



Cooking with Ergot

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Luisa Prieto

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Aspen Mountain Press

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Dedication:

To Darian, Loki, and Hobbes. The three greatest cats in the world.

Haunted Gingerbread House

2 sticks butter, room temp.	1½ tsp baking soda
1 C molasses	1 C brown sugar
½ tsp cloves	1 tsp kosher salt
6 C flour	2 eggs, lightly beaten
2 tsp cinnamon	1 tsp vanilla extract
2 tsp ground ginger *	2 tsp candied ginger *
¼ tsp nutmeg	

Fight the temptation to just throw all of the ingredients together and stir. Think of this as a spell you're casting. You do not toss the eye of newt into the cauldron without first putting in the bog water. I'm kidding about the newt and the cauldron.

Mix the butter, baking soda, brown sugar, cloves, salt, cinnamon, vanilla, and ginger together in a large bowl.

Add the molasses and eggs slowly.

Add the flour, one cup at a time.

Chill dough for at least three hours. Overnight would be awesome.

Roll out dough into ¼-inch thickness. Carefully cut out pieces for the house.

You do have a template already, right? Go to www.themidnightgourmet.com for a design.

Bake the pieces in a preheated oven at 350 for 20 minutes.

After the pieces have cooled, begin assembling the house.

Fend off Hansel and Gretel (aka the neighbor's kids). Once the polyurethane gets sprayed over the house, no one's touching this fairy tale.

* Yes, I said both the ground and candied ginger. It'll be yummy. Trust me.

Chapter One

Dominic Abernathy kept a light current of magic flowing out of him. It moved into the black bowl beside him and stirred the gingerbread batter, keeping the same gentle pressure that he was using on the Oreo cookies he crushed.

The black bits spilled free, crumbling across a waiting plate. His haunted gingerbread house was going to have beautiful and tasty soil. With luck, his producer would find someone who could come in and destroy it.

The phone rang.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his familiar twitch awake at the end of his oak table.

Dominic released the Oreos. Chunks clung to his fingers. "Can you get that, Blaise?"

"Sure." Red-gold dust shimmered over a two-foot-long stuffed tiger lounging beside the phone. As it passed, the tiger's features became smoother. Alive.

By the third ring, Blaise's once stitched paws stretched into pseudo fingers. He picked up the phone.

"Abernathy Manor," Blaise said. His liquor-smooth voice was soft and held a trace of an English accent, a result of the many Hammer Horror films Dominic had seen as a child and had wanted to integrate into his familiar.

Blaise's lips curved up. "Hello, Mercedes."

"Has she found someone?" Dominic asked. The first man she'd found to play the gingerbread exorcist/witch hunter had cancelled earlier that afternoon after he learned his appendix needed to come out. Dominic had sent him some gingerbread men spelled

with healing magic, but he needed someone to come in and chase his make-believe ghost away.

"Dominic is fine," Blaise said. He glanced at Dominic and twitched his tail, tapping the phone's cradle. It was a quiet admonishment, reminding Dominic that etiquette had to be followed. "He's crushing Oreo cookies for the house. How're you doing?"

"Blaise."

"Your youngest won a spelling bee? Brilliance runs in your family, I see."

Dominic sighed. He'd wanted a proper familiar; he'd gotten a proper familiar.

He'd begun gathering the magic for Blaise when he was six. He'd loved the tales of ancient witches and their clever mystical companions.

It took him two years, and when he cast the spell, he concentrated on everything he thought a familiar should have. He wanted it to be as intelligent as Merlin. As courageous as the Scarlet Pimpernel. As cool-sounding as Peter Cushing.

And he wanted it all in the form of his most cherished companion: his stuffed tiger.

Really. What did people expect? He was eight.

Thankfully, Dominic never regretted the decision. Blaise could brush off the façade of stuffing and fur, and he could turn around and fake being inanimate. Hunters looking for a black cat or a raven would be disappointed.

Hunters looking for a ghost in the gingerbread, though, now that was something entirely different.

Dominic released the Oreo chunks and sent a wisp of magic over his fingers.

The spell whispered over his skin, a light, cool sensation akin to his breath. Oreo bits fell away. A moment later, his hands were clean and, he suspected, smelling of chocolate.

Dominic glanced at the bowl he'd spelled to mix, made sure the wooden spoon was moving at a gentle beat, and then walked around the table.

He'd chosen this two-bedroom, two-bath cottage because of the kitchen; outside of his parents' house, it was the only place he'd seen that had a large brick hearth. String a few ropes of garlic around the high, exposed-beam ceiling, set candles into various nooks and crannies, put a cauldron in the hearth, and abracadabra -- a witch lived there.

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A witch and his very proper, very friendly familiar.

"No, you should go on the trip," Blaise said. "Both you and your sister rarely have time to get away and – Dominic is on his way. It was lovely talking to you."

"Now that you're done being charming, could I trouble you to make the buttercream frosting for the roof?" Dominic asked.

"I'm never done being charming." Blaise offered him the phone and then scampered across the table, coming to sit beside a large bowl. "Would you like me to add a couple drops of black food coloring?"

"Yes. Thank you." Into the phone, Dominic said, "Hello, Mercedes."

His producer chuckled. "Someday, you have to introduce me to the man who plays Blaise."

Someday, she would have to accept that the host of the *Midnight Gourmet* was the witch he professed to be and that Blaise was in fact a stuffed tiger.

"Have you found someone to play the exorcist/witch hunter?" Dominic asked.

"Yes."

Dominic smiled. Blessed be. He'd begun to worry he'd have to ask his older brother to come in and help. Justin could act, but the man burned macaroni-and-cheese.

"Carter Brooks will be coming in to play our witch-hating exorcist," Mercedes said.

Dominic's smile died. "Carter Brooks?"

Blaise paused in the middle of stirring. His tail twitched, sending bits of gingerbread castoffs darting to the floor.

"He's seen a few of the episodes," Mercedes said. "We think that, with your divergent styles, you two will really play off one another."

Dominic frowned. On one hand, she was right. Brooks's last release, *Cooking with Ergot: The Salem Witch Trials Cookbook*, was brilliant. The book combined history and food. It was interesting, filled with mock recipes sure to start up a witch hunt. His being a guest on a show about a food witch would be ironic.

The problem was, when Brooks was in any town promoting his books, witches disappeared.

"Can we get someone else?" Dominic asked.

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"What?"

"Can we get someone else? I could talk to my brother."

"Justin is nice, but he burned my hot dog at that barbecue last month. Besides, Carter's already agreed."

Dominic frowned. He wanted to snap or grumble, but he knew a tirade would just make him look insane.

He scowled at the phone's cradle, the table, the stirring spoon, and finally a small metal grater and a block of milk chocolate.

Oh, shit. He would need that soon.

Dominic cast a light thread of magic out, enchanting the grater and chocolate. They rose, circled one another in a slow dance, and then the shredder leaned close and began attacking the chocolate.

"We can begin filming his scenes on Monday," Mercedes said.

Two days to live. Great.

Dominic couldn't imagine how much filming they'd be doing, though, with Brooks trying to set him on fire or drown him or do any of the other methods he'd recommended in *Cooking with Ergot*.

"Dominic—"

"The man's a witch hunter."

"He's no more a hunter than you are a witch."

Dominic stilled.

The spells connected to him followed. The wooden spoon stood over the batter. The grater hovered over the chocolate, catching the afternoon light and glinting silver.

"Now I'm worried about you," Mercedes said.

"Don't be." Dominic lowered his hand. The spoon and grater followed his movement, each lying down on a folded napkin beside their bowls. "I've never hurt anyone."

"Neither has he."

"People tend to disappear when Brooks comes to town."

"Dominic. People disappear, period. They get fed up with their lives and want to

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start over. Or they're hiding from an abusive lover. Or, yes, someone kidnapped or killed them. It happens in places Carter's been, and it happens in places he's nowhere near."

"In his last book, he offered ergot recipes so other hunters can make them, so if they're caught killing people, they have a ready excuse for their madness."

When Dominic had first read those words, he'd been stunned. It was a joke. It had to be. Even Montgomery, his former mentor, agreed. The book was humor at its blackest. It described the burning times as the process people went through when they were first learning how to cook. Brooks made light of unpleasant things, but he meant no ill.

Two years before, Montgomery had been so certain of that. So certain. He'd taken a couple copies of *Cooking with Ergot* to a signing to get Carter's autograph.

He hadn't been seen since.

"What if I could get someone else to take his role?" Dominic asked.

"Justin—"

"Not Justin." Maybe his cousin. He couldn't cook either, but—

"One," Mercedes said, "I worked really hard to get him."

Not as hard as Dominic was working to get rid of him.

"Two, I don't think you could get someone who's written a book on such short notice."

Dominic frowned. Even with witchcraft, he'd probably need a couple days to do that.

"Three, he's already in town promoting his latest book, *Spice Wars*."

"He's *here*?" Dominic hurried over to the window.

The window revealed ten feet of side yard. Late-afternoon sunlight bled through the canopies of several oaks, a couple pines, and crawling ivy. Someone could hide out there. If they weren't afraid of spiders, mosquitoes, or the occasional skunk.

Dominic frowned. Located twenty minutes from San Jose, Los Gatos was a great mix of small-town solitude and big-city life. At this moment, the privacy seemed double-edged. The police would respond to calls quickly. Considering how

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wonderfully the road twisted on its way to his driveway, they might also get lost.

A warm weight leapt onto his right shoulder, and then Blaise leaned forward, studying the outside.

"Dominic, I promise, you're going to love him," Mercedes said.

"And if I don't?"

Mercedes released a long breath. "Then if you don't, just follow the script and pretend he's trying to kill you."

Dominic didn't think he'd have to act that hard.

He kept the unpleasant thought quiet. Mercedes had always been a fantastic part of the show. She loved his recipes, his humor, his tiger. When their original exorcist/hunter cancelled that afternoon, she'd immediately begun looking for a replacement.

And if the guy she'd found wasn't rumored to kill witches, Dominic would have made her the red velvet cupcakes she loved and overnighted them to her.

"It's going to be fine," Mercedes said. "I'll give you a call after filming ends on Monday. You'll see. We'll be chuckling about this in a couple days."

Blaise's tail tapped the back of Dominic's head. The touch was soft, a quiet reminder about etiquette.

"Okay. Talk to you then." Dominic clicked the phone off. "Shit."

"I don't see anyone out there," Blaise said. "He might not have found us yet."

"He doesn't have to find us. Mercedes probably gave him the address." He couldn't do his filming in a studio, could he? Oh, no. None of that artificial background for a witch. He'd argued that the kitchen was the soul of the house. His soul would soon have a deadly guest star.

"You're very public," Blaise said. "If you disappear, people will wonder."

"Montgomery was very public."

Silence.

Dominic stepped away from the window. Sometimes he could go days without thinking about his former mentor. Other times, the wound felt fresh. At one time, Montgomery had been a children's show host. Surrounded by sentient dolls and stuffed

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animals, he told stories and showed cartoons. *Montgomery's Neighborhood*.

The neighborhood had been quiet for a while now.

"Do you think it's a trap?" Blaise asked.

"Maybe." Dominic had always figured people would think he was kidding about being a witch. Then again, people thought Brooks was kidding about being a hunter.

Blaise's weight shifted on Dominic's shoulder, and then he leapt off. Dominic turned and watched him make his way to the counter, use the cabinet handles to climb up, and then slump beside the knife block.

"Shall we arrange an accident?" Blaise asked.

Dominic was tempted. If the ceiling caved in on Brooks, the supernatural world would certainly be a better place.

Witches did not use their powers to hurt people, though. It was at the core of everything they believed in: harm none. If Brooks attacked him, Dominic was free to fight back, but until then...

"No," Dominic said. It was the responsible answer, but he hated it. If Brooks was after him, he wouldn't wait for Dominic to be aware of him. He'd attack when Dominic's back was turned. Dominic usually was fine with witch codes of conduct, but today the *harm none* edict seemed to have been written on a bull's eye and taped to his back.

Except...while the edict did not allow for him to kill Brooks, he could defend himself. And if he needed more information, or to find Brooks first so he could see what the man looked like, then it was okay.

Dominic grabbed the box of Saran Wrap and began covering the gingerbread batter. "I'm going out for a bit."

"I'll go with you."

Dominic shook his head. While he wanted his familiar watching his back, right now they couldn't afford to be together. "I need you to guard the house while I'm out."

Blaise's tail flicked. Its movement was sharp, catching the edge of the knife block and turning it a little.

"Where are you going?" Blaise asked.

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To Dominic, the question was a quiet concession. Blaise did not like his plan, but he was agreeing.

He wished his answer could comfort his familiar. Dominic was afraid it wouldn't.

"I'm hunting the hunter," Dominic said.

Chapter Two

It was dark by the time Carter Brooks left the bookstore.

Cool air snaked over him, teasing him with the scent of cherry blossoms. The trees were close, though Carter didn't see them. The small parking lot held a chaotic beauty only California soil could produce: two oaks, a palm tree in the far corner, and an old willow beside his black BMW.

In the dim light, the willow's branches looked like ropes. Not ideal for lynchings, his paternal grandfather had once said. Until Carter had found the man's pictures from the 1940s, he'd always hoped the man had discovered that sad little fact from reading about it.

Ahead, the willow's thick trunk shifted, and then a thin figure stepped away from the tree.

Carter withdrew his car keys. Please, let it be a carjacker and not the man he'd seen earlier when he'd been signing books.

The figure approached the BMW. "Carter."

Damn.

"Simon."

The name was half resignation, half grumble. Whenever they met, he and his cousin argued. The rest of the family assured Carter it was because they were alike. If that was true, Carter hoped someone would come along soon and shoot him.

"What brings you by?" Carter asked.

"I just finished your latest book. It's not as good as *Cooking with Ergot*, but I liked learning that at one time you could hire an assassin with just a handful of peppercorns."

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Add a few more, and the man would even let you watch.

Carter frowned. He'd written the book; he'd researched and talked to others about those charming little details. And yet he wanted to blame Simon for reminding him.

But then, wasn't that what Simon usually tried to do? Remind him of things he was forever trying to figure out how to live with?

Simon stepped closer.

It was just a step, a slow movement that only brought Simon a foot closer, but it made Carter's muscles tense. The step was light, keeping the weight on the front of the foot, ready to twist or run at a moment's notice. It was calculated. Precise. A hunter's step.

Carter shifted his weight to the left, away from the car. If he kept a small gap open, he could crush Simon against the vehicle and —

He stilled. "We're not twelve."

Simon laughed. "I'd worried you'd lost your instincts."

Carter's frown deepened. He doubted the things could go away.

Unfortunately, he knew they wouldn't. The world had moved on and forgotten its history, and their family continued to pretend that child's play never hurt anyone.

"It's getting late," Carter said. He moved past Simon and stepped up to his car.

Simon's shadow followed, quietly telling him that his cousin was close.

Carter wasn't surprised. It'd been the same way when they were kids and they were playing their own version of cops and robbers: witch and hunter. Their fathers had played it; their fathers' father had played it; many generations of their family had, in fact, played it.

It wasn't until they were in college that Carter realized his cousin wanted to go beyond pretending.

We are descended from the great witch finders, Simon had said. Our senses are enhanced. We were born to hunt.

Carter had listened and then reacted the way he hoped someone would react if he talked about killing people — he drugged his cousin and took him to the hospital.

Twenty-four hours later, the observation period was over and Simon was gone.

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Since then, he'd lived in Carter's peripheral vision, close enough to catch, but far enough away to avoid seeming dangerous. Or, as the family preferred to think of it, not bother him. Simon was a playful soul. Carter was the unstable one.

Carter tapped the key fob. The BMW's doors clicked open, and he reached for the handle.

Something glinted out of the corner of his eye, coming at his hand. Carter turned.

And found Simon offering him a blade, handle first.

"Full moon tonight," Simon said. "A witching moon."

Carter took the blade. His fingers trembled against the smooth metal. Their family was wrong. Simon wasn't playing.

He tipped his head to the car. "Get in."

Simon's smile grew. "You'll join me."

"No. I'm taking you back to the hospital."

Simon's smile faded. "After reading your books, I'd hoped it meant you'd finally come to understand. I'm beginning to realize, though, that you're on a dangerous precipice. If you're not guided, you will lose yourself."

"You realize that my books are both cookbooks and parodies, right?"

"And clever guides to witch hunting."

"It's called sarcasm, Simon."

"It's called hiding in plain sight." Simon frowned. "At least, I'd hoped that was what you were doing. Damn. I should have approached you years ago. Hopefully it's not too late to reach you."

Okay. Perhaps Carter should have lied about where he wanted to take him. At least with Simon handing the knife over, the other man no longer had a weap—

Simon probably had another weapon.

"You're in danger, Carter."

No shit.

Carter opened the car door. If he couldn't get Simon to a doctor, then perhaps he should call one. From inside the car.

Simon slumped against the car door, shutting it.

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It looked like he'd be making that call from outside, then.

"You're the seventh son of the seventh son," Simon said. "It's a very dangerous place to be. You have it in you to be a hunter or a traitor."

Was he freaking serious?

"Simon. Honestly? The only thing that the seventh-son-of-a-seventh-son thing has ever really meant was a lot of hand-me-downs."

Simon scowled. "I don't see how joking about this is going to help you."

Comedy was an angry art. Robert McKee had said so.

Carter reached into the inside pocket of his leather coat and withdrew his cell phone. "It'll take me a few seconds to dial. You can either disappear in the meantime or —"

Simon snatched the phone out of Carter's hand.

Or, yes, that worked too.

Simon slipped his hand inside his trenchcoat, making the phone disappear. His own quiet abracadabra.

Carter stepped back. Fine. He still had the knife and, he hoped, Simon's fingerprints. He could just go back to Borders and call the police.

Simon's hand emerged from his coat. It held a gun.

The weapon was an unpleasantly pretty gray color. The barrel was long, ending in an attachment that, until then, Carter had only seen in movies. When Simon pulled the trigger, few people would hear it.

"I know this can't kill you," Simon said, "but it'll hurt."

Actually, Carter was fairly certain it could do both.

Simon pushed himself away from the car. "Get in. I'll drive."

Carter tapped the car fob. "No."

"I've got a gun."

"I'm still making payments."

Simon's scowl twitched. "It's sad. Even now, I still enjoy your sense of humor."

Carter wondered if he enjoyed it enough to not shoot him.

Simon's thumb flicked over the safety, undoing it.

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Carter inched back, one hand testing the weight of his satchel. It looked like Simon didn't enjoy his humor enough.

Very well. If he couldn't handle words when they were spoken, Carter would have to see how Simon would take them when they were gathered in a very heavy bag.

"My car's nearby," Simon said. "I think there are witches in this area. We'll find one, and when you see what they can do —"

Carter swung his satchel out, sending the heavy black bag at Simon's head.

Simon's gun hand jerked up, protecting his face.

