. Kenth would be king of the debris, and you and I would be dining with the demon king. You’d be my conquest, yet I imagine that you’d still argue for the humans’ lives. My uncle would be charmed.”



“When we first met –” Winter’s uncle was the demon king?

Bloody hell. Did Kenth know what he’d summoned?

“Yes?” Winter asked.

“You said you were quite selective in who you hunted, and that we would never have met.”

“You’re interesting, though. You have a mortal’s tenderness and a demon’s cunning. I would’ve noticed you, Peregrine. I suspect I would’ve had to fight off a couple demons just to get to you.”

Heat crept over Peregrine’s face. Bugger. He was too old to blush like a first-year apprentice, but the warmth ignored him.

To Winter, the words were probably just that. From what Peregrine had read of the demon war, people were either killed outright, or played with for a bit and then killed. He didn’t imagine he’d be any different.

Winter’s hand continued down the sheet. The echo trailed down Peregrine’s side, toward his lap.

“It’s believed that the demons didn’t attack when Kenth’s grandfather ruled because you were afraid of angering him,” he said.

Winter chuckled. The action shook his shoulders, disrupting his touch-spell. “I’ll grant that no scout we sent to your land ever returned when he was in power, but we weren’t afraid of him. Cautious, certainly. That man had the mind of a demon.”

Yes. And if a human could have a demon’s mind, could not a demon be human?

The thought birthed a small, aching hope. If a demon could mourn, didn’t that mean they could also love? Or at least not destroy?

“We kept some of your kind with us,” Winter said.

*What?* “Why?”

“They interested us. We’re long-lived, but have a low birth rate. Humans don’t.”

“You vile –”

“They were cared for. The ones I’ve seen have grown to care for their –”

“Rapists.”

“Partners. If a demon wants to play with someone, they won’t bother bringing them home.”

Peregrine slumped against the doorframe. He hoped Winter was right and those poor people had been cared for. No one had known they were alive, and when the border stones became enchanted, they would’ve been as trapped as their captors.

“Your kind never kept any of us?” Winter asked.

“No.” The council would’ve liked to cast a carefully crafted plague on one and send it back, but Ren said no. The man may have murdered his brother’s family, but he’d still wanted to treat his enemy with honor.

“What happened to them?” Peregrine asked.

“Most died over the years. Your kind age faster than ours. We’ve had some success lengthening witch lifecycles, but it’s an imperfect art.”

Winter traced a finger over the sheet. A moment later, his magic lapped at Peregrine’s ward. Its echo bled through and caressed Peregrine’s thigh.

“None of your kind interested me before you,” Winter said. “Too frail, I thought. Given a little power, you think you’re invincible, but if faced with something stronger, you wilt. Not *you*, though.” Winter smiled. “You remain –”

“Behind a ward.”

“We’ll see.”

Throughout the night, Winter watched Peregrine.

By twilight, the witch had tired. Winter grew silent and waited. Perhaps a change in tactics was called for.

Peregrine spent the next hour blinking, then resting his head against the frame of the door. His pretty violet eyes closed...opened to watch Winter...and then closed again.

They remained closed.

Winter smiled.

Asleep, Peregrine looked at ease. His long lashes lay against his face. His dark shirt had fallen open to the third button, teasing Winter with a glimpse of smooth skin and a dusky nipple. His bottom lip was out, hinting at a pout, and Winter wished the ward would break so he could take him. Bleed him. Kill him.

Bugger Kenth.

A quiet snore tumbled out of the witch. The sound cast a tremor over his ward. It remained standing without him, but the change in his alertness subtly affected it.

Winter rose. Did sleeping alter the ward? Not weaken it, exactly; Peregrine was too clever for that. Did the spell's strength fade a touch, though, if he wasn't there to watch it?

Winter approached the witch.

The protection ward stopped him when he was within three feet of Peregrine. Winter knelt and raised curved claws to it.

The spell stung him lightly, a quiet warning that would increase in pain and peel the flesh from his bones if he pushed further.

Winter pushed his magic against it. He kept the force controlled, preventing it from creating echoes. It would not do to wake Peregrine. At least, not until the ward no longer stood between them.

The magic shifted under his spells. Shifted, twined against it, writhed.

Loosened.

Winter smiled. Soon he would slide his claws through those dull clothes and free his witch. He would take him on the floor, the bed, against the wall.

It would destroy his magic.

Winter's spell stumbled, caught itself, and then continued breaking through Peregrine's.

He did not care if it destroyed Peregrine. The man was the king of a land he wanted to see destroyed, and stood between him and freedom.

And yet, though he did not want to acknowledge it – and thought it too cowardly not to acknowledge it – he wondered. Peregrine had been exhausted yesterday, and being touched renewed his strength. What if he was more demon than human in spirit and didn't need a sacrifice, or had outgrown it?

Humans, for all of their short life spans, could hone their magic faster than demons. Perhaps, like demons, Peregrine would be able to touch magic without his oath. Perhaps there was some benefit to their oaths, one that demons could take, practice, and then move beyond.

Beyond the cursed stones that held them in the north. They could swarm Delvore, destroy the capital, kill everything in their path.

Peregrine would not like that.

Winter frowned. He did not care.

No. That was not true. Human life meant little to him, but it meant something to Peregrine, just as the loss of his friends during the war meant something to Winter.

He increased his spell. These thoughts were distracting him from his mission. He needed to break the wards, take Peregrine –

Peregrine blinked. And focused on Winter.

"Bloody hell," Peregrine whispered. He rose.

Winter mirrored him. "I promise. Only a little blood, to ease my –"

Peregrine's magic broke through the wards and shoved Winter back.

Winter nudged the spell aside and reached for Peregrine.

And was yanked back.

Winter studied the spell around him. It was the same one that had circled Peregrine moments before. It was tied to the doorframe, had a parameter of three feet, and...

Oh.

How charming. The witch had wrapped the protection ward around him, trapping him in place.

Winter turned toward Peregrine and smiled. "I like restraints, but I would much prefer them on you."

Peregrine raised and dropped one shoulder. "I prefer a bit more versatility."

Winter stared at him.

There were times that Peregrine managed to astound Winter anew. Times when the witch's resourcefulness took the demon's breath away. Which was why his first reaction to having the protection ward around him was pure rueful laughter.

When he could breathe without laughing, Winter said, "I'll be out of this soon."

Peregrine picked up his discarded shirt and broke the buttons off. "How long do you think it will take you to break through the ward?"

"Minutes, witch. Five, maybe ten –"

Magic pulsed out of the glyphs, stinging Winter. He hissed and drew back.

"Oh." Peregrine traced a finger over the air. Power pulsed out of him, strengthening the ward. "I would've thought you'd last longer than that."

Laughter eddied through Winter. Clever witch. Clever tongue. Winter would love to see what else Peregrine could do with it. "I'm not finished yet."

Peregrine left, leaving the remnants of his clothes and Winter's cloak behind.

Winter sat.

The spell had been a sudden thing, and the moment Peregrine was out of the building, it would begin to weaken. He would attack it then.

*Find Peregrine. Take him. Kill him.*

Winter dug his claws into the ward, letting the pain push his commands back.

Damn Kenth!

He didn't understand what Peregrine was. A rival, certainly, but also passion and brilliance. The mind of a demon. The soul of a witch.

Winter was torn.

The desire to hunt, to kill, faded.

He yanked his fingers back. They were bones from the second knuckles up, and flesh crept back into place as he watched.

He would need to find Peregrine. Kenth's binding spells would allow for nothing else.

Winter did not want to destroy him, though. He wanted Peregrine to live, to writhe beneath him and arch into his touch. Out of spite, he wanted to see Peregrine crowned king. Out of affection, Winter wished he could touch the witch without wanting to kill him.

When his fingers were whole again, he flexed them. He wondered what Peregrine had been taught about his kind. Did he know that demons enjoyed telling ghost tales around a fire? Had enhanced healing? Were well endowed?

His witch probably wouldn't enjoy knowing the last, though it would amuse Winter to show him. It would be interesting to see how Peregrine escaped that moment. Or even if he'd want to.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peregrine hurried down the stairs.

How long did he have before Winter broke the spell? A day? An hour? A minute?

Gods, let it be more than a minute.

At the bottom of the steps, a figure turned a corner and started up. Its shadow followed, casting a pale darkness over the wall.

Peregrine stopped. It was the former witch.

She looked up, saw him, and stilled. "Please, Celia has gone into labor. She needs help."

"Celia?"

"My sister. Her husband left to pick up supplies. He was going to bring a witch back with him to aid in the birthing, but we don't know when he'll return."

"I'm sorry, I can't –"

A scream erupted from down the hall. The sound was shrill, ending in a moan. She was in agony.

Peregrine sank his fingernails into his palms, using the small ache to center himself. He'd helped with birthings before. It could take minutes; it could take hours. All he cared about was that the mother and child survived. Would they live if he left?

And would they live if Winter broke free and found him with them?

"I'll answer more of your questions," she said. "I also know a man who survived. I'll ask him to talk to you, too, and –"

"No. Please. I'll come."

Wet warmth ebbed past his fingers.

Peregrine eased his hand open and then stained the banister with blood. His oath did not require the sanguine liquid, but the scent of it would distract the demon. Peregrine cast a ward into the wood. When Winter broke through, he might pause at the blood. If he did, this spell might hold him for a bit longer.

He continued down the steps. Light crossed his face. "When did it begin?"

“A few minutes ago.” The woman’s eyes widened, and she dropped to her knees. “Your majesty.”

Bloody hell. He’d forgotten to cast the spell over his eyes.

“Forgive me, I did not mean –”

“Please.” Peregrine helped her up. Yes, he was king. He had a responsibility to her, though. To her, to her sister, to everyone in Delvore. He would live for them and, if it came to it, die for them. “Take me to your sister.”



## Chapter Nine

Kenth set his father's urn on his table.

He had never dared bring the man here. There was always the chance that someone might find him, might cast a tracing spell over the ashes and detect his lineage.

King Byron's casket was down the hall, though. Kenth would never have a greater opportunity to slip the small black shape into it.

Footsteps grew louder outside, and then a knock thrummed against the door.

Kenth moved the urn behind the table. "Yes?"

Dallion stepped in. "The council is on their way up, sir."

"Thank you. Has there been any word about Peregrine?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry."

"Keep the guards out –" Wait. They'd been out all night. "Forgive me. They must be exhausted."

"The Northgate council member has made us a brew to rejuvenate us. We will keep looking, sir."

“I will thank her.” Isabel, the Northgate council member, came from a guard line. Her gate protected the main route leading up to the demon north, and she protected the soldiers that were drawn to the area.

Dallion left. A moment later, several footsteps approached.

Kenth picked up a loose scrap of silk he used as a rest for his kirfane and dropped it over the urn. Later, after the council left, he would slip it into the king’s casket, and tomorrow, when Byron was carried into the family tomb, Savon would be, too.

The door opened, and three women and two men entered.

Kenth approached them, meeting them halfway across the room.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. He turned to the tall, dark-haired woman to his left. “The captain of the guards told me that you’d made them a brew. Thank you. I hadn’t realized how ragged I was running them ’til a few minutes ago.”

Isabel smiled. “They would bleed for you if they thought it would help,” she said. Her voice held a hint of an accent. Her family had come to Delvore from the west, from a land that burned its witches. In her place, Kenth wasn’t certain he would have been able to work with soldiers again. He respected that she could.

