



I

IT HAD been a good night, my favorite kind. Nothing planned—just the fun of being out with a few close friends and letting the night lead you wherever it wanted. Lack of a destination always made the journey fun. Planning was for amateurs.

“See,” Rene Favreau said, smiling over his shoulder as he walked into the club ahead of me, “aren’t you glad I talked you into coming out with us?”

And I was, up until I saw who we were meeting at our last stop. I never understood the need in some people to add others to the mix when what you had with you was working out fine. It was probably the same principle in action that made people cheat. If one guy is hot, two would be better. The mentality to want, need, more was lost on me. I liked small groups, a tight circle of friends, and one lover at a time. But Rene wanted to dance and have fun and to him, the more the merrier. He had gotten a text that Graham Becker and some of his other friends and acquaintances were at a dance club in the Castro, so he had routed us there to meet them. I was suddenly ready to call it a night.

“Wait.” He slipped around in front of me, barring my path. “C’mon, Mal, just stay. You don’t even have to talk to Graham.”

But I would. He was there and I was there, and even in a large group, even with ten of us at a table being loud, I would get stuck at least acknowledging his presence and him mine. And then there would be trouble.

“Malic,” Graham muttered after maybe five minutes of us all sitting down.

“Graham.”

You could feel the ice blow over the table. I shot Rene a look.

He nearly spit out his Chivas and water.

“What’s so funny?” Graham asked him.

He just shook his head, trying to breathe around the burn of having good Scotch go down the wrong hole.

Graham’s dark green eyes were back on me, staring daggers. This was what came of telling the truth.

“How ya been?” I asked politely.

“What the fuck do you care?”

I didn’t; I was making polite conversation, but if he was going to be a dick, I could easily ignore him.

A month ago we had been at a party together, and Graham had been really drunk. At one point in the night he was in my lap, arms wrapped around my neck, nearly dry humping my abdomen and whining for me to fuck his brains out. I had been more than willing to grant his request; he was tall, dark, and handsome, and the sexy green eyes made my cock hard. To cut down on drive time, I had suggested the bathroom. I was thinking of him. Fucking in the john, his face plastered up against the mirror, ass bared, was

more comfortable than my car; it seemed like a good plan. I thought he'd be pleased. He was nowhere near it.

Apparently Graham Becker was not hot to be my hook-up for the evening. He was not a one-night stand kind of guy; the man was looking for a relationship. I just wanted to get laid. He was upset that he had misinterpreted my interest as long term when it was merely immediate. And then he was embarrassed. And then he took it out on me again and again and again until just seeing the man made me cringe. He could hate me if he wanted, that was his prerogative; he just didn't need to be vocal about it.

"Lay off Mal," Rene told him. "Give it a rest."

"Why are you here?" Graham snapped at me. "Shouldn't you be in your closet?"

Christ.

"Well?"

He meant my club. My strip club. My straight strip club.

Ever since Graham had found out my club down on Mission was a girls-only venue, he had been giving me crap about it. Why did a gay man own a place where only women stripped? That made no logical sense. But it made perfect sense to me. At my strip club, Romeo's Basement, you could only watch beautiful women writhe out of elaborate costumes; there were no boys on stage. I had purposely made it a gentleman's club because hot men strutting around in nothing but G-strings would have been hard on me. Sleeping with your employees was bad for business as well as morale, so I made sure I was never tempted to do either. My explanation would not have interested the man

who hated me. What he didn't know was that I took my sex casually for a very serious reason. I didn't want to hurt anyone.

I was not simply a cold-hearted bastard being a dick; I had nameless, soulless encounters in hopes that if they were fast, then the other person wouldn't suffer. Yes, I wanted to get laid, but also, because I was a warder, if you weren't my hearth and I screwed you, you could get hurt. Graham had had no idea of the very real jeopardy he was in.

I was a warder; warders killed demons. I killed demons. I hunted them with others just like me, five of us in all, plus my boss, the sentinel of the city, Jael Ezran. Every city had a sentinel, every sentinel had five warders, and all of them hunted demons together either in pairs or in a group. I fought things that went bump in the night, which was the heroic part that probably would have excited Graham. The part that would not have excited him was that sleeping with me could not only hurt his feelings when I left in the middle of the night but could actually kill him.

The kiss, the touch of a warder, if you were not their hearth, could be deadly. There were a select number of humans that could be intimate with us, and when we found one of them, it was a cause for celebration. It wasn't like a hearth was the one and only mate of a warder; they were simply one of very few people that could handle being intimate with a warder.

Ryan, or Rindahl as my sentinel called him, one of the other four warders I hunted with, had recently found his hearth, and I could not imagine him ever letting the man go. When a warder found a hearth, usually it was because they

had finally taken the step and slept with someone they loved. When they had sex they hoped, prayed, that that person was compatible with them. Ryan had wanted Julian, and so he had gambled on a future with the man. When he found out that Julian was his hearth, could truly be his, I had never seen him so happy. He even allowed Julian to watch us hunt. And it had only happened once, but to so indulge another simply out of love was horrifying. The very idea made me crave lots and lots of air and wide open spaces. Love, in all its many forms, seemed more about control to me than anything else. I would fight to make sure it never got a hold of me.

“No snappy comeback?”

I looked over at Graham, unsure of what he was talking about.

“Malic?”

“Sorry, I stopped listening. What’d ya say?”

He threw up his hands, got up, and stalked away. I turned to look at Rene.

“You know you’re an ass, right?”

My mind had drifted, that was all. I didn’t try and piss people off deliberately, but it happened a lot nonetheless. I bored easily as a rule; it was hard to keep my interest. Those that could usually became my friends. “So, what, are you picking up a fuck buddy or not?”

“We say make love to or sleep with,” Rene corrected me, brows furrowed, scowl dark. “Why do you always have to be so goddamn crass?”

“Have the balls to say fuck, ’cause that’s all it is,” I said, yawning.

“Mal—”

“If it’s hearts and flowers you really want, you should pick someone up at the library and ask them out for tea.”

“You do not have a romantic bone in your entire body.”

Which was probably true, but it didn’t change the facts. “If it’s romance you want, it ain’t happening at a club.”

He was still scowling at me, but I was right and we both knew it. “Malic, you know you’re never gonna find someone to put up with your bullshit, right?”

I grunted because that was simply a fact of life. I excused myself to go hit the head.

“I’m gonna get drinks. Whaddya want?” he called after me.

I yelled back for a Black and Tan and moved through the thick Saturday night crowd toward the bathroom. Once I reached it, I encountered something I never had before: a line.

“Something’s going on,” the guy in front of me said to my shoes.

“What?” I asked, annoyed. It would have been nice to have more people look me in the face, meet my eyes. But they didn’t.

“I think some hustler’s getting his ass beat.”

I moved by him and several others, but no one said a word. The theory was that my perpetual scowl coupled with

my height and wingspan, as well as my shoulders and chest, made most guys give me room. When I stepped around the corner, inside the bathroom, I realized how dark the red neon made it. Because the space was so big, there were dark spots everywhere, and at the other end of the row of stalls, there was a guy standing guard.

“No!”

The scream was from inside the stall, and I moved down toward it. I didn’t run, but it was easy to see that I was on my way down to have a word.

“Back off, man.” The guard put up his hand. “This is shit you don’t wanna be in.”

“Get off me!” Second yell from inside.

I shoved the guard back hard, and when he moved further than he thought he would, I got a wary glance. Power exhibited over others is either seductive or scary. He was scared; it was all over his face.

“Let him out... now,” I ordered, my voice low, cold.

He stared holes in me, but he turned and pounded on the door. “Greg, c’mon.”

I waited. Not that I couldn’t have picked the guy up and thrown him across the room. I was a warder, after all, I fought and killed demons, but it would have raised eyebrows and therefore questions if I put the man through the wall. I was solid and muscular, but the guy in front of me looked like he’d taken a few too many steroids. I might have been big, but the guy in front of me was bigger.

I heard another smack, that unmistakable sound of someone being hit, then a bang, and finally a guy stepped out who was almost as large as the one standing guard. The two of them could have easily passed for defensive linemen—massive muscle-bound guys with no necks.

“You gotta lotta balls, man,” he said, shoving me back as the two of them moved by me.

I slipped inside the stall, and there on the floor was an angel. Literally. The guy was dressed all in white, dusted in glitter in a Lycra T-shirt, white leather pants, and white patent leather Doc Martens. The huge, white feather-covered wings he was lying on completed his outfit.

“Shit,” I groaned, sliding down the wall beside him next to the toilet. His lip was split, there were big red blotches on his right cheek and throat, and his eyes were closed. He had either fainted or he was knocked out. “Hey, look at me.”

There was no movement.

I leaned back, squatting, and got out my cell, sending Rene a text because there was no way he would either hear his phone ring in the club or be able to talk on it.

“What....”

I looked back down at the guy as he looked up... and was swallowed in big, warm, chocolate brown eyes framed in the longest, thickest eyelashes I had ever seen in my life. I could barely breathe.

I hated feeling like that.

His hand reached for my knee.

I cleared my throat. “You all right?”

He nodded, just staring up at me with those huge anime eyes. I instantly changed my mind about his age. Not a guy, a boy. Very young. Maybe, if you were stretching it, just barely legal. He had thick mahogany curls that fell over his ears and down the delicate slope of his neck, fragile features, and full, pink lips that were made to be devoured. He looked about five eight, five nine, built like a gymnast with a tight lean body, defined muscles, and smooth skin. He was beautiful, much too pretty to be on the floor of a bathroom.

“What’s your deal?” I asked him gently.

“You saved me,” he said, lifting himself up, his body very flexible, sliding over my knee and down against my abdomen.

“Wait.” I tried to stall him, but my balance was upset, so I ended up sitting on the floor with him in my lap.

“Why?” he asked, straddling my hips, tightening his legs as his hands went to my shoulders. “You saved me. You have to keep me now that you saved me.”

He was warm on top of me, sliding his tight little ass over my groin, wriggling to get a better angle.

“Stop.”

His eyes narrowed in half, and he bit his bottom lip, pressing, pushing.

“Baby,” I said, because he was so young and so sweet. Tasting him would be heaven.

He leaned forward to kiss me, and when I lifted my head he came up short, his lips on my jaw.

“Stop. Stop,” I said, taking his wrists in my hands, pushing him back so he had to look at me. “We’re not gonna have this scene, okay? Are you hurt?”

He shook his head slowly, his eyes locked on mine. And it was then, after years of experience looking at and talking to men and women who came into my club, that I realized how drunk he really was.

“Why can’t I kiss you?”

I doubted he could even tell me his name. He was sloshed out of his gourd.

“I wanna thank you for being my hero.”

Christ.

I let him go and put my hands on his face, looking at his lip, moving his head, lifting his chin so I could check his throat, his neck. His hands went to my chest as he tried to push himself forward, get closer.

“Stop.”

“God, you’re beautiful,” he whispered, his hand slipping around the back of my neck. I could not even fathom the amount of alcohol that had to be in his system for him to think I was anywhere near hot. The beer goggles were on good and tight.

“I have never seen eyes like yours.”

Uh-huh. “They’re blue,” I said distractedly, checking him over. His neck was already darkening where he had been choked. Christ, who roughed up a guy this pretty?

“They’re like ice,” he said, shifting in my lap, sliding over my groin, notching his cleft over the bulge in my jeans. “They’re really scary.”

And he somehow made that sound good instead of bad. But that was hardly the point. The point was that he was trying to kill me. “Stop,” I told him again, realizing that to stand from the angle I was at in the cramped space, he’d have to move first. Normally I could have stood with anyone in my lap, but the maneuver was out of the question from where I was beside the toilet.

“Mal!”

“Last stall!” I yelled back, and I heard Rene’s shoes clip the floor as he came closer. “Listen, that’s just my buddy Rene, okay? Nobody’s gonna hurt—”

“You smell great.” He inhaled, leaning forward, wrapping his arms around me as his head hit my collarbone. “And you feel amazing.”

His skull was hard and it hurt for a minute when he knocked it against me.

“Do I even wanna know?” Rene asked as he appeared above me, brows furrowed as he held up his phone. “And can I just say that this is the weirdest text message you’ve ever sent me?”

“What?”

“I need you in the bathroom?” He arched a brow for me. “For what?”

I shot him a look as the top of a wing nearly took out my left eye. “Shit.”

“Okay, Cupid,” Rene said, bending down to get his hands under the boy’s armpits. “Let’s get up.”

“Wait,” he protested, but Rene was too strong.

As he was put on his feet, I got up, and Rene and I stood there staring at the wobbly angel.

His thick eyebrows had a slight arch in the middle, which gave him a mischievous, almost wicked look, definitely alluring. He reminded me of those guys in paintings from the Renaissance, fragile looking with porcelain skin and big eyes. Because of all that, he was easily pulling off the angel costume.

“I’m Dylan.” He smiled up at me, his eyes heavy-lidded, biting his bottom lip. “What’s your name?”

“Malic.” I smiled down at him. “What are you doing in the bathroom, Dylan?”

The decadent look I was getting, like I was candy, was adorable, and I had to remind myself that he was much—spell it out in neon—too young for me. And drunk. God, he was so drunk.

He took a quick breath. “I’m not a rent boy, if that’s what you’re thinking. I work at Epic Create and Copy down off Powell.”

“I know where that is, we do some of our flyers and stuff there.”

“Oh yeah?” His eyes glinted in the low light. “I don’t remember ever seeing you come in. I would’ve totally remembered.”

“Totally,” Rene repeated, waggling his eyebrows at me.

“What do you do there?” I asked, ignoring both his compliment and my annoying friend.

“Assistant manager, I work second shift, sometimes graveyard.”

Rene turned and looked at me.

“What?”

“At least this one’s not a stripper,” he said sarcastically.

“That guy didn’t strip at my club,” I said, defending myself.

“You have a strip club?” Dylan asked, way too interested in that bit of trivia.

“Not that you can go in,” I assured him. “You’re too young.”

“I’m nineteen,” he claimed.

“Which is way too young to be at a strip club,” I said, sighing. Why couldn’t he be older? Tougher? Or at least sober? “You know there are laws about serving alcohol to minors, right?”

“But I could just come to see you,” Dylan said excitedly. “Right?”

“Wrong.” I shook my head. “If you’re not a dancer, then what’re you doing in that outfit?”

“You think I look like a dancer?” He belched.

“Charming,” Rene groaned.

I smiled, I couldn’t help it. “What’s with the costume?”

Big smile. “I have a second job from now ’til”—he hiccupped—“January at that Christmas boutique in Union Square. I’m an angel.”

“No,” Rene teased him, “really?”

“It’s seasonal,” he told my friend seriously, nodding.

He really was the cutest thing.

“I wish I was a stripper, how cool would that be?”

He was much too adorable to be stripping; no one should see him take his clothes off who wasn’t planning on keeping him.

“Can I come home with you?” he asked, leering at me, his laughter bubbling up out of him like champagne.

“No,” I said, even though I had the urge to grab him tight and hold him... just crush him up against me; I wanted to feel his skin next to mine. “What’re you doing in here?”

“Oh, see, I was at a bar with some friends, and these guys came over and asked if I wanted to hit a club with them and then meet back up later with everyone else,” he explained, taking hold of the hem of my sweater. “And so I said sure but I didn’t know they thought they could... whatever.”

I nodded, moving back so my sweater pulled free of his hands. “Well, listen, we’re on our way out, so why don’t you come with us to make sure you don’t get in any more trouble tonight.”

“Okay.” He smiled up at me, stepping in close, arms wrapped around my waist.

“Oh for crissakes,” Rene groaned.

“Hey!”

I looked up, and the guys that had left earlier were back. I shoved Dylan behind me and waited.

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you are, man, but—
—”

Rene stepped in close to me. “Back up, man, we don’t want any trouble.”

And even though they were both bigger and younger than Rene and me, they backed off fast. I knew that had my friend been there alone, it was doubtful they would have left. He had a nice face and kind gray eyes with laugh lines at the corners. He was the guy that stopped for people stranded on the freeway in the rain—he wasn’t scaring anyone. It was me. I scared them. I made them uneasy, caused them to fear for their continued safety. I was intimidating just standing still and I knew it. Even if I wasn’t holding my *spatha*, the sword that gladiators used to use in the coliseum, I was still spooky. I was the guy you crossed the street to avoid having to walk by.

“Cocktease,” one of the men called over to Dylan.

“Get out,” Rene ordered them, and they moved a little faster.

“Big scary Rene Favreau,” I teased him, and he smiled wide, his hand on my back.

“Let’s go eat,” he said, looking at Dylan. “You got friends you can call after?”

He nodded.

“Okay, c’mon, we’re not leaving you here.”

Dylan looked back and forth between Rene and I. “Are you guys—”

“What?”

“Together?”

“No,” he said flatly. “Now c’mon.”

Dylan nodded, but turned to look at me, checking to see what I was doing, whether I was coming or not, to see which way I was walking.

“Go, already.”

The way I was being looked at, what the hell was that about?

It was fun to watch the rest of Rene’s friends when he and I joined them with Dylan. His pal Sean could not take his eyes off him, offering to go get him some ice for his lip. Dylan eased closer to me, and when I looked down at him, he smiled.

“What?”

“Will you buy me a drink?”

I gave him a look. “Sure. Whaddya want? Milk?”

He scowled up at me. “Hah, funny, I’m twenty-four, ya know.”

“Really.” I nodded because that was interesting. He had aged five years from the bathroom to the floor.

He cleared his throat. “Yeah.”

“That’s funny, because you already told me you were nineteen in the bathroom.”

“I did?”

I nodded.

“Shit.”

I smiled down at him. An angel swearing was funny. “How’d you even get in here?”

After a minute of staring at me, he answered. “The doorman knows me, we make their drink menus and coupons and stuff.”

“I see. So he let you in here even though you’re underage?”

“I’m barely underage. I’ll be twenty-one in two years.”

I grinned lazily. “Do you even know what you’re saying at this point?”

He made a noise in the back of his throat. “Who cares, I’m legal to do what’s important.”

“Vote?”

“No, fuck.”

“Oh,” I said, chuckling. “That is important.”

He grinned wide. “It is right this second.”

“Stop flirting; it ain’t gonna work.”

“Why not?”

“Just—kill your motor.”

“C’mon, let’s have a drink together. I have a really good fake ID.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m gonna buy you some food instead.”

“And take me home after?” he asked suggestively, his eyes all over me.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Cause you’re too young for me,” I explained.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty.”

“That’s it?”

I chuckled.

“Mal,” Rene said, his hand on my shoulder. “I’ll meet you at Dad’s Diner on Folsom. Whoever gets there first gets the table.”

“Yep.”

“Hey, Malic, can I ride with you and Dylan?” Sean asked me.

“Sure,” I agreed, what the hell.

So I had an angel and a guy that wanted to get into the angel’s very tight leather pants hanging out with me. On the street I realized that Dylan was freezing. I immediately traded him his wings for my heavy leather jacket, and he wrapped himself up.

“Thanks, Malic,” he said, smiling at me.

I took them to my silver Mercedes, and once Dylan was belted in the front and Sean in back, I pulled away from the

curb. As I drove the streets of San Francisco I listened to them talk, Sean telling Dylan all about his job as an associate at a law firm. He was trying to impress the younger man; I knew the hard sell when I heard it.

“Malic, what do you do?” Dylan asked, and I could feel his eyes on me.

“I own a strip club, I already told you that,” I reminded him. “Now tell me where you live.”

“What kind?”

“What kind of what?”

“What kind of strip club?”

“The kind women strip at.”

“Only women?”

“Yes, only women.”

“Oh.”

“I repeat... where do you live?”

“Why?”