The heavy weight of the satchel shook Simon's arm, distracting him. How long, Carter didn't care. One heartbeat, two, and he was able to run around the front of his car. Three, four, and he'd reached another car. He couldn't double back; Simon was there. But five, six heartbeats, if he could make it back to Borders —

The window in front of him shattered. A spiderweb of glass ran out from the hole. Shit.

Carter darted back, cutting between two vans. This direction moved him away from Borders, but maybe that was okay. He hadn't been thinking clearly when he'd thought to run to the bookstore. There were people there. If Simon had no compunction against shooting him or hunting down an innocent, would he care if others got between them?

He didn't know. He didn't want to find out.

Carter's heart slammed against his chest, offering this moment a soundtrack. He'd once read somewhere that it was difficult to hit a moving target. He did not want to test the theory.

Ahead, there was an empty space. Carter darted around the front of the van, keeping close to a car. This labyrinth of vehicles gave him a small protection.

Every labyrinth had a monster, though. Something that had been nudged to the side and forgotten. A minotaur, if he remembered his legends correctly.

A window shattered behind him.

His minotaur was close.

Carter reached the end of the car and turned left.

He'd been running toward the right since he'd begun running, and if Simon was

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keeping pace with him, then the sudden twist would likely throw him. Not enough to allow Carter to reach Borders, but maybe he could make it around the store.

Simon stepped in front of him.

Shit.

Carter stumbled to a stop.

"You're out of practice when it comes to hunting." Simon smiled and locked the gun on him. "Pity."

The bastard was going to shoot him.

The thought swept through Carter, making him feel oddly calm. Simon would kill him tonight. Maybe not now, but later, when Carter tried to stop him from hurting whatever "witch" crossed their path.

Fine.

Carter had spent most of his adult life trying to do something. Drawing people's attention to a past they'd sooner forget, arguing with his family about the things they kept hidden in their attics. Grandfather's white sheet parties could be ignored. Simon killing him? That was going to leave a trail.

Simon jerked his head toward the right. "My car is close. Let's go."

Carter wondered if dying hurt.

Shadows tumbled over Simon, dropping him in and out of the parking lot light.

Simon's smile bled away. "If that's you casting that spell...."

"I'm not—"

A thin man stepped out of the shadows behind Simon and struck his hand, knocking the gun away.

Surprise lanced Carter. God. Someone was trying to help him. The man didn't know Simon, though. Carter had to help him, too.

Simon turned, lashing out with a leg and unbalancing the man. The man fell, disappearing behind a car.

Carter grabbed Simon and threw him against a red van.

"Do you have a cell phone?" he asked the stranger while pinning Simon's forearms against the car.

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"Yes," the man said.

Carter tightened his grip on Simon. "Call the —"

Simon's head snapped forward, slamming into Carter's cheek.

Pain exploded red and black in Carter's cheek. The sensation of holding Simon, of standing, faded.

Carter blinked, fighting against the pain. The darkness. He had to...do something. Fight. Argue. See.

Another blink, and he found himself slumped against the van he'd pushed Simon against. The stranger was standing before him, holding out a hand as if to block a blow. Simon stood a few feet away, scowling.

Carter looked from Simon to the stranger. He hadn't gotten a good look at him before, and all he knew of the man was that he was about Carter's height, with short, dark brown hair.

The man threw something. It struck Simon's shoulder, spinning him and sending him falling against a car.

Simon steadied himself and then reached into his coat pocket. He withdrew a knife. "Suffer not a witch to live."

"If you're going to thump the Bible," the man said, "get a room."

The words were a pleasant tumble, light and sharp. The man had the bland accent Carter associated with people native to California, born of cable programs and not centuries-long traditions. Carter liked it.

Simon's eyes widened. "You —" He threw the knife.

No.

Carter caught a glimpse of the blade growing larger, and then he was thrown down. A warm body draped over him, covering Carter's face and throat as glass shattered above him.

Sharp, cold bits rained across Carter's right hand, pricking him. He winced and pulled his hand close against himself. Then, just to be careful, he turned his face away from the falling pieces.

And saw Simon's feet running away.

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Fuck.

Anger stabbed Carter. The bastard was going to get away, and Carter had no idea how to find him.

Problem was Simon would know how to find *him*. Ignoring his supposed gift for hunting, Carter's travel schedule was online. He might as well have RSVP'd the Inquisition himself.

The weight above Carter shifted. Carter glanced up at him.

The man studied the parking lot. His dark brown hair had fallen about his face, but the little Carter could see of it was nice. He had a boyish face, making it impossible to guess at his age. Late twenties? Early thirties?

Wet warmth tapped Carter's hand. A glance down revealed a thin scratch along the man's hand. A light trail of blood snaked down, gathered into a pool, and then leapt onto Carter's wrist.

"He's gone," the man said. He turned and looked down at Carter. "Are you —"

The man's eyes widened.

Carter stared at him. His eyes were beautiful. They were the same blue as lapis lazuli. They belonged on scarabs and brooches, as gifts for ancient pharaohs and roman emperors. They belonged on illuminated manuscripts, and the longer Carter stared at them....

They shone softly.

Carter blinked. The soft glow was gone.

A reflection of the light, he decided. Simon was wrong — magic did not exist.

They were beautiful, though.

"You're hurt," Carter said.

The man glanced down and then back at Carter. "It's just a scratch. I'm sorry to have knocked you down."

"Don't be," Carter said. "I'm glad you were here."

"I...um...should move."

Carter smiled. He didn't have to.

Chapter Three

What was he doing?

Dominic pushed himself up. He needed to keep his mind on Brooks.

He sent a wisp of magic out, threading it into the air to give him a sense of the area around them.

A moment later, he knew that Brooks was gone, one of the cars in the corner needed more air in its front left tire, and the man staring up at him had the palest gray eyes he had ever seen.

Wait. That wasn't his magic.

"Thank you," the man said. His voice was Southern Comfort smooth, hinting at an upbringing somewhere below the Mason-Dixon line. One could curl up with that sound after a hot day, when the sky turned indigo and the heat gentled into a soft caress.

Dominic drew the spell back, letting it settle over the scratch on his hand, healing it. They were safe. He should call the police and have them start looking for the hunter. "Are you okay?" he asked, withdrawing his cell phone from his coat pocket.

"I'm all right." The gray-eyed man rose. His right hand looked scratched, but it wasn't bleeding. Dominic was glad. When he'd had to choose between casting a spell after Brooks or protecting this man, he'd chosen the man.

Dominic frowned. Bad word. Wrong word. Witches in his line did not say *choose*. The word was saved for special occasions, like when any Disney princess looked at a total stranger and decided he was 'The One'. Such things only happened in fiction.

And to Dominic's parents. His grandparents. Great-grandparents. Great-great-grandparents.

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"How about you?" the man asked. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm glad." The man smiled.

Goddess. He was arresting. Short blond hair, a nose that was a touch large, wide lips that broke easily into an uneven and playful smile, and luminescent gray eyes. Athena's eyes, studying everything around them and recording it for later. He was dressed elegantly in a soft-looking black leather coat, dark blue shirt, and black slacks.

"I'm Carter," the man said.

Carter? Goddess, what if he was the hunter?

Even as Dominic thought it, laughter blossomed inside of him. Carter was an uncommon name, but the hunter couldn't be the only one with it. So he was a Carter. Charles Manson and Shirley Manson shared a last name, but Shirley didn't want anyone killed on her behalf.

Carter's incandescent gaze traced over Dominic. Eyes as smooth as silver. As cool as winter. As ethereal as mist. One could get lost in them.

With Brooks still on the loose, neither of them could afford to be lost.

"Dominic," he said. He began to reach into his coat for his phone when he realized he already had it. Dominic frowned at his cell.

"It's all right," Carter said. His smile softened, becoming gentle. "He unnerved me, as well."

The gentleman was kind. Blaise would probably like him.

"I'm going to call the police," Dominic said.

"That's a good idea." Carter tipped his head toward the bookstore. "Borders is still open. Why don't we wait inside in case he comes back?"

Dominic's fading traces of magic in the area assured him that they were alone, but he nodded.

They made their way through the cars toward the brightly lit bookstore. Dominic dialed 911.

"I'd like to buy you a mocha while we wait," Carter said.

Dominic smiled. And felt foolish. Brooks had attacked this man. The poor guy was

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probably spooked, and still Dominic was flattered. He was being a dork.

"I'd like that," Dominic said. Perhaps this foolish giddiness didn't matter. Brooks was still a danger, Montgomery's body might never be found, but Carter was safe. That meant a lot.

Carter stepped forward and opened the glass door that led into the Borders café.

"Thanks," Dominic said. "They'll be here quickly, though."

"No, they won't."

This being Los Gatos, the police arrived a moment after Dominic ended the call.

Dominic sat outside the bookstore, nursing a small hot chocolate and watching Carter talk to the police twenty-something feet away. They stood beside a black BMW, their voices fading into the cool wind.

Looking at the handsome blond man, Dominic felt odd. He'd been right to go looking for Brooks. He also felt lucky. He had suspected the witch hunter would probably go after someone while he was in the area, but he'd thought it would be him.

"Are you all right?" a warm voice asked.

Dominic turned. His older brother, Justin, approached him. Justin was a study in black and white: white shirt, black slacks, vest, and tie. The end of Justin's dark wool coat swept along behind him.

"What are you doing here?" Dominic asked.

"One of the guys recognized you and called me." Justin joined him on the stone bench. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Dominic brushed his hair back. Chances were, he looked awful; his shirt was torn and missing buttons, his jeans were dirty from their trip to the pavement, and his hair released a fairy dust of dirt and twigs. Carter, though, was okay.

"What brought you here?" Justin asked.

Hunting the hunter.

One did not say that to one of Las Gatos's finest, so Dominic said, "I wanted to get a book."

"An hour before closing."

"I didn't attack the guy."

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Justin released a breath. "Sorry. Finding out Brooks is in town bugs me."

Just wait until he learned why Brooks was there.

"Before I came to talk to you, I talked to one of the other officers." Justin glanced at the gathering of police and Carter and then looked back at him. "Dominic. The guy you protected."

"Stop talking like Captain Kirk."

"It's Brooks."

What?

No. The idea was insane. The man he'd helped was nice.

Okay, they'd only talked for a moment, but when the hunter had kicked Dominic's feet out from under him, Carter had jumped in and tried to fight. Carter had wanted to help the guy who was trying to protect him. He wasn't a monster.

"Someone's made a mistake," Dominic said.

"Dom—"

"He can't be Brooks. The other guy *talked* like a hunter."

"The other guy is his cousin."

Shit.

Dominic looked back at Carter. He couldn't be Brooks. His eyes....

Carter looked back. Their eyes caught, and then Carter smiled.

Brooks. Carter Brooks.

Goddess help him. He'd wondered and then talked himself out of it. A rose by any other name....

Roses had thorns.

"Dom, you're beginning to worry me."

Dominic turned and scowled at his brother. He hated that variation of his name, and Justin knew it.

"Don't call me that. I didn't know it was him."

Justin looked away. "I figured. After Montgomery...."

Yes.

Dominic cast a glance back at Brooks. At Carter. Was he innocent? Or did he and

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his cousin work together? Had Dominic interrupted a hunt, or had they simply been arguing?

Or was this how they worked? Did one playact being threatened and then turn around and kill whoever tried to help? Was that how Montgomery died? If Dominic asked, would Carter tell him?

He pushed the thoughts away. No. If Carter was working with his cousin, he would have attacked Dominic the moment he became distracted looking at Carter. He hadn't. More importantly, the cousin hadn't acted like he expected Carter to suddenly aid him. This wasn't a trap.

Dominic hoped.

"I'm worried about the look you two keep giving each other," Justin said.

Dominic looked at his brother. "I stopped his cousin from shooting him. He turned out to be Brooks. I'd say we have a right to look at one another."

"Not when he should be focusing on explaining to the police why he didn't call for help instead of trying to get his cousin to a psychiatric hospital."

"He was trying to get —"

"Supposedly." Justin frowned. "Dominic, what if you...and he...what if the two of you...?"

Shit. Justin was trying to say *choose*, wasn't he?

"Do you think it's possible you cho —"

"No," Dominic said.

"The way you're acting —"

"I'm just stunned."

"You can't seem to stop looking."

"A part of me still can't believe it." Dominic called that part his libido, and at this moment he wondered if it was trying to get him killed. "If his cousin is the one doing the killing, then he's innocent."

"Or an accomplice," Justin said.

"Or the fall guy."

"For ten years' worth of disappearances?"

Luisa Prieto

"Technically, no one has ever really been able to prove Carter was behind the disappearances," Dominic said.

"Because everyone who went to investigate disappeared."

"If his cousin has been shadowing him, he might've killed them. People wouldn't have known he existed, because he would've disposed of anyone who'd seen him."

"Do you actually believe that?"

Dominic didn't know.

Justin shot a scowl at Carter. If the look had been a weapon, the other man would now be bleeding. "Have you ever considered trying your hand at writing? 'Cause right now, I think you have a future in fiction."

Dominic frowned. "I'll keep that in mind for when the *Midnight Gourmet* ends."

"If you've chosen him—"

"I haven't."

Dominic folded his arms, allowing his hands to grip his elbows. He told himself it was because it was cold, but he suspected it was more than just the chill September night. It was the situation. The mysterious man standing by the car.

That word Dominic did not want to say or hear.

Despite himself, the word, the thought, was still there. People fell in love at first sight all the time, but in their family they'd gotten it down to a freaking art form.

Normally, neither Dominic nor Justin would've admitted it aloud. There was something sweet and corny about the tale behind how their parents met—driving down Winchester, pausing at a light; their eyes caught, and then they pulled over to talk.

Kismet, they said. Lucky that the other person wasn't a serial killer, Dominic and Justin said. At thirty and thirty-five, they'd lost patience with the fantasy. Their parents had been lucky. Their grandparents had been lucky. Their great-grandparents, and so on and so on, forever into antiquity, had been freaking lucky.

Until then—no, even then—Dominic thought the choosing thing was a wishful thought. The world was a more open place now, but there'd been times when having a knack with herbs was grounds for heresy. Witch hunters would come, accusations would scream, and people died. The idea of a true love made the dark times easier to

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bear.

Dominic didn't need a myth to keep him company, though. Certainly not one that would ally him with a man he didn't know he could trust.

"It doesn't happen like that," Dominic said.

Justin frowned. "For your sake, I hope you're right." He glanced past Dominic.

And then stilled.

Dominic was surprised. His brother was looking at something besides Carter.

Unpleasant thought: what would it take to get Justin's attention away from a suspected hunter?

Dominic turned. A dozen feet away, a young Asian man in glasses talked to one of the officers.

"It's not his cousin," Dominic said.

"Oh," Justin whispered.

The man glanced in their direction and then stopped talking.

Dominic studied him. The man was pleasant-looking. He was in his mid-to-late twenties and dressed in a long black wool coat, jeans, and a shirt that was a collage of green, blue, purple, and flecks of silver. *GQ* meets Monet.

The man was still staring at him.

No, past him.

Dominic glanced at his brother. Justin was watching the man; the man was watching Justin. Synchronicity. Kismet.

Shit.

Justin blinked and looked at his well-shined shoes, the cup of hot chocolate sitting between him and Dominic, and finally Dominic.

"It's a fairy tale," Dominic said.

Justin nodded. "Yes."

Dominic wondered if Justin believed it.

"I'll look into Brooks," Justin said. "Find out what he's doing here, see if he was meeting his cousin here or if his cousin was a surprise."

Dominic gathered his breath. The time to tell Justin what he knew had come.

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"Carter was in town doing a book signing."

"And the book you supposedly came down for was?"

"Witch Hunting for Dummies."

"Goddess," Justin whispered. Then, louder, "Why did you come down to the bookstore?"

"I had to."

"No, you didn't. You could have called me, and I would've come and kept an eye on him."

"You couldn't watch him forever."

"Only as long as he was in town."

"Mercedes asked him to be the exorcist/hunter for the next episode of *Midnight Gourmet*. He and I were destined—" Fuck, another word he didn't want to use in connection with him and Carter. "We were going to meet."

"Shit." Justin ran his hands through his hair, forcing the dark strands back. "Is your producer trying to get you killed?"

"No." Although a part of Dominic wondered. "I think she still thinks I'm normal."

A bark of laughter escaped Justin. "She's known you for a year. If she still thinks that, the woman has a houseboat on de Nile."

Watching the detective take his statement, Carter realized that his life had become a yin-yang of problems.

Simon was insane. He was going to kill someone.

Dominic was not insane. He'd felt damn good against Carter.

Carter frowned. He couldn't afford to think about Dominic now. However nice the man's body had felt against his, Simon was still out there. He was a threat. Dominic's body had felt unbelievably good, but it was only a physical reaction. He'd only done that because he'd been trying to help.

Unfortunately, the words felt hollow. If Dominic had only been trying to help him, he wouldn't have lingered on top of him. He wouldn't have looked into his eyes as long as he had.

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He wouldn't be looking back at him now.

They were twenty, maybe twenty-five, feet apart, but Carter could still see his eyes. His face. His body.

Carter usually would not ask out someone he'd just met, but when the man looked at him, he'd felt...he didn't know. Love at first sight?

No, more likely lust at first sight, with an added splash of respect. It had taken guts to step between him and Simon. Carter wanted to learn more about him—what he'd been doing there, what were his favorite books, favorite foods, what kinds of sounds he made when coming.

Dominic looked away, breaking the spell. He glanced at the plainclothes detective beside him, who then turned and scowled at Carter.

Great. Another cop in a small town who didn't like him. Just what he needed.

"When was the last time you saw Simon Brooks?" the officer, a young man named Rhodes, asked.

Carter turned back to the officer. He made it a point to learn people's names and focus on them. The world had grown so chaotic, but the small things still had the power to touch people. Carter hated forgetting about them.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Could you please repeat the question?"

A faint smile touched the officer's lips. "When was the last time you saw your cousin?"

"Last Christmas." Simon had arrived at Brooks Plantation just as Carter was leaving. The family had tried to keep Carter longer, hoping that he and Simon would talk.

Shit. Carter had to call his family and warn them.

Okay, maybe not warn. Explain. While they would be horrified that someone had attacked Carter, their feelings would soften when they learned it'd been Simon. They would probably think that he and Simon had argued and that he'd made Simon attack him.

"Were you and your cousin arguing?" Rhodes asked.

"Yes, after he began talking about hunting down and killing someone."

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"Do you think something you said or did provoked him?"

Obviously, the family wouldn't be the only ones wondering that. "Yes. 'Don't hunt or kill anyone.'"

Rhodes wrote that down.

Carter glanced back at Dominic. What was he being asked? Whatever it was, it was probably just as pleasant; Dominic was frowning at the plainclothes detective.

"Did your cousin say why he was after you?" Rhodes asked.

"Yes." And it made as much sense now as it had when Simon first said it.