The council took their seats around a circle table in the corner. Every week, they alternated where they met, but this week would have been the time to meet at the commons, and that tower was gone. Kenth found it amusing that the others were at the castle instead.

Soon, six witches filled six seats. Kenth studied the people around him, trying to read their moods.

To his right was Randolph. Mature, thoughtful Randolph, guardian of the academy. Beside him was Sabine, guardian of wealthy Southgate. Before she became the king’s witch, Peregrine’s mother had lived in that area.

Fighting a frown, Kenth continued. Beside Sabine was silver-ringed Tasia, who watched the markets and knew merchants from several countries. The chair beside her was empty, and that vacuum created its own brooding, thoughtful life.

Kenth stared at the chair.

Had he ever noticed how close Peregrine's life mirrored his own? That where one went, the other seemed to follow? A shadow to his shadow, subtly haunting him.

No. Kenth wished, but he'd thought Peregrine was just another witch. One with a touch of ambition, but who seemed content to stay in one place. No plans for a family, not even taking an apprentice.

In this, too, they mirrored one another. Kenth wanted to wait until he was on the throne before having a child. What kept Peregrine from adopting a child?

"Has there been any word on Peregrine?" Laurent, guardian of agricultural-minded Eastgate, asked.

"No." Though Kenth hoped the demon would change that soon.

"Do you think Peregrine may have summoned the demon?" Isabel asked. Her attention kept skipping to the empty chair.

"No." Kenth wasn't surprised by the question. The king and his two sons were dead, a potential heir was missing, and a demon was loose in the area. A bard or witch could cast Peregrine as innocent or conniving quite easily. All Peregrine had to do was return with Winter's heart, pronounce him as a traitor, and the people would love him. Peregrine, witch-king. Peregrine, demon-slayer.

Kenth faced the thoughts, the fears, and then began playing with them. That would be a powerful first impression for Peregrine, and if he won, then Kenth would soon be dead anyway, knowing that his blood was going to the city's protection.

If Peregrine died, though, then that impression could be his. Kenth, witch-king. Kenth, demon-slayer. Kenth, son of Savon, protector of Delvore.

“Why not?” Tasia asked.

“You want him to have summoned it?” Kenth asked. He’d toyed with and discarded the idea of letting the others wonder if Peregrine had called the demon. The spells he’d used had erased all traces of the witch who had summoned Winter. Kenth could not mimic Peregrine’s power signature, and even if he tried, it might place his own signature there.

“No,” she said. “If someone summoned it, though, then we aren’t on the verge of another attack.”

“It’s only targeting the king’s line. It doesn’t care about the rest of us.”

“But –”

“Think!” Kenth frowned. It would not do him any favors to forget himself. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine.” Tasia’s lips eased. She didn’t smile, but her gaze was forgiving. She was his friend, he realized.

He wished he could be hers.

“Why hasn’t he contacted any of us?” Sabine asked.

“Would you waste the time or magic if a demon was hunting you?” Kenth asked.

“Yes.”

“And if it killed whoever you contacted?”

Sabine frowned.

“You’ve probably given this more thought than I have,” Randolph said. His tone was gentle, telling Kenth that he was honestly curious and not suspicious. “What do you think is happening?”

“The demon is acting alone; otherwise more than one line would be targeted. I think it’s trying to annihilate the kingdom through its symbol, the king.”

“And Peregrine?”

“His strengths are in divination, healing, and enchantment. If he delved into demonology, when his tower was destroyed the echoes of his spells would have permeated the commons. The only ones who have the knowledge and the talent for summoning a demon are Mathias at academy, council member Sabine, and me.”

Silence. Then quiet laughter.

“Mathias is afraid of his own shadow,” Laurent said.

Kenth knew. According to academy stories, Mathias had pushed his oath too far during the demon war and his shadow had attacked him.

“Neither you nor I would want to hurt this country,” Sabine said.

Such careful language.

Kenth turned toward her. Despite her young appearance, she was the oldest among them. A hundred and ten years before, Sabine had chosen time as her sacrifice. With every spell she cast, she lost a minute, an hour, a day. Currently she looked sixteen.

“A demon is hunting our king,” he said, studying her. Their spells had detected only one demon in the city, but her words made him curious. “We must look at every possibility, or we will lose him.”

“If we can’t trust one another –”

“Our kingdom is threatened. We can’t afford the luxury of blind trust.”

Good words. Right words.

Kenth followed those words with movement, taking his kirfane from its sheath and cutting across his left palm.

“Test me first,” he said, holding out his hand to Isabel. This was a dangerous moment. If a single spell was wrong or weak, they would find it and destroy him.

If they didn’t, though, then even Winter proclaiming him as his master wouldn’t convince them that he was behind the demon’s summoning.

Isabel, the only other blood user in the council, took his hand. Unlike him, her sacrifice was other people's blood. Kenth thought it was a daring choice, one that kept half the guards and most of the council watching her.

It was also a very clever oath, one that offered her a great deal of versatility. Kenth respected her courage.

Kenth relaxed. Her magic would sweep over him soon, testing for an echo of the demon's touch.

A cool thread of magic traced over him. It was soothing, making him feel pleasant. Sleepy.

"I need to stay awake," he said.

"For now." Isabel's magic seeped into him.

The intrusion was gentle, but there, a second skin he wanted to scratch at.

"You didn't sleep at all last night," Isabel added.

"I was hoping for news."

"We all were." Isabel's magic retreated. She glanced at the others. "He didn't summon a demon."

Relief and pleasure darted through Kenth. His spells worked. The council would argue for his innocence against even Peregrine himself.

Kenth took his kirfane by the blade and offered it to Sabine.

She took it and cut across her palm.

"I controlled several demons during the war," she said, setting the blade on the table. She reached past it and offered her bleeding hand to Isabel. "You might sense echoes of it."

"That was ages ago." Isabel took Sabine's hand. "Traces of those spells would have faded long ago."

The council watched Sabine; Kenth wondered about her. She had not summoned Winter, but between the two of them, she was making the others curious.

"Nothing," Isabel said after a moment, releasing Sabine's hand. Around the table, people frowned.

"What have you done?" Kenth asked.

"Nothing."

Ah. He'd asked the wrong question. "What were you going to do?"

Sabine folded her hands before her on the table. Her poise was cool, her face calm. "I'd considered casting a couple illusions before the king's heirs. Faux demons that would attack them, but quickly die when fought against. I decided against it because I didn't think the eldest's heart could have handled the shock."

It probably wouldn't have.

"Why?" Tasia asked.

Kenth retrieved his kirfane. He understood; a scare might have forced the two wastrels into seriousness.

"They were fools," Sabine said. "As they were, they would have made weak kings. If they had to fight for something, I thought it would strengthen them. I never had time to cast it, though. Before I could, the demon came."

Laurent turned to Kenth. "Is it possible a demon could have heard her desire?"

"No," Kenth said. "A thought, a wish, or a fear will not summon a demon. Besides, summoning one would use a considerable amount of power, and she would be physically affected."

"If their upbringing worried you," Randolph said, "you should have brought it up before the king."

Sabine's lips quirked. "If he'd wanted my opinion, he could have made me his witch several times."

*Fool!* She should not draw their attention to any possible vendetta.

She had, though. None of the council would ever forget it, or completely trust her.

“We cannot afford to look divided during a crisis,” Kenth said. “Outside of our chambers, nothing changes. When the king returns and the demon is no longer a threat, we will discuss this again. Do we agree?”

The group nodded.

The council meeting broke up after the agreement. A somber group had entered Kenth’s tower, and now a somber, partially broken group left.

Kenth watched them leave. When he was king, he would have to do something to unite them again. Perhaps, if Winter killed Sabine, the attack would draw the others closer together.

He considered it and decided no.

When he’d first realized Winter was hunting Peregrine, he’d felt uneasy about a demon chasing after a fellow council member. Kenth would not do that to any of the others, regardless of whether they’d looked the other way when his grandfather died. A well-placed snifter of poison could kill them, and not terrify the city with tales of demons.

When the hall outside had grown silent, Kenth retrieved his father’s urn.

Before Savon died, Kenth had promised him that he would one day rest in the family tomb. His father had been touched and said he would rest like a king for eternity because he had known Kenth.

Kind words, coming from a kind man.

Kenth carried the urn out to the hall and proceeded to the casket. Tonight his father would rest like a king. Tomorrow, he would be buried like one.

\* \* \* \* \*



“Sshhh,” Peregrine whispered to the moaning woman. He pressed a cool, lavender-scented cloth to her face and sent a thread of magic into it. There were subtle healing properties in the lavender, and if they were woken slowly, their effects would linger.

“What can I do, your majesty?” the former witch asked. She hovered behind him, appearing and then disappearing at the edge of his vision.

“Add more willow bark to the fire,” Peregrine said. The candles dotting the room provided some light, but the fireplace in the corner provided the heat. “It’s too cold in here for a baby.”

The woman jumped to obey. “Thank you. I – I’m glad you’re here. Celia nearly died the last time.”

Peregrine could see why. Celia was too thin. Peregrine could tell by how easily her flesh bruised when he felt along the bones of her wrist for her heartbeat.

Celia’s eyes caught his. “The child?”

“Is fine.” He smiled and then gently drew the bloody sheets out from under her.

Firewood whispered behind him. He caught a brief flare of heat, and then it faded into the room.

Peregrine cast a further thread of magic out. He could sense Winter upstairs, where his chill pushed against the edge of the ward.

Hard to tell how long it would continue to hold him. Peregrine hoped it would be enough.

*And if it isn’t?*

The thought came despite him. His spell might not be enough. He would not be able to run forever.

When the woman returned to the edge of his sight, Peregrine turned.

Her shadow faded into the room. Pale, but still there, just as she was still there. She had survived losing her magic. He could also.

Grief and fear gathered in him, creating an ache in his stomach. He loved his magic. Loved the power, loved knowing he could affect the world around him. Would he sacrifice it to live?

And would it be enough?

"Please, take these." Peregrine handed her the bloody sheets. After the woman took them, he replaced them with clean cloths.

Footfalls faded and then returned. Peregrine focused on the sound, on the feel of the blood slipping through his fingers.

The woman moved to the side opposite him and took her sister's hand. Like her sister, she was dark-haired with fair skin. The tension around the birth unnerved her. Peregrine wondered what her sacrifice had been.

A sleeve tumbled past his elbow. He pushed it back, though the exercise seemed foolish; his hands were bloodied to the elbow, and the shirt itself spotted.

It was habit, though. Frail, human habit.

He nodded at the pot of tea on a side table. "Get her to drink more of that. It will be good for her blood."

More blood seeped past his fingers.

He fought and won against a scowl, his face settling instead on thoughtfulness. Across from him, the woman fetched hot tea and brought it to her sister.

Celia moaned. Beside her, her sister mopped sweat from her forehead and tried to coax her to drink more.

Lips pressed together, Peregrine struggled to free the baby. Slimy with blood, his hands slid around the child's head and found purchase just under the fleshy cord around its neck.

Fresh blood obscured his view, so he closed his eyes and felt for the lip of flesh that, once teased out, would free the child.

Another thread of magic strengthened the lavender and soothed both mother and child. He continued searching.

And found it.

The baby slid free.

It – she – blinked.

Peregrine smiled. He was tired, and his auburn hair had escaped its band and stuck to the blood on his face. It'd been a good night, though. So far, no one had died.

Peregrine looked up at the former witch. "Would you please take her?"

"Yes." She let go of Celia's hand and came around the table. Peregrine handed her the child.