“Just in case your friends don’t show up and I might need to take you home.”

“Malic, why don’t I just come home with you instead?”

“You can come home with me,” Sean volunteered with a leer.

Dylan’s hand went to my thigh. “I wanna go home with Malic.”

“Why?” Sean asked with a chuckle, patting my shoulder. “No offense, buddy, but I’m way cuter than you.”

And he was. Cute was not a word that described me. I got “scary” a lot, and “cold” and “intimidating” and “mean.” I heard “mean” the most.

“Don’t you think I’m cute, Dylan?” Sean asked.

He didn’t answer, which caused me to turn from the road so I could see him. Big, dark, liquid brown eyes absorbed my face.

“I’m not looking for cute,” Dylan said to Sean while he stared me right in the eye. “I’m looking for a man.”

I just smiled as I turned the corner.

The restaurant was small and cozy, and I went first into the booth with Dylan in the middle between Sean and me. Rene was minutes behind me, taking a seat across from me. He had just started asking me what I was going to have when I realized that the angel was trying to wedge himself onto my lap.

“What’re you doing?”

“I wanna be on the other side of you,” he said, rubbing his cheek against my bicep, leaning into me.

“Why?”

“’Cause I do.”

I looked over him and realized that Sean was much too close, and neither of his hands was on the table. Since I didn’t want my angel to be molested—it would annoy me—I agreed. I shifted back and he went over my legs, ass sliding over my crotch provocatively as he wriggled against me and dropped down on my left side. Wedged between the wall and me, he was in heaven.

“Stop,” I chuckled, as his hand slid over my thigh.

I felt him shiver against me.

“What’re you gonna eat?”

He focused on his menu even as he pressed himself into my side from shoulder to hip.

After the late-night, early-morning snack, Sean had to go with Rene after we ate; there was no more stalling. They had a BDSM club to hit. Dylan was all hot to go, he wanted me to tie him up, but I assured him that he was going home because he was, for the hundredth time, too young. So I was alone as I walked him toward his apartment. It turned out that all Dylan’s friends were out partying, and he didn’t feel like meeting up with them after all. As I escorted him home, strolling through his neighborhood, I couldn’t stop smiling. Hard to remember the last time I was in Haight-Ashbury.

“Why’re you smiling?” he asked me.

“I just remember coming here when I first moved to the city. I feel so old right now.”

“You’re only thirty.”

“Yeah, but compared to you, that’s ancient.”

He pointed and we went down an alley, around the back of a building, up stairs, and inside. It was like a maze, and inside it was no better.

He lived with three other guys in an apartment no bigger than five hundred square feet. One of the rooms had a bunk bed in it, and the other had a futon against one wall and a mattress and box spring on the other. The kitchen had a

stove with one burner and no oven. The microwave oven sat on top of the refrigerator.

“Seriously, why are you smiling?” he asked, turning to face me.

“I just remember living like this. My first roommate and me, I think our place was smaller. Our apartment was in the Tenderloin and the refrigerator was outside on the fire escape and we opened it through the window.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, small,” I said with a smile, passing him the wings I was carrying for him.

“Oh, thank you.”

“Can’t lose those.” I smiled at him.

“Where is he now?”

“Who?”

“Your roommate?”

I squinted at him. “I dunno, that was like a hundred years ago.”

He snorted out a laugh, ending with a giggle. The food had helped a little, but he was still really wasted. “You’re not that old.”

I gave him a grunt.

He cleared his throat and took a breath. “Listen, I don’t want you to think bad about me.”

“No, baby,” I told him, “I don’t think anything bad.” In actuality, I had thought nothing at all. I couldn’t imagine I would ever see him again after I walked out of his apartment.

“Cause I usually don’t drink or do anything but work and go to school, but tonight when I got off and my friends asked me to come out and everyone told me to forget about taking the costume all the way home, that I should just leave it on and change my... oh shit.”

“Oh shit what?” I asked because how pale he got suddenly was spooky.

“I left my bag in my friend’s car.”

“So what, you can get it tomorrow.”

“But I need my books for school on Monday, and my wallet’s in there and... shit.”

He looked really upset.

So I had to fix it. “Let’s try calling whoever you left your bag with. Where’s your phone?”

It was wedged inside his back pocket, how, because of how tight the leather pants were, I had no idea, but he passed it over and told me who to call.

I spent another half an hour on his phone while he was trying not to hyperventilate, running down some guy named Tucker until I got him and he agreed to drop the messenger bag off the following morning before he went to work at eight. He would not forget, at least he sounded like he was sober.

“There,” I told him, “catastrophe averted.”

“God,” he moaned, “this whole night was a fuckin’ disaster... until you saved me.”

The long-drawn-out sigh would have made me laugh if anyone else had done it. But there was something about Dylan that made it sexy beyond words. And he was cute and

hot and everything else, but there was more. Pretty only went so far, especially with me. I saw evil practically every day of my life. What was on the surface was easy to look past. With Dylan there seemed to be an innate goodness that drew me more than anything else. He was so innocent.

“What would I have done if you weren’t there?”

I didn’t want to think about it.

“I just—I don’t want you to think that I’m some fuckin’ twink out there hitting the club scene every night and going home with anybody who asks or shit like that, ’cause that ain’t me, ya know?”

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say.

“That guy and his friend they—they thought I was a rent boy or something.”

“Okay.”

“But I’m not.”

“I know you’re not.” I knew enough of them, saw them in clubs and on the streets, most of them strung out, losing their looks to the ravages of meth and other vices, trading their bodies for money so they could in turn trade the money for drugs. I knew a hustler when I saw one. There was no haunted look in Dylan’s eyes; his were big and wide and baggage free.

“I just don’t want you thinkin’ I’m trash because I’m not and I really like you.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know enough,” he said, his breath catching as he took off my leather jacket I had given him to wear. Instead of

passing it to me like I thought he would, he turned and dropped it on the threadbare couch. “You probably saved me from getting raped or at least really hurt, and then you and your friend protected me afterwards. I’d say I know a little bit about your character.”

“I see.”

“Would you stay?”

“What about your roommates?” I teased him, moving to step around him to get my coat.

He barred my path, his hands on my abdomen. “They’re not coming home.”

“Dylan,” I said gently. “I’m very flattered, but we both know that you are very drunk.”

“So what?”

“So you’ll regret it.”

“I won’t,” he assured me. “I swear I won’t.”

“Baby,” I sighed, “I don’t wanna hurt you, you’re too sweet.”

“Hurt me? How the fuck would you hurt me?”

Having sex with a man who was not my hearth could be potentially lethal; I would not put the angel in danger.

“Malic?”

“Just—”

“You won’t hurt me, I promise.”

It was only then that I realized that the very pretty boy trying to talk me into his bed was on his knees in front of me. When had he done that?

“Please, Malic, lemme take care of you.”

But he was too young.

What if it took a week to heal the damage I inflicted? He had work, he had school. There were practical, real-life, real-world problems to consider. Older men had grown-up jobs and they could miss work, call in, or take a vacation. He was a poor, struggling college student with a job working at a copy store. If I slept with him and he needed to heal, how would he manage that and still get to class? There was no possible way he was my hearth, so was I going to drain some years off him just because I wanted to bury my cock in his sweet, tight little ass? It was beyond selfish, and even though I was, on most occasions, a self-centered prick, even I had limits. If he was over thirty, I would have thrown him down on the couch and pounded him into the floor. As it was, I took his hands in mine, moved them off my belt buckle, and brought him back up to his feet.

“Baby, this is not gonna happen.”

He gave me the most wounded look I’d seen in a while. “So you would never want me, huh?”

I shook my head. “That’s not what I said. You come see me when you’re twenty-five, and we’ll talk. If you still want me, I’m all yours.”

He nodded fast before he looked up into my eyes. “I don’t wanna wait.” One hand went flat against my chest; the

other went up the side of my face and then back into my hair.

“Again, I’m very flattered,” I told him, reaching for his hands, moving them off me. “But no.”

He nodded. “You have the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen. I could drown in them.”

Which was a very cheesy thing to say, but he was just a baby, after all. I remembered talking like that when I was young and dramatic too. “Well, yours aren’t bad either.” I grinned at him, moving to the couch to grab my jacket and pulling it on before I turned around. “So you take care, Dylan, and try an’ be a little more discriminating about who you say yes to in clubs, all right?”

“Could I maybe call you sometime?”

“Sure,” I told him, because it was all I could do for him.

“Can I get the number?” he asked me as he pulled out his cell phone.

After I gave it to him, he stood there looking up at me, his hands shoved down into the pockets of his leather pants. He never took his eyes off me.

“Can I call you anytime, Malic? Day or night? Whenever I want?”

I nodded and squeezed his shoulder before I put my hand gently on his cheek. He was so sweet; I was worried about him.

He pushed his cheek into my hand like a cat does when you pet it, and I saw him shiver hard. I wasn’t helping. I was

giving out mixed signals, and that was a shitty thing to do. I just needed to go already.

“Malic.” He swallowed hard. “I could just—”

“I’ll see ya,” I said gently, turning to leave.

“Oh.”

You had to be made of much stronger stuff than flesh and bone not to respond when someone made a noise like that. Halfway between a moan and whimper, he sounded like he was going to cry. I twisted back and caught him in a tight hug, where he ended up with his face in my chest and his arms wrapped around me. He was tiny, all five-nine of him, maybe a hundred and forty pounds, and as my chin rested on the top of his head, I realized that he fit really well against me.

“Listen, we don’t hafta have sex to be pals, Dylan. Gimme a call and we’ll get some food, all right? Any time you like.”

He nodded, lifting his head so his face was against my throat. He let out a deep breath.

“Okay?”

“Okay, Malic.”

I let him go and he stepped back from me, his eyes flicking up to mine, locking there. “So I’m gonna call you, all right?”

“Yeah.”

“Malic?” he said when I got to the door.

“Yeah?”

He rushed across the room and threw himself at me so fast that I had to scramble to get ahold of him.

“Dylan,” I said gently as he whimpered and twisted in my arms, pulling his shirt off, his hands suddenly on me, on my cashmere sweater, under the T-shirt underneath, tugging it up before I could grab him, pressing his smooth skin to mine.

“Malic,” he breathed out, moaning as he shoved me back against the wall, his fingers fumbling on my belt buckle. “Jesus, your skin is so hot.”

“Baby,” I said softly, cupping his face in my hands, lifting his chin so I could look down into his eyes. “Baby, stop, this isn’t going to make us close. Being friends is gonna make us close.”

His eyes filled, and I sighed deeply before I grabbed him tight and hugged him again. I put my face down onto his shoulder and rubbed his back. The boy was just starved for physical contact, and though I didn’t need it, he really did. I doubted that there was anyone in Dylan’s life that would just hold him. Wherever home was, he maybe needed to visit and have some family time. He needed his mother to love on him a little.

“You okay?”

He nodded against my chest, but when I went to move, he clung to me. I let out a deep breath and held on. At that moment there was no one who needed me more.

The sobbing came fast, and he clutched at me and tried to breathe. I held him until he was drained and sat down

with him on the couch. He wanted to sit in my lap, but I sat on the floor beside him and stroked his hair.

“Malic what?” he asked softly, his eyes heavy-lidded as he stared at me.

“Sunden. You?”

“Shaw.”

I nodded. “Dylan Shaw, I got it.”

He closed his eyes as I massaged his scalp.

“What kinda name is Sunden?”

“Swedish.”

“I like it. I could be Dylan Sunden.”

He was really just edible. It was too bad he was so completely off-limits.

“Would you sleep with me when I’m twenty?”

“No.”

“Twenty-one?”

I chuckled. “No.”

“But for sure when I’m twenty-five?”

“Yes,” I said, placating him.

“I can’t believe you’re just sitting here with me, not wanting anything.”

I leaned over close to him. “Don’t be so jaded; you’re too young.”

He shivered, and I couldn’t resist kissing his temple.

“Please don’t go.”

“Just rest.”

“I’m gonna call you, don’t think I won’t,” he promised, reaching out to take hold of my jacket. “I will have you, Malic.”

I smiled as his eyes drifted closed. When I left, he was sleeping. I hoped his hangover wouldn’t be too horrible.

II

I COULD tell just from how the man was looking at me that he was confused about why I was there.

“What exactly is it that you do, Mr. Sunden?”

I turned my head, looking for Detective Tanaka, not in the mood to talk as I was still raw physically, mentally, and emotionally from fighting earlier in the day. I had gone alone to battle a demon possessing a lovely coed, and it had gone bad like it always did when I was alone and never did when I had backup. Everything always went perfectly when there was someone else there to watch. But because I was by myself, I ended up exorcising the demon, yes, but not without getting sliced to ribbons in the process. It would easily take a week to heal the damage. And then I got the call from Tanaka.

I was really hoping that I would not need to call for help now, because then I was in trouble. If one of my fellow warders saw me and told Jael, I doubted that I would be any use to anyone for a month. It would take that long to convince my sentinel to let me out of my own house.

“Hello?” The man snapped his fingers in front of my face.

“Sir,” Detective Tanaka barked, walking up beside me, putting out a hand to move the man back. “What’s going on, Mr. Everett?”

“I want to know who this man is,” he said, his voice rising as he pointed a finger at me. “I want to know why he’s in my house.”

“He’s a specialist in this area,” Detective Tanaka’s partner, Detective Curtis, said as he, too, joined us, moving Mr. Everett back away even further. “He finds people.”

“Oh.” His voice broke suddenly, and I looked up. There was a hand thrust out to me, and my eyes settled on the father of the missing girl. “I’m sorry—if you can help me find my baby... I’m sorry, Mr. Sunden.... Jason Everett.”

I took the offered hand. “Call me Mal.”

He forced a smile, nodding. “Please, Mal, come take a look around my house.”

It was so much easier when they invited me than when Tanaka and Curtis had to lie to get me in places.

A year ago Detective James Tanaka had found strange symbols at a murder site. When he had gone to the county museum to research what he thought were Celtic runes, the assistant curator of antiquities, Joshua Black, had sent him to see me at my club. He and his partner had been way more than hesitant; I owned a strip club, a high profile, lucrative strip club, and they were uncomfortable being there.

Unease turned to flat-out disbelief when I informed them that they were not looking at symbols but demonic writing. He and his partner, Detective Curtis, had both thought I was nuts. But a week later when we discovered the lair of a demon together, along with Marcus, a fellow warder, they both became converts. The four of us saved a kidnapped mother of three and in the process sent the

creature back to hell. Since then, if whatever they were looking at seemed odd to them, I got a call.

I was at the home of Jason and Kellie Everett because their six-year-old daughter had been taken from a crowded room. The lights had flickered momentarily, and when the power came back on, Sophie Everett was gone, having disappeared in plain sight. It made no sense, and after finding no trace of the little girl anywhere—no tracks, no forensic evidence, nothing—they called me.

Walking into the house, I was overwhelmed by the too-sweet smell of flowers.

“Christ,” I groaned, turning to look at Tanaka. “Don’t you smell that?”

“What?” he asked me seriously, his dark black eyes squinting at me, broad shoulders hunched like they did when he was nervous.

“The flowers,” I told him, smelling magnolia and honeysuckle and gardenia. Normally I liked the smell, but not under the circumstances. The scent was meant to mask other, harder, scents.

“So I told Mr. Everett you were with the FBI,” Curtis said as he joined us, “since I didn’t think he’d be too excited to learn that you own Romeo’s Basement.”

“Probably not,” I sighed, walking into the girl’s bedroom, having toured the rest of the house with Tanaka. I noticed her stuffed animals instantly. “Look.”

Both men turned to look where I was pointing.

“What?” Tanaka asked me, annoyed, unsure what he was supposed to be seeing.

I crossed to the bed, looked at the toys, and then turned, following their blind gazes to the closet door. “She was afraid of whatever’s in here. All her animals are watching it for her.”

“Please, all kids are freaked out about their closets.”

“Not like that,” I assured him, pointing at the animals. “Can’t you see this?”

“I don’t get why the animals are important,” Curtis told me.

“A child believes in the power of their totems,” I told him, picking up a stuffed German shepherd. “The dog is not a dog but a friend ready to rip out the throat of whomever or whatever would come to hurt her. The animals are like a ring of protection; the demon wouldn’t have been able to touch her on the bed.”

“You’re serious,” Detective Curtis said, picking up a fluffy black-and-white wolf with big blue glass eyes. “This is scary?”

“Not to you, but to the little girl he would be her protective spirit.”

He grunted, dropped the wolf back on the bed, and tipped his head at the closet. “I’m gonna tell you again that all little kids get creeped out by their closets.”

“And again I say, not like that,” I disagreed, walking to the door and putting my hand flat on the wood. “She was afraid of whatever is in there.” The touch sent a sliver of ice

straight to my stomach. It felt like when you drink cold water when you're hungry and you can feel it go all the way down, illustrating how empty you are. "Shit," I groaned, taking a step back.

"What?"

"I'm pretty sure I found your missing girl. I just hope she's in one piece when I go in there." I took a breath.

"In where?" Curtis asked me. "In the closet?"

"It's not a closet."

"What is it?"

"A passage."

"Like in *Poltergeist*?"

I looked over my shoulder at him. "Movie references?"

"I'm just tryin' to get a handle on this shit, Malic. I still have trouble processing half the shit I've seen."

I understood that. "Okay, listen, I'm gonna go in here, but you guys need to find the person in this house who is trafficking with a demon. They're doing it in trade for something... money, power, love... I dunno, but the demon was called and allowed to take the child, which is why we have a doorway. You allow it in, you have a passage to its lair; that's how it works."

"Okay, I'll hafta take your word for that."

The look I was getting, the trust, I appreciated it.

"And so what?" Curtis asked me. "Do we pull our guns and go in there with—"

I shook my head, reached over my left shoulder, and pulled the spatha, the straight sword with a long point that I needed for fighting in close quarters, from the sheath strapped to my back. Under my heavy leather jacket, it had gone unnoticed when I walked in. I had a greatsword, or Zweihänder, that I used as well, but I would have never smuggled it into the house. That sword was for when stealth was not important.

Tanaka smiled at me. “That is some cool shit, man.”

The gladiator sword never failed to impress once it was drawn.

“I wouldn’t want to mess with you.”

But I was being stupid and I knew it. It was one thing to fight a lower-class demon alone, but whatever had the little girl... and I was hurt from earlier and I was going into its lair... but I didn’t have time to wait. She didn’t have time for me to wait. I opened the door.

“Hold on,” Detective Tanaka said, hand on my shoulder. “Mal, we’re not gonna let you go in there by—”

“You can’t come with me,” I assured him. “You’re not strong enough. But while I’m gone, find the person responsible for trafficking with the demon. It has permission to be here, a deal was made... I just need to see if I can reason with it or if I have to kill it.”

“Of course you kill it,” Tanaka said, his grip on my shoulder tightening. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Tell everyone in the house that you found a summoning stone.”

“What the hell is that?” Curtis squinted at me.

“My guess would be it’s what you use to call a demon.” Tanaka gave him a look that spoke volumes about his brain process.

I watched Curtis scowl at his partner.

“Just be careful,” I said, squeezing the man’s shoulder. “Whoever called the demon will want to protect that secret. Watch your backs.”

“Same to you,” Curtis told me. “Be careful.”

It was easier said than done. The second I stepped into the closet and closed the door behind me, I saw stairs, saw a light flickering in the distance, and heard words chanted in Latin. I heard the whimpering as well, that was not to be missed. Taking a breath—this was what I did after all, what I had been chosen to do—I rushed forward, taking the stairs by twos.