Carter went over the attack. Even now, he found the numbers thing ridiculous. Being the seventh son of a seventh son did not give him magic powers, any more than being the sixth son of a sixth son made Simon the anti-Christ. A bastard, certainly, but not supernatural.

The lights in the parking lot died one by one as the interview trudged on to its end. Borders closed, statements were given, car owners came out and became pissed when they saw what Simon had done to their vehicles, and Carter was left alone with his BMW, asked to wait a moment for Detective Abernathy to come talk to him.

Abernathy. Carter wondered if he was any relation to the cooking show host he would be meeting in a couple days.

Carter had caught a few glimpses of the show. The host had been hidden behind the beak of a seventeenth-century plague doctor, but his knowledge of herbs had been interesting, as had the stuffed tiger that followed him around. How the hell did they animate Blaise?

A figure ghosted across his car's window. Dark brown hair. A boyish face. Those eyes.

"You're Carter Brooks," Dominic said.

Carter turned. Dominic's tone had changed, developing an edge to match the sharpness of his mouth. His stance. His eyes.

Disappointment stabbed Carter. When he'd first seen Dominic, he'd felt...something. Enchanted, because Dominic's eyes were beautiful. Touched, because the man was either brave or foolish, and he'd been willing to be brave or foolish for

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Carter. A connection, probably created because of the chaos of foolish, brave enchantment.

Looking at Dominic now, though, made Carter realize that it'd been only him.

"Yes," Carter said. "And you are?"

Dominic's lips twitched. "I don't look familiar?"

"Yes. We met an hour ago."

"So until tonight...?"

"My life was empty."

Dominic laughed softly. "I'm going to kill her," he whispered.

"Kill who?"

Dominic shook his head. The movement sent several strands of hair falling about his face, hiding his eyes. "Do you ever watch the *Cooking Network*?"

"Occasionally." If one of his friends was competing in something or he was having trouble writing. The shows were interesting, but if he let himself, Carter could lose whole days just watching that channel. "You?"

"Occasionally." Dominic frowned. The movement made his eyes darken. At one time, lapis lazuli of that depth were ground into exquisite tempura and oil paints. They were worthy of masterpieces.

They hated him.

"You've read *Ergot*," Carter said.

Dominic's lips twitched, briefly giving him a bitter smile. "I knew the term *faggot* originated as a bundle of wood, but I hadn't ever thought of the precise number of sticks it would take to burn someone."

His words were angry, but when he said *faggot*, the word was a whisper. It hurt him.

Carter understood. The ugly word cut at him, too.

"If you hunt the word down to its origin, *fascēs*, it still means bundle," Carter said. "It's Latin for 'strength through unity.' A 'might makes right' kind of leadership. I didn't make either word evil."

"You joke about it."

Yes. And the more he did, the fewer people used it around him. “They can be vile words. I deny them power.”

Dominic’s frown shifted. It still hinted at unpleasant thoughts, but there was a curiousness there now. Dominic might never like *Ergot*—Carter wouldn’t blame him; many people over the years had wondered why he couldn’t write about pleasant things—but perhaps Dominic would be more willing to look past the messenger to the words themselves.

Footfalls approached. A moment later, the plainclothes detective joined them.

“Detective Abernathy,” the man said, offering his hand.

“Carter Brooks.” He offered his and then fought a wince as the detective’s fingers crushed his.

When the detective released his hand, Carter let it fall to his side and slowly flexed the fingers. The detective offered him a smile.

Despite the handshake, Abernathy was a pleasant-looking man, with dark brown hair, blue eyes, and a high forehead. Receding hairlines looked good on very few men. If Carter’s hair decided to travel, he hoped it looked half as good as the detective’s.

“Do you think your cousin knows where you’re staying?” Abernathy asked. His face held a trace of Dominic’s beauty. Carter wondered if they were related.

“Maybe,” Carter said. He thought over what Dominic had said—did he watch the *Cooking Network*? Did he look familiar?

I’m going to kill her.

Her. Mercedes.

Carter released a long breath. He was a dick for not seeing the show before he arrived in town. He had the previous season on DVD and had intended to watch it over the weekend, but that didn’t matter. While Carter had seen a few moments of one episode, all he’d known was that Dominic had dark brown hair, a light voice that slurred words together when he got excited, and a really great special-effects guy.

And, according to Mercedes, a lover.

Carter frowned. Never mind the oh-so-logical certainty he’d had that there was something between them. According to the *Midnight Gourmet*’s producer, Dominic lived

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with his partner, a very charming man who voiced the stuffed tiger on the show.

"Do you have any other place you might be able to stay? Any friends in the area?" Abernathy asked.

"No." Even if he did, Carter wouldn't have wanted to stay with them. Too dangerous.

"He could stay with me," Dominic said.

The detective's head twisted around to look at Dominic. "What?"

"He could stay with me. My place is pretty hidden."

Carter stared at Dominic. Was he serious? Carter had thought the man couldn't stand him.

Dominic glanced at him. The anger had faded from his eyes, leaving them that dark blue that captured Carter again.

No, Carter realized. It wasn't simply the eyes. It was the life behind them, that fierce and brave mind that wasn't afraid to look. To ask questions.

"What about—" Shit. He couldn't remember if Mercedes had given him Blaise's last name. "—your tiger?"

"He's stuffed."

Carter wondered if that meant they'd broken up.

Detective Abernathy sighed. "Dominic."

"Carter's going to be coming to my place in a couple days anyway," Dominic said, looking back at Detective Abernathy. "This way we'll be able to—"

"Fairy tales aside—"

"Work on the gingerbread house."

Fairy tales?

Carter looked from one Abernathy to the other. He wanted to tell them that fairy tales didn't reflect life. At one time, yes. Stepmothers and stepdaughters waged quiet wars in a world that valued men over women. Starving families left children in the woods to die. Strangers would entice and hurt little girls.

Hmm. Maybe the fairy tales were still important. They certainly reminded Carter that, if Simon found Dominic's house, he would kill Carter.

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"I can check into another hotel," Carter said. While he doubted Hansel and Gretel were going to threaten Dominic's gingerbread plans, Simon would.

"He's dangerous," the detective said.

"So am I."

"You'll forgive me if I don't quite believe that."

"I can check into a hotel close to the police station," Carter said.

The two men glanced at him, and then returned to frowning at each other.

"His cousin might keep looking for him," the detective said. "If he finds you —"

"You'd be close. Then you'll be able to catch him and...see what he says."

The detective shook his head. "I don't like this plan."

"Give me a better one."

"I'll assign someone to keep an eye on him."

"You mean for me, right?" Carter asked.

"I can protect him better," Dominic said.

"I can protect me too," Carter said.

The two men stared at one another. After a moment, the detective sighed. "Fine. He's yours."

Dominic's frown deepened.

"To watch," the detective added.

Carter frowned too. Whatever pleasant fantasy he'd had to get to know Dominic better had ended the moment Dominic learned his name.

Honey Pecan Chicken

8 pieces of chicken	2 C pecans
2 tsp butter	1 tsp salt
6 tsp honey	¼ tsp nutmeg
¼ tsp pepper	

Call Blaise and tell him that Dominic is bringing Carter Brooks home. Be told to

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preheat the oven.

Open Dominic's cookbook, the Grimoire. Skim over recipe.

Assure dinner guest that you can cook as well as your brother.

Salt and pepper the chicken.

Wonder why the chicken had to be salt and peppered.

Lightly toast pecans to bring out their oils.

Wonder what oils Dominic was talking about.

Discover dinner guest can speak French. Holy shit, that's hot.

Burn the pecans. Start over.

Mix honey with salt, nutmeg, and pepper. Coat chicken.

Plaster pecans to chicken.

Realize you forgot to preheat the oven. Put it at 400 to quickly warm up, and then put the chicken inside.

Burn the chicken.

Throw chicken away. Order a pizza.

Chapter Four

Justin's last words followed Dominic as he led Carter to his black 2007 Prius. Justin was keeping Carter's BMW in case Simon had put some kind of tracking device on it, but that wouldn't stop Simon from looking for them. Dominic would have to be careful.

The words caught Dominic, pulling him away from his frustrated wondering about Carter's past. He had to be careful. Fine. He would.

Starting with getting them home.

There were many ways to get home. Tonight, Dominic took the most circuitous route over the river and through the woods he could think of—down Winchester, past Vasona Park and the creek that cut through it, onto Highway 17, past oak and redwood woods, and then onto a narrow, tree-shrouded road that led back to Los Gatos and the winding little road that led home.

"Were we lost?" Carter asked.

"No." Dominic slowed and paused at a stop sign. "Just being paranoid." He glanced at both sides of the street, saw no one, and then kept driving.

"California stop," Carter mused. "I've heard of them, but I've never seen it before."

"It's pretty dead—" Another word he probably shouldn't be using right now. "—around here at this hour."

"Ah." Carter drew out the soft sound.

Dominic fought the insane urge to look at him. Carter likely looked the same as when he got into the car, as he had when they met and when Dominic learned who he was. Looking at him changed nothing.

Talking to him, though....

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"Did your cousin come with you to the signing?" Dominic asked.

"No."

"Does he follow you when you travel?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

Interesting. "Has he ever threatened you before?"

"Did your brother ask you to interrogate me?"

"No. I'm doing it for fun."

Carter chuckled.

The soft rumble teased Dominic. The sound was as soft as liquor, warm and sweet, with a subtle kick at the end. Carter was amused by him. He also sounded sad.

"I'm sorry," Dominic said. Justin hadn't told him to ask questions—right now, Dominic knew he would've asked just to be spiteful—but it wasn't fair to Carter. "I shouldn't pry."

"Simon would've shot you. I think you have a right to ask. No, he's never threatened me before. I've occasionally seen him out of the corner of my eye at other readings, but this was the first time he approached me."

"Does he live in the area?"

"No. He's a travel writer. He has a cabin on the family's land, but otherwise he lives out of a backpack."

Great. A hunter with no real address.

And a man willing to answer questions.

"He's not well," Carter said. "Ever since we were children, he's thought he was the next Mathew Hopkins."

"The great witch finder general."

"You know your witch-hunting history."

Dominic frowned at the road. Oh, yes. He knew it. He knew that Hopkins thought familiars drank blood from a witch's teat. He knew that Hopkins had created a special retracting knife so that when he went looking for places on a human body that wouldn't bleed when pricked, he'd find it.

Skin whispered against metal. Dominic glanced at Carter and found him looking

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out the window. His elbow was propped up against the window frame, allowing his chin to rest on his knuckles.

Dominic's frown faded. Carter had a David Duchovny-ish pensiveness. The truth was out there. He just might not like hearing it.

"Kitchen witch," Carter said. "Witch hunting. God, I'm slow tonight."

Surprise surged through Dominic, making him feel unsteady. Did Carter suspect what he was? And if he did, what then? "Pardon?"

"Of course you know the history. It makes for better television."

The surprise faded. Into what, Dominic wasn't certain. Relief that Carter didn't know. Disappointment, though Dominic didn't know why.

Correction—he didn't want to know why.

"So if he's Hopkins, who are you?" Dominic asked.

"Seventh son of the seventh son."

Goddess.

At one time, seventh sons of seventh sons were renowned leaders among witches. Their magic was stronger, their wits sharper, their hearts larger. To find one, especially one related to a hunter, seemed impossible.

"It's not as exciting as it sounds," Carter said.

He was wrong. He had no idea how long it had been since witches had seen one of his kind.

Dominic wondered if Carter had the potential to do magic. Goddess, what if that was the reason why Simon had threatened him?

"I had six older brothers," Carter said. "That means six times the wait to get into the bathroom, six times the opportunity to get lectured for not being as athletically skilled as them, and six times the chance of having every instructor from kindergarten through high school wary of my approach."

It didn't sound like Carter quite understood the seventh-son thing. Then again, he understood what it had meant to him. In a family that had produced a hunter, they would probably not encourage a magical talent.

"Bad students?" Dominic asked. He imagined any line that could produce a hunter,

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especially one that might be hiding in another man's shadow, would encourage scholastics, but it didn't hurt to ask.

"Let's just say there's a small town in South Carolina that has a lot of buildings that were gifts from my family."

Hmm. Perhaps there were no Rhodes Scholars among them. It sounded like Carter came from a wealthy family, though. Dominic wondered if they would get Simon lawyers when he was finally caught.

Dominic also wondered how many of them were aware of Simon's vocation.

The street curved to the right. Dominic slowed and then headed down to where the half block ended in front of his cottage.

"Does your family know he's...." Saying *evil* or *insane* would probably make Carter stop talking. "Not well?"

"They believe he's fine. Just playful."

That playfulness might have killed hundreds of witches.

"I think they'll take it more seriously when he's arrested," Carter said. "They won't be able to say I misunderstood. A trail of bullets and a witness are difficult to ignore."

Unless the witness disappeared.

Dominic frowned. If he pushed aside his unease about the hunter, he would realize that Carter was unknowingly backing up his theory about Simon using Carter as a front for his killings.

Carter's family might be in on it; they might not. If Dominic or Justin went insane, Dominic suspected their family would argue that they were fine, just eccentric, as well.

"I'll be happy to talk to them, if it helps," Dominic said.

"Thanks. Can you promise me you won't question them about Hopkins?"

"No. Why? Is he a cousin, too?"

Silence.

Goddess.

"It's an old family story," Carter said. "I don't think it's any more real than people being descended from Native American royalty."

People could be descended from shamans and chiefs, though. Perhaps there were

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no hereditary titles or castles to inherit, but perhaps some wisdom, some inner strength, could be passed on.

“What would I find if I climbed your family tree?” Carter asked.

An entire line of people who’d survived because they’d hidden from people like his cousin and possibly him.

“We’re pretty boring,” Dominic said. Justin was right. Dominic had made a mistake. He was married to the mistake now.

Shit, he meant he was pulling into his driveway now. Nothing to do besides park and hope they didn’t kill one another.

“Welcome to Abernathy Manor,” Dominic said, getting out of the car. Abernathy Manor, as Blaise liked to call it, was a one-story blue cottage. A large oak in the yard hid it from the street, giving him the sudden thought that no one would see his dead body being dragged out to his trunk.

He was being foolish. His neighbor to the left occasionally stole his newspaper. The least the guy could do was notice if someone was trying to dispose of his corpse.

Carter emerged from the car. “Nice place.”

“Thanks.”

“Are we still in Los Gatos?”

“Yes.” Though after the tour of the area he’d gotten, Dominic could understand why he’d ask. Los Gatos was small, nestled in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Gorgeous place. Ugly residential taxes.

Dominic led him toward the house. Despite the taxes, despite—or perhaps because of—the encroaching woods, the cottage was home. His family had lived in the area since it was called Rancho Rinconada De Los Gatos, or Corner of the Cats. The name was a subtle warning, letting people know that there were wild cats in these parts. Blaise said there still were, and usually then pounced to show he meant business.

Dominic wondered where Blaise was now.

He unlocked the doors and slipped in first. At another time, Blaise would have admonished him for that. One held the door for guests.

If Dominic did that tonight, he was afraid his familiar would pounce on his guest,

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and however uncertain Dominic felt about Carter, the man had so far not done anything to deserve that. The one time anyone had broken into the place, Dominic had found the guy curled into a ball by the door, whispering about how something had attacked him, and then a growling shadow just sat there, watching him. For a little tiger, Blaise knew how to play with light and darkness to freak people.

Dominic waited inside, giving the living room a quick scan. He didn't see Blaise. That meant his familiar was being cautious.

Carter stepped inside and looked around. Dominic closed and locked the door behind him.

"Mercedes said you lived with your partner," Carter said, shrugging out of his soft-looking leather coat.

"Partner?"

"Blaise."

Laughter coiled inside of Dominic. He couldn't believe this.

"Blaise isn't my partner," Dominic said. Not in the sexual tense, anyway.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's fine. We're good friends."

"Does he live here?"

"No." The lie felt strange. It was simpler to say that, though. If Carter was lucky, he would never learn the truth.

"I do have a stuffed tiger named Blaise," Dominic added. "He's around here somewhere." Hopefully not near the knives. Or holding on to a valance, waiting to pounce. Or sitting by an open window, calling out to his cousins. The last thing any of them needed was more mystical cats roaming the area. One hunter was scary enough.

"May I take your coat?" Dominic asked. The night was mad and had its own insane order, but Carter was still his guest. If Blaise weren't likely stalking the man, he would've admonished Dominic later.

"Please." Carter offered him the soft leather.

Dominic carried it over to the coat closet in the hall. In the few moments it took for a spelled hanger to swing out, slip into the coat, and return to the shelf, Dominic

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scanned the hall, the closet, and then back to the bit he could see of the living room. No Blaise. He was probably in the kitchen.

When he closed the closet door, Carter was there, gray eyes studying the hall. Studying him.

"May I get you a drink?" Dominic asked. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm good, thank you. Why did you want me to come back with you?"

"I don't trust your cousin."

"I think neither you nor your brother trust me either."

The seventh son of a seventh son had an amazing sense of the obvious.

"You're not him," Dominic said.

Carter smiled.

Goddess. He was an arresting man, cynical and witty and given to pensive thoughts, but when he smiled, he came alive.

"May I use your bathroom?" Carter asked. "I'd love to wash the parking lot off myself."

"Oh, yeah." Then, because Carter was not allowed back into his hotel room, "I'll get you some sweats, if you like."

"That would be wonderful. Thank you."

Dominic led him halfway down the hall. A quick glance into the blue-themed bathroom showed neatly placed towels, a couple white candles, and no tigers. "Here you go. The guest room is next door. My room is at the end of the hall."

"Useful information to have," Carter said. A smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

"Careful. Somewhere around here, there be tigers."

Carter's smile grew. "I'd like to meet the little guy."

The little guy would probably like to meet him, too.

Dominic went to his room, grabbed a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, and then returned to the bathroom. He set the clothes on the counter and watched Carter undo the laces of his soft leather shoes for a moment. The man had long, dexterous fingers. Dominic wondered what they'd look like working in the kitchen, cutting celery, measuring spices, tracing across his skin.

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He frowned. He shouldn't be wondering.

"There are clean towels in the cabinet," Dominic said. "If you need anything...."

"I'll call." Carter slid his shoe off. He wore a thin black sock. Carter's socks likely matched.

Dominic wondered if his did. Sometimes he cast a spell over the laundry, making it fold itself. His green socks, he'd learned, were quite fond of pairing off with his black ones.

He glanced at Carter's hands one last time and then left, heading for the kitchen.

Unease blossomed inside of Dominic. As he crossed the living room, it grew. What if Blaise wasn't even in the kitchen? Dominic hadn't seen him in his room, but all that meant was that the tiger might under the guest bed.

There was a flash of red-orange fur near the bookshelf, and then Blaise pounced on Dominic's chest.

When Dominic was younger, the force of jumps like that had knocked him onto his back. At thirty, it made him stumble back and hit the wall.