"Wash her."

Peregrine turned back to the mother on the bed. Celia lay pale, but sleeping.

The sister took the child to a basin and poured warm, clean water over her. Silent throughout the birth, this set the baby crying.

Peregrine pressed on points along Celia's body, casting a light thread of magic out to check for bleeding.

The cups of tea he had administered during the labor were doing their job, and the flow of blood, surely fatal had she birthed alone, had thickened nicely.

Behind him, the door to the room opened, and the night air crept in. Peregrine set his bloody washcloth down. Had the husband returned?

A cool touch slipped over his skin, settling atop his heart.

Peregrine stilled. The coldness did not belong to the night. It belonged to Winter.

## Chapter Ten

Winter stepped into the room and surveyed the tableau. A sleeping woman on a bloodstained bed. A blood-spotted woman cradling a crying babe.

And, in the center, Peregrine. Bloody, lovely Peregrine.

A shiver darted through Winter, pooling in his cock.

“Your majesty?” the standing woman asked.

Winter quirked an eyebrow. Someone knew. Lovely. He could kill her, ease some of that longing –

“Not a word,” Peregrine told the woman. “Wake your sister and get her out of here.”

The pale girl nodded.

“I can’t let her go,” Winter said, stepping into the room. The end of his cloak whispered over the dull wooden floor.

“She won’t tell.”

Winter doubted that. In this, humans and demons were similar; both enjoyed a good story.

“She has other concerns,” Peregrine said.

And the witch expected him to believe her king was not one of them? To help with a birthing, he'd sacrificed the couple hours it took Winter to break through the ward. If a demon had done that for another, the other demon's entire line would forever view him as a treasured friend and would die to protect him. Judging by the broken threads of magic the woman was fighting – and failing – to gather, Winter suspected that humans here might also feel the same.

Winter studied the woman. Pale, thin, it wouldn't be difficult to snap her neck.

Her magic was shattered, though. He could see it in the air, the way it shifted uneasily around her before settling into place again.

So this was what Peregrine feared. Interesting. Perhaps, if they studied her –

Pain arced through him.

Find.

Take.

Kill...

Her. Kill her. Buy the witch time.

Peregrine stepped between them. "Go," he told the woman.

Winter focused on him. "I can kill her slowly. I'll learn from her dying spirit, and in the time it takes for her to die, you can escape."

Peregrine's gaze darted to the woman and then back to Winter.

Winter's claws grew. Would the witch agree?

No. He knew Peregrine. These lives mattered to him. Winter should force the choice on him and kill her.

Peregrine pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it to the ground.

A delicious pleasure-ache filled Winter. In the candlelight, Peregrine looked beautiful. Pale and bloody and alive.

*Kill.*

Winter forced the desire back. It was dangerous to play with a demon. Peregrine might distract him; he might entice him. But eventually the witch's power and cleverness would falter, and Winter would kill him.

"You were meant for me." Peregrine turned and walked past the woman.

With his back to Winter, Peregrine grabbed a bit of cloth from beside a washbasin and cleaned the blood off. Red-hued droplets escaped and ran down his hands and forearms.

Winter watched him. He was aware of the woman waking her sister, of their slow progress out of the room. He knew, if they escaped, they would run and find someone to come back and help.

He didn't care.

Peregrine's hands delved into the basin. Magic pulsed out of him, and when his hands returned, the cloth was free of blood.

Winter closed the distance between them. Peregrine was doing this for him, echoing a purification rite. Winter was touched.

When Peregrine raised the cloth to his shoulder, Winter slid his fingers over the witch's.

"You can't reach every spot," Winter said.

"I'm fairly dexterous. I think I could."

The words, his tone, the image – all combined and created a delicious ache in Winter's cock.

He took the cloth and ran it over Peregrine's arm. Slow movement, aided by a light trace of magic, brushed the blood away from his skin.

When his arm was clean, Winter ran the cloth up, brushing it over the witch's neck, his face.

The movement nudged Peregrine's head back, sending his auburn hair over Winter's shoulder.

Peregrine's eyes were clenched shut. This close, Winter could sense his magic, banked and waiting.

"They're probably going to try to find you help," Winter said. He ran the cloth down Peregrine's neck, down his chest, over his heart. The flesh was still pale, a quiet reminder that Winter had almost killed him.

"Her sister just gave birth," Peregrine said. "They'll probably be more focused on getting her someplace safe."

Winter moved the cloth down Peregrine's stomach, chasing the movement with a light spell, clearing away the rest of the blood from his body.

"You could run," Winter whispered into Peregrine's ear. "If I saw them first, it would buy you time."

"Why would you offer that to me?"

"I don't wish to see you destroyed."

A tremor darted through Peregrine. His eyes crept open. Meeting Winter's gaze, he drew away.

And became trapped between the basin and the demon.

Winter pressed closer. Magic might not be holding Peregrine in place, but he had no doubt the witch could slip away. He'd seen him escape from worse.

"What was Kenth's order this time?" Peregrine asked.

"Find you. Take you. Kill you."

"So this is him washing me by proxy."

"No." Winter moved the cloth down Peregrine's neck, his chest, letting a thumb brush over Peregrine's nipple. "This is me."

The nub of flesh hardened beneath him. Winter's hand crept lower, down the witch's stomach.

Peregrine's fingers closed over his wrist, stopping him. "I can't evade you forever."

"No." Though Winter would have enjoyed the attempt. An uneasy thought occurred to him. "You're not going to run, are you?"

"No."

Winter brushed his lips over Peregrine's face. What was he plotting now? "Surrendering?"

"No. Trying to find a way through Kenth's orders."

"I'm afraid he was rather precise this time." Kenth had been angry, but sadly, he was careful. Winter had hoped the other witch would make a mistake, but he was beginning to fear he would not be around for when that happened.

Peregrine drew Winter's hand up.

Winter let the cloth slip from his fingers, allowing his skin to whisper over Peregrine's.

"You nearly stopped my heart once," Peregrine said.

"Yes." Winter moved his fingers in slow, circular motions.

"If you did it again, for just a moment, it would satisfy Kenth's commands."

"I'd still need to take you."

"Would stilling my heart for a moment afterwards satisfy his commands?"

"Yes. I've studied your banshee, though. She covets the king's life. The moment your heart stopped, she would claim you. Kenth would become king."

"Damn."

Winter agreed. He did not enjoy the image of his master as king. The man was gifted and careful; Winter would never deny that. His heart was human, though. To live, to really protect his people, a king should have a demon's.



“You could let him be regent,” Winter said. His fingers moved down, past the subtle guard of Peregrine’s hand, over the soft warmth of his stomach, and touched the drawstring holding his breeches closed. “We could go to the north, you and I.”

A tremor darted through Peregrine. “I don’t trust him to take care of Delvore.”

“Because his grandfather couldn’t?”

“Because he summoned you.”

“Would you have preferred a civil war?”

“No.”

Winter loosened the knot and then slipped his hand into Peregrine’s breeches.

Peregrine’s fingers locked around his wrist, stopping him. “You told me before that demons had had some luck extending a witch’s lifecycle,” Peregrine said.

“Yes. It would involve weaving my life force into yours. Death would never part us.”

And then Winter would never be able to leave the witch. Once Peregrine was proclaimed king, Winter knew he would never leave. He would be trapped there, in Delvore, forever. “It would not stop my master’s commands,” he added.

“To kill me.”

“Yes.”

“To kill, to deprive of life.”

The definition sounded very precise. It reminded Winter of his uncle. “Are you hoping to distract my master’s commands by directing me to destroy another tower?”

“We don’t have another tower. What we have is my magic.”

Winter stepped back. He did not like the power oaths had over witches. “Kenth –”

“His intent is your intent. He needs to dispose of me, but I upset him. He wants me destroyed now; else he wouldn’t have bothered to tell you to bed me.” Peregrine turned toward him. “Can he sense when you’ve fulfilled a part of your orders?”

“Yes.”

“If we – if you and I – the reading –”

“The Lovers. Yes, I remember.”

“It will destroy my magic. If you believe it is killing me, he will sense it.”

Winter remembered the pale-shadowed woman. “It might not kill you.”

“But I fear it would. In the moment of...” Peregrine released a sharp, annoyed sigh.

“When you take me, there will be a point when my power may increase briefly.”

“I recall. You teleported away.”

“That was an accident. I couldn’t control it; I just wanted to get away and...and next time, I may not be so fortunate. In that moment, when my magic shatters, a part of me will die.”

Ah.

And with a part of him gone, Kenth’s desire might be nudged.

It might be enough.

It might also not be.

“He’ll realize you’re not dead when the banshee fails to appear before him,” Winter said.

“I know. That’s why we’d have to move quickly. You head toward the north, and I’ll go to the city and find the council. They’ll proclaim me king, and we’ll deal with Kenth.”

“He’ll summon me to destroy them and you.”

“If you’re far enough away, the council might be able to wrest your control away from him. I’ll have them free you.”

“I imagine they would rather punish me for killing the other two heirs.”

“Kenth’s designs killed them. They will understand that, and if any of them argue, I’ll remind them that I’m their king.”

“And you would free me, knowing what I know of your land?”

“You helped me. I think you would do the same for me.”

Winter caressed Peregrine’s arm, his shoulder. “I might also have kept you.”

“I would make a dull companion.”

“I doubt it.” But Winter wanted his freedom. Wanted to return to the north, wanted to see the mist, wanted...

Wanted the witch.

He wanted everything, in fact – the mind, the magic, the intensity and passion and hope. Would those things survive if Peregrine was no longer a witch?

Winter considered it... Yes. They would. His mind would still think. His heart would still beat. Delvore would never be home, but it had created Peregrine and was thus a more interesting place than Winter first thought.

“I do remember a time when witches didn’t need a sacrifice,” Winter said. “What if your magic survives?”

“Then we will know that a witch needs to keep their oath for a minimum of nine, maybe ten years.”

“Why such a precise time?”

“The woman lost her magic eight years after making her sacrifice.”

Winter smiled. How like his witch, to be able to get a stranger to confide painful and private secrets to him. “One wonders what the demons could do with that knowledge.”

Peregrine looked away.

Winter drew closer. He should not have shared that with the witch. Peregrine was probably imagining demons attacking now.

Sadly, so would Winter’s uncle if Winter shared that secret.

“We don’t know,” Winter said.

“No, we don’t.” Peregrine slipped away. “The room, upstairs. It seemed... nice.”

Yes. While this one had a certain sanguine atmosphere, it wasn’t a place where Winter would want to debauch a witch-king.

Quick, heavy steps thumped nearby.

Winter caught Peregrine’s arm. “As fine as this place is, there is one problem with it.”

Peregrine stilled. He tilted his head toward Winter, not quite turning, but enough to glance at him. “What is it?”

“Someone’s coming.”

“Bloody hell.”

Winter slipped an arm around Peregrine’s waist. He could not teleport long distances, but a few miles was possible.

He grabbed the hem of his cloak and threw it over the witch. Sometimes the magic stirred whatever loose objects were about. He didn’t want a sharp stick or rock to wound Peregrine.

The room faded around them. Winter caught a hint of movement beyond the door, saw the pale-shadowed woman and a dark-skinned man.

And then they were gone, fading into a thin mist.

The fog shifted around them, and for a moment Winter wondered if something had happened to Kenth and he was free.

Then the spell dissipated, leaving them in a small tree-shrouded vale.

Peregrine pulled the cloak away from his face. Winter sensed him casting a thread of magic in a circular pattern around the area, a combination of obfuscation and protection.