The descent was endless; my hands on the wall were slimy with wet mold, sliding on the goo, my feet stumbling occasionally because the stairs were ancient and worn. I was no longer in the house in Marin, and I knew if Curtis or Tanaka opened the door now, I would be gone, having completely disappeared to where they could neither see nor hear me. If they opened the door, all they would see would be whatever was normally in the closet: clothes, shoes, toys. When I heard the crying, I sped up.

I found Sophie alone in a huge hall. The little girl was in a daze, and I could tell that as soon as I saw her. I couldn’t see what she was looking at for a minute, but then I concentrated, took a breath, and the empty walls filled in

with her memory. I was looking at the night she had been abducted. She was walking through the dining room in her home, but where there should have been noise, party sounds, there was only silence. No clinking glasses, no music, no low buzz of conversation, no one calling her name. Everyone but her was frozen. People like statues poised to speak to one another with no one moving. She looked around the room and saw men and women silent and still, suspended in time. All was stopped but for her and now me.

“Sophie?”

The sound of her name being called out startled the child, and she whirled around to face me.

“Hi,” I said softly, squatting down, holding out my hand for her to take. “How’re you?”

Her face scrunched up, dirty, wet with tears, she was so scared, so exhausted, and there were scratches where the demon’s claws had gotten her without even trying. Her party dress was in disarray with drooping bows, soiled skirt, and ripped lace. She was terrified and I was tall. Even down on the ground, I was much bigger than she was, and I was armed. I wished I had remembered to bring her stuffed wolf. But I had... what did I have I could give her?

I searched the pockets of my jeans and my leather jacket and... feather. I had one of the white feathers from Dylan Shaw’s costume on me. I had found it in the passenger seat of my car and shoved it, for whatever reason, in my pocket.

“Look.” I held it up for her. “You know what this is?”

Quick shake of her head, short red curls falling into her

dirt-smudged face, huge baby-blue eyes absorbing me, wanting so much to trust and so terrified to at the same time. It was heartbreaking.

“It’s an angel feather,” I assured her. “I got it from an angel.”

She was unsure.

“I promise. He’s an angel.”

“What’s the angel’s name?”

“Dylan.”

She took a quivering breath. “Dylan’s a funny name for an angel.”

“I think it’s a really good name, actually.”

Her eyes were studying everything about me, not missing a thing.

“You want it?”

Quick nod.

“Is it okay if I bring it to you?”

Second nod.

I rose to my full height, which was not short on a good day but to her had to be huge. I was careful with how I moved, and when I was a few feet from her, I knelt down and held out the three-inch white feather dusted with gold glitter. Why in the world I had held onto it was beyond me, but it was perfect that I did.

She took the feather and stayed close, which was a start.

I made a face. “It stinks in here, huh?”

She nodded.

“Maybe we should go?” I asked, tilting my head and smiling at her.

She took a big breath, like she was jumping into the deep end of a pool, and flung herself at me. Trust was just like that; you had to take the leap of faith.

“Oh, there’s my girl.” I smiled, holding her, rubbing her back, as she trembled against me. “My name’s Malic, but you can call me Mal.”

“Mal,” she repeated, clutching me with her skinny arms. “Did you bring that sword to fight the scary man?”

She meant the spatha. “Yes.”

“He wants me to stay here, and I think he wants to eat me.”

I grunted. “He’s not going to eat you. I won’t let him.”

“Promise?”

I moved the spatha so she could really see it, how long the blade was. “I promise.”

She nodded fast.

I stood up with her tucked against me. “Okay, cute stuff, let’s take a look at this memory of yours and see who took ya.”

Small whimper.

“Oh no, sweetheart,” I sighed, pointing. “See, it’s a dream, yeah? This is all over. It’s all happened already. None of this can hurt you; we’re just looking at it together, me and

you.”

“Okay.”

She didn’t question me. She was six, so her mind could accept a hell of a lot more than an adult could. I said it was a dream and she calmed because that meant it wasn’t real, none of it, and *that* made sense. She could accept the Twilight Zone; it was being away from Mommy and Daddy that was freaking her out.

I walked slowly, and the longer we strolled, the calmer she got. We moved in between and around people frozen in action, some looking as though they should have fallen over, so incapable of holding the pose they now held. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something flutter, move, shift, but instead of stopping I increased my stride, feeling the weight of my weapon in my hand.

“There, see?” I pointed, and Sophie was suddenly looking at herself.

We came to a stop, both of us staring.

“Look.” I pointed again, and the little girl’s eyes went to where I guided them.

She saw, just as I did, the woman lifting her up into the arms of what looked like a huge, hooded bird. It was like a vulture cloaked in a cowl, and it had talons, which was how Sophie’s chubby little arms got scratched up.

“Watch.”

Sophie stared as the creature slowly flew, frame by frame, like we were watching a movie that we were fast-forwarding through. The dark wings flapped and the robe

blew back, as though air were rushing by. Sophie's hands were over her face and she was fighting, twisting, sobbing, absolutely terrified because the woman had given her to the creature.

"Who was the lady, honey?"

"My nanny, Nanny Lisa."

Nanny Lisa was going to jail if I didn't get to her first.

"She wants to kiss Daddy, but he said no. He said she had to go away."

And that fast I understood the whole scenario. The nanny wanted the husband, and he in turn wanted only his wife and child. So she was on her way to being fired for hitting on him when she came up with the plan to get rid of the little girl and make the demon give her the man of her dreams. And even as I wondered how regular people even knew how to traffic with demons, I also thought, what a waste. Why hadn't the nanny just gone to one of those online dating services and gotten hooked up that way? Why did some people feel that they could just take what they wanted from others? Even I wasn't that selfish.

I continued to watch, and Sophie with me, as the demon flew her up the stairs to her bedroom and through the open door of her closet and in and down into the dark.

"I don't like it here."

It was the understatement of her young life. "No, me neither," I agreed, speeding up, back toward the stairs.

"Where do you run to, warder?" The eerie singsong tone, drawing out the word "warder" for an endless moment, made

the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Just from the sound of its voice I knew what it was.

I hated all demons, but blood demons, the ones who centuries ago had given rise to vampire legends, those I simply reviled. The little girl knew what she was talking about—he wanted to eat her and drink her blood, but he wouldn’t be satisfied with just that. He had to scare her first and hurt her. He would tear her limb from limb.

“I was waiting for the one who gave the child to me. I have to pay her too.”

Apparently the nanny was not getting her reward; she was going to be a snack before the demon tore up the little girl. You had to be very careful when bargaining with demons; there was always the fine print.

I tucked the little girl’s head down into my shoulder. I had more history with demons than the nanny did. I didn’t trust him. I had no idea if he was alone or not; they usually were, but there was no way to tell. If he was alone, I could put Sophie down and have her close her eyes, stick her fingers in her ears and sing “Jingle Bells” for me at the top of her lungs. But I couldn’t be certain, so I needed her safe in my arms. There was no way he was getting her from me. None.

The demon went through its first shift, transformed into a monster; claws grew where hands should have been, and enormous vacant eyes with a jaw that was now hawklike, with a jutting beak filled with razor-sharp teeth that snapped open and shut. What looked like drool was actually blood that dripped into a small puddle at the creature’s feet. It was disgusting, and even though Sophie could hear it, she also

heard my whispered words of comfort and felt my hand on her head. She was holding onto me tight.

“I have her now,” I told the demon, “and I’m going.”

“I think not, warder.” He smiled slowly, coming closer. “I think I will let the child see the blood run all out of you. I want you to remain here with me for a bit, and we shall see all there is to see. You need to find if there is an end to suffering. Do you imagine an end?”

If the demon got his hands on me, there would be no end. Caught here, kept here, undead in this limbo, I would learn what true terror was. I glanced around his hall and saw sights that were familiar. He was powerful, much more so than I had thought when I came down to bring Sophie home—he could kill me.

There was a bridge at one end of the huge room that ended at a wall, suspended in air as it touched the stone; it showed nothing unless stepped upon. It revealed where you belonged, where your acts on this plane said you deserved, either leading to a life after death of reward, repentance, or reincarnation, a bridge of renewal, offering comfort or... hell. It was a place, for all intents and purposes, that was hell, a realm of fear and fire and punishment. If I wanted to get out, I had to either roll the dice and cross over to another domain or go back up the damn stairs the way I had come. Since I was not ready to be judged on the bridge, and because both me and Sophie had a lot more living to do, I took a step back and slowly brought the spatha around in front of me.

“What do you hope to do with that, warder?”

“This child is mine, not yours,” I said defiantly. “She’s

bound to this world, not yours.”

“No,” he said evenly, “you will stay, for her life ebbs even as you defy me. Soon she will be done, and you will have no way to return. As long as she lives, you can journey back; if she dies, so goes your passage.”

“Her life is not ebbing,” I assured him, “and I’m not a demon; I don’t need to be tethered by a living soul promised as sacrifice to move between the planes. I’m a warder, and I have dominion over you.”

He took a hissing breath and stepped away from me, but as he did, he yelled Sophie’s name.

Her head snapped up and she turned.

“No!” I ordered her, grabbing her head, shoving it back down fast. “You keep your eyes closed!”

I did not let her see the demon’s true form.

He threw back the cowl he wore to reveal a face with empty sockets where his eyes should have been. The face was withered and drawn, gray and ashen. He looked as though he was decaying, and I winced with both revulsion and pity. The demon was in pain, it had to be, and I wondered, even in that second, what it had started out life as. Everything had a start; it didn’t just blink into existence. What had it been?

“Warder!” His voice, when he spoke to me, was booming even as it came out of a rotting, decomposing face. “You will die because you are alone!”

I was thrown back hard into the wall, and for a moment, I couldn’t breathe. My spine felt like it had shattered.

Sophie was crying hysterically as I clutched at the rock wall, trying hard to keep my balance, shielding her, having no choice but to drop either my weapon or her. I would not lose her, and I had to hold onto the stones at my back to remain vertical. I was scared for a second, because he was advancing and I was unarmed, before I felt the rush of cool air blow through the hall.

“Thank God,” I groaned, taking a quivering breath. If I hadn’t been sliced up earlier in the day, if I was at full strength, I would have been okay. It would have been hard, just his presence was draining me, but if I was healthy, I could have held him off long enough to make a run for it. Hurt, I was in trouble, and I had been on my way to being scared. But now I didn’t have to be, because now I had help.

The thick fog rolled toward us. “I’m not alone,” I yelled back.

“No!” The demon roared, advancing on me, raising a hand to strike me.

A low, menacing growl came from the direction of the fog before it was suddenly all around us, enveloping the demon, the child, and me. I released a deep breath even as I watched the demon shrink back away from me.

“Leith,” I breathed out. “She has a wolf; it’s black and white and it has blue eyes like hers.”

“I can’t,” came the disembodied voice. “This is her house.”

“No,” I corrected him, “it’s not. Look again. Change and look. You followed me and so you can’t see it yet. Wait a second.”

It didn't take even that long. My fellow warder was not as fast or strong a fighter as me or Ryan or Jackson, but he was more observant than all the rest of us put together—smoke and mirrors never tricked him.

"I see it now," he said, and all at once I had a huge wolf beside me, against my hip.

In the real world, in San Francisco, California, my fellow warders and I were guys that fought with supernatural creatures with our swords and fists. On alternate planes, in limbo, in between the living and the demons, we had other powers. Leith Haas, who was better at shifting than the rest of us, Leith who used his mind more than his sword, was at his strongest here.

I could never see myself as fog or a wolf or anything but me. I didn't have the breadth of imagination. I was thankful that Leith did. He was everything I'd hoped he could be.

"Oh," Sophie cried, her eyes huge, the excited sound of her sucked-in breath making the demon cringe. She wasn't scared, she was happy, and demons had a rough time processing joy.

I let her slide down my side, and she tripped forward against Leith. He looked like she knew her stuffed wolf did in real life. He was huge. His head, his paws, the tulip-shaped ears, and his teeth. His teeth looked downright vicious. But not to Sophie. To Sophie he was salvation and safety and just... hers. She saw a wolf; she believed it, had the absolute faith that only a child can have. Her face was buried in his neck, her little hands in his thick fur, and she squealed out her happiness. I was a good protector; he was better.

“Take her,” I ordered him, bending as the smell assailed me, the demon’s breath as he came at me.

I caught him by the throat, holding him off, shoving him away.

He drew back, gathering his strength for the next charge. I lifted the little girl.

“Hold tight,” I ordered, barking out my command.

“No,” she wailed suddenly, and I realized what a dear sweet girl I had on my hands. With her own safety imminent, she didn’t want to go without me.

“Go!”

She clung, and Leith flew forward to the stairs. He wasn’t there for me, he was there for her, and that was all right. If I was done, it would be okay because she wasn’t.

Knives drilled hard into my chest, and I was slammed back into the rock wall, sharp edges punching through my jacket, sweater, and T-shirt.

“You die now, warder, and you will bide with me!”

Not knives, *talons*, his long, sharp, barbed claws driven deep, so deep into my flesh and muscle. All I could process was heat and pain.

My girl was gone, so I could use my barroom vocabulary. “Fuck you!” I yelled back, wrapping both hands around his throat and choking him hard.

He yanked free and the barbs tore out pieces of me. I felt the rush of fluid, blood, but I dove down for my weapon, grabbed it, and rolled to my feet. I twisted around, the spatha extending out in front of me the way I had been

taught.

“I am stronger than you, warder; you will not see another day. I will take you to hell with me.”

And that was okay, but then I saw the stupid feather. Sophie must have dropped it when she fell in love with her wolf all big as life in front of her. The white angel feather was lying in the dirt, trampled but still in one piece.

“Shit,” I groaned, realizing that for whatever idiotic reason, I could not get the stupid boy... kid... man, barely man, definitely kid, out of my head. I really wanted to see those big dark brown eyes again.

When the demon bashed me into the wall the second time, I felt my skin open, my bones crush, and everything get soggy. It was terrifying. But his howl of pain, in the same moment, comforted me. In his haste to eviscerate me, he had missed that I had changed my grip on the spatha and driven it up like a dagger.

I ground the point in deep, and since demons had hearts just like everything else, me piercing it and shredding it left him just as dead and bleeding at my feet as anything else.

I collapsed beside him, our blood mingling in the dirt. I couldn't even make it to the bridge to see where I was off to, heaven or hell.

“You fuck,” I was growled at, “don't you dare die.”

I opened one eye to see Leith standing above me. “Funny,” I gasped, coughed, and it hurt. “With a name like Leith—shouldn't you be like Irish or Celtic or something?”

He scowled at me as he knelt down beside me. “Shit, how am I gonna move... shit.”

I outweighed him by at least fifty pounds. “I betcha wish you were bigger right about now, huh?”

With a name like Leith, you expected some highland laird. What you got was a surfer from Malibu, Zuma, who had actually had to live on the beach for a time in his life. Now he was a welder during the day, an artist in his free time whose media of choice was wrought iron, and at night...at night he did what all the rest of us did: he hunted demons. He was amazing and he didn’t know it, and I liked that about him best of all. I was also a fan of the wavy, sun-bleached mass of thick blond hair that fell to the middle of his back. It matched the blue-green eyes, his dark eyebrows, and pale lashes. He had freckles across his nose that made me think he was younger than thirty and a scar beside his right eye that gave him character. Leith was closest to me after Marcus, so if anyone had to watch me die, this man with his quiet strength would do.

I let out a deep breath and my eyes fluttered shut. I was falling asleep.

“No-no,” he barked at me. “Open your eyes.”

“In a second.”

“Mal—”

“Shhh,” I soothed him. “Be still.”

“I don’t know if... oh no, I can.” He was talking to himself and I found that comforting. “You’re such an idiot, if no one can go with you, you don’t go, you stupid fuck.”

He was talking about earlier.

“Okay,” I said, hoping to shut him up.

The sound of thunder, and I let out a deep breath. Warders, could, in emergencies, travel in funnels of wind, wormholes, where we basically moved from one place to the other, following the path of other warders. It felt like falling with a tornado whirling around you. I hated it, the cold, the icy rain that came with it, how loud it was. I tried never to use it, and now Leith was moving me that way. It was how he had followed me, but he wasn’t sure he could use it again; it took a lot of energy to wield. But he apparently had it in him for one more shot. Not that I would be awake for all of it.

“Malic!”

Everything went dark.

“LOOK at me.”

The tone, the father tone... fuck.

“Shit,” I growled, opening my eyes just enough to see my sentinel, my leader, Jael Ezran, hovering above me. The man was huge, easily seven feet tall and built like a tank. He was massive, and he looked even bigger as he squatted down beside me, leaning in, looking at me, hand on my chest. I was stretched out on a bed in his enormous guest bedroom that had been decorated in early Middle Ages chic. You would have thought, glancing around, that I was in a castle in Scotland or something, but I was actually at his mansion

in Sausalito. I hated his big gloomy house and had never, ever, wanted to be there, especially wounded and unable to leave.

“When you’re well, I’m going to beat you,” he assured me.

I let out a breath, my body starting to shake. I was really cold.

“Only you, Malic, have no regard for you own safety. If you had a hearth, you would.”

The man was consistent. He never missed an opportunity to tell me that I needed to find a hearth, someone to love, to return to at the end of the day, to make a home for me, to be my anchor. With Ryan having found his hearth, I was the only one who didn’t have one, and apparently that fact was grating on my sentinel.

“You need a home.”

But I didn’t. Home equaled jail. What I said was, “Okay,” because I hurt too much to argue with him.

“Leith spoke to the detectives,” he soothed me, hands open above me, fingers splayed out, tensed.

“Wait,” I pleaded, because it was going to hurt like a son of a bitch. When Jael knit you back together, it always did. Finesse was not the man’s strong suit.

“No,” Leith rasped, pacing behind him, “do it now. He’s way too pale even for him.”

I would have flipped him off if I had the strength. I was Swedish, first generation born in the United States; my parents moved from Stockholm three months before I

arrived. It didn't change anything that we lived in California; I was never going to be the guy that tanned. "Sophie...."

"Is fine. She told her parents about her wolf protecting her, and they feel better thinking that she missed the real horror and focused on the dream part. Her nanny was arrested for kidnapping and giving the child to others to hold hostage for ransom."

"That's what—" I gasped because it felt like something rolled inside me and broke, down deep. "Leith told them?"

"Yes," he said, and I saw the faint glow around his hands.

"No, oh God," I muttered. "Jael, can't you just—"

"Everything's fine, Malic: the girl is safe, the demon is dead, the detectives are appeased, and the family thinks you're a hero. Now shut up and let me heal you!"

But the bone knitting and everything else hurt so goddamn bad, and it was like jumping off something high: there was nowhere to go but down.

Leith tried to take my hand, but I pulled free, annoyed. I didn't need him to comfort me like a child.

"Stubborn asshole," my friend Marcus Roth, Marot, said as he charged across the room and dropped to his knees beside the bed I was laid out on. Dark sepia eyes locked on mine, and he grabbed my hand and held tight. It looked cool, his dark brown fingers wrapped around my pale ones. When we patrolled together, people always stared at the picture we made: the tall, dark, African-American man and his blond-haired, blue-eyed... friend? Lover? No one had the balls to ask since he was big and so was I, both of us looking

dangerous and combative. He, at least, was handsome. “Malic!”

I lifted my eyes back to his, realizing I’d closed them. The warmth of his hand was welcome.

“We’re gonna do this now ’cause your lips are blue and you’re turning a very unattractive shade of gray.”

My groan of protest was loud. “I just needed to know everyone was okay.”

“Fine, now don’t be such a prick and hold Leith’s hand. You know he’s fighting with his hearth, so give him a break.”

“Fuck you, Marcus,” Leith growled.

It was the last thing I heard before Jael yelled at everyone to shut the hell up and he leaned over and put his hands on me.

It felt like he poured lava into my chest.