"You brought Brooks *here*?" Blaise asked. His English accent softened the words, but they still cut Dominic. Blaise sounded afraid. Angry. Dominic had never meant to upset him.

"I take it Justin called," Dominic said.

"Yes."

Good news traveled quickly. Dominic wondered if his older brother had mentioned the choosing thing.

"It's a long story." Dominic pushed himself away from the wall and, with one arm curling around Blaise in a half hug, half support embrace, went into the kitchen.

"I'd like to hear it."

"I think Carter isn't the one who's behind the disappearances. It's his cousin, Simon."

"And you know they're not working together because...?"

"Simon was going to shoot him. I stopped him."

"And Brooks is our guest and not Justin's because...?"

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"Justin has to find Simon. He can't do that and protect Carter."

Dominic checked the answering machine. No messages. Great, no way to find out what Justin had told Blaise. How could Dominic explain what had happened without making himself sound insane or in the throes of the C word?

"Protect." Blaise's brows eased out of their scowl. "Oh. Dear. You've chosen him."

Goddess. "I have not."

"It's the only sane reason I can come up with for why you brought him here."

"His cousin is hunting him. The jerk probably knows the hotel and room number where Carter is supposed to be staying. Justin and I thought he'd be safer here."

Blaise shifted, clambering up Dominic's chest to be level with his eyes. "Justin thought that?"

Well...not exactly.

Blaise's tale twitched. The end tapped Dominic gently, a quiet request to please go on.

"He agreed with me about Carter needing to stay someplace unknown," Dominic said.

"Don't suppose he gave you one of his guns. The one he enchanted so that the bullets go around corners would be nice."

"No, he didn't offer." Dominic didn't know whether to be happy that Justin might think he could take care of himself without a weapon, or be annoyed that Justin might think he'd sooner shoot himself than Simon.

Blaise's tail twitched. The movement was slow, not quite touching Dominic. "I could always call on Vinny and Vito."

Vinny and Vito were Blaise's nicknames for the two stone cats up on Highway 17. They stood outside the gates of a private house and were known as Leo and Leona. According to local legend, during moonless nights they bled out of their shells and hunted.

As charming a story as that was, Blaise added to it by calling them his cousins. Vinny and Vito, uncaring what the mortal world called them, watched and hunted and waited. Whenever Blaise talked about them around Justin, Dominic's brother grumbled

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something about Dominic being too young when he cast the spell to acquire a familiar. Dominic argued that Blaise was kidding. The tiger usually just smiled.

"I didn't get that good a look at Simon," Dominic said. "I doubt I could describe him enough for them to catch his scent."

"I was thinking they could start with Brooks."

"No."

"He's kin. If they had a taste of his blood —"

"They might decide they like it. I don't want them to hurt him."

"If you haven't chosen him, the thought of him bleeding shouldn't matter."

"He's the seventh son of a seventh son."

"I don't bloody care if he's Merlin reborn. His presence endangers you."

Behind Dominic, soft footsteps drew close.

And stopped.

"Are you fighting with the stuffed tiger?" Carter asked.

Blaise stilled.

Dominic turned. Carter's blond hair was damp, hinting at a recent association with water.

"Do you often argue with Blaise?" Carter asked.

"Yes. I mean, no. I was practicing for the next episode."

Carter chuckled. "Who wins the argument?"

"I don't know yet."

Carter stepped toward him. His gray eyes studied Dominic. They were as cool as silver. As gentle as mist.

Fur brushed Dominic's arm. The touch was light, but it still surprised him. It wasn't like Blaise to twitch in front of a stranger.

Then again, it was completely in Blaise's character to want to protect him. For now, he would keep his façade of being a stuffed animal, but he would nudge Dominic out of his libido-induced stupor.

"You have a nice place," Carter said.

"Thanks." If it was a gingerbread house, Dominic would have been tempted to add

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another floor, a turret, and maybe a bay window. Here, he would add nothing.

Okay, he'd added a master retreat to his bedroom so he'd have a small office, and that second bathroom hadn't been original to the house, but whoever had built the cottage in the 1900s hadn't considered whether he'd ever have guests over.

Carter looked past Dominic. His eyes widened. "Mercedes told me you were building the gingerbread house. She said it was big but...wow."

Dominic glanced back at the table in the corner. The house in question, a four-story Victorian house that sprawled across the dining room table, was his sequel to the Winchester Mystery House.

Carter approached the table. "How long did the house take you?"

"A week."

"It's beautiful."

"My home is nice, but the gingerbread is beautiful."

"Your home is perfect. I'd change nothing. This...." Carter circled the table. "I'd add a carriage port. And a funeral coach."

Goddess. That would be awesome.

Carter scanned the house, the crushed Oreo soil, the gossamer green sugar trees. "I read once that gingerbread was eaten as a medicine in England."

Yes. People had thought ginger had an effect on the body's humors. They called it a spiced honey cake.

Dominic set Blaise on the kitchen counter. There was more, and while he normally worried about boring people with the information, Dominic thought Carter would be interested.

Carter picked up a piece from the discard plate and looked up over the gabled roof at Dominic.

"May I?" he asked, raising the dark, honeyed piece to his lips.

Dominic nodded.

Carter opened his mouth, offering him a hint of teeth and tongue, and then bit into the gingerbread.

"Mmm." Carter chewed. "Molasses. Dark brown sugar. Cinnamon."

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"You can taste all that?"

"Oh, yes. Cloves. Nutmeg. Honey."

"You have a super power, sir."

"Cardamom. Vanilla. Oh, no. Just a very exacting professor once. Anise. Salt. Ginger. Lots of ginger. It tastes different, though. Stronger. Sweeter." Carter looked thoughtful. After a moment, he smiled. "You used candied ginger."

Yes. Both powdered and candied, actually.

"What kind of frosting are you using?" Carter asked.

"Pumpkin cream cheese."

Carter walked over to the frosting bowl and glanced at it. "Fresh pumpkin?"

"No. The house is for looking at, not eating." Dominic walked over to him. He'd spelled the bowls to keep their chill or warmth, depending on the project. Dominic could tell him that he'd just taken the bowl out a few moments before, but eventually Carter would stumble upon something he wouldn't be able to explain.

Carter spooned out a small amount of frosting and brushed it over the napkin. Then he ran two fingers through it, raised it to his mouth, and – *Goddess* – tasted it.

"Mmm. Nice frosting. Very light."

Dominic watched him. When he'd made the pumpkin frosting, he'd wanted something versatile that could go on anything from brownies to gingerbread. Now he wondered what it'd taste like on skin.

Thump.

Dominic frowned. Blaise had just fallen off the counter to get his attention, hadn't he?

Carter glanced past him. "Blaise fell."

Yes. Dominic would have to have 'The Talk' with him again. Just because Dominic looked didn't mean he was going to touch.

And just because his familiar pounced didn't mean he wanted to kill someone. Sometimes it was for fun. Other times it was because he was worried. Right now, Dominic suspected Blaise was plotting.

Carter stepped past him. Dominic turned and watched him pick up Blaise.

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His touch was gentle, not crushing the stuffing or holding Blaise by his tail or ear. Carter carried him over, gray eyes set on Blaise's amber ones.

The sight of them together made something in Dominic's stomach twitch. Surprise, perhaps, for Blaise rarely let himself get into a place where a newcomer might touch him. Enchantment, because Carter was taking care with him. Dominic did not believe in choosing, but if one had to....

Carter smiled. "Even a kitchen witch needs a familiar, hmm?"

If Dominic had to choose, he hoped it would not be Carter.

"Yes," Dominic said. Despite Carter's light tone, his words were a quiet reminder. Dominic was a witch; Carter was a scion of a hunter. Their foreparents hid and hunted one another. They were not meant to be.

Then Carter looked up and fixed silver eyes on him, and Dominic wondered if maybe this time things could be different. Carter was clever and wry and sardonic. His humor was dark, but edged with a concern Dominic hadn't thought possible. He was the seventh son of a seventh son, and he had everything that came with it—hand-me-downs, the possibility of enhanced magical abilities, and a large extended family that included a homicidal cousin.

"I always thought witches needed to have a black cat as their familiar," Carter said.

"My grandmother made him for me before she died," Dominic said.

Carter's smile softened. "He's perfect."

Yes.

Chapter Five

When Carter woke, he found the stuffed tiger crouched over his satchel on the desk, watching him.

Carter blinked. This was strange. The last time he'd seen the tiger, the little guy was under Dominic's arm, going with him to his room, Hobbes to Dominic's Calvin.

As the guest of a supposed witch, he supposed he should expect some eccentricities. If Dominic had woken in Carter's guest room – aka the living room couch – he would either have spent the morning perusing Carter's prints of Salem along the walls or his small collection of thumbscrews he kept under the glass of the coffee table. When he was working, Carter liked to surround himself in research. Dominic was either similar or really playful, and by playful he meant weird.

That was okay. Weird could be interesting.

Carter rose. The curtains to either side of the tiger were open, allowing soft gray light to creep in. Raindrops tapped across the glass, creating an uneven lullaby.

A quick glance at his watch told him it was a little after six in the morning. It was a good time, his version of the witching hour, that time when the world was still asleep and he could attack whatever project was at hand. Today, gingerbread. Tomorrow....

Probably more gingerbread.

Carter considered returning to the clothes he'd worn the day before, but besides carrying traces of the Borders parking lot, his slacks were torn along one knee and his shirt had lost a couple buttons somewhere between when Simon pulled out a gun and when Carter took his shower.

He approached the desk. He carried a small toiletries case in his satchel in case he

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indulged in his love of garlic or the wind tried to give him a new hairstyle. While his current sweats and t-shirt ensemble would keep him barred from joining his family for dinner, he could at least ensure he remained presentable until he was able to retrieve his suitcase from the hotel.

Hopefully, that time would come soon.

"Thanks for guarding the laptop," Carter said, picking up the tiger. Normally he wouldn't talk to inanimate objects, but when in Rome, *operor ut Romanorum operor*.

Dominic's answer to the velveteen rabbit was light, with soft, burnt-orange fur and black stripes. Carter set him beside a tall white candle and then turned to his satchel.

He took his small case and headed out to the bathroom. The hall was dark. At the end, Dominic's door stood partially open, allowing a whisper of a snore to escape.

Carter went through his morning ablutions and planned.

Originally he'd planned to watch the *Midnight Gourmet* today. Since he was a guest of the gourmet, he could use this opportunity to learn from the man himself. Carter could study the house he would soon destroy, bake some gingerbread, watch Dominic's lips as he described the trial-and-error art of perfecting the recipe, the way his eyes shone when he laughed....

And maybe just break down and touch him. Kiss him.

The thought was magic, drawing up images of the night before when Dominic had crouched above him. Dominic wasn't afraid to question, to move and act and fight. As a lover, would he be just as challenging?

Carter returned to his room. As lovely as the idea was, he suspected he should wait. While past lovers had been enchanted with the money Carter's lineage brought, his last name seemed to be working as a mood-killer with Dominic.

And if that didn't make his commando-going member keep a low profile, all he had to do was remind both himself and it that Simon was still out there. His cousin might not have hurt him last night, but that didn't mean he hadn't found someone else to reenact his *Malleus Maleficarum* fantasies with.

That thought worked liked a silver bullet. Where was Simon now? Had he killed someone?

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Carter shoved the small case back into the satchel. He wanted to call home and warn them. He couldn't; Simon had taken his phone last night.

Carter withdrew his laptop from the satchel. Would Dominic mind if Carter killed his phone bill? What time would he wake, so Carter could ask him?

"Something tells me Dominic's not a morning person," Carter said, slipping the case back into his satchel. He glanced at the tiger. "It seems fair. I'm usually dead by the witching --"

Blaise wasn't on the desk.

Carter turned, scanning the floor. If the tiger had fallen, it hadn't landed on the floor, or beneath the desk, under the bed, or behind the curtains.

He slumped against the desk. The room was dressed in shadows, but he was certain the tiger had been there. He'd held it. Maybe Dominic had come in and taken it back.

Except, he'd heard Dominic snore. The kitchen witch was still sleeping.

Carter frowned. Perhaps he'd still been half asleep when he thought he saw it. Yes. It wasn't the first time he thought he'd seen something odd. Once, when he was working on his last book, he'd looked up from his notebook and thought the thumbscrews in his coffee table were covered in blood. One blink, and the blood had disappeared.

His frown faded. He needed coffee. The tiger had not come to life.

And if it had....

The velveteen rabbit: one. Carter: zero.

* * * *

In the morning, Dominic awoke to whispers.

"No, they slept apart," Blaise said.

Dominic rubbed his eyes. Blaise's voice was soft, but it sounded like it was coming from the right.

"Brooks made some kind remarks about me and the gingerbread house...Yes, Dominic was moved. He said good night afterward, though. I would give them a day,

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perhaps two, before anything happens.”

Frowning, Dominic pushed himself up. He could not believe this.

He shrugged into a lightweight black robe. After a quick scan of the room, he found Blaise in the master retreat, partially hidden beneath Dominic’s desk.

“Brooks has a book filled with pictures of lynchings in his satchel,” Blaise said. “He also has a laptop and —”

“You went through our guest’s belongings?”

“Bloody hell. He’s awake.”

Click.

“Good morning,” Blaise said, emerging from under the desk. He hopped onto Dominic’s chair and then the desk.

“You went through his things.”

“You told me not to kill him in his sleep.” Blaise tapped the mouse, waking the computer. “You said nothing about his stuff.”

Dominic massaged his forehead. He was the only witch in his generation to want a familiar. On days like this, he wondered at the wisdom of it.

“Last night you said Brooks had a cousin.”

“Yes. Simon.”

“He has a website and blog.”

Dominic slumped onto his chair and pulled it closer to the computer. “Does he talk about the evil he does?”

“No, but he has a few articles about some of the places he was in. One of them was two years ago in Sacramento.”

Montgomery.

Dominic read the article. It was, unfortunately, well written, leaving him with an unease similar to the time he’d read a story about how close a comet had come to striking the earth. Sometimes something deadly missed you; sometimes it didn’t.

And sometimes it came close enough to wound before continuing on its way.

“I also have another window up,” Blaise said. “It has a list of Brooks’s signings.”

“How often do they correspond?”

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"A third of the time."

So either Simon knew to be careful and published articles in an order to show that he and Carter weren't in the same place at the same time, or it was a coincidence.

Of the two, Dominic leaned toward the malevolent first.

"Did you tell Justin?" Dominic asked. He liked to think that, when not reporting on his lack of a sex life, his familiar was also informing one of Los Gatos's brightest about the hunter's past locations.

"I didn't have a chance to. He asked me about what happened last night."

Dominic frowned. He hoped Justin's sex life was just as dismal as his.

The hope, he knew, was hollow. Justin lived alone, in a studio over the Starbucks in downtown Las Gatos. The building had a small parking lot, making it difficult for potential lovers to visit, but once inside, they wouldn't have a tiger stalking them.

"Don't suppose he mentioned having a lead on this case," Dominic said.

"Technically, he's not on the case."

"But in reality...."

"He hasn't learned anything."

Perhaps if the cretin paid more attention to what Carter had said than he did to his brother's imaginary sex life, he would have been closer to finding Simon.

"I'm going to grab a shower," Dominic said. "Go ahead and call Justin back and tell him about the site."

"You don't want to talk to him?"

"No. Right now, I'd probably kill him."

One of Blaise's ears flicked up. "He's worried about you. We both are."

"You, I believe. Your research is awesome. Justin is focusing on the wrong things. He's being a prick."

"He thinks you've chosen."

Dominic wondered if he had.

It was a dangerous thing to consider. If he fell for Carter, the other man would eventually discover what Dominic was. Would Carter remain open-minded, or would he take after Simon? If Carter decided to dispose of Dominic, he might also go after

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Justin and the rest of their family.

"If I'd chosen," Dominic said, "I would be talking to you about Carter."

"You currently *are* talking to me about Carter."

"And Simon and Justin. It's a complex conversation."

"I agree."

Dominic sighed. He wasn't going to win this one. If he told Blaise that he felt drawn to Carter, Blaise would either run him through the same concerns Dominic was already having, or he would begin making the guest list for the handfasting.

"His name is dangerous," Blaise said. "Assuming Simon is doing the killing, we can't ignore that their grandfather was involved in a couple lynchings."

"What?"

"I bookmarked it. The photos in his satchel? Someone used a copy of one of them for the cover on a photo book of lynchings from the eighteen hundreds to the nineteen sixties. Even if Carter was the black sheep in that family, these aren't people I'd feel comfortable having at a handfasting."

"This could just be lust."

"So sleep with him. If you haven't chosen, it'll get him out of your system."

And if he had, being intimate would cement it.

"I don't want to sleep with someone I'm going to be working with," Dominic said.

A warm, furry paw brushed over Dominic's hand. "Whatever happens, I'm here."

"Thanks. I haven't chosen him."

"Of course. Go not have sex with him."

"Geesh, Blaise, we've barely known one another twelve hours."

"Your strength of will astounds me. I doubt Justin would last that long."

"Yeah, well, if you'd seen him last night...He took the guy home, didn't he?"

Blaise's tail twitched. "He didn't say."

Meaning Justin had likely been whispering over the phone to Blaise, then.

"Go shower," Blaise said. "I believe our guest is in the kitchen. I'll keep an eye on him."

"Keep an eye out *for* him."

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"Tomato. Tomah-to."

After a brief shower, Dominic dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved cotton shirt and then left the room.

The house was quiet, though the faint scent of rain ghosted down the hall. When Dominic stepped into the living room, he saw why -- one of the windows was open. The dark blue curtains on either side fluttered, allowing cool, wet-smelling air into the house.

Dominic approached the window. It was morning, and though hunting seemed like a night activity, one never knew.

The morning was overcast, with a heavy layer of clouds crouched overhead. The cloud-light was shadowed, giving the morning a sleepy feeling.

Dominic sent a light trace of magic out. The ghost touch wove outside, gauging the moisture, the cold, the area.

Three houses down, a man was starting his car. The clouds above the area were pregnant. It had rained an hour before. It would rain later. When it did, it would be cold and sharp. It would stab everyone it touched.

"Are you worried about Simon?" Carter asked.

Dominic jerked and then turned. "Goddess."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to -- Goddess?"

"Figure of speech."

"Oh. Okay. I'm sorry I spooked you."

"You didn't. I was just...." Dominic ended the spell. He wasn't used to casting the spell behind him when he was home. If he had, he would have sensed Carter there. Had Carter felt him do magic?

"I'm still waking up." Dominic said. If Carter had sensed him doing magic, then the bond was growing. "What brought you out?"

"I saw the tiger on the counter. I figured you must be up." Carter looked past him to the window.

A chaos of emotions swept through Dominic. Relief -- Carter didn't know. Whatever happened between them, he might not hurt Dominic's brother or their family.

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Disappointment – if Carter couldn't sense magic, would he believe it existed?