Winter shrugged off his cloak and draped it over the grass at their feet. The grass provided some softness, but he wanted more.

He knelt and moved his fingers over the shadow-silk material, weaving magic into the fabric.

When the cloak had the feel of a feather mattress, Winter stripped and approached Peregrine.

The witch knelt a few feet away, setting sticks in a circle of stones. As Winter stepped beside him, Peregrine flicked his fingers over the sticks. Smoke rose, followed by a thin ribbon of fire.

The sight of the red-orange flames pleased Winter. They reminded him of his own fire in the demon lands, of how it fought for its life in the chill night and, with a little aid, flourished.

Peregrine rose. "This was my first spell."

And he wanted it to be his last.

"How old were you?" Winter asked.

"Three. I set my tutor's favorite lounge chair on fire, and no one knew whether to be happy or furious."

Destructive at an early age. How endearing.

Winter took his arm and turned him. "We don't know what will happen."

"But I do. I will lose everything."

"And start over," Winter whispered, his lips moving over Peregrine's. "An end entwined in a beginning, wasn't it?"

"And a beginning borne of an end."

Winter took his hand and led him to the cloak.

As he unfastened the drawstring holding the witch's breeches up, Winter kissed him. It was a brief thing. A brush of skin, a small nip followed by a hint of tongue. When the knot was undone and the fabric pushed down, Winter broke the kiss.

Peregrine stepped out of the pants. Moonlight turned his skin ghost-pale, his hair red. He sat on the cloak and then raised surprised eyes to Winter.

Winter knelt beside him. "I have taken your life since we met, your majesty. The least I can do now is make you comfortable."

"You're quite kind, sir."

Not kind. Aching. Hungry. Cold.

Winter pressed him down, kiss-nipping his shoulder, his neck.

A tremor darted through Peregrine. In its wake, the witch's breath stumbled out of him.

He was afraid, Winter knew. An act that normally brought people together might destroy him, and he would chance it in the hope that it would buy him time.

"I've never hurt a lover," Winter said, ghosting his lips over the hollow in Peregrine's throat.

"Pardon?"

"I've never hurt a lover."

"Ah." Sharp, sweet-sounding laughter escaped the witch. "And Kenth was so certain you'd leave me bleeding."

They were lucky Kenth hadn't suggested it.

Winter did not want either of them to think of Kenth now, so he crept up, tracing his lips over Peregrine's neck, his face.

Peregrine trembled and then shifted, brushing his lips over Winter's.

The kiss was soft and teased Winter with warmth. He deepened the kiss. Peregrine's tongue caressed his, and then the witch drew back. His eyes were bright. Surprised.

Winter smiled. There was passion in his witch, and curiosity. The demon longed to draw it all out.

Propping himself up on an elbow, Winter traced the claws of his free hand lightly down Peregrine's body. The witch had allowed a kiss. Would he allow a touch?

"Have you ever wanted anyone inside you?" he asked, stroking the witch's cock.

"No." Peregrine's breath skipped. "Yes."

"It might feel strange at first." Winter cast a quick spell, slicking his fingertips. He caressed the oil over Peregrine's cock, his balls, and then reached down and brushed it over his opening. "I'll tease your body, and within moments you'll be aching for more."

"Gods."

Peregrine's hand brushed over his elbow, his arm, and then gripped his shoulder. "If you unsheathe those claws inside of me," he said, "I swear I will never speak to you again."

Winter chuckled. No claws. All right. To Peregrine, he said, "I'll keep that in mind." He stroked a fingertip into the witch.

Peregrine made a quiet, breathy sound.

The sound sent a shiver through Winter. It pooled in his cock, making it grow heavier.

*Find him. Take him. Kill him.*

The ache inside Winter grew, warring with the pain-pleasure pressure in his cock and pushing it into pain. Breathing slowly, Winter teased Peregrine's opening.

Peregrine shifted beneath him, one leg drawing up to give Winter better access.

The demon smiled and then added a second finger.

Touching Peregrine eased some of the ache. He hoped Peregrine would somehow evade him afterwards. Teleport away, or wrap his protection ward as tightly around himself as his body would soon be around Winter's. Something. Anything. As long as he kept his magic and survived.

Magic pulsed out of Peregrine. It was light and brushed over Winter like a sweet breeze.

Peregrine dug his fingers into Winter's skin, creating – and countering – the other ache. Kenth's words faded from Winter's thoughts.

"Don't let go," Winter whispered, moving his fingers deeper into Peregrine.

"I wouldn't. I – Oh, gods."

The heat of the witch's flush turned his pale skin pink against the dark cloak.

*So lovely.*

Winter leaned down to lick those pink lips, capturing the groan that escaped when his fingers shifted, moving and scissoring inside of Peregrine.

Peregrine writhed, his hips undulating and trying to control Winter's fingers. Deeper. A touch faster.

Winter drew his fingers out.

Peregrine's gaze skimmed down and then back up to meet Winter's eyes. "Forgive me," he said, running his fingers down the demon's arm. "I hadn't thought to touch you."

"It's all right." Another time, Winter would have spent days teaching him how to touch, stroke, and kiss him. Perhaps, if Kenth was disposed of...

No.

This would be their only time. Either Peregrine's plot would save him, or Winter would kill him.

Warm fingers ghosted over Winter's cock. They moved lightly at first, making Winter wonder if he'd imagined it. Then they trembled a touch and moved down, teasing his tip.

Winter stared at Peregrine. The witch dared...

The witch dared.

Winter slid his fingers over Peregrine's, guiding them into stroking and squeezing his cock. Peregrine complied, and his skin whispered over Winter's flesh.



Sharp, almost overwhelming pleasure gathered in Winter's balls, making his breath catch. He released Peregrine's hand. This needed to last; this might be all they ever had.

He moved over Peregrine, pushing his knees beneath the witch's thighs.

Peregrine shivered and then mirrored him, drawing his knees up to either side. His gaze caught Winter's, and a smile rose and faded from his lips.

Winter lightly ran his slick fingers over himself. Beautiful, demon-hearted witch. If Winter had the power, he would make him king.

He didn't, though. All he could give was gentleness – and even that, Winter wasn't certain of. His master's desires were strong.

Then again, so were his.

Winter pressed the tip of his cock against Peregrine's opening and inched in.

Tight heat enveloped him, pulsing around his pleasantly aching cock. Winter's breath stumbled. Peregrine made another lovely, breathy sound. His eyes clenched shut and then blinked open.

"No claws," Winter whispered.

"Thank you."

"What about teeth?"

"I have my own."

Chuckling, Winter pushed deeper into him. When he was completely inside of Peregrine, he stilled.

He brushed Peregrine's hair away from his eyes, his face.

Peregrine's lips twitched and eased into a smile. "Tired?"

"Not quite." Winter withdrew and stroked back in. He repeated the movement, creating a slow grind.

Peregrine sank his fingers into Winter's arms, digging deeper and then easing in time to Winter's thrusts.

Winter reached down and caressed Peregrine's cock.

"Oh, gods." Magic pulsed out of Peregrine, brushing over Winter's body, warming it.

Peregrine leaned up and caught his lips. Winter gave in to him, following him back to the cloak without breaking the kiss.

It was lovely. Until today, he hadn't kissed anyone in decades, but this brushing of lips, of teeth catching and lightly teasing Peregrine's bottom lip, was sweet.

Winter clenched his fist around Peregrine's cock. The witch gasped, and liquid heat splashed across Winter's stomach.

Winter continued his slow, careful thrusts. Brilliant, beautiful witch. He could still feel his magic inside him, coiling tighter and tighter.

Pleasure swept over Winter. His release surprised him. One moment he was enjoying the feel of a warm body wrapped around his cock; the next, a delicious wave erupted out of him, leaving him lightheaded.

Peregrine's magic erupted, touching Winter, the cloak, the trees.

Winter threaded his magic into it and Peregrine. Peregrine's power twined around his, confused.

And then settled. Returning to the witch.

Winter crouched over him. In him. Wondering. A witch's sacrifice was indeed fragile. It could be broken, though. It just needed someone there, to help.

The witch would need to trust them, though. One slip, and it would destroy them.

An ache gathered in his chest.

*Find him. Take him. Kill him.*

He's dying.

He's dying.

He's dead.

The ache dulled and then faded.

Beneath him, Peregrine's breath evened. Winter nuzzled his ear, listening to his heartbeat settle.

"Demon," Peregrine whispered. His voice was hushed, sleepy-sounding.

"Yes?"

"The card. Demon. Sometimes, it's a reader's only friend."

## Chapter Eleven

Peregrine reached the outskirts of Delvore by midday. His shadow preceded him, as dark as the borrowed shadow-silk clothes Winter had drawn from his cloak. Demon magic was different than human, something Peregrine was thankful for today.

As he approached Northgate, Peregrine cast an illusion over his eyes.

The spell felt the same as always; a light touch brushed over his eyes, and when it was gone he knew his eyes were brown.

He smiled. He couldn't believe he could still do magic. He hadn't had time to really wonder how or why, but he was glad of it. After he dealt with Kenth...

His smile faded. He would think about many things after Kenth was gone. His magic. His affection for Winter. Whether Winter would share with the demons whatever he suspected about witches' oaths. Whether the knowledge would help the demons break free and attack Delvore.

Peregrine wondered if it would have been better if he'd let the demon kill him two days before.

Frowning, he shoved the thoughts aside. Winter was gone, hopefully halfway to the north by now, but the spell was a habit, and if the demon returned, Peregrine did not want to make him have to kill anyone else.

Soldiers stood outside of the Northgate itself. They glanced at him for a moment and then went back to patrolling.

He cast a second spell as he passed through the market, listening to the people whisper around him.

“No one’s found his body.”

“He’s a witch. Surely a witch can fight a demon.”

“That courtesan is beautiful. How much do you think he is?”

Peregrine quickened his pace.

His second illusion began growing weak as the castle came into sight. Peregrine cast another. After having a demon loose for two days, the council would probably be close to the castle. All he had to do was find them.

He found two.

Laurent and Sabine stood outside the castle gates, talking with a handful of soldiers.

Peregrine smiled. Laurent and Sabine were the eldest on the council. Laurent had been a longtime friend of his mother’s, Sabine her friendly rival. Both had always been pleasant to Peregrine. He hoped they could help him.

As Peregrine approached, he sensed the trail ends of their protection wards tap against his skin, his magic.

The illusion stumbled and faded under their cursory spells.

The two council members turned toward him. The soldiers mirrored them, turning to study him.

“Peregrine.” Laurent closed the distance between them. Three guards followed, looking alternately relieved and surprised. “How are –”

Laurent’s eyes widened, and he dropped to one knee. The guards followed, tipping their heads down.

More guards approached, as well as Sabine. In a moment they followed the others to the ground.

Whispers drew close. Peregrine looked around. People were gathering at the edge of the street.

Bloody hell, he should have cast another illusion. If Winter returned –

No. Wait. He was with the council. Things were going to be all right.

“Please, rise,” Peregrine said.

As one, the council and guards rose.

“Kenth summoned the demon.”

Laurent frowned. “He couldn’t have.”

Peregrine was not too surprised to be told that. The council liked Kenth. If Peregrine hadn’t personally met the demon and confronted Kenth before now, he probably wouldn’t have believed it either.

“I talked to him two days ago,” he said. “He admitted it.”

“Peregrine.” Sabine approached, smiling. “He had Isabel test him and myself yesterday. Neither of us did it.” She studied him. Her smile faded. “Shadow-silk?”