I wanted to die.

III

“HE’S here again.”

I looked up from the laptop on my desk where I was trying to make my brain click around the spreadsheet that my accountant, Frank Sullivan, Jackson’s hearth, had sent me. “What?” I asked the woman standing in the doorway.

“I’m sorry, what word didn’t you understand?”

I groaned loudly. It was too late in the day—technically night—for her to be this snarky.

“Mal?”

Claudia Duran, the woman I trusted more than any other in the world, my manager, my right hand, was standing there, hands on hips, looking at me and scowling. “I don’t know what we’re talking about.”

She tilted her head like women do when they know you’re a dumbass but you’re too stubborn to ask for help. “Would you like me to help you read the—”

“No,” I barked at her. “I can figure it out. I’ve looked at a spreadsheet before, I’m just—who’s here?”

“The”—she waved her hand dismissively—“boy.”

“What boy?”

“The boy, the boy,” she was exasperated with me, “and Christ it must be nice to be you, huh? Just take off

whenever you frickin' feel like it?"

I had been healing. Muscle, bone, skin, all of it knitting back together had taken me seven days on my back. A normal man would have been dead. A normal man would not have lived through the first demon attack; the second was not even an option. As it was, Marcus and Leith had taken turns visiting me, bringing me supplies, as well as Ryan and his hearth, Julian Nash. I had to admit that Ryan cooked like a dream and Julian reading to me had been, well, really nice. The man had a deep, sultry voice that had been more soothing than I cared to admit. No one had read to me since both my parents died in a car accident when I was ten. I'd forgotten how much I liked it. Not that I told him or thanked him. I'd done a lot of grunting. Ryan had just smiled at me as he sat at my bedside.

"You can go," I had snapped at him, tipping my head at Julian. "You can leave him; I'll keep him."

I'd gotten an indulgent look. Ryan was keeping his hearth—that was plain to see. Watching Ryan Dean stare at the man he gave his heart to had actually made me wonder what I was maybe, possibly, missing. The way Ryan had to touch him, brush against him, the way Julian pushed Ryan's mane of hair back from his face to see his lover's eyes.... It was nice to see men touch each other gently, tenderly, and not just with heat and need and power.

"Hello."

I looked up at her, realized I had kept her waiting. "I'm the boss and I own this place, so yeah, it's nice to be me, you giant pain in my ass."

She blew a long piece of hair off her forehead and we both laughed. She didn't buy my bluster at all, never had, which was why when I did my thing—walked through the place and slammed doors so hard the walls vibrated—she was usually right behind me giving me hell. And then I'd have to poke my head out of my office and yell out the apology to my staff. They were all scared shitless of me except her. She kept me human.

"Shit," I said, grinning at her, "what boy?"

"I dunno, Mal, some guy—looks like he just graduated from high school, he's been haunting the front door for, like, two weeks, and Dante's like, fuck no, you ain't gettin' in no matter how great that fake ID is, but he totally slipped past Pete tonight and now he's at the bar."

I squinted at her. "Throw him out."

Her face scrunched up. "Yeah, but Mal, he's, like, the cutest thing I ever saw... he's got those big brown puppy dog eyes and curly brown hair and... how can you be such a heartless bastard?"

I was at a complete loss. "What're you talking about?"

"Mal." She started talking with her hands, all animated and restless, dark eyes firing, the candy-apple-red lipstick glaring with the light behind her. "He just wants to see you. Just fuckin' see him already."

"Already?"

"Honey, he's been here every single damn night for two weeks. He stands by the door, in the cold, in that denim piece of crap coat he's got, in those ripped jeans that leave nothing to the imagination, and he waits... for you... and I

think somewhere along the line he stopped eating.”

I squinted at her.

“Sometimes he doesn’t show because he has to work early and other times he hangs out until around ten because he has to work the graveyard shift at—”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because he told me,” she said, annoyed, enunciating the words for me. “Like I said, he’s been out there haunting the front door for awhile.”

“You were screwing with me.” I squinted at her. “You knew who you were talking about the whole time.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, “and so do you.”

Of course I knew. “And?” I asked her, shutting off my laptop, closing it up before I stood.

“And.” She widened her eyes like I was the most irritating man on the planet. “What are you going to do about Dylan?”

“What do you want me to—”

“Malic Sunden!”

“Oh for crissakes,” I grumbled, striding toward her.

“Poor little thing. He saw you leave with that guy last night and he was so sad.”

I needed the release and I could tell that Mario... something... I either didn’t get his last name or had forgotten it already, who knew? What I did know was that the man was not my hearth, but since I would have traded my soul to get laid, it hardly mattered. So I had gone home with the guy

who had come with his buddies to my fine establishment. He had ditched the other members of the bridal party because he needed my dick up his ass.

“Come home with me,” he had offered, leaning over to press a kiss to the side of my neck. “You can fuck me for hours.”

Pushy bottom was what he was, but true to his word, I had fucked his brains out. And then slunk away the second he fell asleep, seeing in the fading light the streaks of white in his dark hair, his drawn, pinched face, and the lines around his mouth. I had taken maybe five years off him that would heal in a couple of days. He would think he had the flu; he would stay home because he felt like shit and looked like shit and then, by the weekend, he would feel better again, he would look like himself and would return to his quest for the perfect top. I would be nothing but a memory.

“Claud—”

“I saw him, Mal; I watched his little face crumple all up when you put that guy in your car.”

“Did you just say ‘little face?’” I stopped from brushing by her to peer down into her pretty topaz eyes. “Are you kidding me with this?”

“Oh c’mon, Mal,” she said, hand on my chest. “He’s adorable and so sweet... why not take the kid home and make a meal of him.”

“You have lost your mind,” I assured her, drawing out the word *lost* in case she missed it. “He’s a baby. You know they imprint on the first adult they see.”

She chuckled deeply before she suddenly caught her

breath.

“What’s wrong?”

She pressed her heavily coated lips together and took hold of the lapel of my suit jacket. “I just... you... thank you for opening up the 401k plans for all of us, Mal. I got my packet in the mail yesterday, and you’re going to match up to ten percent of what I put in.”

“It’s not a big—”

“It is,” she said flatly. “It’s a huge deal, Mal and way more than generous. Everybody, your entire devoted staff, we all got them and we all appreciate it.”

“I just don’t want you guys to think you’re missing out if you work for me.”

“No, dear, we’re not missing out on anything. None of us think that.”

I reached out and grabbed her, yanking her into my arms and holding her tight. Instantly she wrapped herself around me. I was always surprised at how fast women could mold their bodies to mine, and the deep purr of contentment that accompanied it.

“Just because I’m an ass does not mean that I don’t intend to take care of you guys.” They all had great health insurance that included dental and vision, and now they had 401K as well. “This is me.”

“I know,” she said, trembling, burying her face in my shoulder. “For a self-professed dick, you’re an awfully nice guy.”

I growled, shoved her off me, and swatted her hands

away when she tried to hug me again before starting down the hall.

“I wish.”

I stopped and looked back at her. “You wish what?”

“That people could see you the way I do.”

I grunted.

“All they see is six feet four inches of scary-ass Swede, but that’s not really you.”

The hell it isn’t, I thought as I walked away from her.

At the end of the hall, I opened the door and was instantly assaulted by driving techno music. There were men and women dancing at my club where you could drink, dance, and watch some of the most beautiful women in the city strip. I liked it; it was upscale, clean, drug free, gangster free, urban yuppie goodness. No one messed with my club because no one wanted to tangle with me. As I made my way to the bar, I saw my angel standing at the end. Claudia was right, he looked like crap.

Pushing through the press of bodies, I made my way to him. You would have thought I was the second coming or something. Who got looked at like that?

“Hey,” I greeted him, pushing up to the bar, wedging in between him and the guy beside him. “You can’t be in here.”

He reached out for the lapel of my suit jacket, fingering the material. “You look nice.”

What I looked was normal. I always did.

I was tall, so that was why people saw me at all. But my

eyes were set deep, the color too bright for my somber face, my nose had been broken many times, my eyebrows sat too close above my eyes, and I looked like I was tired most of the time. I kept my white-blond hair cut short because it was coarse and stuck up otherwise, and the stubble that ran over my jaw and upper lip was, for whatever reason, darker than my hair. The pieces of me either pulled apart or lumped all together did not add up to beauty. The boy in front of me did not have that problem.

Even with strippers in the room, he was still the most heavenly creature there. His enormous eyes, all innocent and pleading, the lush kissable lips and skin... God his skin... he was just delectable. I needed to run.

“Go home,” I snarled at him, turning away.

The whimper froze me.

Fuck.

“Malic,” he said, slipping in front of me, hands on my chest, fisting the dress shirt I was wearing under the jacket. “Is it ‘cause I’m poor and you think I want your money?”

“What?”

“I’m a starving college student,” he said, stepping in closer, his head tilted back to look up at me, licking his lips. “Is that why you won’t take me out?”

“Whaddya want?” I asked flatly, my eyes locked on his mouth. He really was the sweetest thing I had ever seen.

“Well, what I’d like is for you to take me to dinner and then ask to take me home with you,” he said, his eyes all over my face.

“You need money?” I asked him instead.

It was strange, but beyond all his surface pretty was a warmth that just flowed off him. Just looking at him was soothing. He felt like home, and I had no idea why.

“Malic?”

I bristled with my need, the want in me. I hated it. “Just tell me what the fuck you want.”

He shook his head. “I told you what I want; I need to go out with you.”

I searched his face.

“For crissakes, Malic, I work for a living, I don’t need money, and yeah, I’m a little short right now ’cause I just paid tuition, but I have enough to eat and—”

“Tell me what I can do for you.”

He squinted at me. “I did, you’re just not listening.”

“Dyl—”

“Malic.” His sigh was annoyed and I liked that, him being irritated at me. It was endearing. “I go to school during the day and I work the second shift, four to midnight, at Epic. I told you all that, remember?”

“Sure, I—”

“I go to the Art Institute; I’m getting my bachelor’s degree in Graphic Design. I mean, I just started, but I should be done in four years just like most people.”

He was so normal. He was just a poor starving college student who had a job and went to school full time. “Where are your parents?” I drilled him, wanting to know everything

about him down to the last detail.

“They live in Atlanta. What about them?”

“I dunno,” I said, shrugging, “do you see them, do they send you money—what?”

“No, they don’t send me money. I have half a scholarship, and that’s why I work. They gave me the option, stay there and go to school and they’d pay for everything, or come out here and do it on my own.”

It was nice to listen to him talk about his parents. He was smiling just a little.

“They were really proud that I came out here to do it on my own, ya know? I mean, if I was gonna starve I’d break down and call my dad... maybe”—he grinned—“but I know he’d send a helluva lot more than I need and then both my folks would worry, and I just don’t wanna have that whole scene, ya know? I’ll see them at Christmas and they can fuss over me then.”

“They don’t care that you’re gay?”

He gave me a strange look. “They’re my parents, why the hell do they care who I sleep with? What does that have to do with them and me?”

“You do know that some parents go so far as to disown their children when they find out that they’re gay.”

“No, I know, but that’s not how it is with us. They love me no matter what. My dad says as long as I don’t bring home a Democrat it’s all good.” He squinted at me. “What’re you?”

“Never mind,” I grunted, “you got brothers, sisters?”

"I have two of each, and a grandfather who is mean as spit who lives with us, them. You sort of remind me of him."

I reminded him of his grandfather? "You know what," I said, leaning away from the bar. If he had put up a billboard he could not have reminded me any more obviously of our age difference. "You need to go."

"Oh c'mon, Malic, I didn't mean you reminded me of him 'cause he's old. You remind me of him 'cause you're a jackass just like he is."

That was so much better. I pointed at the door.

He grabbed my hand and pushed it down. "C'mon, it's noisy in here, will you take me to eat and we can talk?"

"No."

"Please, I wanna eat with you."

"You're just hungry," I muttered. "But you don't have to eat with me," I said, pulling my wallet from the breast pocket of my suit jacket. "I'll give you some money to—"

"Really?" He cut me off sharply, stepping back, eyes scrunched tight, hands balled into fists before he crossed his arms tight. "That's what you think? You think I have to trade a fuck for food?"

I was completely blindsided. I thought I was doing him a favor, and he looked like I hit him. "Dylan, wait a—"

"Fuck you, Malic," he shouted at me, which didn't have nearly the same effect, as he had done it in the middle of a loud, busy club.

But I heard him. His anger hit me like a sledgehammer before he pivoted around and charged toward the front. He

was like a pinball bouncing off people on his way to the door.

It was best that he went. I doubted that he'd be back. It was over before it started, and I was glad.

Mostly glad.

Sixty-forty glad.

Shit.

I scanned the room and saw Claudia at the bar. She was pointing at the door, looking at me like I was the biggest idiot on the planet. And I probably was.

"Goddamnit," I growled, starting after him. I didn't want things to end like that between us. I wanted them over, but I didn't want him to be mad.

On the street, I looked both ways and saw him halfway down on the right. He was talking to himself, taking five steps forward and then two back. It was obvious that he was deciding on a course of action. Leave or return and fight with me. The way he turned sharply in the direction of the club made my stomach roll over. He was going back to yell at me, I could tell, and honestly, if someone cared enough to fight with you, to try and make you see things their way, what other kind of proof do you need that they're in it up to their eyeballs?

He was ready to give me hell. I saw it in the set of his shoulders and the furrowed brows. When he looked up suddenly and realized I was there, staring back at him, the way his face lit up was really something to see. He had no right to look at me like that; I was annoyed and thrilled at the very same time.

"You're just grateful 'cause I saved your ass from gettin' beat," I yelled down the street to him.

He shook his head.

"You'd wanna fuck any guy that saved you."

"Nice." He threw up his hands. "Why don't you just take out ad space that I'm a whore!"

"No," I yelled back, "you're just beholden to me."

"I'm not," he corrected me, his voice carrying to where I was, the street empty but for the occasional cars. Thursday night was dead, not like the hustle of the weekend with its crowded sidewalks.

"You are!"

He flipped me off.

I liked him a lot.

And then he turned his head. Someone must have called out to him from the alley he was passing, and he was yanked suddenly off his feet sideways into darkness. I bolted down the street, went flying around the corner, and came to a skidding halt in front of the two men standing there.

"Such heroism," the guy on the left hissed at me.

My eyes searched all around them, but there was no sign of Dylan anywhere.

"Looking for this kitten?"

The voice came from the left, and when I turned, a woman with black hair and green eyes stepped from the shadows. She pointed behind her on the ground, and there, propped up against a dumpster, was Dylan.

“Let him go,” I told them.

“As soon as he gets up, he can go,” the woman assured me. “What makes you think we give a shit about the human... warder?”

“Shit,” I growled under my breath, taking a step back.

I felt a rush of wind, and there were hands on my shoulders, almost claws, holding me still. When I tried to move, whatever held me tightened its grip. I couldn’t tilt my head back to look; I was afraid to take my eyes off the people, the *things*, in front of me. The pressure was like a vise, and I sucked in my breath.

“Here’s the thing,” the voice said, close to my ear, breath curling around me, hot and wet. “Killing warders is easier when they’re all alone.”

Shit again.

“You know how to break a sentinel’s spirit?”

I kept quiet.

“You kill their warders.”

I swallowed down my fear and took a quick breath. “I have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Oh I think you do, warder of Jael, servant of the Labarum. I think you do.”

What was I supposed to do? Just stand there and trade snappy banter with him? It? I rolled my shoulder, left the blazer with whatever had been holding me when it flexed its talons, and ran. I got halfway down the alley before I felt something rip at my back. Hurling myself to the ground, something flew over me and crashed into a dumpster. I got

my feet under me and ran sideways, the scream from somewhere terrifying me even as I ducked under a fire escape. A creature, I wasn't sure what, hit the metal, and when I looked up all I saw was what appeared to be a giant bug. It was a cross between a cockroach and a wasp, and it had hit the metal hard enough to bend it. The buzzing, hissing noise it made had my stomach rolling as I dived to the right.

Caught fast in claws, I struggled hard even when I was hurled down onto the concrete. My back took the brunt of the impact, and I hoped it wasn't broken even as I had no air to breathe. There was a man, a *demon*, crouched over me, and with one slash of his talons, my shirt and the T-shirt underneath fell away.

"I love skin," he told me before his hand came toward my chest.

I grabbed his hand with both of mine, and his wail of pain startled me.

He tore his arm from my grip, and we both saw the burn on his withered flesh.

"Vienna!" he screamed.

I heard wings, saw the woman above me, and then a smell hit me hard, like molding oranges and mothballs and dirt. I couldn't help retching.

"Get off him!"

The voice thundered through the alley, filled the space, and had the demon above me recoiling, pushing back.

I rolled sideways and felt a knife in my right shoulder, buried deep and hard. I stumbled forward, onto my feet somehow, and hit the side of the building. My hand was there to brace me, hold me up, my fingers splayed on the brick.

I wasn't usually the one hunted; I was normally the one who did the hunting, which was why I wasn't armed. And I was a little slower as I was fresh from healing a lot of damage. It was my only excuse.

The shrieks turned my head, and I saw a man. At least he looked like a man. But the way he was fighting, moving so fast, *too* fast, let me know he was more than human. When he stopped suddenly, freezing in mid-strike, intent on beheading the insect-like creature I had seen earlier, I was amazed that his eyes were locked on mine. And then he smiled, and I registered the lengthened canines.

"Close your eyes, idiot."

And he was right; the splash would hurt if I didn't. It felt thick when it hit me. When I opened my eyes, I was covered in warm, viscous green slime. The man was in front of me, smirking, one eyebrow raised as he surveyed me. I trembled, falling back against the wall.

"Careful." He caught me, making sure my back never made contact with the wall. "You don't want that poison claw in any deeper."

I could barely drag air into my lungs. I saw the giant bug sheared in two behind him, beyond that a rising cloud of steam, or at least what looked like it, and then pieces of what I thought was a mannequin until I focused.

I turned and bent in half, dry heaving, retching hard, bringing up only bile from my stomach. He had disemboweled and eviscerated everything that had been in the alley moments before. I felt my body shudder with spasms, the smells making me gag over and over.

“Christ,” he grumbled, giving me a hard slap on the back. “What kind of candy-ass warders does Jael Ezran have?”

I slid down the wall. “I just... I was hurt... still healing,” I said from my knees.

“Shit,” he growled at me.

I fought back a wave of nausea.

“Malic!”

I lifted my head and saw Dylan charge around the guy who had just saved my life. He was on his knees beside me seconds later, his hands all over me, and his eyes that I was crazy about were absolutely sick with fear.

“It’s okay, baby,” I soothed him.

“Oh God,” he said, pulling out his cell phone, flipping it open. “I gotta get help.”

“No,” the man breathed out, taking the phone, kneeling down beside me next to Dylan, hands on my arms. “I’ll take care of him.”

“We need to go to the hospital!”

“You don’t know anything,” he said, and when he pulled his right hand up to look at it, I saw that it was covered in thick, dark blood.

“He’s bleeding.” Dylan sucked in breath; hand on my chest, on my bare skin. It felt amazing. I registered the heat because I was freezing.

“Warders don’t go to hospitals, idiot, you know that!”

“Not my hearth,” I managed to get out.

“Oh shit,” the stranger breathed out, leaning back, staring at both of us.

I had a glimpse of his dark eyes, his chin, and then his boots. It was all there was as I fell forward.

I WAS warm. So warm. Opening my eyes, I immediately saw the man sitting on the edge of the bathtub beside me.

“Finally.”

“Shit,” I growled, shifting in the tub, feeling the electric currents of pain run through me just from even so slight a movement.