"Considering how last night turned out," Carter said, "I would expect Simon to leave town."

Logically, that made sense. The hunter had his reasons for staying close, though.

"If he's serious about the seventh-son thing, he won't back down," Dominic said.

"Possibly. Probably." Carter looked thoughtful. "Maybe I should consider calling my family and warning them."

In theory, that was a reasonable idea. In reality, Dominic wondered if they would be able to trace the call. Having one hunter in the area was bad; inviting a family of them could be deadly.

"Do you think it'd be better if the police called them first?" Dominic said. "They wouldn't be able to say you blew things out of proportion then."

The words sounded callous to Dominic. Whatever he suspected about Carter's family, it was just that – a suspicion. He was a bastard letting his worries get in the way of Carter's concern for his family.

Carter's brows crouched over his eyes. "Point."

Guilt clawed at Dominic. He was currently annoyed at Justin, but in Carter's place he would have wanted to warn his family.

Dominic touched his shoulder. "You can use the phone in my room if you like."

Carter glanced at Dominic's fingers.

Dominic drew his hand back. Shit. What was he doing? "I'm sorry. I wasn't –"

Carter caught his wrist. "No. I don't mind." His fingers slid down Dominic's palm. Carter's touch was light. Warm. "Words can't always connect people, though they can do a lot. Food tantalizes and brings people together, but sometimes they're afraid to try new things. Touch? Touch is always nice."

Yes.

Dominic curled his fingers around Carter's. Touch was its own language. The whisper of skin, the rustle of cloth, a subtle magic, open to anyone who was open to hearing it.

Carter kissed him.

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The kiss was soft, a bare brushing of lips against his. The feel of Carter's lips uncurled something inside of Dominic. Warmth, surprise, pleasure. If he was going to choose someone....

Goddess. He was thinking of that word again.

Carter withdrew, leaving a memory of his warmth against Dominic's mouth.

"So," Carter whispered. "Gingerbread. I think we were going to bake."

Were they?

Dominic kissed him.

His tongue teased Carter's lips, seeking and gaining entrance. Inside, Carter was velvet warm. He felt so good against Dominic. He also felt dangerous. His incisors were sharp. He could bite.

Dominic drew back. Goddess. What was he doing? This man could destroy him.

This man was also lifting Dominic's hand up to his lips. Breath caressed Dominic's skin, and then warm lips touched his knuckles.

Dominic stared at him. Carter could hurt him. Whatever Justin might think, Dominic had never forgotten that. Carter also had the power to complete him. Others in his family had their chosens. Perhaps he could as well.

"I have never felt this strongly about someone," Carter said.

A smile crept across Dominic's lips. Carter might not have been formally trained as a witch, but he felt something. If Dominic had indeed chosen him, Carter sensed an echo of it.

"I imagine that sounds like a line," Carter said.

"It doesn't." Dominic considered telling Carter what he knew. That magic was real. That his cousin was indeed a witch hunter. That people had disappeared over the years, and many thought it'd been because of Carter.

Dominic knew his words would frighten Carter. He didn't want to do that. Not now. Not here.

Without words, Dominic was left with touch. He brought their hands up to his lips and kissed Carter's fingers.

Carter watched him, his pretty gray eyes bright.

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Dominic pressed another kiss to Carter's hand and then drew him down the hall.

Their steps were the soft tapping of rain against glass, of heartbeats against a ribcage. Gentle. Alive. Quick.

Once they were in Dominic's room, Carter kissed him again. Fingers slid over clothing, pulling off shirts, sweats, and jeans. Lips followed in their wake, kissing, laving.

Dominic stroked Carter's abdomen and then followed the light trail of hair down, over the soft thicket of pubic hair.

Goddess.

Carter's breath stumbled. "Dominic. Please."

Yes.

Dominic caressed him. Carter had a luscious cock. Thick, long, with a tulip-shaped tip that leaked pre-come over his fingers.

"I want you," Dominic whispered. Here. Now. Tomorrow. Yesterday. Forever.

"Soon," Carter said, brushing his lips over Dominic's ear. "Very soon, I'm going to lie you down. And stroke you. Tease you."

A shiver darted through Dominic. Goddess. The man knew to play with something as sensual as words.

"Condoms?" Carter whispered.

"Nightstand." No, the bathroom.

Shit.

Dominic pushed magic out, focusing on the bottom left drawer in his bathroom. Condoms. Lube. Two. Now.

He felt a brush of air along his right side.

Carter glanced at the small bedside table and chuckled. "I didn't see them when we came in. I admit, I wasn't looking. Is it magic, sir, or were you hoping to seduce me today?"

"Magic."

Carter picked up a small vial of lube. "I like magic."

The plastic broke, sending vanilla-scented lube over Dominic's stomach. The feel of

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the liquid created a hodgepodge of sensation, with cool air, warm skin, and wetness touching his body. Dominic chuckled.

“Not quite the thing I would have wanted to get on you,” Carter said. Laughter haunted his Southern Comfort voice, turning the tease into something sinful.

Carter wiped the lube off him.

The light touch teased Dominic, making him aware of the air over his bare skin.

Carter traced slick fingers over his cock and then slid the condom on. A moment later, he brushed his fingertips and cock against Dominic’s member.

Dominic reached down, stroking their flesh. Pleasure chased after his touch.

The dual soft-hardness against him sent a shiver through Dominic. Life was filled with such contrast. Love, hate. Hot, cold. Witch, hunter.

Witch, seventh son of a seventh son.

Carter’s lips traced over Dominic’s ear. There were secrets in Carter’s breath, his touch. The trembling in his fingers told Dominic that whatever Carter’s family had or had not done, Carter meant well. He was gentle. He was afraid.

Dominic turned, brushed his lips over Carter’s.

The kiss was sweet, soft.

After a teasing nip to Dominic’s bottom lip, Carter drew back and smiled at him. The softness in that look made Dominic’s breath stumble. Goddess, he was magnificent.

Carter’s hands ghosted over Dominic, turning him onto his side.

Warm fingers stroked down Dominic’s back. They traced over his ass, caressing the flesh and then circling, teasing his opening.

Pleasure shivered through Dominic. Yes.

Fingertips stroked. Stretched.

When they left, their loss haunted Dominic. He’d lived thirty years without this man. They’d been good years; he was happy with what he’d accomplished. But he couldn’t imagine going another thirty without him.

Carter’s cock was hot, and when it touched Dominic’s opening, the heat and whisper of air there made Dominic tremble. The tip teased him, pushing in, withdrawing.

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And then inching into him.

Carter moved slowly. Gently. His heat crept into Dominic, touching and stroking places that made Dominic's toes curl.

"You feel so good," Carter whispered.

So did he. If Dominic was going to choose, if he dared, if he wasn't afraid --

Carter's hand slid over Dominic's stomach, down his abdomen, and over his cock. Long fingers played over his flesh.

Dominic reached back, digging his fingers through Carter's hair. If he was going to choose, Dominic would want this man. This moment. Forever.

Carter's thrusts were gentle, creating a pleasant beat. Dominic trembled. Carter was heat and friction, and when he slid into Dominic, wonderful pressure gathered in Dominic's balls. Dominic's breath caught.

And broke free.

Pleasure erupted out of Dominic. He gasped, feeling come strike his stomach, dotting the vanilla-scented spot.

Carter's lips traced over Dominic's ear, down his neck. Dominic tipped his head, bathing in the delicious aftershocks darting through him.

His magic flicked, sending a small burst of power out, lighting the candles in the room. Dominic gasped, sending another burst of magic out and extinguishing the flames. Carter was focused on him. He couldn't have seen the brief light. Dominic was certain. He hoped.

Carter's thrusts became erratic, quickening and stroking against Dominic's prostate. A moment later, Dominic felt a throbbing sensation inside of him.

An echo of pleasure surged through him. Goddess. He was feeling his lover come.

The sensation was sweet, echoing and sharpening Dominic's pleasure. Carter was perfect. Handsome and clever and kind. Dominic wanted to just lie against him and feel him. His skin. His breath. This connection.

Wait. Connection?

Dominic stilled. Now that he'd thought the word, he was trapped with it. Goddess help him. He had chosen this man.

Cooking with Ergot

* * * *

Dominic slumped in front of his gingerbread house. Rain attacked the window behind him, a quiet reminder that the world was gray and it wanted to get in and break his make-believe house.

The scent of melting cheese snaked over him. A moment later, Blaise's paw pushed a grilled cheese sandwich in front of him.

Dominic's lips twitched. One always knew when Blaise was worried; he shared his most favorite foods with others.

"He couldn't get it up, could he?" Blaise asked.

Dominic laughed softly. "He could."

"Then...?"

"I've chosen him."

Silence.

"I'll make some cocoa," Blaise said.

Tandori Everything (though Carter preferred steak)

8 oz yogurt	½ C chopped onion
3 Tbsp sugar	2 Tbsp lemon juice
2 tsp salt	1 tsp minced garlic
1 tsp ground cumin	1 tsp tumeric
1 tsp cinnamon	1 tsp ground ginger
1 tsp candy ginger	¼ tsp cayenne pepper
¼ tsp ground cloves	

Go ahead and buy the chicken that smells so good in a deli. Preferably the one that isn't drowning in any sauce. Put your significant other or child on deboning detail while you make the tandori marinade.

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Discover that the stuffed tiger is watching you. Turn it to face the opposite direction.

Throw all of the ingredients together.

Mix everything together. Smell. Taste.

Pour half of the sauce over the steaks. Leave them to marinate for at least four hours (overnight would be best).

Discover that the stuffed tiger is watching you again. Put the mixing bowl in front of it, ask it to taste and give its opinion, and then go get the chicken.

Try not to pass out when you return and see a teaspoon of sugar sitting beside the bowl.

Add sugar. Mix. Pour over chicken.

Wonder if you should set an extra plate for the tiger at the table.

Chapter Six

Post sex languor made Carter want to cook.

It was an odd trait. Carter suspected it went back to caveman days, when the guy realized that now that he had someone in his cave, he had to care for them.

A quick perusal of the spice tray revealed everything Carter would need for his most prized dish. Pleased, he headed for the refrigerator.

Inside, he found a collection of homemade gingerbread mixes and all that was needed to sustain it -- milk, eggs, butter. There were also some slices of American cheese in one drawer and tomatoes in the bottom.

Carter smiled. With these ingredients, he could make either cheese omelets or grilled cheese. Dominic seemed to be living off of college food.

He closed the refrigerator.

And found the tiger sitting on the counter beside him.

"Jesus," Carter said and then laughed. Okay, he hadn't looked at the counter before opening the refrigerator. Blaise had probably already been there, because Carter had certainly not seen Dominic slip in and put the tiger there. The velveteen rabbit: two. Carter: zero.

Footsteps drew close. Carter turned, watching Dominic approach. A small mark peeked out from the neckline of Dominic's shirt.

Carter smiled. His lips had left a shadow of their touch on Dominic's neck, where neck met shoulder. Carter didn't know how long he would have Dominic in his life, but the sight of the small mark delighted him. For a moment, Dominic was his.

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"What's so funny?" Dominic asked.

"Hobbes is trying to give me a heart attack."

"Blaise," Dominic said, drawing out the name.

Carter picked up the stuffed animal and offered him to Dominic. "I suspect he's being a gracious host and trying to make sure I find everything." He laughed. "I can't believe I'm talking about him like this."

"Keep going. He's going to be stalking you on the next episode." Dominic took the tiger. He glanced at the refrigerator, then looked back at Carter. "You've probably noticed I don't have much."

"Yeah. I understand. After filming all day, grilled cheese is simple. I'd like to make something for you tonight."

Dominic smiled. "No one's ever cooked for me. Well, my brother once."

"Let me guess -- grilled cheese."

"It's the only thing he can't burn."

As long as the man was a brilliant detective, Carter would not fault him.

"I hope you don't mind a trip to the store," Carter said. Normally he would have wanted to keep the entire affair a surprise until later, but Dominic was currently his chauffeur. If Carter asked to borrow the car, he would be stranding Dominic. He would much rather bring Dominic along, tease him with hints of what was to come, and then take him ...

To dinner. Yes. Food first.

"Nah," Dominic said. "I wouldn't mind picking up a few things myself."

"I don't think I've ever gone shopping with a witch before." Carter pulled Dominic close.

"We're pretty much the same as human shoppers."

"No eye of newt?"

"Too chewy. We prefer fillet of salmon and breast of chicken."

Carter chuckled. The small laugh shook him, making his lips trace over Dominic's. When Carter's amusement faded, he kissed Dominic.

An unpleasant confession: Carter usually didn't like kissing his lovers. He was too

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impatient, always wanting to move on to the next step, the next touch. With Dominic, he thought he could lose himself in the feel of his lips.

Currently, his lips felt silk smooth. Dominic's tongue teased into his mouth, making Carter's rise and stroke against it.

A shiver of pleasure snaked through Carter, ending in his cock. There, it coiled, waking his body.

Dominic drew back. "Later?"

Oh, yes. "Lead the way," Carter said.

Outside, the dark morning had crawled into a pale gray sky. The area he'd caught snippets of in the dark now surrounded him in green. Ivy crawled along the wooden gate separating Dominic's yard from his neighbor's. A couple redwoods soared above the woods behind the house. Tall oaks crouched over the road, creating a cavern.

Carter found the oaks in particular charming. The driveway leading up to his parents' home had a similar path. As a child, he'd been certain they were eldritch fingers reaching for him.

During the drive, they chatted. Nothing serious, which amused Carter. Life did not revolve around his cousin. There were times over the last day when Carter had forgotten that.

It was raining when they reached Whole Foods. The blades of water chased after them as they hurried from Dominic's car and into the warmth of the store.

"Quite a toad strangler," Carter said.

Dominic raised an eyebrow. "You strangle toads when it rains?"

"It's a figure of speech. I got it from one of my brothers, who lives in Oklahoma. Not a California saying, huh?"

"No."

"How would you describe this weather?"

"Not something I'd want to be riding a broom in. In California speak, it would be 'this sucks.'"

Ah. The versatility of language.

"What are we shopping for?" Dominic asked.

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"Steak, white onions, garlic, and plain yogurt."

"Huh." Dominic looked thoughtful. "Up until the last ingredient, I would've thought you were making Salisbury steak."

Carter chuckled. He shouldn't be surprised that Dominic was already trying to figure out his recipe. Carter had done that to him last night.

"Why don't you go conjure up a couple nice rib eyes from the butcher," Carter said, "and I'll grab the other stuff."

"I'd be enchanting the butcher to give me the best cuts, not conjuring."

"No enchanting other men."

Dominic feigned a sigh. "No trust."

"I trust you. It's the other men I'm uncertain about."

A weird mix of worry and pleasure flashed in Dominic's eyes. Carter wondered if he'd spoken too soon. Some things were better left said in bed, where the shadows in the room could obscure the vulnerability.

"Steak," Dominic said. A hint of a smile touched his lips. "No enchantment."

"Thanks."

Dominic left. Carter watched him walk away. The man had a beautiful ass. Later, he told himself. He turned.

And found himself face to face with Simon.

Carter frowned. His cousin was a master of disguise; he'd darkened his hair blond hair to auburn and slipped on a pair of wire-framed glasses.

He was dressed simply in slacks, a vest, and a white shirt. A businessman, stopping in for a quick errand. Simon wondered where he was hiding a weapon.

"We have to talk," Simon said.

"Yeah, we do. With a lawyer and the police present." Carter looked around. He didn't have a cell phone anymore, thanks to this bastard, but there was a guest services counter a couple dozen feet away. They probably had a phone.

Carter headed for them.

Simon fell into step beside him. "I'm offering you a one-time neutral place to talk. Next time, you won't see me coming."

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Carter's frown deepened. He would prefer not to see him at all. Unfortunately, since he hadn't seen Simon coming the last two times, he suspected Simon's threat was valid.

"Talk," Carter said.

Simon tipped his head to the left. "In the little coffee shop in the corner. I need water."

They headed for the corner. Despite the danger beside him, Carter occasionally glanced around. Dominic was close. If Simon saw him, the bastard would kill him.

Carter shoved the worry aside. The thought was horrible, but Simon was focused on him. If Dominic saw Simon, he'd call the police. Carter just had to keep the bastard busy.

The coffee shop was a corner room, with two walls made up of floor-to-ceiling windows. Rain obfuscated the outside, turning the room into a cavern. The place was empty, save for a barista/cashier who hid behind a steam machine.

They stepped up to the counter, where Carter created a paper trail and bought Simon his bottled water. And not just any bottle of water; it was in a clear glass bottle with a wide top. Apparently the modern witch hunter couldn't drink anything that the magic of science hadn't purified for him first.

After the water was paid for, Simon led Carter to a small wooden table in the corner.

Carter sat across from Simon. "Did you kill anyone last night?"

"No."

Thank God.

"I'm glad you were able to come with me," Simon said. "I'd worried the witch had enchanted you."

"He can't do magic." Simon's words saddened Carter. It reminded him of all those men years before, thinking that women -- and occasionally men -- had cast spells over them to entice them. Cowards and hypocrites, afraid to take responsibility for their own desires.

"He can," Simon said, twisting the silver ring around his index finger. "He isn't

human."

"Simon --"

"I know. You don't believe me. You think I'm mad." Simon slid his ring off his finger. "I can prove it, though."

He set the ring between them.

"Do you recognize this?" Simon asked.

Carter glanced at it. "It's the ring Grandfather left you in the will." The old man had left Simon creepy jewelry; Carter got a cabin up in serial killer county, Massachusetts. Carter had never been certain which one of them was worse off.

"It's more than a ring."

"Yes. It's also kitsch." The ring was a thick silver band. Grooves flowed over it like choppy waves. The one time Carter had touched it, he'd discovered that some of the curves were sharp enough to draw blood. "Did you ever file the sharp bits down?"

"That would ruin it." Simon uncapped his water.

"That would be the point."

Frowning, Simon picked up the ring and dropped into the bottle. As the slip of silver sank, a crimson trail eddied up from the grooves.

Carter stared at it.

He'd once overheard their grandfather saying the ring could do that. Carter had been certain the man had been senile. Looking at the red line, though, made him wonder. Magic wasn't possible. That line argued otherwise.

"What did you do?" Carter asked.

His words were soft. Uncertain. If his grandfather had not been senile, then....

Were witches real?

Simon's frown faded. A hint of a smile tugged at his lips.

"It's not me," Simon said. "When I tried to get the witch out of my way last night, I scratched him. The ring sensed his taint and captured his blood. It's how I was able to find you today."

No. Carter grabbed the bottle. Dominic was...beyond words, but he was no more a witch than Carter was. Magic wasn't real.

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And if there was any chance it was, Carter wasn't letting Simon near the ring again.

His cousin raised an eyebrow. "I had been under the impression you didn't think much of my inheritance."

Carter still didn't think much of it.