Peregrine frowned. What he wore wasn’t important. “I’m afraid it was all that was available at the time. What kind of test did you give him?”

“A very thorough one.” She shrugged out of her fur-edged white cloak. “Here. Why don’t you slip this over you and remove the clothes?”

“The clothes don’t matter. What kind of test –”

“Your majesty –”

“What kind of test did you give him?”

“A blood test,” Kenth said behind him.

Peregrine turned.

Kenth stood on the other side of the castle gate. He was dressed in a simple black shirt and breeches. He wore no rings, no charms, and Peregrine knew immediately that Byron’s funeral was that day.

“I cut my palm and offered the blood to Isabel,” Kenth said. “She found nothing.” His warm brown eyes skimmed over Peregrine. “Shadow-silk?”

“It’s just cloth.”

“Demon-enchanted cloth.” Kenth opened the gates wide. “It protects them. Us, it slowly poisons.”

Really?

No. Wait. Winter would never poison him. Even when the demon was trying to kill him, Peregrine thought he would rather have done it in person than from afar.

“Guards, please escort his majesty in. He needs to be purified immediately.”

The guards gathered around Peregrine, not quite touching him – whether out of respect for the throne or fear of the shadow-silk, Peregrine didn’t know. They pressed close, though, making him move forward.

“Kenth summoned the demon,” he said. “I don’t know how he’s hidden it, but he has.”

“Perhaps I should be arrested,” Kenth said. “It might calm him.”

Laurent frowned. Sabine chuckled.

“The strain of being hunted for two days may have affected him,” Laurent said.

“And while having you away may calm him,” Sabine said, “it will do little to present a united front.”

Peregrine couldn't believe he was hearing this. He knew the council would trust Kenth and be surprised; but this, this was madness.

"The clothes aren't affecting me," he said. The guards nudged him forward, past Kenth.

"Is the demon dead?" Kenth asked.

His tone was so warm, so worried, that for a moment Peregrine thought he was actually worried for him.

Then he remembered Kenth pressing him up against the wall, and frowned. "Can't you tell?"

Kenth turned to Laurent and Sabine. "Gather the council and remain here, outside the castle. The demon will probably arrive soon."

"Yes, Kenth."

"All right."

"He can get into the castle," Peregrine said. "I saw him."

He needed to do something. Scream, perhaps, or push past the guards and attack Kenth.

Except then everyone really would think he'd lost his mind. They would subdue him, argue for a few months, and then probably send him for convalescence out in the country. As far as they knew, he still couldn't have sex, so hoping he would sire a child was out. They would instead look for his kin, and when they found one, a quiet accident might befall him.

Dark, unfair thoughts, but Kenth was leading them. Kenth could probably make anything sound reasonable to them.

Peregrine thought about past council meetings. Had Kenth manipulated them then, too? Peregrine could remember a few times when they disagreed and he liked to hope it meant that they weren't his pawns.

"Your majesty," a guard said. "Forgive me, but my grandmother worked on the wards for the castle. They're good wards."



Perhaps, at one time. Now they were a textbook that would teach Winter, and the demons, how to work around them.

Kenth followed them into the castle. The tall double doors closed behind him with a deep, hollow thump.

"I've been strengthening the wards in my tower," he said. He loosened the top two buttons of his shirt, revealing a hint of skin to Peregrine. "Take him –"

"You bastard."

"– there and post a guard." Kenth tipped his head toward Peregrine. "This isn't over, Peregrine. I'm going to get my kirfane from my workshop, and then I'll join you."

Kenth turned and stalked off.

Peregrine pulled away from the circle of guards. Without the council's aid, he wasn't certain of his own chances against Kenth. Human magic had no effect on him, but Kenth was physically stronger. A kirfane across the throat would kill him, and he could blame Winter, or say that Peregrine had attacked him and he'd needed to defend himself.

"Your majesty? This way."

"I've been to the tower before." At one time, it had been his mother's.

As one, they marched in the direction of the tower.

Peregrine walked ahead, brooding. The council did not believe him. He'd expected surprise, but not this.

He took the stairs up to the tower two at a time. Perhaps, if he could get enough distance from the guards, he could dart into an alcove or door and escape. He'd played hide-and-seek here once. The castle couldn't have changed much since then.

A chill traced over him.

Winter?

No. The spot over his chest felt the same. For better or worse, Winter was heading north. Peregrine had watched him head toward it, waited until the demon was out of sight before starting for the city. Even if Kenth had summoned him immediately after seeing Peregrine, the demon couldn't be here so soon.

Peregrine sent a pulse of heat out, pushing the cold back. If this wasn't Winter, who was it?

Several sighs erupted behind him, followed by the thump of bodies falling to the carpeted marble floor.

Peregrine turned.

Kenth stood on the other side of the slumped guards.

The chill around Peregrine faded.

Peregrine drew magic into his fingertips. He should attack Kenth now, when they were somewhat alone. Kenth's magic may not hurt him, but he could hurt Kenth.

And, if he wasn't careful, the guards, who he now sensed were sleeping.

Peregrine inched back. He needed to move away from the men. "I suppose you spent enough time with him to mimic his style," he said.

"Yes. He never gave me his clothes, though."

"Did you ask?"

Chuckling, Kenth walked around the guards. His kirfane caught the light, turning the blade silver. "No. They do look nice on you. Quite nice."

Peregrine threaded a heavy ward around himself, thickening the air.

Kenth stopped at the edge of it. He tapped his kirfane against it. Sharp, painful little stabs echoed through, stinging Peregrine.

Peregrine frowned. The other witch wasn't attacking, exactly. More like teasing him. Testing. Showing him where the faults in his spell were, in a way that the banshee's curse might confuse as helping him.

"I did call him," Kenth said. "When he arrives, I'm thinking a nice little battle. Something quick and bloody, with you sacrificing yourself to destroy the demon. It will be quite romantic. Delvore will spend the next twenty years writing sonnets about it. I would like to stage it in my tower so the guards won't be harmed, but that's up to you."

Bastard!

Peregrine continued moving back. Was there another exit near him? A door or a window? "How will you explain standing by and doing nothing?"

"I'll let the demon wound me." Kenth followed. "Perhaps I'll get a nice scar from it."

Peregrine could think of several good places for Winter to scar Kenth.

The image was amusing, but didn't help. He pushed it aside and moved his arms out to either side. He wove a thin strand of magic through his ward and traced it over the hall behind him.

Without turning, he sensed two doors to his right, behind him. One led to a library, the other to a washroom. The first had small windows, and the second a narrow slit.

Damn!

Kenth turned his blade to the side and tapped it against his fingertips. He raised the bleeding skin to the shield.

Peregrine drew back, letting his spell scan behind him for other doors. No warding spell was perfect; when cast on stone or paper, there was time to strengthen it and add other wards over it.

Here, it was a quick casting. It was not secured to anything, and it weakened near the back so that he could look for an exit. If another witch threaded their blood into the ward,

they could work together to strengthen or weaken it. Knowing Kenth, he would probably try to undo it.

Peregrine drew his shield further in. If Kenth attacked, or if there was force in his spell, the banshee's curse would deflect it.

This gentle nudging confused it, though. This, it would let through.

Further back, Peregrine found a small, windowless room. Next was a window, and then Kenth's tower.

Peregrine's magic retreated to the window.

The glass was mullioned, but if his spell pushed at the metal separating the diamond-shaped pieces of glass, he would break it. He could throw the glass at Kenth and, while the other witch was distracted, use another spell to cushion his fall out the window.

The air at the edge of his sight shimmered, taking on a red hue.

Bloody hell, Kenth was breaking through.

Peregrine motioned at Kenth, clapping his hands together as if trapping something.

His ward mirrored him, wrapping itself around Kenth.

The spell was instinctive, cast before Peregrine could really think about it.

Now that it was there, binding Kenth seven feet away, Peregrine knew it wouldn't last. Winter hadn't known how these wards worked, and he'd been able to destroy them. Kenth knew how they worked and would probably get through them faster.

Kenth wove bleeding fingers over his side of the shield. "Your magic feels different."

He could tell?

Peregrine turned away and focused on the window. He could not afford to be distracted. Winter was coming, and when the demon arrived, he would kill Peregrine.

The thought chilled him. His hands trembled. There was something especially ugly about being murdered by a lover. For Winter, the encounter might have been little more

than an opportunity to strike against Kenth by twisting his orders, but he had been very tender. Peregrine would rather never see him again than have to face him in battle.

“It feels stronger, as if you’ve been stretching it.” Kenth’s voice was quiet. Thoughtful.

Dangerous.

Peregrine threaded magic into the panes of glass. They shimmered, and then one by one the metal holding them weakened, allowing him to move them.

He set them on a small table beside him. If he attacked Kenth now, it would wound him, but also give him more blood to work with. It would be better to wait until a moment when the rush of pain and power would overwhelm him, causing him to make a mistake.

The ward behind him fluctuated, growing weak.

Peregrine pushed the thin metal mullions apart. It was a clear drop to the garden outside, but no one was there. If he hurried –

Pain slid into the back of his right shoulder.

Hissing, he turned.

Kenth approached him, holding one hand up. A thread of magic led to Peregrine’s shoulder, where Kenth’s kirfane was buried.

Peregrine yanked it out. Pain pulsed around the wound. He caught a glimpse of blood and torn flesh before the demon-silk closed over it.

His blood shone across the blade.

“You bedded him,” Kenth said. “You broke your oath and... and it did nothing to your magic.”

Peregrine sent a spike of magic into the kirfane and then sank it into the wall. Kenth would have a difficult time freeing it from the stone. “My intent. My desire.”

The blood on the blade trembled and then dissipated. The red-hued air crept to Kenth.

Kenth raised a hand, twining his fingers through the air. “Your experiment. My lesson.”

*What?*

Kenth clenched his fist and made a pulling gesture.

Pain pulsed in Peregrine’s wound. Blood ran down his back... and then the flesh closed over it, ending the pain.

He stared at Kenth. The other witch was trying to break past his own sacrifice.

Peregrine snatched a pane of glass and threw it at Kenth.

The glass cut his palm, but it was light and lanced through the air. The edge of it skimmed past Kenth’s left hand, leaving a wet red trail.

Pain snaked across Peregrine’s bleeding hand. Foolish witch! He should have used magic, not given in to panic and thrown it.

Peregrine wove magic around the other panes and cast them at Kenth. Light winked off the glass pieces as they flew at the other man.

And on the first one he’d sent, as Kenth sent it back at him.

The trajectory was low, and in the moment that Peregrine realized Kenth had thrown it and not used magic, it embedded itself in his thigh.

Pain lanced through him. He stumbled back, hitting the wall. Blood escaped around the glass and ran down his leg.

The shadow-silk shifted around the glass, closing the tear in the fabric near the glass but leaving the broken shard in place.

Peregrine grabbed the glass and tore it free. Blood erupted, forming a pool around his leg. The shadow-silk closed over it, and though the bleeding slowed, it did not stop, and the pool grew.

Dizziness crashed over him.

He was dimly aware of Kenth's breath stumbling, of the other man slumping to his knees and gasping.

Peregrine clenched his wounded hand, using the sudden burst of pain to keep the dizziness back.

Kenth retched, and the sickly-sweet smell crept past Peregrine.

Peregrine frowned. Pushing through an oath's parameters wasn't easy. Perhaps Kenth would be unable to do it.