“Listen,” he sighed, quick hand on my chest, holding me still. “I purified the water, and it’s pulling the poison out of your body. If you come out before it’s done, you’ll die—you know that.”

I looked up at him and studied his face. “Who’re you?”

“Raphael Caliva. Raph,” he said.

“It takes a lot of energy to purify water,” I said, studying his face. I couldn’t do it; it was way above my pay grade. A sentinel could, but the power and then the drain of power was painful.

He grunted.

“Thank you for saving my life.”

He smiled, and again I saw the elongated canines. “Do you know what I am?” he asked me.

“Yeah, you’re a kyrie,” I answered him, looking around the room for Dylan and spotting him across the room leaning against the door, slouching forward, obviously asleep.

“He pretty much passed out maybe fifteen minutes ago,” he told me, obviously having followed my gaze.

I let out a painful breath.

“He’s okay... Malic, right?”

I returned my eyes to his. “Yeah.”

“He told me all about you, how you saved him from being raped, how you’re like the second fuckin’ coming.”

“Sorry, he’s young.”

“Yeah, he is.” His scowl got darker. “And so, what, warder? He’s not your hearth, but you’re gonna go ahead and fuck him anyway?”

“No, I’m not gonna fuck him,” I assured him. “What if I killed—he’s just a baby.”

He grunted. “Awful strong-minded possessive-ass baby, if you ask me. The way he talks about you... does he know you’re not gonna fuck him?”

“Yes, he knows.”

“I dunno about that.” The click in the back of his throat was judgmental at best. “Close your eyes, warder, so I can heal you.”

I wondered vaguely why there wasn't blood in the water.

"Close your eyes," he ordered a second time.

"So... kyries," I began, "they're like bounty hunters, right? What were you paid to hunt?"

"The harpy that attacked you, Vienna. There's a witch that wants her dead."

"So you were tracking across planes."

He nodded, uninterested, apparently, in talking about himself. "From looking at you I'd say that you've taken quite a beating lately, warder. Your body is beat to shit."

We both heard the startled groan at the same time, and when I turned to look, Dylan had fallen forward and in the process woken himself up. He was adorable, all sleepy-eyed and out of it, his gaze sweeping the room before it landed on me.

"Malic," he gasped, voice cracking, breath hitching, as he scrambled across the room on all fours, getting to the bathtub as fast as he could. He nearly lurched forward and hit his head, but I was faster. Even though it hurt like hell to move even a little, when his forehead hit the back of my hand instead of marble, I smiled. The man was not coordinated at all.

His hands on the tub, he pushed up on his knees to stare at me. His eyes were raw, like he'd been crying.

Reaching out, I put my hand on his cheek and watched as he leaned into my touch, turning his face to kiss my palm before he tipped his head back so my fingers slipped around his throat.

“You’re sure he’s not your hearth?”

I looked over at the kyrie. “Yes.”

He shrugged like he didn’t get me at all.

The whimper returned my attention back to Dylan.

“I wanna be that.”

I squinted at him. “You wanna be what?”

“Please, Malic,” he said, taking hold of my hand to hold it against the side of his face before moving my palm down under the collar of his cable-knit sweater.

“Dylan—”

He moved my hand to his collarbone. “Please, Malic, Raphael told me all about warders and their hearths. I wanna be that.”

I looked up at Raphael. “You son of a bitch, what happened to lying your ass off? Isn’t that the kyrie code? Lie?”

His smile was wicked. “Oh I like you; you’re a dick just like me.”

Pain shot up my spine, and the room went white for a second.

“You gotta move back, kid,” Raphael told him. “I gotta submerge him.”

“What?”

The room came back slowly, first colors and then soft, fuzzy shapes before it clicked over to sharp, clear focus. “Listen,” I told Dylan. “Go home, okay?”

There was a heartbeat when I thought that he was resigned and going to get up and leave before his brows knit together and I knew better. The dark scowl was really something to see.

“Fuck you, Malic,” he yelled at me. “I ain’t leaving. No way in hell am I leaving.”

“Go!”

He shook his head.

I looked to Raphael for help.

“Unless I can kill him, you’re shit outta luck,” he snapped at me. “Now close your eyes, warder, and let me heal you before you die.”

“He can’t die,” Dylan told him. “I need him.”

“Oh for crissakes,” he growled at Dylan before he took my hand from him and took it in both of his. “Close your goddamn eyes, warder.”

I did as I was told, squeezing his hand back for a second before I felt the pain crash over me again. I didn’t note the exact moment I passed out.

IV

MY EYES drifted open slowly, and I heard his deep exhale of breath.

“Christ,” he groaned, leaning back, sitting beside me on the strange bed, one arm on one side of me, bracing him up, the other on the edge of the mattress. “I forget how fragile warders really are. It’s a wonder any of you live.”

I stared up at him with only one question. “Why am I naked?”

“Because your clothes were covered in duatin blood,” he told me.

“Oh,” I said, nodding, “that’s what that flying thing was. I blanked it.”

“You want some water?”

I nodded, tiring fast. Everything hurt.

He passed me a tall bar glass, and the room-temperature water in it was perhaps the best thing I had ever tasted in my life. After a minute I noticed him squinting at me.

“What?”

“Nothing, I was just wondering what an unarmed warder was doing out patrolling alone?”

“I wasn’t patrolling,” I said, glancing around the room. “Where’s Dylan?”

“Christ, both of you have totally one-track minds.”

“Where?”

“Right there, idiot.”

Turning my head, I saw Dylan Shaw. He was passed out beside me, covers tucked around his shoulders, only his head sticking out from under the down comforter.

“Poor baby,” I sighed.

“Oh, poor baby, my ass,” he snapped at me. “He asked me so many fuckin’ questions. I have never been interrogated like that in my life.”

“What’d you tell him?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know a helluva lot about warders, but what I do know, I told him.”

“Shit.” I groaned, trying to sit up.

“Careful,” he said, hand on my chest. “You lost a helluva lot of blood.”

I looked into his eyes. “You bathed me?”

“I stood you up in the shower”—he tipped his head to my left—“he bathed you.”

I looked back at the young man on the pillow beside mine.

“He is small but he is scary,” Raphael chuckled, “and a fuckin’ possessive-ass bastard.”

I returned my eyes to his.

“But he’s not your hearth?”

“He’s nothing, actually.”

“Does he know that?” He smiled at me. “’Cause he didn’t let me do anything to you at all. If it involved touching your skin, he was doing it.”

“Can you just take him home for me?”

“No.” He yawned, indicating Dylan with a tip of his chin. “He’s your problem.”

“You made him my problem with your whole policy of full disclosure.”

He chuckled. “Fuck you, warder. This is your clusterfuck, not mine.”

“Why’d you put him in bed with me?”

“He got in bed with you, I had no choice. Like I told you before, unless I kill him, short of that, he’s doin’ whatever the fuck he wants. He’s not scared of me and he’s not scared of you. I just don’t get him at all.”

I groaned loudly; this was such a mess. “If I beg you can you take him home?”

“No. Hell, warder, if you don’t want him I’ll keep him.”

“He’s too young for you,” I almost yelled. “He’s too young for me. He’s too fuckin’ young for anyone but another college freshman. He needs to go home.”

“Guess who stopped bleeding?” He smiled, changing the subject.

“Whaddya want to take him home?”

His eyes narrowed as he looked down at me. “What will you give me?”

“Fuck you,” I growled at him, trying to sit up.

He wrapped his hand around my wrist, holding on. “Stop,” he said softly, smiling at me, “I’m just fucking with you.”

I settled back, staring up at him.

His dark eyes glinted in the light. His hair was buzzed short, like a military cut, and was just as black as his eyes. He had exotic features—long nose, full lips, dark brows, long lashes—not a handsome man, but very striking. If I saw him on the street, I would have moved out of his way. The teeth, those shiny, white, vampire teeth, didn’t help make him look any less threatening.

“If you really want me to take him home, I will.”

“Thank you.” I sighed out my relief.

“Yeah, but when he does wake up he’s gonna be pissed. And he looks all cute and sweet on the outside, but inside... he’s seriously fucked-up. I think he’s a little off. When he wakes up, he’ll come after you. That one doesn’t suffer from self-doubt; he knows who he is and he knows what he heard and saw.”

“I don’t care. If he comes to see me, I’ll just tell him he’s crazy,” I said with as much conviction as I could dredge up.

“You want me to take him now?”

“I don’t want him to wake up.”

“Well, you've got to get up and go to the bathroom then, because the displacement wave will make you sick. You're not strong enough not to feel it.”

“I can't get up,” I told him. “Just bring me a garbage can and I'll barf in that.”

“And who gets stuck cleaning that up?” he groused at me.

“Scary-ass kyrie and vomit is gonna be too much for you?”

He smirked at me, but he got up and grabbed the garbage can. I was able to sit up, my back up against the headboard, and hold the small garbage can between my knees.

“Where the fuck am I going, warder?”

I gave him the address as he threw the quilt off Dylan. I saw that he had shed his denim jacket and hoodie, and only his long sleeved T-shirt and jeans remained. He looked warm, and I had an urge to reach for him and hold him tight, happy to let his body heat my cold one.

“You change your mind?”

“No.” My voice dropped lower. “Why? Did my smell change?”

“Little bit, yeah.”

Kyries and their damned noses. Who needed a bloodhound?

I sighed deeply. “Don't forget his sneakers.”

He muttered under his breath as he grabbed Dylan's shoes from where they were shoved under his bed. He tucked the rucksack under his arm, picked up Dylan in his arms, and just as the smaller man started to open his eyes, the room wavered, began to warp and shift, the shape stretching and pulling. My stomach lurched, and I tried really hard not to lose it, but in the end it was inevitable. I emptied the contents of my stomach, retching hard.

Warders moved through wormholes, but even the strongest of us could only do it once, maybe twice in one day. I had never been able to pull it off more than once. Ryan, and now Leith, could go twice. Your body told you if it was possible. You were silent for a moment and when you concentrated, your body either felt hot or cold. Cold meant that you were stuck wherever you were. If you were like Jael, a sentinel, it didn't matter how tired you got. Sentinels could use displacement to travel because they moved with their minds, just like kyries and most demons. Displacement sort of melted one place into another, and that *melting* sent out a wave of power that, if you got caught up in it, made you feel like you were being turned inside out. It was like food poisoning except it didn't last all day. Once whoever was traveling came back, it went away. Waiting through it, however, was horrible. After I threw up, I realized I had to pee. It felt like the night would never end.

A long time later, there was a knock on the bathroom door.

"You all right in there, warder?"

He couldn't just use my fucking name? "Fine," I growled back as I hung on for dear life to the side of the sink.

I had crawled off the bed, dragging the stupid metal wastebasket with me. After flushing the contents down the toilet, I managed to put the garbage can in the shower to rinse it out. And that was all I could do. I had to sit on the floor and gather my strength for a few minutes. Moving again, I crawled to the sink, which is hard to do in a sheet, and got first to my knees and then slowly, awkwardly, finally, to my feet. I splashed cold water on my face and used the hotel toothbrush and toothpaste to brush my teeth, rinsing away the taste of vomit. I felt better after that for a second before I slid back down to the floor.

“Can you walk?” he asked through the door.

“Can you?”

“Barely.”

“Get in bed; I’ll be there when I can.”

“Sounds hot, I wish I had the energy to fuck you.”

Fuck me? Nobody fucked me. “I do the fucking,” I yelled back, correcting him.

“Whatever, just hurry the hell up, I’m freezing.”

His body temperature was dropping. I had asked a lot of him. He had purified water to drain poison out of me, which took a lot of strength, and then I had asked him to move Dylan. It had been selfish, but I had no alternative. Dylan needed to have a monster-free life, and I was going to make sure he got it.

I wanted to walk back into the room, but I ended up crawling. Once I made it to the bed, I collapsed beside Raphael, who was facedown and not moving. He was naked,

and I noted the dark bronze color of his skin. He was strong and muscular, with a carved physique that came from using his body as a weapon on a daily basis. I had no doubt he was a formidable fighter even if I had never seen him in battle.

“Can you move?”

“A little,” he sighed. “Why? What do you have in mind?”

“If you can let me hold you then I can wrap the blanket around the both of us.”

He lifted up, slid over, and slipped his leg over my thigh, draping it between my two, before he put his head down on my shoulder, pressing his face into the side of my neck. Like we had been lovers for years, we notched into position, the easy slide of skin over skin, the warmth jumping between us immediately. I pulled the thick down comforter up and tucked it around the both of us.

“Christ,” he groaned. “You smell good.”

I grunted. “So you dumped him and he was okay?”

“He was sleeping when I left.”

“Good. Thank you.”

“He’s gonna be mad as hell when he wakes up,” he grumbled, nuzzling in tighter.

I had no doubt. “Did you kill the harpy?” I asked quickly. Now that Dylan was gone I was able to focus on other things.

“No, and she’s gonna be really pissed when she resurrects in a few hours. I know you saw her in pieces, but I would have to burn her alive to kill her. Chopping her up into pieces only slows her down.”

"I don't know anything about the demons I fight; I'm not the brains of the operation, that's more Leith and Marcus."

"Just kill the bad guy, that's all warding really is."

"So you killed all the others?"

"I killed the duatin and the woral, but Vienna got away."

"The guy talking was the—"

"Woral," he said, shivering.

I wrapped my arms around him and tucked his head under my chin. "I'm not trying to—"

"You think I care if you lie here naked next to me?" he asked gruffly. "I don't give a shit. I've had plenty of men in my bed over the years."

"Women too?"

"Yes."

"How 'bout those bug things?" I teased him, which wasn't like me at all. I might have been a little more out of it than I thought.

The silence made me smile.

"You did not just say that," he growled at me.

I coughed so I wouldn't laugh. I was definitely in a strange mood.

"Listen," he said after several long minutes, stirring me from the almost sleep I had fallen into. "When you get up and you're rested... would you give me some blood?"

"Sorry?"

"I need blood."

“Why?”

“I don’t heal like you do, and the fight and purifying the water and then taking care of your boy... I’m drained.”

“And my blood will help?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you weren’t a vampire,” I teased him.

“I’m not.”

“But you wanna bite me.”

“Very much,” he said, lifting his head to look down at me, eyes flashing dangerously in the low light of the room.

I smiled, letting out a deep breath.

“I would love to sink my teeth into your throat. Like I said—you smell fuckin’ great.”

“You saved my life,” I said, my voice husky and soft, “thank you.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“I wanna help you, but...” I trailed off.

“Trust me, I won’t take enough to hurt you.”

I studied his face. I owed him my life.

“Why would I want to kill you, warder? I just saved you.”

His argument seemed logical.

“Please.”

I exhaled deeply. “Okay, but do it now. That way I can just rest and not have that to look forward to when I wake up.”

“Are you certain?” he asked even as he bent and opened his mouth on my throat, licking the salt from my skin. “You have to be sure.”

I pressed my neck into those lengthened canines of his. “I’m sure. I owe you this.”

“Tell me I can, give me the words,” he said, his voice thick as he sucked in his breath.

“You can, I pay my debts.”

He sucked hard, then licked again and sighed deeply.

“Will it hurt?”

“Only for a moment.”

“Okay.”

“Willingly, you give me your blood.” He shivered hard. “Warder... Malic... I think perhaps I will take you with me to the pit. You’re extraordinary.”

Stupid was what I was, and I got that a second later when his teeth skewered into my skin. Maybe, just maybe, this wasn’t the best idea I ever had.

It hurt for a second, he hadn’t lied, but the pinprick was followed immediately by a rush of heat that swept through my body. I heard him swallowing as I felt my body get heavy, sinking down, down, into the bed. I was so tired. One of his hands slipped over my heart, the other was on my chin, holding me still. I took a last breath and fell through the floor.

There was only black.

V

WAKING up to a glowering Ryan Dean was a mixed bag. The man was very easy on the eyes, and seeing him in nothing but jeans, leaning over me, hand on my forehead, the other on my heart, was nice. Close up or far away, he really was a treat to look at. On the other hand, he annoyed the crap out of me. And just as I suspected, the minute he opened his mouth he was an annoying dick.

“Are you stupid or are you new?”

I groaned and closed my eyes.

“Open your eyes!” Marcus roared at me.

I opened them slowly because they were really heavy as Marcus climbed onto the bed from wherever he’d come from and crawled across to reach me. Once there, he dropped over me, his head on my heart.

“I’m obviously breathing, asshole.”

The pinch to my hip hurt like being branded. He had the five-second pinch that my grandmother used to have. It was a twist of skin and then he let go, and you thought for a minute that it wasn’t going to hurt and then came the burn.

“Fuck,” I growled at him, rubbing it fast. “Marcus, you shit.”

He leaned up, hovering over me, and I saw the pain in his eyes. The others would be worried and annoyed, he was

worried and hurt. Because he was the best friend I had and it went both ways. We didn't spend as much time as we wanted together—his hearth, Joseph Locke, was the reason for that, as we were like oil and water—but....

"Hey, that's funny," I said, thinking of something.

Cognac colored eyes settled on my blue ones.

"All Jael's warders are gay. That's funny, right?"

"Jael isn't gay."

"I didn't say Jael was, I said his warders are."

Marcus just stared at me.

"What'd I do that you're lookin' at me like that?"

"You almost died," Ryan said after several minutes of silence where Marcus just kept staring. "What in heaven's name would make you submit to a kyrie? You know better'n that."

I did? "Is it bad?" I was guessing it was bad. From the look he was giving me, I was guessing it was very bad. "Why don't you have a shirt on?" I noticed then that Marcus didn't, either. "What the hell?"

"We've all been taking turns lying in bed with you for the last three hours," Ryan barked at me. "All of us expect Jackson. Your heart remembered to beat because hearing ours reminded you that it was supposed to. The skin on skin was needed so your body remembered that it was supposed to warm itself—shit, Malic, you know this."

I did.

“If you have a fuckin’ death wish it would be better if you just let us know so we would stop trying to fuckin’ save you!”

I reached up, pulled the pillow out from under the back of my head, and covered my face with it. Maybe I could pay him to go away.

“Malic—” Ryan began.

“No,” Jael’s voice filled the space. “Malic, look at me.”

I lifted the pillow so I could see my sentinel.

“Leave us,” he said softly.

Marcus got off the bed and Ryan stalked out of the room. I noticed as he was leaving that there was blood on his jeans.

“What happened?” I asked Jael, tucking the pillow back behind my head.

He took a seat on the edge of the bed, squinting, staring down at me and studying my face.

“I don’t have a death wish,” I defended myself. “I had no idea that—”

“If you had a hearth, you would allow no other man to put his fangs in you.”

It was a weird thing for him to say. “If I had a hearth, I doubt he would have fangs.”

He nodded slowly. “The point being that you are made loyal to one man at a time, Malic Sunden, and if there were one man in your heart, no other could claim it or trick you or almost kill you.”

“I—he, Raphael, he asked me to let him drink and since he had just saved my life and he was lookin’ a little shot I figured that donating a pint or so would be a good thing. I figured it would help him out and—”

“Blood demons and kyries are separated only by what side of the plane they appeared on!” he yelled at me. “There is a balance with everything and so for every blood demon that springs from the pit there is a matching kyrie that rises in limbo. They both drink blood, Malic, one from a desire to kill and the other from the desire to enslave. A kyrie is not good. A kyrie is inherently evil just like a blood demon. They are not to be trusted, and they are not your friends.”

I never doubted Jael, he was my sentinel, but really... did he know all the facts in this instance? “He saved me. He could have let them rip me apart but he saved me instead. And he took a friend home for me. He helped me.”

“Are you sure he took your friend home?”

I thought about that, thought about the bored way I had been answered at the time, Raphael’s interest in me over Dylan. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

He scowled at me. “Rindahl went to you because his hearth wanted to invite you to dinner and found the kyrie there with you.”