Simon motioned to the bottle. "I have a bracelet and a necklace that act similarly to the ring. If you want something to aid you in our hunt, I think one of those would suit you better."

"I'm not hunting with you."

Simon's smile faded. "The witch has enchanted you, hasn't he?"

"He's not a witch."

"In the *Malleus Maleficarum*, part two, question one, chapter six, 'How, as it were _'"

"Chapter seven," Carter said. If Simon was going to quote the Book of Stupid, he should get it right. "How, as it were, man had so much time on his hands that he could think up stories about how someone would steal his virile member."

Simon frowned. "I'm glad you're familiar with the chapter. I hope this means you understand the warning."

"Yes. That you seem a bit interested in my body. Kind of creepy, if you think about it."

"And what, then, is to be thought of those witches who in this way sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report?"

Sadly, that was an actual quote from the book.

If Carter remembered correctly, the rest of the paragraph went on to talk about a guy who somehow lost his member going to a witch for a new one. She said, sure, have your pick, but not the large one, that belongs to a priest. The priest that came up with that little gem was probably still chortling in his grave.

"What is to be thought?" Simon asked.

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"If Viagra had been invented in the thirteenth century, maybe the authors would have gotten over themselves. Were you aware that Kramer forged some of his endorsements?"

"Blasphemy."

"I agree. Lying about endorsements is terrible. Also, Sprenger, the supposed co-author? He couldn't stand Kramer. Some scholars believe Kramer put him down as a co-author to give his book more authenticity."

"There are days when I cannot believe we were raised together."

Carter understood. He often felt the same.

"If you can't resist the witch's machinations, I will be forced to tell our family that you've been—" Simon rose. "Get behind me."

Carter turned. Had Dominic arrived with the police?

No. It was just him. Hurrying toward them. Toward him.

Warm fingers grabbed Carter's wrist. Carter yanked his hand free and rose.

Simon looked from Carter to Dominic. "Get behind me."

"No."

"He wants you."

"Good." Carter shifted, torn between moving away from Simon and staying close. His cousin hadn't pulled out any kind of weapon, but as he had proved with the ring, Carter didn't have to recognize the thing for it to be dangerous.

"Fool!" Simon scowled at him. "He will use you to destroy everything our family has—"

The end of a black plastic tray slammed into Simon's face, sending him falling back.

Carter turned.

As his gaze went from Simon to the room, he caught a glimpse of the tray hovering in the air.

And then dropping beside Simon.

Carter looked back

Dominic was a few feet away, one hand raised to the now-sleeping barista.

Carter stared at him. He wanted to tell himself he'd imagined the tray floating.

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Maybe Dominic had a brilliant aim. Maybe he knew how to throw something as lightweight as a tray and make it act like something that weighed ten times its size. Maybe ...

Maybe the tray had floated.

Maybe Simon's ring had caught a taste of Dominic's blood.

Maybe Dominic had enchanted him. Like he'd enchanted the barista.

"Carter?" Dominic reached him. "Are you okay?"

He didn't know.

Simon twitched and then got up. He reached into his vest.

Dominic held out a hand. His fingers, those charming, short things he'd kissed just a few hours before, splayed out, making a "stop" gesture. The air around the tips wavered, making everything around them blur.

Carter looked from Dominic to Simon. Magic was real. Simon had been right.

The thought made something inside Carter twist. Yes, magic existed. Was it evil? Carter didn't know.

Simon yanked his empty hand out of his vest and inched back. He glanced at Carter and then back at Dominic. "We are descended from—"

"Hopkins," Dominic said. "I know."

Simon moved back, hitting a table, knocking over a chair, and then he was free of obstacles and running away.

Carter was surprised. Considering how Simon talked, he would have expected a witch to kill him. Perhaps Dominic's beliefs were humane and didn't allow for that.

Or perhaps Simon was right, and Dominic was biding his time until he could kill more of them.

Carter frowned. He'd read the Book of Stupid. He didn't believe it.

He did believe what he saw, though. And what he saw was the air around Dominic's fingers stilling. His lover was at once dangerous and in danger.

Dominic's hand fell to his side. "Carter...."

"You can explain. It's not what I think."

Dominic turned. His lapis lazuli eyes were thoughtful. Sad. The rich color was

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meant for power. For pharaohs and emperors and....

And witches.

“Disenchant the barista,” Carter said. “We can talk when we get back to your place.”

Chapter Seven

The drive back was silent. Rain tapped across the car, creating an unsteady beat. Dominic didn't know how the toads were faring, but he imagined anyone driving in this wasn't too happy either.

Carter sat beside him, half hugging a bottle of water. Dominic watched him for a moment and then focused on the road, silently playing out what he could say.

Magic is real.

Blaise is my familiar.

Simon is a witch hunter. I think he killed my mentor.

You're my soul mate.

Dominic wondered which would upset Carter the least. Possibly the one about Simon; Carter probably already suspected it anyway.

Chances were, he probably wondered about almost everything on his list. The last, well, Dominic wasn't certain how to bring it up. He'd only recently allowed himself to think it.

"Why did you want me to go home with you last night," Carter asked.

So much for waiting until they were home.

That was fine. The silence felt unpleasant. Dominic would rather know what Carter was thinking.

"Your cousin was dangerous," Dominic said and then frowned. That was a half-truth. "Witches tend to disappear when you're in town. When I realized who you were, I began to wonder if Simon was hiding in your shadow, and if he'd finally decided to

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break free. When you mentioned that you were a seventh son —

“It means nothing.”

It might also mean everything.

Dominic considered telling him about the legends surrounding seventh-borns. The last one had led the witches during the last great hunt, bringing them to this area. The cats Blaise referred to as his cousins were rumored to have been his familiars.

Those stories, while meaningful to witches, might unnerve Carter. He was still trying to accept magic. He didn’t need to be told how other witches would see him.

“Witches don’t hurt people,” Dominic said.

“Harm none. Whatever you do returns thrice.”

Carter certainly knew his way around the basic tenets. “Yes,” Dominic said.

“Nothing personal, but the ‘harm none’ thing sometimes seems like it was written on a slip of paper that was then taped to your back.”

“You forgot the bull’s-eye.”

“God damn it, Dominic.”

“Blasphemous, too.” Dominic certainly knew how to choose a lover. Frowning, he pulled into his driveway.

Carter released a breath. “I’m trying to understand.”

“And the metaphorical *kick me* sign?”

Carter clenched his eyes. “I’m also dealing with my surprise. Badly.”

No. Carter wasn’t doing as well as Dominic would have liked, but he wasn’t doing badly. Carter wasn’t trying to kill him.

They left the physical closeness created by the car and darted toward the house. The rain stabbed Dominic with cold needles, pushing him to unlock the door and send Carter inside.

Once in the house, Dominic slumped on one end of the couch. Carter walked around a coffee table and then dropped onto the armrest of a loveseat across from him. Close enough to see, far enough away not to be touched. The distance stung.

“Are you afraid I enchanted you?” Dominic asked.

“No.” Carter’s lips twitched. Smile. Frown. A little of both, perhaps. “I have always

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believed that everyone who ever thought that was simply afraid to take responsibility for their own desires.” He leaned forward and set the water bottle on the table between them. “I took this from him.”

His lover stole water. How gallant.

“He said it captured some of your blood when it scratched you last night,” Carter said.

What?

Dominic sent a wisp of magic out, circled it around the bottle, and yanked it toward himself.

“With that power,” Carter said, “I think I would have become a stage magician.”

Over the centuries, some witches had survived doing that. Despite the moment, Dominic was delighted that Carter thought enough like a witch to think of that.

Carter frowned, making Dominic realize that a smile had escaped him.

Feeling his lips curve down, Dominic studied the silver band lying at the bottom of the glass container.

The ring was thick, with two rows of choppy waves. Light glinted off the edges.

Dominic turned the bottle to one side. The edges looked sharp.

A thin red line rose up from one of the sharp indentions. The crimson turned in the water and snaked toward him, stopping when it reached the side of the bottle.

A chill blossomed inside of Dominic. Goddess. Some hunters might have lied about having items that could detect witches, but Simon—and whoever he’d gotten the ring from—hadn’t.

“Where did he get this?” Dominic asked.

“Our grandfather.”

“What did he give—” Maybe the bastard hadn’t given Carter anything. Carter wasn’t like Simon. He was clever and cynical. Coming from a family like that, Carter was either their heir or very lonely.

“What did he leave me?” Carter asked.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“How kind of you to give me that.”

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"Carter."

"He left me a cabin in the woods. Simon got jewelry. My eldest brother got some old medieval weapons."

"Goddess."

"What about you? Who taught you magic? Is your brother a witch?"

"My mentor's name was Montgomery," Dominic said. Considering all of Carter's questions, that was a good place to begin. "He hosted a children's television show many years ago. *Montgomery's Neighborhood*."

Carter's eyes widened. "The puppets...."

"He used his magic to animate them. He was wary about having a familiar."

"Why?"

"At one time, seeming overly fond of an animal or an inanimate object could get you burned at the stake. Not that his caution helped him. I think Simon killed him."

Dominic set the bottle on the table. He had to tell Justin he had the ring. To leave the room now, though...he couldn't. He had to keep talking to Carter while the man was still willing to listen.

"How do you know it was Simon?" Carter asked. "Until yesterday, you didn't know he existed. You thought it was me."

Carter's tone was soft. Wounded.

"Not when I saw you," Dominic said.

"Why not then?"

"You're...." Dominic frowned. If he told Carter that he was his chosen, the other man might run.

And if Dominic didn't tell him, Carter might begin to stop trusting him. However strained things were now, at least Carter was listening.

"I'm what?" Carter asked.

"Among witches—among a lot of people, really, but especially among magically sensitive people—there's this belief that everyone has a chosen."

"Chosen for what? To be your familiar?"

"No." Not everyone had the strength to share their life force with another creature.

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“Soul mate.”

Carter stared at him.

“I know it sounds foolish,” Dominic said. “My brother and I have always snickered about it, but it does happen. My parents —”

“I’m not your soul mate.”

The Usual

Go through the Wendy’s drive-thru.

Order the garden salad, a bowl of chili, and a water.

Make that two salads and a water. Need to watch your weight. The last witch you faced heard you coming.

Do not order the fries. Repeat. Do not...

Okay. Just a small one, though.

Pay in cash, preferably with nothing larger than a ten.

If the cashier finds it odd that you’re wearing such thin gloves, come back later and kill them. Put body in trunk. Dispose later.

Chapter Eight

Despite how much Dominic had resisted acknowledging the reality of him choosing Carter, it hurt when the other man denied it.

"Look," Carter said. "I don't understand magic but...." He shook his head. "I don't think Simon is right. I don't think you're right, either. About choosing. Maybe one of your spells twisted last night when Simon's ring touched you or something."

The words stabbed Dominic, making something inside of him bleed. Carter wasn't accusing him of trying to bewitch him, but he was refuting him. Them.

"I'm sorry if anything I did led you on," Carter said. "I never meant to hurt you."

Dominic laughed. Manners, even now?

His throat tightened, ending his mirth. Dominic pushed himself up. He'd never heard of anyone denying a chosen before. If someone could do it, it would probably be Carter. The man might be willing to believe in magic, but he did not believe in Dominic.

"I'm going to call Justin," Dominic said. He should have called him before him, but after Simon left, there hadn't seemed to be a reason. His lover had been in danger.

Goddess. He hadn't wanted Carter yesterday. Losing him now shouldn't hurt.

"It would probably be best if I left," Carter said. "May I trouble you to call a cab for me when you're done?"

"No trouble." They were retreating into words, Dominic realized. Etiquette couldn't hurt them.

Words weren't enough. Dominic wanted physical distance.

He headed for the kitchen.

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The familiar space was at once comforting and alien. Carter had stood before that refrigerator just a couple hours before.

Carter didn't want him.

Dominic crushed the knowledge close. He'd always thought he wouldn't have a chosen. He'd never thought it would be—because such things did not exist anymore, not because his lover would refute him.

He slumped against the counter.

And was surprised to be alone. Usually his familiar would've appeared by now.

Dominic opened his senses and found him in the hall near his bedroom, watching Carter.

Oh, Blaise.

Dominic closed the spell. He couldn't decide whether to be relieved to be alone, or sad that his familiar wasn't making him a grilled cheese sandwich.

Cool air snaked over him.

Dominic turned and found the back door was open.

He frowned. Blaise occasionally opened that door when he was expecting his cousins, but since Dominic had begun building the gingerbread house, his familiar left the door closed. Normally Blaise wouldn't tempt the local animals with a chance at the gingerbread, but with Simon in the neighborhood, Dominic understood why he'd risk it today.

Dominic headed toward the door.

And then stopped.

On the table, a large knife stuck out of the gingerbread house's gable.

Fuck. He'd been so distracted, he hadn't considered that this might be a trap.

A floorboard whispered behind him.

"It didn't do that when you stepped on it," Simon said.

"The ground is warded."

"Really."

No. Dominic just knew how to step around that spot.

Simon walked around Dominic. In one hand was a gun. "You don't really want to

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involve my cousin, do you?"

Actually, Dominic rather thought he would.

"Let me rephrase that," Simon said. "Do you want me to shoot him, or just you?"

Bastard.

Simon smiled. His eyes were the gray of cigarette ash, dark and smoldering. Dangerous, though few had known. How many people had Simon killed because no one realized his danger?

Dominic gathered magic into his fingertips. It would be dark, but he would like to burn his own surgeon's warning on Simon's skin. *Caution. Dangerous to your health.*

"Did he tell you that when we were children, we used to play witch and hunter?"

Dominic's gathering magic sputtered and fell apart. Carter had practiced hunting? No.

"Oh." Simon's smile grew. "He didn't, did he?" He stepped closer. "Let me tell you a secret," he said, lowering his voice to a whisper. "He was always a better hunter than me."

Asshole. Carter was young. He would never have played such games if he'd understood.

Dominic was forgetting that he didn't quite know Carter.

Simon motioned to the door. "Shall we?"

For now.

Carter stared out the window. Rain attacked the glass, reminding him in sharp beats that while life seemed uncertain where he was, it was the same outside. Wherever he went, he would never completely know the people he was with.

Fuck.

He yanked the curtains shut. He wanted Dominic to come back. He wanted to...Carter didn't know. Apologize. Wish he could believe. Get out of there before he made things worse. Offer to let Dominic look through the family Bible and see if they could trace the history of witch disappearances alongside his family's movements.

God. His family.

Cooking with Ergot

Carter clenched his eyes shut.

How could Dominic have slept with him if he'd suspected his cousin—let alone the rest of the Brooks line—of being witch hunters? Why hadn't he just left Carter in the parking lot last night?

It probably had to do with his Disneyesque, true-love-at-first-sight fantasy. Remembering Dominic's anger when he realized who Carter was, he'd likely been trying to fight against his belief in choosing. Carter felt for him. The fantasy worked for feature-length cartoons. In real life, Carter doubted it existed.

Movement whispered behind him. Carter turned.

And found the tiger sitting on top of the couch, watching him.

He frowned and approached the stuffed animal. On the *Midnight Gourmet*, the little guy moved as gracefully as a cat. Carter had always thought their CGI guy was brilliant. Now....

Carter picked him up. Blaise might be magical. He might also simply be a beloved toy that had picked up enough residual magic to follow Dominic around.

Whatever Blaise was, his brows were crouched over his eyes. Carter told himself they'd been like that earlier. He knew he was lying to himself.

"He's in the kitchen," Carter said.

A tremor ran over the tiger. As it passed, seams faded and the fur became lustrous. The feel of soft stuffing changed, becoming thicker. Heavier. The tiger's amber eyes shimmered and became darker. Alive.

"Something's happening with Dominic," it said. Its voice was soft and held a trace of an English accent.

"Shit."

"If you drop me—"

Carter's fingers twitched, and then he hugged the tiger to him. No dropping the magical stuffed animal. The velveteen rabbit: three. Carter....

He couldn't compete.

"Ack," the tiger choked out.

Carter loosened his grip. "I'm sorry. I can't believe—"

Luisa Prieto

"I'm alive. I talk. Get over it."

Carter frowned. "Yeah, because something like you is easy to accept."

"I wrapped my mind around you. I think you can reciprocate."

Why would the tiger need to get used to him?

"Dominic," Blaise said. "Hurry."

Carter ran into the kitchen.

He found the large room empty, the back door open, and a knife cutting through the gingerbread gable.

Carter's frown deepened as he approached the house. The knife had the same handle as the one Simon had handed him last night. If Dominic had left, he hadn't had much of a choice.

Blaise leapt off him and darted across the table, coming up to the blade.

Carter followed, stopping himself from pulling it out. The house would fall apart when the damned thing was moved. Very clever of Simon. This was probably his cousin's way of inviting him to a hunt.

Fine. He would hunt.

A weight dropped onto his shoulder, followed by claws digging into his skin.

Carter winced. "I don't remember you having claws."

"I don't remember Dominic being threatened before you came."

Carter wondered if it had been very difficult for the tiger to not kill him in his sleep.

"Go," Blaise said.

Carter headed for the back door. "Shouldn't you stay in case Dominic—"

"He needs me. I'm not going to bloody well sit around and wait."

Carter stepped outside, slamming the door shut behind him. There were car tracks in the mud along the side of the house.

Fuck. "I don't have a car," Carter said.

Keys jingled, and then a burnt-orange paw held out Dominic's keys.

Carter took the keys and hurried around to the front of the house. The rain had stopped, but the thick clouds overhead gave the late afternoon a cool threat. It might rain later. Accidents happened in bad weather. People disappeared. Died.

Cooking with Ergot

Carter pushed the thoughts aside.

"Will you sense it if he's hurt?" he asked.

"Yes."

That was both a blessing and a curse. Carter wanted to know what was happening to Dominic, but it would hurt to know he was wounded. He didn't want anything to happen to Dominic.

Wishing him to be safe wouldn't do anything, though, and at this moment there was little more Carter could do than move and hope. It frightened him.

It was a strange feeling, made up with many ingredients. At its base was horror at the knowledge that wherever Dominic was, Simon was close by. Then, a couple teaspoons of surprise. A pinch of anger, something that would be hard to place, but it brought out all of the flavors in the feeling better.

Over that, to hold the ingredients together, was fear. A cup, maybe two. Had anyone ever been successful in fighting witch hunters? Everything Carter remembered from history didn't paint a pleasant picture.

Carter got into Dominic's car. "Which way?" he asked, starting the car.

"Go down the road and turn onto the freeway."

Carter drove, heading onto Highway 17. Tall oaks and redwoods surrounded the two lanes heading toward Santa Cruz. They ate the light remaining to the day, turning the late afternoon into evening.

Fuck. He didn't know this area. He didn't know if he'd be able to find someone in this early darkness.

"We'll be turning left in a few moments," Blaise said.

Something inside Carter twitched. It was odd, but Carter wanted to keep heading forward, into the mountains. Needed to. Dominic was close.