And perhaps, unlike him, Kenth would be able to do it alone.

Peregrine cast a quick healing spell around himself and rose. He needed to get away while Kenth –

Blackness tugged at him, drawing him back to the ground.

Gods, no.

Peregrine cast another spell over himself, this one to push the darkness away. If he passed out, he would never wake again.

The blackness faded. He was slumped against the wall. A trail of his blood snaked toward Kenth.

Kenth sat across from him, his skin sallow.

The blood between them shimmered brightly. It trembled, sending a ripple back toward Peregrine.

Peregrine inched away. Kenth couldn't kill him, but if he disturbed the binding the shadow-silk offered, it would open his wounds and bleed him.

And he was using Peregrine's own blood to do it.

## Chapter Twelve

The ripple grew closer.

Peregrine raised a hand and cast a spell, blocking it. Banshee take him, Kenth had broken through his own oath.

If Kenth could use Peregrine's blood, all he would need to do was keep his wounds open and bleed him out. It would take time, but they had time. The council trusted Kenth with their king's life.

There was a flash of light, and then another glass shard darted over Peregrine's hand, leaving a bloody trail. Wincing, he pressed the back of his hand against his chest.

Another rippled darted from Kenth, heading toward him.

Peregrine gathered his magic into himself. The banshee's gift to his father had left him with enhanced health, but he was losing blood too fast for it to help. Perhaps if he kept his power inside, it would aid the ability and help sustain him if he lost more blood.

On the ground, the pool grew. The ripple dissolved into the blood, and then the pool trembled, sending a pulse over him. When it faded, he felt weak.

Peregrine slid his fingers into the blood. It was his, and just as Kenth could now use it, there had to be something Peregrine could do against him.



Blackness swam around him. Peregrine took a deep breath and used a bit of his magic to push it back.

His spell shuddered. It wasn't going to last. It had to last. It had to –

The dizziness crept back and then returned, sweeping over him.

Gods. He'd lost too much blood and was using too much power to keep what little blood he had strong. If he didn't escape out the window... But by now he might no longer have the strength to both keep himself alive and get to the ground safely.

Another tremor shook the pool of blood, and it shifted. It rose, growing darker, larger. Ripples flowed away from it, toward him and Kenth.

Peregrine moved back along the wall. Faster, he needed to move faster, before the blood reached him.

A pulse darted over him, drinking away his energy. He slumped against the ground.

The ripple swept over the blood, toward him. Behind it, the shape developed features. There was a hint of a small round head, of long arms and a thin body.

The banshee, he realized. He was dying, and the banshee had come.

The ghost turned, studying him with dead eyes.

Peregrine drew back. His movement was slow, awkward, but he didn't care. While his heart still beat, he would not make this easy for that bastard. If Kenth wanted to kill him so badly, he could bloody well get past the banshee to do it.

The ripple snaked over his hand, seeping into his wound.

Sleepiness swept over him.

After the last two days, this was almost a relief. No blackness, no dizziness, just a familiar tiredness that made him want to close his eyes. Perhaps, after he rested for a bit...

The banshee turned away from him, toward Kenth, who had risen. His legs were unsteady, and several cuts lined his body.

He wasn't afraid to look at the ghost, though. Peregrine wondered if he'd dreamed of this moment.

*His heart is fading*, the banshee said to Kenth. *Normally I would wait for it to stop, but you didn't wait for any of the others.*

A cool touch traced over his chest.

The cold stirred him, pushing some of his sleepiness aside. Winter was approaching. Peregrine needed to move, to fight.

Or...just lie there. Perhaps, if Winter killed him, Kenth might free him afterwards.

No. Peregrine didn't want to die at his only lover's hands. If he could move, he would go back to Kenth and let him do it.

The demon knelt, and then cool, black-gloved fingers brushed Peregrine's hair back.

"Winter."

"Shhh."

"Please don't..."

"You're dead." Soothing magic traced over Peregrine. It lapped at his wounds, stitching the skin closed. "I can't kill something that's already dead."

Peregrine's lips twitched. Such kindness. Perhaps demons and humans didn't need to always be at odds with one another.

The banshee sighed. *You hungered for blood. May it now give you nourishment.*

The spells connecting Winter to Kenth twitched. Winter sensed that it startled the witch, and he struggled to gather the fraying ends of his spell.

Winter slammed his power into them.

The binding shattered. Echoes of the broken spell shook him, stealing the chill from his skin.

Winter let them. He was free. He could return to the north, to his fire, or stay here. Life in his uncle's court had grown stagnant for him, and while he would be missed, he had to admit he'd grown...fond of this land.

He smiled. Whatever he chose, it would be lovely.

First, though, he had to kill Kenth.

Peregrine's head fell back, and his body slumped sideways. Winter caught him before his head could strike the ground. "Peregrine?"

Silence.

A few feet away, Kenth's breath grew ragged, and a glance showed him on the ground, twitching.

Winter looked back at Peregrine. The witch's skin was colder than his, and a cursory spell told him that if he set Peregrine down, he would be dead within moments.

Kenth was vulnerable, though. He was just lying there, with all color bleeding away from him, his eyes shifting and turning a pretty violet. Winter's former master jerked, exposing the long column of his throat.

The demon drew Peregrine closer. His skin was colder than Winter's.

*You will lose everything.*

If that was true, then he would also be starting over. He could do that here. He chose to do it with Peregrine.

Winter cast a heating spell. He gently warmed Peregrine, hoping the heat would strengthen him. The blood, Winter dissipated into the air.

He sensed the pool's loss disturbing the ghost's form. A glance back showed the air around her and Kenth reddening and then clearing.

Kenth cried out. He twisted, clutching at the air, his throat, the ground.

Winter's lips drew back in a quiet snarl. It would be so easy to send even a small spell at his former master, he realized. Something quick and fatal.

Beneath his hand, he sensed the magic thrumming through Peregrine fading. As it slowed, so would his heart.

Winter turned away from Kenth. Banshee take him; Winter had more important witches to focus on.

He laid his hand over Peregrine's heart, mirroring the pale spot he had stained into the witch's flesh. He sent a light thread of magic out, searching for an opening. He found it immediately, in Peregrine's wounds.

Winter sent a slow pulse of magic into Peregrine. He waited a moment and then repeated the spell again, and again.

Peregrine twitched...and then his skin grew warm.

Winter increased the strength of his spell. Slowly he sent a thread of his spirit into Peregrine and felt it snake into him. A moment later, Winter sensed Peregrine's spirit twine around his, locking it into place.

Sighing, Winter sent another pulse of magic over him, strengthening the blood flowing through his heart and cementing the bond. The witch had said their lives were entwined. Now even death wouldn't part them.

Peregrine's magic sent an echo back, a quiet greeting that grew stronger with every breath.

Winter smiled. He had spent the last seventy years without this passion. He would not continue to live without it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peregrine wasn't dead.

Kenth could sense it, just as he could almost feel the warmth of his body, the taste of his blood. He'd focused so much magic into it, it would taste unbelievably sweet.

There was another presence there, beside Peregrine. Kenth studied it.

Cool flesh, slower beating heart, shadow-silk.

Bloody hell.

Winter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Someone was tugging at him.

At his blood. His spirit. His magic.

Peregrine tugged back.

And found himself cold.

That surprised him. Usually when he woke, he was at least comfortable. He felt spoiled for that; in the commons, people were fortunate to have roofs over their heads.

Peregrine opened his eyes.

Winter smiled.

He'd seen the demon smile many times – when he was about to do something dark, when he was considering something scandalous, when he was being sardonic. This was one of the few times his smile was sweet. It made him look quite fetching.

"I thought I was sleeping," Peregrine said and frowned. He'd been drifting away, yes, but not to sleep.

"You're awake now," Winter said. His hand was over Peregrine's heart, and when he moved it, the skin felt haunted.

"I almost died."

"You didn't."

“How?”

“I wove my life force into yours.”

“You –” Peregrine sat up. “When you leave –”

“I’ll stay.”

“But you’re free.”

Winter’s lips twitched. “Are we not bound by our decisions, your majesty?”

His majesty.

Kenth.

Peregrine followed the dry red line of blood snaking down the hall to the wizened banshee.

She scowled at him, her small face cracked and red. Peregrine looked past her to...

Nothing.

Kenth was gone.

Peregrine rose. His legs trembled. And then Winter was there, supporting, but not holding him up.

“Where’s Kenth?” Peregrine asked.

The banshee tipped her head down the hall, past the sleeping guards. *I saw him crawl toward your father’s casket.*

With a clawed hand at his back, Peregrine hurried down the hall.

A trail of blood led to the partially open doors. Peregrine headed for them.

His strength returned slowly, and by the time he approached the tall doors, he was able to walk on his own.

He drew magic into his fingers, making his fingernails grow into sharp, curving points. Kenth’s kirfane and the glass had done more to hurt him than his magic, and Peregrine would learn from him and attack physically.

He pushed past the doors and stepped inside.

When his mother had been the king's witch, this room had been used for small ceremonies. A quiet exchange of vows. The naming of a new child. A place for a dead king to rest before his funeral.

A tall black casket lay on a table in the center of the room. Dozens of thick white candles sat on small tables, a chair, a desk.

He couldn't see Kenth.

Peregrine walked around the chamber. There was a second door at the opposite side of the room, and two small windows. Between the three, Peregrine suspected Kenth had either gone through the door. Or into the casket.

Winter mirrored him, moving around the opposite side of the room.

When they passed, Peregrine headed for the casket, and Winter for the second door.

"We need to make it quick," Peregrine said.

"Agreed. My witch needs to be taught to slow down, though."

Peregrine sighed. Gods, he'd missed Winter.

Out of the corner of his eye, Peregrine saw the banshee slip past the doors.

The casket was unlatched. Careful to keep a distance, Peregrine used magic to lift the lid.

As it opened, he sent a light thread of magic into the casket. He sensed a cold body and a small ceramic shape.

Peregrine turned. The banshee stood beside him.

"You gave him a gift."

*Yes. He wanted blood; blood will now nourish him.*

Gods. As a former blood witch, Kenth would enjoy that. Would he become as dark as Nolan? "Is he king now?"

*No, your majesty. You came first in the line of succession. If your middle brother came back to life right now –* She shot a glare past him. *– then he would be king in place of you.*

“Why not my eldest brother?”

*He wouldn't have survived seeing me. His heart would have stopped.*

The air at Peregrine's back grew cold.

“I found stairs,” Winter said. “When I went down, I found the garden. No Kenth.”

Damn.

“Can you sense his intentions?” Peregrine asked.

“No. I was able to break free when the banshee cursed him. My last sensation of him was surprise that the banshee's gift had frayed his control over me.”

Damn.

And good. Peregrine was glad Winter was free. He was also worried about what the demon would do with that freedom, but for now he was willing to wait and see.

*Kenth is interesting, your majesty. I haven't seen anyone work so hard to take the throne since your grandfather Ren.*

Peregrine frowned. “He has a claim to the throne. If he openly challenges me for it, it will lead to a civil war.”

*He doesn't want a civil war.*

“He's responsible for three deaths.”

*I would not gift a king who would tear this country apart.* She smiled, flashing hundreds of small, sharp teeth. *I would kill him myself.*

“Can you sense where he's going?” Peregrine asked. He did not like the idea of her quietly pruning his line.

*No. I can only sense the king.* The banshee's red-rimmed eyes crept from Peregrine to Winter and back. *I find your decision fascinating.*



Judging by the quirk of Winter's lips, Peregrine thought the demon understood.