Any warder could find any other of the warders in his clutch, or group, by standing still, thinking of them, and concentrating. If a warder had not traveled through their wormhole that day, had not been whipped through the tunnel, that vortex of wind, then they could go to wherever their fellow warder was. It looked cool, simply appearing in a

new place, but it took a lot of concentrated effort. Ryan must have really wanted to find me if he had done it. I wondered why. We were not close, far from it. Why had he come looking for me simply at Julian's request? Unless....

"You're having Ryan watch out for me, check up on me."

"Not just him."

"So I need babysitting now?"

"Obviously."

"That's not fair. I'm a good warder."

"You are, there's no argument," he agreed. "You above all the others balance when you do and do not use your abilities."

"Well then."

"You fight well, you carry yourself well, but your regard for your own safety... that piece is missing, and so until I see that self-discipline in you, until then we all watch you."

I shook my head.

"You have no say."

But I opened my mouth to give him hell.

His raised hand shut me up. "When Rindahl arrived and found the kyrie draining your blood, he got him off you and called for Marot and Jaka."

It explained why Marcus was there, but where was Jackson Tybalt, Jaka? And it was funny how Jael instinctively used their warder names. He just thought Marot, Rindahl, and Jaka and I thought Marcus, Ryan and Jackson. Funny.

“Jaka went to get us all dinner, but when he returns... you remember that his parents were victims of a blood demon.”

Great. So now I had given my friend a new nightmare. “I’m sorry.”

“He was incensed. Rindahl had to hold him down while Marot got the kyrie off you.”

“You know,” I said, thinking of something, tired and irritable and thus not having my usual stop-block in my head, “why do we have to have the whole warder name and regular name? Why can’t we just get rid of the warder names and just use the ones we were born with? I mean I say Jackson, and you say Jaka, ’cause you’re the sentinel. I think Ryan, and you think Rindahl. That’s stupid, right?”

He squinted at me. “As you know, some warders, like Ryan and Jackson and Marcus, lead very public lives. As we have to interact with people while still being discreet, other names, warder names, are necessary. You and Leith own your own businesses and so are relatively unknown. The use of warder names for you is not vital and so you use your warder names for all facets of your lives. But Malic and Leith are not the names either of you was born with.”

I knew that. I was born Alexander Sunden; Jael made me Malic. And Leith was born Edward Haas. Jael gave him the name Leith. But when I became a warder, I became a different person, and as my parents were gone, so was Alexander. Leith was the same. Even though the others didn’t have families either—except for the clutch and their hearths— they still held onto their former lives. As Jael said, being in the public eye in one form or another, they needed

their regular names. I was glad I could just be Malic and not have to worry about answering to two separate names.

“Are you done trying to divert me?”

“I wasn’t trying to... I was just thinking about it.”

He nodded.

“How did Ryan get all the blood on him?”

“When he first got to the hotel room and pulled the kyrie off you... the kyrie took half your throat with him.”

But my throat was where I left it when I fell asleep.

He sighed deeply, beyond exasperated. “I healed you. Again.”

I noticed then how bad he looked. “Shit, Jael, I really am—”

“You didn’t know, I understand”—he cut me off with a raised hand—“but Malic, you need to realize now that the kyrie has a taste of your blood.”

“What does that mean?”

“The kyrie drank from you and you lived, and now he will crave it, crave your blood, until he dies. Now he is in thrall to you.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

He nodded slowly. “There is a temptation in that because a kyrie can go places and retrieve items, relics, things from the abyss and other planes that you cannot. If you ask him to search for something or someone, find a treasure for you, then he must, but then you must pay in blood.”

“How much blood?”

“Malic!”

“I’m just saying that if we really needed something, then—”

“Eventually he’ll want it all, do you understand? He’ll want every last drop and maybe your body and soul along with it! Don’t be an idiot! Never, ever call him again.”

“How would I even do that?”

He growled at me. “You think I’m some novice to give you the key to your own destruction? Do not take me for a fool!”

“No, c’mon,” I soothed him. “I don’t wanna die, I swear to God. I just—”

“Don’t care if you live,” he rasped. “You have never understood your value. Never! You alone make me want to tear out my hair and have you tied up and flogged. I thought when you and Rindahl... I thought he would make you understand, but both of you need grounding, both of you are high strung and volatile. That match could have been disastrous. I was happy when it first began because I knew no better, but then ecstatic when it ended,” he said brokenly, angry and sad at the same time.

I watched him stand and pace beside the bed I was on. I was back in his guest room again. I wondered how long he’d keep me before I could go home and sleep in my own bed.

“I’m sorry about almost dying.”

“I know, Malic, you’re always sorry.”

Which made me feel about *that* big. I stared up at him. “Who wants to hurt you by hurting your warders?” I asked him.

“Pardon?”

“The woral that attacked me, he knew I was your warder. How come he wanted to hurt you?”

His scowl was back from earlier. “Malic, I am the sentinel of this city. Every demon out there knows who I am and who my warders are. Just because this is the first one who has apparently called you by name, make no mistake. You are known and so am I. And every demon with a brain in its head knows that killing warders weakens a sentinel. When Grayson died, I... he took a piece of me with him.”

And now I’d managed to remind him of the death of one of his warders. I was like the plague.

“Malic!”

I cleared my throat, my focus back on him. “Sorry... again.”

He released a sharp breath. “Listen, when I met Julian, when we all did, I saw that Rindahl had found in him a man that would be his omphalos, his center. I want the same for you. A man... perhaps a woman who—”

“A man,” I corrected him. I adored women, but the idea of being in bed with one left me cold.

“Fine, then,” he told me almost sadly. “I feel that you will continue to take chances and do things that you know are ill-advised unless you find your hearth.”

Ill-advised, hear suicidal. God, I was driving him nuts. “I don’t do—”

“No.” He cut me off hard. “It takes seconds to make a call on your cell phone. Even better,” he said sarcastically, “stand still and silent, think of me or the others, and we’ll feel it, feel the call, and then we’ll check with each other and figure out who’s in need.”

“Yeah, I know, I just didn’t think.”

“You... never... think. You just do!”

“No, I—”

“You fought one demon alone and then went blindly into the lair of another. All you had to do was call one of us, any of us. But you almost died, and I felt it and I called to see who could go. In the middle of my own fight, I had to stop and leave Jaka alone to call someone to check on you! What if Jaka had died? What if there had been no one to go to you? Everyone else but Leith was fighting. If he had been engaged as well, you’d be dead! Do you understand? Are you hearing me, Malic?”

“Jael—”

“No, Malic,” he yelled, “tell me why you needed a kyrie to save you? Why not call one of us? Why let a kyrie drink from you? You knew it was stupid when you agreed to it.”

And I had, a little, but it seemed basically harmless. Mostly.

“You care nothing for yourself!”

“Is he up?” I heard Jaka yell from the other room.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath.

“Perhaps I should send you to speak to the Labarum council. They will determine if—”

“Jael,” I crooned, making my voice low and soft. “Please, I’m not a basket case. I just... I didn’t think. The little girl, she—she needed me, and by the time I realized I was in over my head, it was too late. And Dylan got grabbed by—”

“Who’s Dylan?”

“The guy, the angel, he—”

“Angel?”

“No, he’s not an angel, he—”

“Who is this man?”

“He’s not a man, he’s just a boy, and—”

“How old is he?”

Why in the hell were we suddenly discussing Dylan?
“He’s nineteen.”

“He’s a man, Malic, not a boy.”

“Fine”—barely a man—“but something grabbed him and—”

“Your first instinct was to save him.”

“Well, yeah.”

Jael nodded. “Where is he now?”

“Home, school, work, I dunno.”

“And you’ve slept with this man, and he’s not your hearth?”

“No, I haven’t slept with him,” I snapped. “He’s just a baby.”

“Nineteen is not a baby.”

I scowled at him as Jackson came striding into the room, pointing at me.

“You stupid fuckin’ son of a bitch! How dare you let anything take blood from you!”

What was I supposed to say? Sorry would not fix it.

He barreled up to the side of bed, bent over, and put his hands down on both sides of my head. “Goddamnit, Malic! I don’t wanna lose anyone else!”

Anyone else? What was he....

“When we lost Grayson two years ago, it nearly fuckin’ killed me. I never thought I’d get over that shit, and then Leith came and it was better and now he’s a friend too, but... Malic! You and me... Ryan... Marcus... and Jael... please,” he pleaded with me, his voice cracking, softening almost to a whisper, his eyes squinting hard so he wouldn’t shed a tear, “Malic, please.”

But I was the asshole they all hated.

“I can’t... I lost my parents and then I lost my sister and then Grayson and if—” He swallowed hard, and I heard him take the shuddering breath before he straightened up and started walking away.

“I’m sorry!” I yelled after him.

“Fuck you, Malic!” he roared back.

I stared after him, and Ryan stuck his head into the room and gave me a thumbs up.

I flipped him off.

“Brilliant,” he said, and then I saw his eyes do the thing that hazel eyes did and darken and change color. They went from a sort of light brown to deep dark green. “Maybe tomorrow you can play in traffic or something.”

I let my head roll to the side so I was looking out the window instead of at him.

“Hey, where’s the man with the death wish?” I heard Leith yell from the other room.

“In here,” Ryan called back cheerfully. “But he’s sorry.”

“He’s always fuckin’ sorry!”

Christ. It was going to be a long-ass night.

VI

I RECUPERATED, and after three days of staying with Jael, the man finally let me go home. I was excited about the prospect of solitude. After eating with all of them, running with all of them, training, and just lying around watching TV with all of them, I thought my brain was going to explode. I would have never made it in the armed services and my hat was off to the men and women who did. To constantly have other people underfoot and around, to never, ever be alone, would have slaughtered my sanity. I never wanted to see any of them again for the rest of my life. But it was not to be.

I had to promise to check in with someone, anyone, once a day every day. It was humiliating, but I agreed just so I wouldn't have to see the wounded look on Jackson's face again. I was actually astounded that they cared as much as they did. Who knew that even if you were a prick to everyone they would actually still like you?

"If you see the kyrie again, Malic," Jael had said, "you call immediately. He disappeared when Rindahl pulled him off you and he might think you're dead, but if he checks back he'll know you're alive and he'll try and contact you. Do not meet him or speak to him alone. Promise me."

And I had promised because there was nothing else I could do. I didn't have a death wish, but apparently conversing with kyries alone constituted suicide. I wasn't so

sure. Raphael had seemed all right to me, but it was too much to ask anyone to trust my judgment at that point.

By the weekend I was back to work, and the second I walked in the door I received a stack of pink messages from the pad by my receptionist's desk. Apparently Dylan had called every day twice a day for a week. And someone had given him one of my business cards, so my e-mail and voice mail had messages as well. He was persistent, I would give him that.

When the week rolled over to the next, the calls stopped, the messages stopped, it all just stopped. And I was glad, but I wasn't, but that was okay. I had looked for him over my shoulder, Raphael over my shoulder, and between the nightly patrolling and work and spending time with the other warders as well as my very human, very normal friends, I was too busy to think. I went out with Rene in a fog, going through the motions, but not really myself. He told me I should get laid, but the idea was not appealing. I was lifeless and it was hard to figure out why. My head was so much in a different place that when Claudia sent me to pick up posters promoting a change of venue, I didn't even think about it. Everyone else was busy; I was the only one who had nothing to do, who could even go home if I wanted. So I walked into the copy shop at ten after nine at night and there at the front counter, talking to a customer about God knows what, was Dylan.

I stood behind the man and waited.

"Be right with you," he said without looking up.

I kept quiet.

“Can I help you?” the girl who had walked up to the counter beside Dylan asked me.

“Yeah,” I said, smiling at her. “I’m here to pick up some color posters for Romeo’s Basement.”

“Oh.” Her bored smile got huge. Promotional materials for strip clubs tended to perk people right up. “Sure thing, lemme go grab ’em.”

I stood there not even daring to look sideways to see if Dylan had noticed me. If he ignored me, that would hurt; if he was smiling expectantly, that would hurt too. I was erecting the wall between us for him, but the distance, being forced, was hard to maintain. I just wanted to talk to him.

When the cute little girl with the side-pony came back, I thanked her, didn’t bother to check what I was paying for, grabbed the bag, and left. Walking to the car, back around the building to the parking lot, I took my first breath in easily ten minutes. Once inside, I just sat there in the car as it began to rain.

I had no idea how long I listened to the drops in the dark interior of the car. It was sort of peaceful. I was finally ready to go, feeling that I had completely closed the book on Dylan Shaw, when I saw the back door open and he came out.

He was standing under the awning in the circle of light, just waiting. He could not have been there for me; for all I knew he hadn’t even seen me. When I saw the sleek little Acura roll up, I understood. He didn’t move, just stood there, leaning on the wall. After a few minutes, the driver left the car running but got out and ran around the front to reach

him. He stepped in front of Dylan and his gestures said it all. What the fuck was he waiting for; he needed to get in the goddamn car. It was all there in the sharp, exaggerated motions. He wanted to know what the hell was going on. Dylan shook his head, and then did the head tip for him to go. The stranger didn't leave; instead he grabbed hold of Dylan's chin, forcing his eyes up to his face, and yelled. I couldn't hear the volume, but you could tell there was shouting.

Dylan yanked free and immediately started across the parking lot in the rain to my car. Little shit. He'd known I was there the whole time. When he reached the passenger side, I reached over and opened it for him. I could have just clicked the button, but in the downpour, he would have no idea it was open. And I wanted him to see he was welcome.

"Get in the car," I snarled at him. "You're gonna catch fuckin' pneumonia."

He shook his head, which sent water all over the car.

"What the hell are you—"

"You didn't leave," he sighed deeply, moving fast, throwing his courier bag in my back seat, pulling off his fleece-lined denim jacket and the heavy hoodie underneath, stripping down to the thick fisherman sweater before he pulled that off as well. I saw smooth skin for a second as the T-shirt pulled up, but then he tugged it back down when he tossed the sweater with the rest of his clothes past my head into the back.

"What're you doing?" I growled, turning to face him. "And who was—" I began, but glanced back into time to see

the Acura screech from the parking lot. The guy was pissed, that was obvious. “What—”

“I was hoping,” he said breathlessly. “I was praying, I thought if I stop stalking you then maybe you’d come around.”

“I had to pick up some posters, you deluded—”

“No.” He cut me off, grabbing my face, shutting me up, climbing over the emergency brake, moving over into my lap. “I don’t care why the hell you came to the store. I only care that you didn’t drive away.”

I scowled at him as he wiggled around on my lap until he found the position he liked, his ass pressed to the hardening bulge in my pants. He did wild, wicked things to my libido just seeing him, and my body craved him even as a warning buzzer went off in my brain.

“Jesus, Malic, you’re hard for me already,” he gasped, pushing forward, the low moan torn from his lips.

I sighed deeply. “I’m too old for you.”

He arched an eyebrow for me. “I’m done with boys, I told you. I’m ready for a man.”

“Dylan,” I said, swallowing hard. “Lemme take you home and—”

“I wanna go home with you,” he said, hands on the side of my neck before he sighed deeply, savoring the sensation of his hands on my skin. “Please, Malic, what do I hafta do? Raphael told me if I’m not your hearth that it’s gonna hurt me and drain me a little, but I... don’t care....” He bent

forward so his lips were hovering over mine, our shared breath hot, wet. “Malic, please... you gotta let me have you.”

The eyes looking at me full of need, the hopeful expression coupled with the way he licked his lips, nervously bit them... there was just no way to say no. And I was tired, so tired, of fighting with myself and him at the same time.

“Okay.” I relented for the moment, my hand sliding up the back of his neck. “How ’bout I feed you and we can talk about it?”

He trembled, and groaned, his eyes fluttering as he pushed his groin into my abdomen.

“But you gotta move,” I said, because I was really uncomfortable. My cock was rock hard in my pants, straining against him, and as much as I wanted nothing between us, wanted to be buried inside him; it would wait and had to. There were things that needed to be said, boundaries drawn, and rules to be set down. So he needed to get up. “Now.”

“Why?”

“’Cause you’re killing me.”

“I have lube and a condom in my bag. Fuck me right here holding my ass. I’d love to ride your cock.”

I felt my brows furrow and the smile that spread across his face, the way he lit up, was just ridiculous. He had no right to be that happy. “Get. In. Your. Seat.”

He scrambled off me, crawled back over the emergency brake, and flopped down into the passenger seat. I shook my head when I heard the seatbelt snap.

“Ready,” he announced.

He was way too cheerful. I looked over at him. “Can you imagine what your mother would say if you took me home for Christmas?” I asked him. “She’d be horrified.”

“She’d be impressed,” he assured me. “She wants me to have someone serious about me. If she met you, Malic, she’d be fuckin’ thrilled.”

I couldn’t even get him to be rational.

“I’m starving, feed me.”

And he was damn bossy.

“Please, honey.”

Christ.

I TOOK him for Italian food in North Beach at a small café I loved that was open late. I tried to steer the conversation toward generally safe topics, but he wasn’t having it. As we ate, he wanted to know about me being a warder and that was all. The questions came fast and furious between bites of lasagna and garlic bread and the wine that I could have but that he couldn’t. His mineral water actually looked pretty good, though.

“God, enough already,” I snapped at him. “Don’t you wanna know about anything else?”

He thought about that a moment. “Sure, whaddya want me to make you for breakfast.”

“Funny,” I said, smirking at him.

“You can cook if you want. Can you cook?”

“Listen,” I snapped at him, leaning forward, “you need to understand that—”

“Malic.”

The sneering tone was not lost on me. Looking up, I was not surprised to find Graham Becker standing beside the table. His suit must have cost a small fortune, and the very beautiful man standing beside him, obviously his date, looked the same.

“Graham.” I said his name, tipping my head at the guy beside him. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Nathan Chase. Nathan, this is Malic Sunden.”

We shook hands, and I immediately introduced both men to Dylan. I watched Nathan’s eyes slide over him, and my blood went cold.

“Thanks for coming over.” I cut the conversation off, leaning forward to see if Dylan had liked his lasagna.

“I loved it,” he said, smiling at me, his eyes locked on mine. “Every last bite.”

I heard them drift away and then was aware, because my peripheral vision was good and I was paying attention, that I was being talked about when they reached their friends. They were only separated from us by two other tables, and it was obvious that Dylan and I were the butt of many jokes. I was going to get up when Dylan reached across the table for my hand. When I looked up, I was caught in his milk chocolate gaze.

“Who cares?” he said, shrugging, lacing his fingers into mine. “They think I’m some twink, but you know I’m not. They think you’re too old for me, but we both know we’re probably about the same age emotionally.”

“What?”

He was laughing at me.

“God, you’re a pain in my ass.”

His smile was out of control. “C’mon, Malic, you know I’m serious and into you, and that if you let me I could make you so happy... if you just fuckin’ let me already.”

“Already,” I muttered, “you don’t even know me.”

“Pay the bill and let’s go home.”

Home? “Dylan, you and I don’t live at the same—”

“We will,” he assured me. “But c’mon, take me home, Malic.”

“You mean let’s go to my house,” I corrected him.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “That’s what I said. Let’s go home.”

“Dyl—”

“Just stop fighting with me.” His eyes settled on mine. “God, aren’t you tired of fighting? Malic? Aren’t you?”

I just looked at him. It was like he could read my mind. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Take me home with you. We’ll figure everything out in bed.”

I shook my head.

“Pay the bill, I wanna go.”

I was waiting at the front door for him to catch up—he had to run to the bathroom—when Graham stepped in front of me.

“You’re making a fool of yourself with that little boy,” he said before I could even get a word out of greeting.