Two thoughts occurred to Carter. The first was that Simon was right. Hunting others down was in his blood. It was simply up to him to decide how to deal with it.

The second was that Dominic might not have been kidding about the soul mate thing.

"Left, here," Blaise said.

Luisa Prieto

"I think we should keep going."

"You...Bloody hell, you can sense him."

Carter frowned. Was the tiger pleased or disappointed?

Was *he* pleased or disappointed?

He was, he realized, because this might help him find Dominic. He also wasn't, because he didn't believe in choosing. He doubted he'd be good for Dominic. His ancestors were bastards. Dominic deserved better.

At the moment, though, Dominic had Simon. If Simon found out about the choosing thing, he'd be horrified. It might stop him from killing Dominic for fear it would hurt Carter. It might also make him want to do something worse in the hope that Dominic would undo whatever enchantment Simon would likely think Dominic had cast.

Carter pressed on the gas. Simon didn't know. He couldn't. If he found out, he'd likely take Dominic back home. Since the rest of the family tended to overlook his cousin's tendencies, Carter thought they would share Simon's concerns. Dominic was a witch. He was dangerous. Whatever Simon or other hunters had done, it'd been in self-defense.

Fucking cowards. Whatever unearthly power Dominic possessed, he did not hurt people. He did not hunt anyone down and bleed them. He took his power and made gingerbread houses and taught people how to cook. Food brought people together. Simon killed them.

"Normally," Blaise said, "when a witch dies, their familiar dies as well. It's something to do with the way the spirits are bound when the witch calls a familiar."

"He's not going to die." Carter hoped.

"If he does, I won't be following him. Because he chose you, I am now bound to you as well." The tiger shifted, moving forward so Carter could see him as well as the road.

"If anything happens to him," Blaise said, "I will make you pay for the rest of your life."

Blaise would get along swimmingly with the rest of the Brooks clan, then. Carter almost looked forward to Christmas.

Cooking with Ergot

“Turn.”

Carter turned.

Ahead, the road curved past two large stone mountain cats flanking a gate. Small violet flowers and ivy hugged the road.

“Pull over and stop in front of the gates,” Blaise said.

Carter made it so, coming to a stop in front of one of two giant cat statues.

A sense of correctness crept through Carter. It traced over him, echoing Dominic’s touch.

Carter drank in the touch. It moved up his neck, over his face.

And then nudged his head toward the right.

Carter stared out into the woods. He really was Dominic’s chosen.

A shiver of fear and excitement darted through Carter. He’d never thought this was possible. Now that he knew it was, he had to find Dominic. Find him, hold him, and tell him that he was sorry.

Blaise lowered the window. The scent of rain and green places crept into the car.

“I’m getting help. Go on ahead. If anything happens to him—”

“Simon dies.”

Chapter Nine

The stale scent of French fries surrounded Dominic. Judging by the crumbled Wendy's bag at his feet, the modern witch hunter did not often find time to cook.

The car dipped sharply to the left.

"Fuck," Simon whispered.

Dominic watched Simon fight the road. The genius had wanted off Highway 17; the genius had gotten this road. Each twist made him slow; each dip made the car jump.

The road: two. Simon: zero.

"These roads are bewitched," Simon said.

No. They'd just had a storm, and rain did things to them. Dominic hoped the road killed the bastard's shocks.

Another dip, and the car shuddered. Simon fought the steering wheel, dropping the gun.

Relief lanced Dominic. Goddess, the bastard was finally distracted.

Dominic sent a flare of magic at the door, unlocked it, and leapt out.

He came out beside a hill. His feet slipped, sending him sliding down. Distantly, he heard Simon snarl something at him from behind glass.

When Dominic reached even ground, he pushed himself up and ran, gulping in air to get the scent of stale fries out of his nostrils.

The air here was good, alive with the scent of recent rain and coming evening. It cleansed him, making him feel focused. Alive.

The sound of wheels screeching erupted behind him. Dominic sent a surge of magic

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into his legs, increasing his speed. This path hugged the road, and while it would take him back to civilization, it also kept him close to Simon's car.

Dominic darted to the left, moving deeper into the woods.

Cold air circled him, stealing his heat. Dominic's breath tumbled out of him. He occasionally went hiking in the woods behind his house, but this area didn't look familiar.

Pain blossomed in his side, making him stumble.

Shit. When he was younger, he'd been a sprinter, but it'd been years since he'd really kept up with it.

Dominic slowed, redirecting his magic to ease the pain.

"Are you sure you want to make this difficult?" Simon called out. To Dominic's unease, he sounded close. "I can always go back to your place."

By now, either Carter had realized he was gone and called the damn taxi himself or....

Or what? He and Blaise were mounting a rescue? To paraphrase the tiger, not bloody likely.

Dominic hurried through the woods. His steps had slowed, in part to keep his energy going, and also to allow him to keep his balance. There were wild cats in these woods, and thick roots, and poison ivy. While not everything would kill him, they could all hurt him or slow him down.

Simon stepped out from behind a tree.

Fuck.

Dominic stumbled to a stop. If he didn't know better, he would've thought the bastard had magical abilities himself.

Simon raised the gun with a faintly trembling hand. His breath came quickly, and his hair clung to his sweaty brow. Catching up to Dominic had strained the hunter. Dominic hoped the man had pulled some hard-to-reach muscle.

"The bullets are silver," Simon said.

"I'm not a werewolf."

"Silver is stronger than normal metal alloys. These bullets will hurt you."

Luisa Prieto

"Normal bullets would have done the same. You overpaid."

Simon frowned. "I don't believe you."

Dominic didn't care.

The hunter clicked the safety off and steadied his aim.

Dominic cared.

He twitched his fingers and began gathering magic out of the elements around himself. Justin had once told him it was difficult to hit a moving target. If he could gather a strong current of air around himself –

A warm weight slammed into him, knocking him down.

The sound of a bullet cut through the air, breaking his concentration. Shards of the spell fell about Dominic, ionizing the air and making it tremble.

The warm weight above him shifted.

Dominic turned

And found Carter above him.

Dominic stared at him. He hadn't thought he'd see Carter again. If the man couldn't believe him about choosing, why would he come out there?

He had, though. Goddess knew why, but he had.

"Carter."

"Are you hurt?"

"Damn it," Simon said. His steps crunched closer on the wet earth.

Anger and power flared up in Dominic. He was a fool to forget Simon. Simon was a fool for still being there.

Dominic yanked the remnants of his spell. *Wait*. Simon had missed once. Now that Carter was there, the bastard would probably want to be closer so he wouldn't miss next time. *Wait*.

When Simon's shadow spilled over Carter, Dominic slammed his spell into Simon.

The magic swept over Simon, bleeding color out of his skin and clothes. The man trembled and then flew back a dozen feet and struck an oak. The tree shook, raining water and leaves onto him. Simon pushed himself up, slumped down, rose, and then stumbled off.

Cooking with Ergot

The traces of Dominic's spell clung to him, telling Dominic that the man was weaving unsteadily through the trees, heading back in the direction of his car. His movement was unsteady, making him hug the occasional tree.

Dominic frowned. The bastard shouldn't be able to move after a spell like that. The hunters in Carter's line were made of something fierce. What he wouldn't give to get a look through their genealogy.

For this moment, that thought was a fancy, something to consider and put aside. Dominic would rather focus on the man above him.

Dominic glanced at Carter.

The blond man was studying him. His cool gray eyes were beautiful and large and sad.

"Are you hurt?" Carter asked.

"No. Did the bullet hit you?"

"No." Carter brushed Dominic's hair out of his eyes.

A shiver ghosted through Dominic. Goddess help him, Carter felt so good against him.

"I should move," Carter said.

Yes, though Dominic wished he didn't have to.

Carter rose and offered Dominic a hand. Dominic considered, but in the moment it took him to decide to stand by himself, his hand had moved ahead and accepted Carter's offer.

"How did you find me?" Dominic asked, rising.

"I sensed you." Carter frowned. "I wish I could explain it better, but I just had a feeling you were here, and I had to come."

Goddess. Carter felt their connection.

"I didn't cast a spell," Dominic said. Whatever else Carter thought or feared, Dominic wanted him to know that he hadn't done that. "I didn't bewitch you."

"I know." Carter's voice was sad. Resigned.

The soft tone stabbed Dominic. Did Carter doubt him? Or did he wish Dominic had, so that he could strengthen his resolve against Dominic's choosing?

Luisa Prieto

"If you were in danger," Carter said, "I'd want you to do it. Enchant someone, conjure something. I'd want you to fight."

"You don't find magic threatening?"

"No." Carter looked thoughtful. "Despite the terrible things that have happened, I think there's a mystery in this world, how people could survive so much horror, how they could become stronger. Maybe it's magic. Or knowledge. Comedy. Love." Carter smiled. "Does it really matter what it is? As long as it's there and it works?"

The ache inside of Dominic shifted. In his hurry to get away from Simon and the hurt he'd felt about being pushed away, he'd forgotten how very easy it was to care for this man. Magic was new to Carter, but he wasn't afraid. Maybe he was beginning to accept the choosing.

"You're trembling." Carter shrugged out of his leather coat.

Was he? He hadn't noticed.

Carter draped his coat over Dominic's shoulders.

"Please don't...." Goddess. It felt so good against him.

"I want to," Carter said. Whispered.

They stared at one another. Dominic wanted to return the coat, but the fabric was warm, making him realize that he was cold. His t-shirt and jeans were not made for running around in the woods on a chilly September evening.

The coat also felt like Carter. As soft as his skin. As warm as his body. As smooth as his Southern Comfort voice. It was his. It might be the only thing of Carter's that ever was.

"Dominic." Carter drew closer. "About the choosing thing."

"Yes?"

The sound of several large cats rumbled nearby.

Carter looked away, eyes searching the woods. "Damn. They could be anywhere."

The cats' cries rumbled again, sending a shiver through Dominic. They sounded angry. Hungry.

Frowning, Dominic tipped his head toward the wind, studying the sound. Their cries were light, allowing the growls to bleed into the air. It was a frightening and

Cooking with Ergot

beautifully ethereal sound. It was too airy to have been made by a breathing creature.

"Did Blaise come with you?" Dominic asked.

"Part way. He said something about getting help."

Blaise, Blaise, Blaise. Dominic would have to make him a mountain of grilled cheese sandwiches for this.

"They sound close," Carter said.

Simon screamed.

"And busy," Carter added, scowling. "Simon's a bastard, but he doesn't deserve...okay, he probably does."

He was family, though. Dominic suspected Carter did not like the thought of his cousin getting spiritually torn to bits.

"They won't eat him." Dominic would need to go back to Whole Foods later, though. Vinny and Vito were going to need a thank-you gift. Fifty pounds of raw steak apiece should please them.

"How do you know?" Carter asked.

"Blaise won't let them." Knowing his familiar, he would probably think letting Simon die quickly would be a kindness.

"Shall we?" Dominic asked, heading toward the sound.

Footsteps sounded on the wet ground behind him, and then Carter caught up. "These aren't normal wild cats, are they?"

"No," Dominic said. "They're Blaise's cousins."

"Exactly what is he?"

"A familiar. Magic made sentient. The spirit of a dead mage. It varies, depending on what grimoire you're reading."

"Ah."

They found Simon a moment later, rocking himself silently beneath a redwood. Blaise sat three feet from him, idly licking his fur clean.

Shadows shifted through the trees behind Blaise, casting him in and out of darkness. As Dominic approached, the shadows fled.

Dominic knelt beside Blaise. "You're just showing off."

Luisa Prieto

The muscles in Blaise's legs shifted.

Oh, no.

And then a bundle of fur launched at Dominic, sending him falling back. A bed of wet leaves and softened soil greeted Dominic, gentling his fall. Dominic shifted, looking up to see his familiar clambering up his chest until they were eye to eye.

"I'm happy to see you too," Dominic said.

"Dominic?" Carter asked, kneeling beside him. He looked from Dominic to Blaise and back.

"He occasionally greets me like this," Dominic said.

"No claws?"

"No. Blaise doesn't—" Dominic frowned at his familiar. "Did you claw him?"

"Not as much as I would have liked."

Blaise's Grilled Cheese

American cheese	white bread
two slices of tomato, thin	pinch of kosher salt
2 Tbsp unsweetened butter	

Melt the butter.

Take a brush and lightly coat one side of each piece of bread.

You do have a brush, don't you?

Turn off stove. Go to store and buy a brush.

Get some extra cheese, bread, and butter while you're there, too.

Start over.

Heat the pan on medium. MEDIUM. While the bread will grill quickly on a higher setting, the yummy cheese won't have a chance to melt.

Sandwich placement: bread, cheese, a couple thin slices of tomato, cheese, and then the last slice of bread.

Grill the sandwich. I like a nice golden hue, but the darker hues do have a pleasant

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crunch.

After the sandwich is done, let it rest for a moment.

Cut sandwich into quarters. Leave it on the table and walk away. Don't look back.

Chapter Ten

"Tell me again why you didn't call for help," Justin said.

"He had a gun on me." Dominic watched the paramedics secure Simon in the ambulance. Occasionally the bastard said something, but no one had been able to decipher it. Something about shadows and tigers and claws.

Oh, my.

Dominic slipped his hands into his coat. The rain had ended, and now chunks of night sky peeked through the clouds. The dark gray blanket had done its magic, making the stars appear brighter, the sky a deeper velvet, the air crisp and new.

That was rain, Dominic decided. Threatening at times, strangling traffic and toads, but it cleansed and it revealed.

It reminded him of Carter.

Chances were everything right now was going to remind him of Carter.

"I looked into Brooks," Justin said. "He's the seventh son of a seventh son. We should have him tested for magic."

"I think he has it. It's untrained and sleeping, but it's there."

"You base this on...?"

"He found me," Dominic said. Whatever else happened between them, he would keep that memory close. Carter had accepted their connection for a little while. He'd used it to help him. "He sensed where I was and tried to protect me."

Justin frowned. "If you've chosen him...." When Dominic said nothing, Justin's frown gentled. "His family will be a danger."

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"I doubt Carter will be taking me home to meet them anytime soon." Or at all.

"Considering how things ended with his cousin, it might not be safe for him to go back either."

"They've never hurt him before," Dominic said.

"Dom, I know —"

"Don't call me Dom."

"Have you read *Ergot*? *Spice Wars*? Those books were not written by someone who had a happy upbringing."

Dominic frowned. He was a jerk; that had never occurred to him.

"Let's start with the possibility that he might have magic," Justin said. "We need to find someone impartial to test him."

"Blaise?"

"The tiger looks a bit too comfortable right now."

Did he?

Dominic turned, looking for Carter and Blaise.

He found them a moment later. Carter stood ten feet away, talking to another officer. He held Blaise lightly against him.

Dominic smiled. Some men looked a third their age when they held a stuffed animal. Carter looked poised. Dominic hoped Blaise was becoming fond of Carter and wasn't simply trying to keep him close to watch.

Justin released a breath. The quiet sound caught Dominic's attention, making him focus on his brother.

Justin had dressed with his usual careless grace — white shirt, dark slacks, dark coat. He wore a pretty blue and silver-flecked tie.

The splash of color was unlike his brother. It reminded Dominic of the man Justin had been staring at the night before.

Justin half turned to say something to a passing officer. The movement shifted his shirt, allowing a small splotch of color to peak out from beneath Justin's collar.

Dominic blinked. Forget the tie. Was that a hickey?

The officer nodded at Justin and left. His brother turned toward him.

Luisa Prieto

"I hope you'll be careful and take things slow," Justin said.

"I will. What about you?"

"This isn't about me."

Dominic raised an eyebrow at his brother. "And in my place, you'd take things slowly?"

"We're talking about you."

Dominic sent a light wisp of magic out, brushing over Justin's shirt. The magic nudged at the cloth, pushing it down and teasing Dominic with a pretty splotch of color.

Justin frowned and drew his collar up higher.

Dominic fought and lost his battle against smiling. However things turned out for him, he was happy for—and a touch jealous of—his brother. Justin was a great guy. Dominic hoped they'd be happy.

"Never mind me," Justin said. "I know you've been fed all of these fairy tales over the years. You need to be careful, though. Love at first sight—"

"So did you ever learn the name of that guy from the Borders parking lot?"

"Graham."

"What's he do?"

"He's a web comic. He saw Brooks's cousin run by, and he drew a picture of him. We're talking about you."

Dominic considered telling his brother that the one time he'd brought up choosing, Carter had refuted him. Dominic decided against it. Knowing Justin, his brother would be tempted to shoot Carter.

"He and I haven't made plans to move in together," Dominic said. Color crept across Justin's face. "We're—have you and Graham already discussed moving in together?"

"My place is getting fumigated," Justin said. "It's temporary."

Of course.

"He'd probably like an October wedding," Blaise whispered.

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"I haven't even asked him if he'd mind me staying in the area," Carter said, holding the tiger close. The police had smiled when they'd seen him holding Blaise. Detective Abernathy's brother was renowned for his eccentricity, and officers Rhodes, Miller, and Evans had commiserated, for they had held the tiger on occasion.

"Little guy has hidden claws," Miller had said.

Miller tried to feel up Dominic the year before, Blaise said.

"If I'd known sooner, I would've passed you to him," Carter had grumbled. Blaise had purred.

"Dominic will be open to you remaining in the area," Blaise said.

"And his brother?"

"I'll deal with Justin."

Hmm. Having a vaguely homicidal creature on his side. Carter could get used to this.

Officer Miller approached Carter. A few minutes ago, he'd been a pleasant, auburn-haired man. Now, Carter thought the bowling-pin-shaped man was in need of some anti-dandruff shampoo.

"We've got your statement," Miller said. "Do you need a ride back?"

"Thank you, no. I have to tie my shoelace, though." Carter offered Blaise to Miller. "Would you mind?"

The officer blanched. "Um. No. Sure."

"Thank you."

Carter knelt and redid his laces.

He kept his pace normal. Taking his time would seem odd, and while this time offered him and Blaise a moment to get along, it wouldn't do to draw attention.

When he rose, Miller was holding Blaise by one foot and pressing his right hand against his chest.

"I think whoever made him accidentally lost a needle in him somewhere," Miller said.

"I'll ask Dominic about it." Carter took the tiger.

A chorus of steps drew close. Carter turned and found Dominic and his brother

approaching.

Twenty-four hours before, the detective had scowled at him. He scowled at him still, though now there was something else in his eyes. Resignation, perhaps, or wary patience. Carter hoped the detective never gave Dominic that look.

Carter wondered if he already had.

"I saw your car on my way in," the detective said to Dominic. "If you don't feel up to driving, I can take you back."

Claws lightly touched Carter's arm.

"I can drive him," Carter said.

"My car is close," the detective said.

Dominic smiled at his brother. "Thanks, Justin. I think we'll be okay."