*I apologize for my haste, your majesty.* The banshee tipped her head toward Peregrine.  
*You were so close. I'd looked forward to tasting your spirit as it faded.*

"I'll be the only one tasting any of him," Winter said.

*Perhaps.* She glanced at Winter. *You cost me a king.*

"You can have Kenth."

She smiled. *You have a human's heart.*

"And you have a demon's."

Was Winter arguing with the banshee?

*May it cloak you in this land.*

Winter hissed. "You are not cursing me, bitch."

Yes. He was arguing with the banshee.

*I believe I just did.*

The banshee faded.

"I am a demon," Winter grumbled. "None of my line bedded or betrayed her."

No, but one of his kind had bedded and then remained loyal to a member of the family that she couldn't stop hating. Or loving. Perhaps, beneath her anger and desire for destruction, a part of her still hoped for the happy ending.

"I think she meant it as a gift," Peregrine said.

"I'm going to study her further and find a way to lay her to rest."

"We'll place her in the royal tomb, then." Peregrine couldn't imagine the banshee resting, but if it happened, he would see to it that she was remembered. She'd been a part of his family for too long to be forgotten.

Peregrine stepped up to the casket. He reached in and touched his father's hand.

Byron was dressed in a simple black shirt. His handsome face was clean-shaven, and his dark hair was lined with silver.

*You were never certain if I was yours, Peregrine thought, but you cared for me regardless. I will never forget your kindness.*

Peregrine began to close the casket.

And then noticed another shape inside.

Peregrine pushed the lid back open and moved a bit of the shirt's sleeve away from his father's arm.

There, held lightly in Byron's grasp, was a small black jar.

Peregrine studied the ceramic shape. Usually, kings were buried alone, taking with them the love of their people.

"Have you ever seen this jar before?" Peregrine asked.

"Yes." Winter stepped beside him. "Kenth showed it to me a few weeks ago. It's his sire. He promised to place him in the royal tomb."

An ache gathered in Peregrine's throat. Whatever else Kenth had become, he'd obviously cared for his father. Peregrine might intend to hunt him down and destroy him, but he could not deny his familial loyalty.

"Shall I remove it?" Winter asked.

"No." Peregrine closed the casket. "Although he was obsessed with revenge, he still cared for his father's ashes."

"You're far too kind."

"If I forget what makes him human, I'll lose all ability to understand his darkness."

Winter drew closer to him.

There was no chill, and when his hand brushed over Peregrine's, Peregrine found his skin warm.

Peregrine entwined his fingers through Winter's. Gods, what had the banshee done to him? Peregrine would not miss the cold, but the demon might.

"Winter, your –"

Voices rose outside.

Peregrine turned toward the door. The voices stumbled over one another, and then footfalls thumped closer.

"They think your clothes are poisonous to humans," Peregrine said. The words surprised him, but he didn't regret them. When the soldiers saw Winter's clothes, they would wonder why two people were wearing shadow-silk. At worse, they would realize he was a demon.

The clothes shimmered. When it faded, the shadow-silk dulled, mimicking the clothes Kenth had been wearing.

"Are they poisoned?" Peregrine asked.

"No. We poisoned everything we wore during the war, but those kinds of spells take weeks to create. I never had the time or resources to do it here, and I doubt Kenth was very interested in dressing like me."

The doors were flung open, and the guards darted in. They saw him and encircled him, hands falling to their swords.

"Your majesty, are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Forgive us –"

"The cold –"

"There was so much blood."

"It's Kenth's," Peregrine said.

The guards studied the room. In their gazes, Peregrine saw sympathy and worry.

Unease crept through him. The guards, the council, possibly most of the witches in the city, trusted Kenth. No one would ever believe him.

Warm fingers brushed over his.

No one except Winter, Peregrine amended. There was no one else he would want at his side.

One of the guards tipped his head toward Winter. "May I ask who this is, your majesty?"

These men were now his guards. Peregrine decided he would be honest with them. "He's from the north. He protected me from the creature that was trying to destroy me." He reached for Winter's hand and threaded their fingers together. "He's my witch."

## Chapter Thirteen

It was the scent of blood that drew Kenth out of his sleep. It was hot and iron-tinged, teasing his senses.

He stirred, turning slowly toward the sanguine warmth.

Darkness surrounded him. It smelled cool, with a hint of earth. A quick thread of magic told him that he was underground and that someone was outside his chamber. Someone warm, with a strong heart and a melodic pulse.

He rose and headed toward them.

Pale light flickered along the bottom of a door. Kenth felt for a handle, found it, and pushed open the door.

Outside of the dark room was a small circular alcove. There was a door to either side of the one he'd just come through, a gate across from him, and stone steps leading up. Six sconces were hung from tall wooden beams, casting trembling light over the space.

A mausoleum, he realized.

In the corner, a figure sat on a stone bench. It rose and approached Kenth. The steps were familiar.

"Dallion," Kenth said.

“Sir.” The captain of the guards stepped into the light. He tipped his head forward.

“Why am I here?” Kenth asked, motioning around him.

“The king didn’t seem well, and I feared he would accidentally hurt you. When I brought you out of the castle, sunlight burned you. I covered you in my cloak, but this was the only place I could think of that had no windows.”

Kenth studied himself.

His clothes were torn, and the skin he could see was pale. No burns. No cuts.

Strange.

Stranger still to be in this place. Was this the place Dallion’s grandfather had brought Savon? It was dark and chill, but the wet-earth smell was nice, and there were many places to hide. For a frightened child, this might have seemed like a haven.

“I’m pleased to see your magic has healed you, sir,” Dallion said.

“Thank you. I’m touched by the lengths to which you went for me, but you should know that the king will want my blood.”

“He has been under a considerable amount of strain. The council believes he needs to rest.”

The council was still going to defend him? That was unexpected. Kenth had thought they were so desperate for their king that they would give in to his every request.

Hunger spiked in Kenth’s stomach. He felt cold suddenly and sensed that Dallion was warm.

*You hungered for blood. May it now give you nourishment.*

Oh.

Clever banshee, giving him a curse that a blood witch would know how to work with. He would have to learn how to deal with the hunger, but he still thought she’d been very kind.

The heat of Dallion's body called to Kenth. His blood would not be as sweet as Peregrine's, but it was still good, belonging to a good man.

A good man who'd risked his life to help him. A good man descended from other good men, who'd protected Kenth's father and Delvore.

Kenth forced his hunger back. This curse-gift came with responsibilities, the first of which was in taking care not to hurt his people. Later, he would travel into the city and find a criminal. Someone vile, who deserved to lose their blood.

*Nolan started with criminals*, he thought.

Nolan should have stayed with them.

"If I may be bold," Dallion said.

"Please." The man and his line had helped him and his. Kenth could not afford to think of anyone as a friend, but this man tempted him.

"How did the banshee bless you?"

Kenth stared at him. He *knew*.

This was a dangerous secret to share. At the same time, this man was one of the few people who had a right to it.

"You know who I am," Kenth said.

"I've seen a coin with Nolan's profile. You look similar. Also, since you've woken, your eyes are violet."

Gods. Violet eyes.

If only Peregrine had died during their struggle.

"Ren outlawed all coins with his half-brother's image," Kenth said. The man had also offered anyone who brought him the coins twice their worth in silver. Kenth couldn't believe a single coin had escaped.

“My grandfather collected coins, sir. It would be a dishonor to his memory to dispose of it.”

Kenth nodded. He understood honoring the dead. They honored the living by working and fighting for them when alive. When dead, they deserved respect.

“Because of my interest in blood, she decided that it should also give me nourishment.”

Dallion twitched. Kenth suspected the man wanted to step away from him, but feared insulting him.

“I give you my word.” Kenth held out his hand. He made a fist, pricking his surprisingly sharp fingernails into the mound of his palm. Blood ran down his hand.

The scent, the color, drew him. He was so hungry, and if his blood only teased him, Dallion’s...

“You and yours are safe from me,” Kenth said. He cast a pulse of magic out, burning the words into the blood droplets. They dissipated, carrying his promise into the world.

Dallion dropped to one knee. “You honor me.”

No, he was returning the respect he was given.

“The king will view your aid to me as a betrayal,” Kenth said. He had never lied to himself, and so he would not lie to this man.

“He’s not well at the moment, sir.”

“I’m a rival for the throne.”

Dallion frowned.

Kenth toyed with adding that he’d also summoned the demon, but decided against it. No point in alienating a man who had helped him, and might help him again in the future.

“He’s very kind,” Dallion said. “I wish him a long, peaceful reign. Sometimes, though, unexpected crises arrive and kind kings cannot deal with them. When that happens, it’s for Delvore’s benefit that another leader step in.”



"I will not create a civil war."

"I am glad, sir. A demon has killed several people, though. If it kills Peregrine one day, you could step in."

Ah. A man who understood.

Kenth nodded. "I'll need to get out of the city. If anyone sees me and recognizes what my eyes mean..."

Dallion nodded. "I'll get you transportation for tomorrow evening."

Kenth was used to traveling during the day, but he agreed. His gift had turned him into a night creature. He would learn to schedule his life around the dark hours.

His hunger twitched. He glanced at Dallion, but the man's image grew hazy, and Kenth realized that his blood oath was in effect, shielding Dallion from him at this moment when his resolve might falter.

"Forgive me," Kenth said, "but I must go out for a bit."

Dallion stepped out of his way.

Kenth walked past him and took the stone steps two at a time.

Aboveground, the night air wrapped around him, thrilling him.

Kenth sighed, enjoying this moment. The banshee had given him a gift, but Peregrine was still alive. Kenth could challenge him for the throne, but it would create chaos. Civil war, the land torn, blood tingeing the cobblestones.

Red-hued streets. Such a lovely image.

*No.*

Kenth forced the images aside. He was meant to be king, and as Delvore's king he was responsible for protecting the country. He would honor his people by remaining in the shadows and waiting.

This hunt would continue. One day, he would destroy Peregrine and his demon.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cleansing bath took two hours, a hundred lit candles, and the ritual burning of the clothes. As Peregrine soaked, the council gathered in the room, separated from him by a wide tapestry screen.

And argued.

“It’s Kenth.”

“We tested him.”

“He’s better than you.”

“Who are you again?”

“Winter.”

Even with the screen between them, Peregrine sensed the council’s spells lapping over Winter. The first one, the one that would test for demon, failed. The council cast it twice more before moving on, testing for enchantments, illusions, and geasa.

Their spells passed over Winter, and after the first two, Peregrine knew they would not find anything. The banshee had taken Winter’s cold and given him this protection.

As with all of her gifts, it was both a kindness and a wound. Winter had never seemed fond of humans. How irksome to now be able to pass for one.

Physically pass for one, anyway. Winter’s charm could still alert them to his identity.

The spells ended.

Silence.

“I sense a tie to his majesty.”

“He was wounded. I healed him.”

Silence.

Peregrine rose from the water. A quick spell to brush away the remaining traces of the bath, and then he slipped into a robe. When he’d joined the council, there had been an

awkward period. The others were nice to him, and though they'd known him, it was like they had to become familiar with him again.

Winter did not have a shared history with them. They could attempt to look into his past, but the people patrolling the north were scattered and did not all know one another. With nothing in Winter's past to guide them, they would study him now, but their observations would be tainted by the simple fact that the demon was not Kenth.

As much as it disturbed Peregrine, the others loved that man. Believed in him. Thought he was off hunting the demon, in fact.