I released a deep breath. “It’s not what you think.”

“What do I think?” he asked snidely.

“That I’m screwing him.”

“And you’re not.”

“No,” I sighed wistfully, “I’m not.”

The smug look on his face changed as he stared at me. “You’re really not, are you? You’re not fucking that boy.”

“Not yet,” Dylan said cheerfully, walking up beside me and slipping his hand in mine. “C’mon, I wanna see your bed.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but the daring grin I got back made me mute. “Gotta go,” I told Graham, squeezing Dylan’s hand and yanking him after me to a lusty squeal of delight. It was an extremely uncouth exit that made everyone around us smile. Except Graham. Graham’s look should have killed me. Fortunately for me, warders were made sturdy.

I LIVED in Pacific Heights close to the Presidio. My place was small in comparison to most of the others on the hill, but I

loved it and it was comfortable. I liked quiet; it was a sanctuary away from the noise and crazy of my business. If I wanted, I could drive down the hill and be in the Marina District, which I liked to walk around at night. Mostly I stayed home, sat out on my deck, and had a drink. There was no way a nineteen-year-old would like it there even for a night.

“Oh my God, I love your house,” he said with a smile, looking around, his eyes wide, dropping his things everywhere like it was understood. Like he lived there too.

“You—”

“Where’s your bedroom?”

“Come over here, lemme talk to you.”

He moved fast and leaped at me. Even unprepared, I was bigger than him, stronger, so I easily caught him and sat down on the couch with him in my lap, straddling my thighs.

“See?” He beamed at me, tightening his legs on either side of my hips. “Man.”

I chuckled, hands on his face, pushing his hair—and there was so much of it, big wild unruly curls—back from his face. “What’re you talking about now?”

“You’re a big strong man, Malic, and I don’t wanna be in bed with skinny, scrawny guys like me anymore. I wanna be loved hard and held tight after. That’s what I want.”

But I was a cold, miserable.... I could not be the warm man he wanted, craved. “Dylan, honey, listen to me. You need—”

"I know what I need," he said, scrambling off my lap to walk over to where he had dumped his courier bag onto a chair.

He bounced back over to me, and I was smiling, I couldn't help it, when he sank back down into my lap. I was passed a brand new tube of lubricant.

"I have this in my nightstand," I told him.

"Yeah, but it would be just like you to tell me that you didn't have any so that's why we couldn't do it," he said, squirming in my lap until I had to clench my jaw to fight the urge to devour him.

"You're driving me nuts," I told him, swallowing hard.

"Good," he said, passing me a box of condoms.

I let out a snort of laughter. "This I most certainly have as well."

"Same reason," he said, and then he coughed so that when he spoke his voice was low. "No, Dylan, we cannot have sex without protection. Step away from the penis."

I glared up at him, and he dissolved into peals of laughter.

"That's it," I said, dumping him off me, down onto the couch. "I'm takin' your ass home."

Before I could get up, he was back in my lap, arms wrapped around my neck, legs pressing against my hips, his lips on the side of my neck, nibbling up the side, kissing and licking his way to my ear.

"Knock it off," I grumbled as I put my hands on his ass and shoved his groin against mine. I couldn't help it; he was

like candy. He felt so good in my arms, and a lot of it was simply the fact that he was young and hot, but that wasn't all. He wasn't afraid of me even a little, and because of my size, my strength, just for a moment, sometimes I instilled fear in others. Most of the men I took to bed were apprehensive about relinquishing their control, worried about what I could do if I wanted. And I could hurt Dylan if I wanted, but that thought didn't even enter his mind. "Hey."

We were eye to eye, and again I pushed the unruly curls back from the face I was so crazy about.

"You should be more careful, you know. If you're into big scary men, then one of these days, one of them might hurt you."

He squinted at me. "For starters, just to put your mind at rest, I never go to anyone's house that I don't know. Those guys that pick people up in bars... like you... and take them home and fuck them and then have to spend the next day doing laundry, washing some stranger's jizz off their sheets—yeah, that ain't me. I've slept with a total of two other guys in my life and that's two too many, if you ask me."

"Oh shit," I groaned, trying to move him out of my lap.

But his legs held me tight and his wrists were locked behind the back of my neck. "And now you're worried that I haven't fucked enough other people to know if fucking you will be enough." He laughed softly, leaning his forehead against mine. "For crissakes, Malic, could you maybe give me a chance to become disillusioned with you myself instead of thinking up reasons for me to leave you?"

He was so young, he would leave. And if he actually turned out to be my hearth and then he left... it would destroy me.

“Here, look,” he said, unfolding a piece of paper he had also retrieved from his courier bag and passing it to me. It was, as far as I could tell from the quick glance I gave it, a printout of some kind. “I had to get shots for school and I thought since I was there I’d get tested, just so you could see that I am free and clear of any and all communicable diseases.”

“You’re just carrying around a piece of paper from—”

“The clinic on campus,” he grinned at me, “yeah.”

“Why?”

He looked confused. “Because I wanted to make sure I had it when I saw you again.”

“If you saw me again.”

“No,” he shook his head, “when.”

“Oh for Christ’s—”

“I’m ready for my lovin’ now,” he announced. The brown eyes looking at me were so soft, so warm, and so full of everything anyone could ever hope for that, of course, my first instinct was to growl at him. What the hell was wrong with him?

“Why the fuck didn’t you run away that night as soon as you came to?”

“Why would I run?” he asked, restless hands going to work on the buttons of my shirt.

“What’re you doing?”

“I’m being nice,” he assured me. “Instead of ripping this off you and ruining a shirt that probably cost more than my rent, I’m being careful, but it needs to come off because I need to touch you.”

“Dylan,” I said, stilling him, surprised at how much my shirt gaped open—he already had a lot of buttons undone. “I’m a warder. I kill demons.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, shaking my hands off. “Hey, you’re gonna like having my legs wrapped around your hips when you’re buried in my ass.”

“Dylan,” I groaned, my hands on his thighs, loving the feel of the hard muscles under the denim.

“Malic.” He sighed out my name, pushing forward. “Tell me, why would I run?”

“Because you should,” I told him. “You have your whole life to live, and to be burdened with my secrets... it’s not fair, and I don’t wanna do that to—”

“God,” he grumbled, cutting me off, leaning back to whip his T-shirt off over his head. He wadded it up and threw it at his courier bag. “Is there a reason to not do me that you haven’t thought of, ’cause I’m going with no.”

I had a moment to look, to see the defined chest, the dark nipples on hard pecs, the flat, cut stomach, before he pressed all his warm, sleek skin to mine.

I jolted under him, closing my eyes for a second as the sensations roared through me, and when I opened them to look at him, I found his face inches from mine.

“What’re you doing?”

“Where’s your bedroom?”

“It’s at the top of the stairs on the right,” I lied.

He rolled his hips forward, put his hands on my face, and stared down into my eyes. “Don’t lie, where is it?”

“How the fuck do you know I’m lying?”

“I can read it on your face,” he said, shrugging. “That’s how I know you want me bad but you really, truly, are worried about hurting me.”

I just gazed back at him, loving the way he was staring at my mouth. He was drunk with the sight of me and it had never happened to me before. He was the only one who had ever wanted to not only fuck me, but keep me. It was all over him, in every glance, every movement, the desire to stay, to be asked to stay. I had no idea what to do.

“Even if I’m not your hearth, Malic Sunden, I am something, and yeah, it’ll fuckin’ kill me if I’m not the guy for you because I wanna belong to you so bad and you want me to be so bad, but if I’m—”

“I never said I wanted you for more than a night.”

His snort of laughter made me smile. I couldn’t help it. We both knew I was full of shit. He was laughing at me and he was laughing hard.

“Shut up,” I muttered, shoving him off me, getting up and walking toward the stairs that led to the second floor. My house wasn’t big—more like a summer cottage in South Florida than anything else. The porch in back—half of it enclosed, half open, the French doors for windows, small

fireplace—had an airy feeling with lots of light. At night, in the summer, I left everything open. Now, in fall, it was warm once I got a fire going. Since I had just gotten home, it was a little chilly, but my bed would be cozy under the down comforter.

I felt him hit my back and wrap arms and legs around me, and I lifted him up, carrying him easily. His lips grazed my ear, and then he sucked the lobe into his hot mouth.

“Quit, “I said, pinching his ass as he shoved his hardening cock against the small of my back.

“Malic,” he breathed out, which put goose bumps all over my body. “If you fuck me and I age, you can use that wormhole thing and get me home and away from you before you do any real damage. How long does it take to see if you hurt me?”

I had told him far too much about the ins and outs of being a warder. It had been a mistake to arm him with knowledge.

“Answer me.”

“What, oh, I dunno, right away,” I said, walking by the first bedroom, the guest one, on the right and passing by my office and the bathroom to move on to my bedroom. Once there, I dumped him down on the mission-style bed and walked through the room to snap on the light.

“Oh, I love this room,” he said, smiling as the green and brown tones of the room became visible to him. It was still light, but darker than the rest of the house: the colors, the décor. The stained teak furniture, the cherry wood armoire, the large mirror, and the wingback chair in the corner with

the matching ottoman. “I would have known this was your room, Malic, it feels like you in here.”

“Like what?” I asked from the doorway that led from the bedroom to the connecting bathroom.

He looked over his shoulder at me. “It’s warm, just like you.”

I strode back to the bed and towered over him. “I am not warm. I have never been—”

“Yes you are,” he said, lying back down on the bed, unzipping his jeans, and wiggling out of first them and then the underwear underneath.

My first look at his beautiful penis made my mouth go dry. It jerked as I stared at it.

“It likes you,” Dylan said huskily, and when my eyes caught his, I saw how heavy-lidded and hot they were. He was turned on just from me looking at him. “Come suck me.”

“I—”

He rolled to his knees, looking boneless as he moved, and had one hand on my belt buckle and the other on my hip. “Lemme take this off and suck you, then. I’ve felt you against my ass, but I would love to see your dick, Malic. I bet it’s just as big and gorgeous as the rest of you.”

He thought I was gorgeous? How? “We should talk about—”

“I’m sick of talking,” he said hoarsely, moving away from me, giving me a perfect view of his firm, round ass as he crawled back up to the top of my bed and got under the covers. “And it’s cold in here. Get in bed, Malic.”

I stood beside the bed and kicked off my dress shoes before unzipping my pants. The catch of breath made me look over at him.

“Christ, Malic, it’s like you’re carved out of granite or something.”

I was a big, strong, muscular guy. My physique was all I had going for me looks-wise.

“Come here.”

Once I had everything off and had thrown my cufflinks and watch on my nightstand, I got under the covers. It was cold for a moment before he wiggled up against me, his thigh sliding up over my hip as his hard cock pressed into my abdomen.

“You want me out of this bed, you’re gonna have to throw me.”

“I just don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” he promised me, his hand sliding over my cheek. “God, Malic you have the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen in my life. Whaddya call that color, ice-neon blue?”

“Dylan, fucking you would be—”

“Is that what we’re gonna do?” he whimpered, pressing into me, hands on my face as he eased me down closer. “Please say that’s what we’re gonna do.”

My heart was pounding so hard, so fast, and his touch was just making it worse.

“Malic.” He shivered. “Finally.”

I felt his hands on my chest under the covers, fingers splayed out, circling my pebbling nipples before he pinched them. A hard throb of desire washed through me.

“Quit that.”

He made a noise in the back of his throat. “Malic, I wanna be yours, make me yours.” His hands slid up to my throat. I couldn’t stifle the soft moan of anticipation; his fingers caressing my skin felt so good. “You’re all big and scary, but you love to be touched.”

Not by everyone I didn’t.

“Most of all, you want me to touch you.”

He was guessing, he couldn’t have simply known. “Dylan, you—”

“Why’re you fighting me so hard?”

I couldn’t tell him for the five thousandth time, I just didn’t have it in me. “I think about you all the time,” I confessed to him; my voice was a raspy, choked whisper.

“You do?” It was easy to hear the surge of happiness in his voice.

“Yes.”

“Me too,” he said with a smile, letting out a deep sigh.

I had been looked at a lot of different ways in my life, but never, ever, like I was a goddamned gift. I had him spellbound, and I had no idea how. He was so young and innocent and sweet, and it would kill me to see anything but trust in those big melting eyes.

“Malic,” he groaned, lifting his mouth to mine at the same moment he eased me down. “Is kissing all right? Could I please... just... kiss you?”

I could have said no. I could have. But I caught my breath when his lips touched mine. He tasted even sweeter than he looked, and the whimper of need washed heat all over me. My lips parted on instinct.

His mouth was hot, and I kissed him hard because in that moment, he was mine. I could kiss him all night, kiss him until his lips were raw and swollen, kiss him as he begged me to never stop, kiss him as he writhed under me. When his tongue swept inside, I felt my body shudder. There came the quick tensing, the warmth, and my need for his touch. He tasted so good; I pressed and rubbed against him. I felt his hands roaming all over, sliding down my chest, my abdomen, and finally to my cock. When he fisted me gently and pulled, I moaned into his mouth.

“Christ,” he gasped, his voice husky and low, “Malic, you’re so strong and there’s so much power in you and heat and... and I could, I want... Malic.”

I rolled over on top of him, pinning him down to the bed, and ordered him to wrap his legs around me. Tight.

“Oh Malic... yes....”

“I’m not gonna be gentle,” I told him, making my voice gruff, hard, trying to scare him. “You’re gonna be fucked and claimed and—”

“Oh thank God,” he almost cried, climbing me, molding his small body to mine, trying to get closer, to transfer his need to me.

The heat in his eyes, the darkness, his want... I loved it. All that hunger was directed at me and no one else. I realized that I didn't want him to look at anyone else that way, ever.

"Please stop thinking," he begged me. "Stop worrying... just fucking stop. You're not gonna break me! I'm not too good for you! I am your hearth. I know it in my heart, and if you don't take a chance you're never gonna know if I'm the one who is gonna make your life a fuckin' joy to live, you grouchy-ass bastard!"

Grouchy-ass bastard?

"Malic! Just stop!"

I stopped.

I pulled out of his embrace and kissed my way down his chest, over the flat stomach to his hard, leaking cock. It really was just as pretty as the rest of him. I smiled up at him, which made him catch his breath before I bent and swallowed him down the back of my throat.

"Malic!"

I licked and sucked, loving the feel of the velvet hardness sliding over my lips, my tongue, coating him from head to balls before I wrapped my hand around the throbbing shaft.

He jolted under me, drawing his knees up, lifting, the whimpering and the long, aching whine telling me what he needed much more articulately than any words could.

Releasing his shaft, kissing it before I moved, I lifted over him to reach into my nightstand for the lube.

"Malic, when was the last time you got tested?"

“Why?” I asked, grabbing a condom from the pile in the drawer, putting it between my teeth as I brought the lube with me.

“Cause I want you without anything between us,” he confessed.

“No,” I told him quickly around the foil packet in my mouth.

“Please, Malic.” He caught his breath. “I know you get tested, it’s how you are, where’s the fuckin’ piece of paper? I wanna see it.”

He was so damn bossy, and I liked it more than I would ever tell him. I reached again and came back with the sheet of paper from Jael’s doctor that showed that as of a month ago I was healthy as a horse.

His face lit up like it was Christmas.

“Oh for crissakes, that doesn’t mean we’re gonna—”

“Mine is from two weeks ago, yours is from four... holy shit, Malic, we can fuck like bunnies and we’re both good.”

“Maybe,” I said, “we’ll see, but tonight... I wear a condom or we’re done.”

“Why?” He sounded so pained.

I sat up slowly, straddling the lean hips. He was a vision and I was frozen, admiring the line of him. His body was sinewy, defined, and when I bent to kiss his abs, his torso quivered under my attention. “Because what if I got something in the last two weeks or—”

“How,” he gasped, “you’ve been hurt right, recovering? You didn’t fuck anybody.”

He had sounded so damned sure. “I could’ve.”

The look I got, full of understanding, was annoying as crap. “You didn’t.”

“Dyl—”

“So you want us both to get tested again?”

“Just me,” I told him.

He rolled his eyes like I was stupid, and I was going to tell him off, but the way he was looking at me changed, heated, and made my heart beat funny.

“You must really like me since you’re so worried about me being safe and all.”

I didn’t want anything to hurt him. Ever.

“Let me put the condom on you.”

He took the foil packet from me, and while I watched him, his hands started to tremble. I found that just as endearing as I found the contour of his hip erotic. Everything about him was spellbinding. I told him so as I reached out and fisted his cock in my hand, my grip gentle but firm.

“Malic,” he whined, his foot on my thigh, pushing. “I need you.”

I stroked him, using the leaking precome to coat the end of his shaft.

“Guys think ’cause I’m small they hafta be careful... no one ever trusts me or believes me, so I never get what I need. I never get it deep enough or hard enough... I never do.”

With two whole other lovers he didn’t get what he needed? I knew a prepared speech when I heard it. I snapped

open the tube and squeezed more than I needed onto my palm. “You will,” I promised him as I ran my fingers across his entrance.

“Oh,” he gasped, shivering, “Malic....”

I swirled a finger around the puckered hole before I slid it deep inside.

“I don’t need you to... I’m ready now.”

But he wasn’t, no matter what he would have me believe. When I pulled out and then pressed two fingers inside him, spreading them, opening him up slowly, gently, I realized that the words, just as I thought, had been for me and not him.

“You think ’cause I’m big and strong that I need it mean and rough,” I said, working my fingers in and out, deeper, stroking his cock harder, faster, watching him come apart in my hands. “You think that if you let me hurt you that I’ll want you.”

He was panting, back bowed, thighs quivering, biting his bottom lip hard.

“But it’s not true,” I said, curving my fingers forward, inside him, feeling for the spot even as I jerked him off at the same time.

My name had never sounded like it did at that moment, deep and sexy and so very hot.

When I withdrew my fingers, his yell of outrage made me smile. My name went from one extreme to the other.

“Malic!” He railed at me. “I need you now! You’ve gotta—
”

“I know.” I cut him off, chuckling at his anger, grabbing his thighs, lifting them up and then pressing them back against his chest as I buried myself in his ass in one smooth stroke.

His voice went back to being infused with bliss, and my name was again a prayer.

I pulled out partway and then sheathed myself inside him a second time, harder on the second plunge, deeper. I had taken my time getting him ready, and from the way his muscles held me, tightened around me, I understood that he was teetering on the edge, his orgasm seconds away.

I lifted his knees, sliding first one, then the other over my shoulders, bending forward, arching my back.

“You feel so good, Malic, so fuckin’ good. Please, I won’t break... I won’t... fuck me. Oh God, please fuck me.”

The seductive pleading nearly killed me. I drove inside harder, feeling the sizzling heat pooling down low, my balls tightening, the rise and swell that signaled my impending climax. His hands gripped my shoulders tightly.

“Malic,” he gasped, his voice giving out on him. “I can’t take—I need you, I wanna come, make me come.”

His response to me was so honest and open, his ragged breathing and small shudders letting me know how much he wanted me.

“Baby, please—I... please.”

He was eager and begging, his body throbbing with heat, and I leaned over and kissed him, letting him taste

himself on my tongue, on my lips, and his frustrated growl let me know how turned on he really was.

My kiss combined with my movement, the thrust forward, me burying myself inside him, undid him. He clutched the sheet, his hands balled into fists, and pushed himself up into me and yelled my name.

“Harder! Malic, just—fill me up, do it hard, do it now!”

I buried myself in him, in his heat, loving the feel of him wrapped around me, his muscles squeezing me tightly, milking my shaft.

“You feel so fuckin’ good,” I groaned, pushing in deeper and harder with every stroke. “God, I hope you can be mine.”