They walked to Dominic's car in silence. Unlike their last trek to the Prius, this quiet wasn't haunted by Simon. With luck and a good lawyer, his cousin wouldn't see the light outside of a hospital for the next few years.

"I'd worried..." Carter wasn't certain how to finish the sentence. There'd been so much to be afraid of. That Simon would kill Dominic. That he would simply disappear with him and Carter would never know.

"He didn't know the roads very well up here," Dominic said. "He knew his way around the woods; I'll give him that. But when driving, he got distracted."

Carter toyed with telling him that he and his cousin had practiced hunting one another through the woods back home for years. Later, he decided. The information was unpleasant, but as with all knowledge, it might help someone someday.

Right now, he wanted to focus on Dominic. There were other things Carter wanted to talk to his lover about.

"You're my chosen," he said.

Dominic stumbled.

Carter caught his arm, keeping him from falling. Perhaps he should have led up to those words better.

"I'm sorry," Carter said. "Should I have waited until the full moon to bring it up?"

"No. I'm just surprised."

Cooking with Ergot

"I didn't understand," Carter said. "I know I've been a bastard."

"The choosing thing goes back to antiquity."

"I don't know if anyone else in my family takes after Simon, but I will never let any of them near you."

"Just about everyone in my line has found their chosen, but I never thought it would happen to me," Dominic said.

"I want to be with you."

Dominic kissed him. The feel of his lips against Carter's was sweet. Trembling.

A warm weight shifted between them, and Blaise coughed.

Dominic inched back. His pretty lapis lazuli eyes looked from Carter to Blaise and back. "Sorry."

"Don't be."

"I accept both your apologies," Blaise said. "Let's head home now."

Once in the car, Blaise twitched in Dominic's lap, and the red-gold shimmer swept over him. Seams faded, his eyes grew bright, and his paws settled against Dominic, steadying himself.

His tail twitched, lightly tapping Carter's arm. It was a pleasant touch. Friendly.

"Tonight," Blaise said, "I'll make the grilled cheese."

The trek back to Dominic's house took a couple hours. There was little Carter was willing to give his cousin, but he would grant Simon this: the bastard knew his way around the hidden roads.

"What time will we start filming tomorrow?" Carter asked. "I'm afraid my mind has lost the information."

"We usually start around ten in the morning. Give the neighbors a chance to wake up and be gone. Why?"

"We're going to need to rebuild the gingerbread house. Simon put a knife through the gable."

"Shit, I forgot."

The three talked at once. The gingerbread house was ruined. Simon was a bastard. They would have to start over and bake like they'd never baked before.

Luisa Prieto

"That's fine," Carter said as he pulled into Dominic's driveway. "Gentlemen, we can rebuild it. Make it stronger. Taller. Creepier."

Dominic smiled. Something inside of Carter twitched. It was a pleasant feeling, akin to the pull he'd felt when he'd gone looking for Dominic. The man was right here, but the sensation made him want to get closer.

Later, he told himself.

Later, when the first batch of gingerbread walls was out of the oven and Carter had made his super-secret tandoori marinade, Dominic joined him in the kitchen.

Dominic smiled. "Hey. How's the super-secret recipe I'm not allowed to know about doing?"

"Good." Carter stepped up to him. "You're going to love it."

"What's in it?"

"It's a surprise."

Dominic looked past Carter. "Blaise?"

"No, it doesn't have any tigers in it," Carter said.

Behind him, Blaise chuckled. "It has neither tomatoes nor cheese in it."

"He's keeping your secret," Dominic said, glancing at Carter.

"He," Carter said, drawing Dominic close, "wants me to surprise you."

"I don't always like surprises," Dominic said, his tone light.

Neither did Carter. After the surprise wore off, though, he occasionally realized the surprise was a gift. Something, someone, he couldn't live without.

Carter kissed him.

Dominic stilled, then relaxed against him. His lips were soft and velvet warm, brushing Carter's thoughts away. Simon was gone. Magic was real. He had Dominic.

More importantly, Dominic had chosen to be with him. This was Dominic's warmth against him. These were Dominic's hands sliding across his body. Dominic's skin under his fingers.

A thread of air traced over Carter's clothes. His shirt trembled, and then the buttons snaked out of their holes.

Carter smiled, breaking the kiss. He could get used to magic.

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Dominic leaned into him, ghosting his lips over Carter's. "Tell me what's in it," he whispered.

"Kosher salt. Cayenne pepper. Sugar. Yogurt."

"Yogurt. Strange."

"You'll like it."

They kissed again, slowly undressing one another.

Blaise coughed. "Audience." Cough. "Not exactly the most comfortable place for this."

Chuckling, Carter and Dominic retreated from the kitchen. Along the path to Dominic's room, they began losing items of clothing.

Carter traced his fingertips over Dominic's shoulder, his back. His touch was light. Trembling. He'd been afraid they would never be this close again.

They were, and when Dominic tumbled him onto the bed, Carter pulled him close for another kiss.

Carter slid his hands over Dominic's body. Down his chest, where his nipples pricked against Carter's fingers. Down his stomach, his abdomen, over the hair that whispered against his skin, and finally over his cock.

Dominic gasped, breaking the kiss.

Carter stroked him, sliding his thumb over the tip.

Dominic had a beautiful cock. Long, thin, with lusciously soft skin and a subtle strength.

Carter caressed him, moving his fingers from Dominic's sac, down the vein running along his shaft, to the bulbous tip. Pre-come slicked his fingers.

"Goddess," Dominic whispered.

"I don't think I've ever been called that before."

Laughter tumbled out of Dominic. The sound was sweet, broken by his unsteady breath.

Carter kissed down his neck, feeling Dominic's amusement as it shook his body. Over his chest, the laughter sounded like a rumble. Over his stomach, like a sigh.

And over his cock, like a moan.

Luisa Prieto

Carter took Dominic into his mouth. He tasted wonderful. Hint of sweat, and bitter-sweetness from the pre-come. Nice.

Dominic writhed. The sound of his body whispering over the sheets sent a shiver of excitement through Carter. The sibilant sound was sweet. Carter ached to make him come.

Carter drew back, letting Dominic's cock slip past his lips. The long shaft rose, eager for contact.

"I want you," Carter said. God, he wanted him. Needed him.

Dominic reached over to the nightstand and returned with lube. His fingers trembled, but he broke the packet open. The faint smell of vanilla crept over Carter. Unlike him, his lover could open things.

"Condom?" Carter asked.

Dominic's brows rose. "I imagine the choosing thing is still new, but I'm safe."

Physically, Carter thought yes. His lover might be free of things that would kill this moment, but a part of him would always be mysterious and magical. Enchanting, yes. Safe, Carter wasn't certain of.

That was all right. Carter normally preferred his life to be quiet, but for Dominic he was willing to challenge himself.

"I am, as well," Carter said. "It's just words, though. I want to get tested and show you."

Dominic smiled. "After today, I would've thought you'd been tested enough."

"How'd I do?"

"Fine." Dominic tore open the condom wrapper. "A couple weeks from now, though? I'm burning these."

Carter chuckled. The amusement stumbled when slick fingers caressed him, followed by the feel of thin material sliding over his cock.

"I didn't see where you got that from," Carter said. "Magic?"

"Nightstand."

Carter chuckled. Pity.

Dominic gave him a withering look. "You know, anyone else laughing like that

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would have seriously affected my ability to continue.”

“Sorry.” Carter smiled and took the small packet of lube from Dominic. A quick squeeze, and then cool, slick gel coated his fingers. “I keep expecting fireworks.”

“I can do fireworks. They’ll –”

Carter stroked Dominic’s cock. Dominic’s breath stumbled, falling into a pleasant gasp. “Hmm?”

“Fireflies,” Dominic whispered. “It’ll look like fireflies. They’ll rain their glow over everything around them.”

“Mmm. Sounds....” Something. Nice. Yes.

Carter slid his gel-slick fingers over Dominic’s sac, studying the terrain of his body, then traced down and teased Dominic’s puckered opening.

Warmth lapped at his fingertip, tempting him inside.

“I like fireflies,” Carter said, stroking and teasing his finger into Dominic. “On summer nights, I used to sneak out of my room and watch them.”

He’d thought they were fairies. Something magical and ephemeral, and if he could approach them, then they’d take him away to someplace where people didn’t talk about hunting or killing.

The dancing, glowing shapes always fled from him, though. If there was magic in this world, as a child he’d been certain it didn’t want him.

Carter pushed the thoughts aside. He didn’t have fireflies, but he had Dominic. Alive, enchanting Dominic. Carter stroked Dominic’s opening, then pushed two fingers in. His fingertips teased, stroked, pressed, and stretched.

Dominic shifted. His hands slid over Carter’s arm, and his hips ground, moving into Carter’s touch.

“Tell me,” Dominic said.

“Anything.”

“What did you want from the fireflies?”

“I wanted magic.”

And now he had it.

Carter withdrew his fingers, spooned up behind Dominic, and then slid into him.

Luisa Prieto

He kept his pace slow. Slow thrusts, making his balls tap against Dominic's pretty ass.

It felt so good to hold him, to be inside him. There'd been moments this day when Carter had been afraid he'd lost him.

Carter reached around. He found Dominic's fingers over his cock, stroking himself in beat to Carter's thrusts. Carter slid his fingers over Dominic's, increasing his rhythm. Lube, pre-come, and sweat slicked their skin.

Dominic trembled and then came, splashing warm liquid over Carter's hand.

Pleasure lit through Carter, gathering in his balls, teasing his member. So close. *Yes*. Carter came.

His hips quickened, trying and failing to ride the jolt of orgasm as it faded.

Carter kissed his lover's ear, his cheek. Dominic turned his head toward him, kissing him.

God. Dominic felt so good. Carter lay there, in him. He wanted to stay in Dominic forever.

Forever lasted a couple minutes. Then Carter withdrew, wishing he had magic and could dispose of the condom without leaving.

The small nuisance took a moment, and when he was done, Dominic curled against him, lips pressing against the corner of Carter's lips.

Motes shifted around them.

Carter blinked, watching the ethereal shapes grow larger. Brighter.

Soon, seven blue-silver shapes flicked around them in the shadowed room. They danced, shimmering dust over the carpet and furniture, creating a trail where they'd just been.

Carter watched them and smiled. Magic was not the threatening creature that Simon and others in his family thought it was. It could be beautiful. It could be fierce and protective.

It could also be passionate and curl up against him.

The lights twitched and then fell, retreating to the carpet. The desk. The chair. They shone softly, keeping that pretty shade of blue. They reminded him of Dominic's eyes.

Cooking with Ergot

"That was beautiful," Carter said.

Dominic's lips traced over his chin, up his cheek, to his ear. "I didn't do it," he whispered.

The End

Luisa Prieto

Thank you for your purchase of Luisa Prieto's *Cooking with Ergot*.

Coming in Spring of 2009 Luisa will have another release at Aspen Mountain Press. We invite you to visit www.AspenMountainPress.com and see our collection of M/M romances and to use this coupon for 5% off when purchasing Luisa's future e-book release *Dark Designs*. Prieto-14636

Here is a little about this upcoming work, *Dark Design*, by Luisa Prieto:

Until Kyler saw the tattoos move across his intruder's skin, he didn't believe in magic. Now, he's entwined in a battle between good and evil...on evil's side.

In his past life, he was Etherwolf, the youngest of the Darkness' knights. Mages have long believed that once the final knight rose, the Darkness' time would come and the end of times would begin.

The stories, Kyler knows, are true.

Where once he gloried in his power, though, now, he wants to fight. If he can't resist his past, Kyler knows the Darkness will destroy everything he cares for, starting with the lover Kyler once considered seducing to the dark.

Excerpt:

A chill breeze stirred his hair.

Kyler turned.

Across the room, the back door crept open. Sunlight bled across the hardwood floor.

Unease unfurled inside of him. He always locked doors behind him. When he didn't, someone died.

Kyler crossed the room.

His image scowled at him from the door's glass as he approached. Despite the scar, he was handsome. Cerulean eyes, aristocratic nose, and wide lips. When he was with others, he set his shoulder length black hair free, letting it hide the scar. Alone, he

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preferred it out of his way. At thirty-six, he unfairly looked thirty.

Kyler shoved the door against the wall, knocking his doppelganger aside.

Outside, sunlight painted the small yard in an ethereal light. There was a patch of concrete, some grass, and a cluster of yellow flowers. The gate in the left corner was locked. No one was there.

Behind him, someone sighed.

Kyler turned.

A shadow spilled across the entryway to the kitchen, hinting at a thin frame.

Kyler's heart thumped staccato-quick against his chest. In Colombia, the guerrillas had come up silently behind him.

They were dead, though. He'd seen the bodies, the way their heads had been nearly twisted off. They couldn't be there.

But what if—

Kyler reached into his coat and withdrew the penknife.

A quick tug at the cap, and then the blade caught a flash of the overhead bulb, sending a splash of light over the wall, across the room, and into the eyes of the figure stepping into the room. It--she--raised one over her eyes.

Kyler studied her. She was pretty, with light cocoa skin and short dark hair. She wore a black vest and jeans, exposing the various tattoos that shadowed her flesh. Butterflies lay along her right arm, a long red serpent wound around her left, a couple small spiders dotted the bit he could see of her stomach, and a dark slash of color lay across her neck.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was sweet, with a trace of an Irish accent.

The surprise faded into disquiet. She wasn't from Colombia, but she'd still broken into his house. Should he call the police?

No. If she was a thief, he had little she could steal.

"If you leave now," he said, "I won't call the police."

Her fingers splayed, allowing Kyler to catch a glimpse of her eyes. They were the green of Colombian woods. Pretty. People disappeared into them and were never seen again.

Luisa Prieto

"You can call them, if you like," she said. "It won't matter."

Kyler's unease sharpened, making his hand twitch. The reflected light jumped and stabbed light into her eyes.

The woman's fingers shuttered. She chuckled, and the soft noise made her chest and shoulders shake. "I'm pleased to see you too, Etherwolf."

Etherwolf? "What're you —"

A shadow. Ethereal, a second skin that he could never touch. That's what he saw, the night the guerrillas came. Just his shadow and theirs; his crouching while theirs towered over him. Crouching, shifting, waiting —

Kyler blinked. For a moment he'd thought that he was in Colombia again. The shadows....

God. What was he thinking?

"It's going to be all right," the woman said. She drew closer.

"Get out," he said.

"No." She unbuttoned her vest. "There's something you need to see."

Kyler closed the distance between them. He didn't want to hurt her, but he could scratch her. A light pain would hopefully send her running.

He raised the penknife.

And then discovered that he couldn't hurt her. She wasn't threatening anyone. She simply wasn't well.

The realization was a relief. A worry. He wasn't a monster. He was just in trouble.

"I'm not interested," he said, pushing past her. The phone was on the counter. Hopefully the police would be there in a few minutes.

Movement whispered behind him. "I was never your type."

Fool! To turn his back on an unknown. Had he learned nothing?

Kyler turned and scowled at her.

"My name's Rhune," she said, undoing the last two buttons. "You'll understand soon."

She took a step toward him, causing his shadow to fall over her, and then turned. The vest slipped off her shoulders, revealing nothing more than a bare back in shadow.

Cooking with Ergot

Kyler clicked the phone on. "I'm calling—"

Concentric circles rippled across her skin. They moved over her shoulders, down her arms. Where it crossed, spider legs stretched and butterflies fluttered.

What...how....

Kyler slid back along the counter. His shadow slipped away from her flesh.

Light swept over her, revealing pale brown skin and an obsidian shadow. The tattoo echoed his posture, his stance, the curve of his face. It was odd and beautiful and

—

It shifted, turning its subtle features toward him.

Different shades of black wove a nose, hint of eyes, lips. It smiled.

Kyler stared. It couldn't be moving. He had to be imagining this. Had to be dreaming or hallucinating or....

He wasn't.

Kyler set the phone and penknife down, and then touched Rhune's back.

She had warm skin. Warmer where the shadow was.

The darkness lapped at his fingers, sending a cool shiver through him. Images flickered at the edges of his mind: the guerillas, their shadows...

...painted a story across the wall. Two of the men wanted to take a student outside to talk, yes, just talk. Kyler said no, but it wasn't a request, and he was introduced to a knife.

It traced from the corner of his left eye to his hairline, giving his burgeoning scar the illusion of Egyptian kohl.

It was a game, the guerrilla explained. The knife would go in deeper if he blinked.

Kyler remained quiet as blood snaked down his face. Behind the guerrilla, the shadows drew closer.

A breeze traced over him, whispering...something.

The guerrilla's hand twitched, sending the knife in deeper.

Pain stabbed Kyler, blurring his sight. Men became shadows, shadows men. When he could see again, the guerrilla smiled.

The wind sharpened, making the shadows dance.

Luisa Prieto

"Etherwolf," the wind whispered. It caressed Kyler's skin, lapping at the blood. The touch was familiar. Comforting.

Behind the guerrilla, the shadows approached.

Kyler stared at them, at their man-made darkness, and knew who he was. Kyler, yes, but also —

Kyler yanked his hand back. God. There'd been something in the wind, something alive and —

Black tendrils followed him, tugging at his fingertips.

He stumbled back, hitting the counter. The tendrils snapped and retreated into Rhune's flesh.

A chill breeze brushed over Kyler, stealing his warmth.

"Etherwolf," it whispered.

"Did you hear that?" Kyler asked.

Rhune half turned toward him. "No. I can sense it, though." She held out an arm. Ripples ebbed across her skin, stirred as if a breeze was playing across water.

A moment later, the breeze swept over him.

It teased his skin, slipping beneath the ends of his coat and shirt to taste his skin.

"Ether —"

"No!"

The wind stopped.

Kyler snatched the penknife off the counter turned to Rhune. "What the hell was that?"

"The Darkness." She glanced at the knife and smiled. "A sentient culmination of all of humanities' fears and hates."

That sounded horrible. "What does it want?"

"It's mercurial. Sometimes it wants death. Sometimes domination. Every once in a while I think it wants to look at something pretty. Right now, it wants you."

No. "Get out."

Rhune's smile faded. "I'm beginning to wonder if I should've brought someone for you to kill."

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"I don't kill people."

Rhune laughed. The quiet sound shook her body, making the ink shimmer. "Oh, my friend. Do you think the Darkness would be able to call you if there wasn't something inside you yearning for it?"

She was wrong. The only thing Kyler wanted was to remember and....

Was that really true? He'd begun to remember something a moment before, and he'd shied away from it.

Rhune's laughter faded. "I read your last book. I know how the guerrillas died."

"The authorities believe they turned on one another."

"The authorities can be blessedly stupid."

Kyler drew back. When he'd woken up beside the bodies of the guerillas and five of the children, the surviving kids said nothing. Kyler had hoped he hadn't hurt anyone.

But what if he had? What if Rhune was right and this was in him? What if...?

What if he had killed the guerillas?

"It's going to be all right," Rhune said.

She was wrong. It might never be all right.