Peregrine was their king, though. A touch eccentric, perhaps, but they would find Kenth and question him if that was the king's desire. They would also question Winter.

"It's growing late," Peregrine said, walking around the screen.

The council bowed their heads.

"Your majesty," Isabel began.

"Please, call me Peregrine. We've known one another too long to begin being so formal. Besides," he added, offering them a smile, "the youngest of you is twice my age."

The council and Winter chuckled.

"I examined his blood," Isabel said. "There are no traces of demon summoning, though I did sense a hint of demon blood."

"How far back?"

"Six generations."

The banshee was good.

"He's human enough to be on the council."

"I don't know if he has the experience, though," Sabine said.

Winter smiled. "I'm quite experienced."

Silence.

“Peregrine.” Laurent’s brows teased and released a frown. “If I may be so bold, you’ve known him, what, two days? It’s a bit...impulsive to trust such an important role to a relative stranger.”

Peregrine did know him, though. He’d seen him struggle against Kenth’s spells, looked into his past and seen his fire. Peregrine knew him better than he knew the council.

“The king periodically does choose his witch from outside of council,” Peregrine said. Byron had done it twice, first with Peregrine’s mother, then Kenth. “When they want a fresh perspective, some have been known to pick someone from out of the city.”

“But you don’t know him.”

“Yes, I do. When the demon was hunting me, Winter was always near me. When I was dying, he was the one who brought me back.”

The council left shortly afterwards. As they walked out the great doors, Peregrine sensed another light tracing spell over Winter. He tracked the spell – and the ensuing echo from Winter – to Sabine before it faded.

A servant arrived to take them to the west tower. Peregrine had never been in this part of the castle. Along the way, he realized that living in the castle would take some getting used to. There were more stairs than at his tower, but the steps were wider and the carpet thicker.

The servant softly explained that the king’s rooms were still being cleaned and that they would arrange the witch’s tower for Winter as soon as possible. She showed them two rooms, one with windows overlooking the garden, the other with a view of the city, and left.

“You’re going to give me Kenth’s tower,” Winter said.

“The witch’s tower. It was my mother’s before his.”

“Will I be able to burn everything of his?”

“I think the servants want to save it for him.” Peregrine slumped against the doorway to the garden room. Was there anyone in this city who didn’t think the best of Kenth?

Winter stepped up to him. “He has their respect. You have their heart.”

“You’re kind.”

“I’m observant. Even with a demon hunting you, you helped with a birthing.” Winter’s lips traced over Peregrine’s. “Not many kings – not many people, demon or human – would have done that.”

Winter kissed him.

Peregrine stilled. They were new to one another, but Winter still surprised him. He relaxed, lips parting in a little sigh.

Winter slid his tongue gently between Peregrine’s parted lips, drinking in a slow, sweet kiss.

When the kiss broke, Peregrine took his hand and led him into the room. The door closed behind them and gave a quiet click as Winter locked it.

“The council likes you,” Peregrine said, his tone a light tease.

Winter chuckled. “Yes. I felt just as welcomed today as I did when I last visited this fine city.” He stepped up behind Peregrine and slid his arms around Peregrine’s waist, drawing him close.

“The man in glasses?” Winter asked.

“Randolph.”

“Kent’s dearest ally. He will fight to get him reinstated. The woman with dark eyes?”

“Isabel.”

“Your greatest ally. She may never believe you about Kent, but she will argue for your mental stability.”

Peregrine frowned. If she were his friend, she would try to understand why he’d said those things about the bastard. “She will argue that I was simply imagining things.”

“She will also argue against a well-placed dagger.”

Ah. Peregrine's frown eased. That was helpful.

He slid his hands over Winter's. "You're rather good at this."

"My uncle is the demon king," Winter said, his lips teasing Peregrine's ear. "I'm not a stranger to intrigue. The woman with white circles around her hands and neck where jewelry would go?"

"Tasia," Peregrine said. "It's tradition not to wear ornaments during a funeral. If any light shone off the items, it might draw the departing spirit back, and then there would be a haunting."

"Interesting." Warm lips brushed over Peregrine's neck. Winter's hands escaped his and slid down, over the tie fastening his robe closed.

"She fancies me," Winter said, undoing the tie. "She will be disappointed soon."

Chuckling, Peregrine let his head fall back, resting it against Winter's shoulder. He was glad to hear that not all of the council was focused on trying to prove Kenth's innocence.

Lips ghosted up his neck, along the tip of his ear. Winter's hips shifted, and Peregrine felt a hot shape brush past his ass.

A shiver darted through him. It lasted only a moment, but every place it touched felt raw. Sensitive. The tremor ended in his member, where it coiled and created a pleasant ache.

He reached back and traced his fingers over Winter's hip. He moved his hand down, brushing over soft shadow-silk, a hint of muscles in the demon's abdomen, and then –

Winter's breath stumbled. "There's more," he whispered, nipping Peregrine's ear. "Gods, I wish there wasn't."

"I understand." Peregrine let his hand fall. Strange, that Winter wanted to discuss this now. Peregrine appreciated it, though. As king, his life and the life of his city were entwined.

"That one, Tasia, also believes that Kenth may have tried to take control of the demon after their last meeting. She thinks his attempt failed, but the demon became aware of him.

The demon then turned around and told you that Kenth was its master, to pull the council apart.”

What?

Peregrine stepped away. “That’s mad,” he said, turning to face Winter.

“She thinks it’s quite reasonable. Kenth is innocent and you’re sane, though confused. The other man?”

“Laurent.”

“Is more concerned with there being a banshee-blessed king on the throne than with Kenth. He will be more focused on keeping you safe than finding Kenth. The woman in the white cloak.”

“Sabine.”

Winter took the end of his shirt and drew it up, over his head. “She seems torn about Kenth.” He dropped the shirt onto a plush black lounge chair. “Not that she believes you; I get the impression that she likes Kenth despite herself.”

“I can appreciate that.”

Winter continued stripping, pulling off his boots, followed by his breeches.

Peregrine watched him. Gods, the demon was handsome. Peregrine wanted to capture him on a card. He would be his new Demon, smiling and dangerous and seductive. Or his Witch, charming, imaginative, and yet practical.

Tomorrow, he decided. There would be time, before the coronation. He would begin his sketches for his new deck then.

When Winter was naked, he closed the distance between them and eased the robe away from Peregrine’s shoulders.

The thick fabric pooled around his feet. Peregrine stepped over it, traced Winter’s lips with his own, and then headed to the four-poster bed.

The blankets had been turned down, rich, dark blue things that were thin enough for a summer night.

A warm body moved up against his. Winter kissed his shoulder, his neck, and then nudged him onto the bed.

Peregrine moved back along the sheet and then turned.

Winter studied him, gray eyes incandescent. Smiling, he crept onto the bed. He moved over Peregrine, entwining his fingers with the witch's and gently pressing his hands to the bed.

A shiver darted through Peregrine. He remembered this moment. It'd been in his last reading.

"We didn't have much time together before," Winter said, ghosting his lips over Peregrine's chest, his stomach, his abdomen.

"I know. I –"

Warm lips whispered over his member.

Gods. Peregrine had read of this.

Wet warmth teased him, taking his tip and gently sucking it. The lips retreated, not quite touching him, and then returned, sliding past the tip, down the body.

Peregrine writhed. He wanted to grab Winter, touch him, *something*. The hands over his held him, though.

Winter's lips released him, and his mouth moved down the side of Peregrine's member, lightly nipping the flesh.

Peregrine tugged at his hands. He had to touch him.

One hand broke free.

Peregrine sank his fingers into Winter's hair. The black strands were soft and thick, twining easily around his fingers.



Winter chuckled, and the sound cast a warm, teasing breath over Peregrine's member.

A moment later, Winter's hand caressed Peregrine's. His fingers were slick; Peregrine wondered how his spell worked, and made a silent note to ask him about it in the morning.

Winter's lips retraced their path. His fingers crept down and stroked Peregrine's ass.

Peregrine gripped, released, and then gripped the demon's hair again. The movement drew a sigh from Winter.

Warm lips teased Peregrine's tip, and then Winter's oiled fingers caressed his opening.

The touch sent pleasure pulses through Peregrine, making his breath skip.

Winter moved up his body, kissing, nipping, laving. His fingers teased into Peregrine, rubbing, stroking, pushing.

There was a pleasant tightness. Thrilling and surprising and good.

The fingers moved, withdrawing, barely touching...and then returning.

Gods.

As he teased, Winter continued creeping up his body, kissing the pale spot on Peregrine's chest. He released Peregrine's hand, which Peregrine then slid around Winter.

Peregrine clenched his fingers in Winter's hair one last time and then ran his fingertips lightly down the demon's back.

Winter's fingers twisted, each one moving back and forth in synchronized motion. They brushed past something inside Peregrine, setting off a sudden pleasure.

Gasping, Peregrine bucked, sending Winter's fingers deeper inside him. His member twitched and brushed against Winter's thigh.

Winter's fingers withdrew slowly. Teasingly.

Peregrine reached down and stroked Winter's member. The flesh was oiled, so Peregrine traced his fingers over him, caressing the tip, the underside.

Chuckling, Winter nudged Peregrine onto his side. The demon positioned himself behind him, teeth grazing over the crook where neck and shoulder met.

Then Winter pushed into him.

The feeling of fullness, of something hot inching into him, surprised Peregrine. The tight-pleasure feeling was there, teasing close to something that, when brushed, made his breath catch.

When Winter was completely inside, he stilled. His lips whispered over Peregrine's shoulder, his neck, the corners of his lips.

Peregrine turned his face and caught Winter's mouth.

Whenever he'd read of kissing, Peregrine had always imagined that the expression of affection was a still thing. One pressed their lips against another's, and then it was done.

With Winter it was movement, lips brushing over someone else's and then parting so a tongue could dart out and tease into his mouth.

Winter shifted his hips, withdrawing his member, and then stroked back in.

Peregrine gasped. He reached down and grabbed Winter's hip. Yes. There. *There.*

Winter slid his fingers past Peregrine's to his hips, guiding them into moving in counterpoint to his thrusts. Peregrine mirrored him, pushing and pulling and then pushing again.

Winter reached down around him and caressed him. Peregrine felt his member jump at the combined sensations, his inner muscles clenching at the thick shaft stroking inside him.

Winter groaned into the side of his neck and began to quicken his thrusts.

"So beautiful," Winter whispered, laving the tip of Peregrine's ear.

"Beauty fades."

"So clever."

Okay, he liked that.

Winter's fingers wrapped around him, squeezing and releasing and then squeezing again. Pleasure coiled up inside Peregrine.

And then exploded. Wet warmth splattered his thighs, his stomach. Peregrine gasped, chasing his breath.

Echoes of pleasure fluttered through him, making his thoughts stumble. Oh, gods. Winter was his. He was going to remain there for him and be his witch. Be his.

Winter groaned. His thrusts continued, stroking deeply into Peregrine and making him writhe.

So good.

Winter trembled, and then he came.

The demon held on to him for a few moments, his breath tumbling over Peregrine's shoulder. Peregrine brushed his face against Winter's.

When Winter's breath evened, he drew Peregrine toward him, turning Peregrine until he was looking down at Winter.

Peregrine brushed Winter's hair away from his gray eyes and then kissed him. The body against him felt wonderful, warm and firm and his. His Lover. His Demon.

 THE END 

## L. M. Prieto & Jayson Taylor

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*Shadow Hunt* is L.M.'s and Jayson's first collaborative effort with Loose Id®.