“Yours already,” he rasped, his body flushed, so hot and so wet. “From the second I opened my eyes... since then.”

Love at first sight was romantic bullshit, but he was a baby so he didn’t know it yet. I was kind of glad.

“Tell me!” he yelled at me. “Malic!”

“Mine,” I growled, my hands on his hips, lifting him before I buried myself in him, cognizant of my angle, watching his body convulse as he roared my name, spurting thick come over his beautiful, quivering stomach.

All his muscles tightened at once, bearing down on me, and watching him, seeing his desire there in his eyes on his face, raw and open, I came, hard, filling the condom. My heart stopped for one perfect frozen moment in time. This man was it. How the hell it had happened I had no idea, but somehow, somehow, he had taken hold under my skin and I wanted him more than I had ever wanted anyone else in my

life. If I could not spend the rest of my life with him, it wouldn't be any kind of life at all. There was only one response to such an epiphany.

"Fuck," I growled at him.

His deep throaty laughter made me scowl down at him. "Kiss me, you dick."

There were no better words.

I WOKE up and he was gone. I sat up, my back against the headboard, and felt his spot on the bed. It was still warm, but that didn't mean anything. Maybe he was somewhere hurting. I threw the covers off me and was ready to get out of bed when the door opened.

"Do not get up," he ordered me.

My eyes filled with Dylan and the tray of food he was carrying. He was in his jeans and nothing else, and the tousled curls, sleepy eyes, and swollen lips were enough to make me hard all over again.

"You're hungry, right?"

"Put that down and come here," I grumbled because I was so happy to see him.

He smiled widely; he made sure the tray was steady on the nightstand and then crawled across my huge king-size bed to me. He didn't stop when he reached me but climbed into my lap, straddling my thighs, rubbing his ass over my groin.

“Stop that,” I muttered, hands on his face, checking him over.

“I’m fine,” he assured me, unsnapping the button of his jeans, working the zipper down. “And after you’re done eating, I wanna do it in the shower.”

I opened his eyes with my fingers, examining his pupils as he giggled. “This is serious business, idiot. You could die from letting me fuck you.”

“Nope,” he told me, rolling sideways, shucking out of his jeans, kicking them off before returning to my lap. “But I could die from not letting you fuck me. That would be the real tragedy.”

“Could you just—”

“Malic,” he said, his breath touching my face before his lips claimed mine. He kissed me like he owned me instead of the other way around. He tilted my head back, and his tongue was all over mine, tangling, sliding, stroking as he whimpered for attention. I liked it when he got pushy and bit my lip.

I took pity on him and took his cock in my hand.

“Oh,” he gasped, shivering in my grip, breaking the kiss to let his head fall back as he levered up off my lap, pushing in and out of my fist. “Malic... could you... oh.”

I took hold of his beautiful, tight little ass and pulled him forward into my lap, lifting up and carrying him to the edge of the bed.

“What’re you doing?”

I put him on his feet and sank to my knees in front of him.

“Malic—”

“Come on, baby, let me suck you dry.”

The whimper let me know it was the greatest idea I’d ever had in my life. When I swallowed him down, his hands were instantly in my hair, threading through, tugging, holding tight. My gag reflex being nonexistent, I took in the length of him and sucked and licked and rolled him in my hands. I tugged gently and then with increasing force as his breathing became panting and the begging, pleading, turned to loud, adamant demands. When I slid a finger into his still slippery crease, he gave me quick warning.

“Malic, I’m gonna come,” he gasped, his breath hitching.

I sucked harder, added another finger to the first, and then the back of my throat was coated in thick, salty come. I swallowed hard and fast, working my tongue over and around him, continuing to suck until I had it all. Not until he was limp and soft in my mouth did I let the sated cock slip from my lips.

“Feel better?” I asked him.

He sagged against me, and I threw him over my shoulder and stood up. I dumped him back down onto the bed and stared at him. He looked like he belonged there.

“Come here,” he sighed, gesturing me to him.

He took my face in his hands as I bent to kiss him.

“You’re amazing and I get to keep you.”

My head snapped back as I stared down at him.

“Don’t be scared,” he crooned, “I’ll take good care of you.”

I stood up, and he couldn’t keep hold of me as I moved fast around the bed, putting it between us. I had to think.

“Oh, you are scared,” he teased me.

I scowled at him.

He wagged his eyebrows at me. “C’mere, lemme feed you and fuck you.”

I ran my fingers through my hair, yanking hard. What the hell was I going to do? Yes, he could be my hearth, but... that didn’t change the fact that he was just a baby. “I’ll fuck up your life.”

“Okay, that’s one option,” he said, laughing at me. “There is maybe another.”

“Don’t—this is serious now.”

“It’s always been serious, you big stupid jerk, now it’s permanent.”

“What?” My voice went up way higher than it should have.

His laugh was goofy, the grin stupid. “You squealed like a little girl.”

I cleared my throat. “You—I’m still too old for you. What would your father say?”

He looked me up and down, finally coming to rest on my shaft. “Who cares? Let’s ask instead, how did I feel wrapped around your cock?”

I made a noise, pulled up from my gut, I couldn't help it. He had felt like heaven.

"Malic," he said, rolling up to his hands and knees, presenting me with his perfect ass. "You want romance; you need bullshit words and a fuckin' sonnet?"

"Jesus, Dylan," I moaned, feeling the sensation of a wickedly smiling angel looking over his shoulder at me with his heavy-lidded, bedroom eyes.

"I wanna ride you. Come lie down."

"Please," I managed to get out, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth.

He patted the bed.

I sank down beside him, stretching out so my feet were on the floor, knees bent over the side of the mattress. Instantly he was up and back with the lube from the nightstand.

"This time there's no condom, Malic. There doesn't need to be, and safe, unprotected sex is the gift you get when you're monogamous. You don't have to worry about me, I will never, ever, get in bed with anyone else. I finally have the man I always wanted."

I was going to protest, tell him I wasn't his, but when I felt his slippery hand fist my cock, I forgot who I was and therefore had no idea what we were talking about.

He lifted up, and I saw my shaft glistening with the lube he had coated me with before he sank slowly down, inch by inch, letting me feel his muscles clench around me, engulfing me, holding me tight. I had no idea how such a

small man could take the length and width of me so easily, so completely, but the reason was unimportant, only the fact that he could and apparently loved doing it.

“Made for you,” he told me as if he was reading my mind. “I was made for you, Malic Sunden... just you.”

Head back, eyes closed, he shivered hard as I was fully seated inside him. I wrapped my hand around his shaft, milking it as he started to move, rising and lowering, letting me slide in and out of his tight, hot channel.

“Don’t wanna hurt you,” I said, feeling my cock go deeper with each downward plunge.

“I can’t get... I need more,” he whined, pushing forward into my fist and back to push himself down on my cock. “Malic!”

I lifted him off me and smiled as he yelled his outrage. “Shut up,” I growled in his ear, before I put him down on the bed on his hands and knees.

“Oh yeah,” he whispered as I shifted him off balance so he went facedown onto the big soft bed. I slid over him, pinning him under me, letting him feel my weight, before I kissed a trail down his spine, watching the goose bumps appear over his silky skin.

“Malic, I—” he began, his voice sounding like dried leaves.

“Tell me I can do whatever I want.”

“God, you sound sexy as hell.” His voice with the catch of desire made me ache.

“Say it.”

“Malic—yes, whatever you want.”

I moved down his body and kissed the taut flesh of his ass, first one cheek and then the other before my tongue slid between them. He writhed under me.

“You can’t do that,” he gasped, trying to move away from me. “Malic, don’t—”

But it was just him and me, us mixed together, and he tasted like sweat and come, and the lube was there too but I didn’t care, couldn’t be made to. I loved the musky smell of him, the feel of his puckered hole under my tongue, all of it making me groan with my own need.

“Nobody’s ever... oh.”

All the sounds he was making, the moans and the whines, all muffled in the pillow he had buried his face in even as the small tremors shook him, it all ran right to my cock, made it swell and harden. I slipped my tongue in deeper, in then out, continuing the rimming that I could tell was driving him wild. I stroked gently over his hip with one hand, the other slipping under him. The begging started, and I kissed a wet line up his spine then down again. When I returned to his ass, nibbled on it, unable to resist, my mouth sucking and licking at the same time, I thought maybe he was going to come right there. I pushed my tongue deep inside the fluttering hole, bathing him in saliva, tasting him, feasting, until he was panting and finally demanding that I fuck him.

I lifted up, grabbed hold of his hips, and breached him in one driving forward plunge. He howled my name.

I froze, terrified that I’d hurt him.

“Malic,” he yelled, pushing back against me, sliding off my throbbing cock before slamming back against me. “Fuck me. Please... oh baby, please.”

I rode him hard. I fisted my hand in his hair, yanked his head back hard, grabbed hold of his hip with my other hand and slammed into him over and over, deeper and deeper, as he got louder and louder.

“Malic, I can’t... you feel so good... .so fuckin’ good.”

He was so tight, so hot, so slick, and so vocal. I had never been wanted more and knew that I truly never would be again if I was stupid enough to let this man go. But did I have any right to keep him tethered to me and my secrets and the uncertainty that was my life? Yes, he was my hearth, or could be my hearth, but was that any reason just to make him mine?

“Malic!” he screamed, pushy little bottom that he was. “I need you, drill me through the goddamn floor!”

I buried myself to my balls in his ass again, and he spattered the sheet below him with semen. It was thick and messy, and seeing his body contort in ecstasy brought my orgasm roaring through me seconds later. I froze, only my hand moving, massaging his head where I had yanked on his curls.

He slid off the end of my cock, lurched sideways so he wouldn’t hit the come-splattered sheets, and rolled over on his back. I stared down at my wicked man, and he arched one mischievous eyebrow for me.

“You wanna do it again?”

I flipped him off.

“Can’t do it, old man?”

I gave him both fingers. “I need food and water and sleep.”

“I can do that with you.” He grinned at me, motioning for me to go to him. “First we’ll eat, then we’ll shower and change, and then you can fuck me again when you’re all rested.”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“Like I give a shit.”

“Why you gotta be so crass?” I said even as I realized it was probably the most hypocritical thing that had ever come out of my mouth.

“Maybe someday you can make love to me,” he sighed, “but for now, I want you to hold me down and tie me up and do whatever the hell you want to me. I just wanna be the only guy in your bed, sucking your cock, making you come.”

“Dylan, you gotta slow down, you’ve got to think about what you really want and—”

“Malic, you’re lying your ass off if you say you want any other guy’s dick in me. Go ahead; tell me it’s okay for other guys to fuck me.”

Shit. “I didn’t say I wanted any—”

“If you don’t wanna keep me, then other guys will get to fuck me. If you tell me that’s okay with you, then I’ll go.”

Pain-in-the-ass conceited smirking self-righteous son-of-a-bitch brat from hell!

“Malic, kiss me ’til I come again,” he moaned, licking his lips. His feet, his beautifully arched, fine-boned, feet started sliding up and down my thighs.

He was insatiable. I arched over him but didn’t sink down, and his hands wrapped around my neck as his back bowed up off the bed to try and slide across my chest and abdomen.

“Malic... I’ve never come that hard in my life. Just your hands on me and your mouth... your eyes get so dark and your skin is... siddown and lemme get in your lap. My ass feels empty without your thick cock stuffed inside of it.”

Jesus.

I sank down over him, pinning him to the bed, and kissed him to shut him up. He tasted so good and his tongue swirling over mine sucking, drawing me down deeper, made me wonder if I could end up drowning in him if I wasn’t careful. All of him, his entire body was wrapped around me, but instead of feeling powerful and strong, I felt nurtured and... loved. But surely he didn’t feel the same—

“God, I love you, Malic... don’t ever lemme go.”

I was so screwed.

VII

WE WERE arguing as I walked him down the street toward the restaurant where we were meeting Ryan and Julian for dinner. Marcus was my best friend, but his hearth and I were not on good terms so introducing Dylan to him first was out. Leith wasn't around or I would have called him next and since Jackson was still mad at me, that left Ryan. To be fair, Ryan was okay, and I really liked Julian, so sharing a meal with them sounded like it just might work out. I had to introduce Dylan to the other warders eventually, even if I didn't end up keeping him.

The idea of not waking up beside Dylan every morning for the rest of my life had me breaking out in a cold sweat the night before. Watching him sleep next to me, in my bed for the fifth night in a row, it was hard to imagine him anywhere else. And the way he had taken over my house, accepting the spare key with a look like it was about fucking time, had made me growly and mean for the entire afternoon. He was driving me nuts, but even as I remained annoyed and on edge, I could not stop kissing him, holding his hand, grabbing him and hugging him. And each time, every caress, every display of affection was met with a surge of enthusiasm and him clutching me tightly. I thought of myself as rough and bruising without meaning to be, but to Dylan, with Dylan, I was gentle even when I squished him.

As usual, he was questioning me, which he did all the time, and it was always, consistently the same. “You’re gonna keep me. Right?”

“You’re too young,” I replied, again, “you’re gonna get bored.”

“Bored of what? You? Your life?” The scowl I got had been adorable.

“You need to be careful of me,” I told him for the millionth time as I walked beside him. “I’m not a good man, I’m not some big teddy bear, I’m a mean-ass war—”

“Malic!”

I turned to the sound of the squealing voice, turned in time to see the little girl tearing down the sidewalk as fast as her little six-year-old legs would carry her. Running toward me like it was life and death. I knelt and she was there, filling my arms, squeezing me as hard as she could.

“Malic,” she cried, hugging me tight and kissing my cheek before turning her little head to lay it on my shoulder in complete and utter trust.

There was a noise above me, a sharp exhale of breath. I tilted my head up, and Dylan moved so I could see him.

“Oh yeah,” he said, grinning wickedly, and I saw that he was on the verge of tears, moved by the cherub in my arms. “You’re a very bad man.”

This was not helping me make my case. I opened my mouth to say something.

"I lost the angel feather you gave me," Sophie Everett said as her father ran up, skidding to a halt beside Dylan before he doubled over, hands on his knees, heaving.

"You all right there, Mr. Everett?" I snorted out a laugh.

He lifted a hand as he panted, and held up a finger for me to give him a minute.

"I can't find the feather anywhere," Sophie whimpered, leaning back to look into my face. "Do you have another one?"

"I—"

"I looked and looked and no one believes me, but I know you gave me an angel feather and I need another one."

"Oh, baby, I don't have—"

"I do."

She and I both looked up at Dylan as he flipped open the flap of his messenger bag, felt around inside the smaller pocket, and then pulled out a pristine white feather. Her eyes went round, as did her mouth.

"Oh thank you," she said, her eyes glowing as she looked up at him. "Do you know the angel too?"

"I do know the angel," he told her, stepping closer, hand on the back of my neck, stroking up into my hair. "And those come off his wings all the time."

It felt so good, his fingers petting me. I loved that he had to touch me all the time.

"Malic had the feather in his jacket; he said it was from an angel, Dylan from Heaven."

Christ, I couldn't remember what I had for lunch but she could remember a month-old conversation?

"Did he." Dylan nodded. "From heaven." He smiled wide, leaning next to me so his hip was at my shoulder.

"Oh thank you so much," she said, beaming up at him.

"Thank you for wanting it," he told her.

I let out a deep breath and so did Mr. Everett, his because he could finally breathe and mine because I finally gave up.

Turning fast, I buried my face in Dylan's abdomen, feeling it contract with the contact, the muscles there tightening. I lifted the T-shirt, kissed the warm skin hard, and pulled back, covering him up.

"Crap."

"Say it," he pressed as I rose above him until I was looking down at him.

"You're with me now," I told him, leaning in, pressing a kiss to the side of his throat before I eased back to look at him. "And I love you and that's it."

His breath caught as he stared at me with wide eyes, his mouth dropping open, and I wondered why he was....

"Awww, shit," I groaned, realizing what had just come out of my mouth.

"That's a bad word," Sophie reminded me.

Double shit.

He caught his breath. "I just wanted to live with you."

"Dylan—"

“It was all I was hoping for.”

“Dylan—”

“I figured I’d wear you down eventually, get you to love me.”

“Malic—”

“Shhh, honey,” Mr. Everett said softly, shushing his daughter, “the adults are talking.”

“Dyl,” I began, “just forget I—”

“No.” His hands went to my face. “Malic, you love me?”

What the hell was I going to say? The sweetest eyes in the world were staring up at me, waiting.

“Of course I love you, idiot,” I growled at him. “What the hell?”

“Is hell a bad word?” Sophie asked her father.

Dylan’s smile was luminous.

“But I fu—” Sophie was there, “screwed it up,” I grumbled, annoyed, disgusted. “I wanted to be—” I stopped myself, grabbed him, and shoved him a few feet down the street into an alcove, up against a wall. It was rough and I manhandled him, but the look on his face, the narrowed eyes, let me know it was okay. More than okay. “I wanted to be in bed with you and tell you how much I—”

“Malic.” He cut me off, breathless. “You love me and you told me, and I could die happy right this second!”

I grunted, mortified with my delivery. “I just, I wanted it to be special.”

“It was perfect,” he said as tears slipped down his cheeks.

“Don’t cry, baby,” I soothed him, burying my face in the side of his neck, kissing gently. His breath quavered, almost stuttered, and I opened my mouth and ran my tongue over his collarbone. When I sucked hard, his hands went to my waist, burrowing under the shearling jacket, marled sweater, and beneath that to the T-shirt covering my bare skin.

“You’ve got too many clothes on.”

“It’s the middle of winter,” I reminded him, defending my layers.

“Malic.” He moaned my name, distracted now as he squirmed against me, pressing, pushing, rubbing, trying to get closer. “You feel... so... good.”

I bit his shoulder, making sure I left a mark before I licked the bite, swirling my tongue over his skin, bathing it to take away the sting. The answering groan was full of absolute agony and shot racing heat straight to my groin. He loved it when I left marks on him with my mouth, would stand in front of the mirror in the morning and trace the raised bruises with his fingertips, a look of dreamy bliss on his face.

“Malic,” he whimpered, shifting against me, hands moving over the skin he’d bared as he rubbed against my leg between his.

When I pulled back, I exhaled slowly, which put goose bumps all over him.

“Tell me again.”

I watched him tremble, saw the jaw clench as he looked up at me. “I love you, you belong to me, and so that’s it. I need you to move in, all right?”

“It’ll be my house too?” He smiled up at me. “My home?”

“It already is.”

His head bumped against my shoulder, his face buried there as his arms wrapped around me tight. “I knew it, you know, and I know you think it’s stupid or not true or whatever, but I knew.”

He was a mess. “What’d you know, honey?”

“I knew when I met you, when I looked up at you the first time. I knew you were the one... I just knew it. You were supposed to be mine, my man.”

“Oh yeah?”

“It’s all right, you don’t hafta agree with me, but just look where you’re standing.”

I couldn’t argue the point with him.

“And I know it’s been weird ’cause it’s been so fast but, Malic, I know this is it for me, I know you’re it for me.”

He didn’t say, *I know it’s been weird because you kill demons*. That part didn’t come into play for him. He couldn’t care less.

“You’re the one.”

“It’s the same for me, D.”

We stood like that for several minutes before he nodded and gave me a heart-stopping grin. He was all fixed up.

“Let’s see if the angel and her daddy want to have dinner with you and me and Julian and Ryan.”

But he was the angel; at least he was to me. Holy crap, how did I ever get so lucky to get an angel?

“Oh, is that her mom?”

Oh yeah, the whole Everett clan was there to witness my fall from badass warder to big romantic sap. Everyone was watching us from down the street. Mrs. Everett had teared up; Mr. Everett looked sheepish, uncertain what to do. Sophie zoomed up to me, eyes big, pointing at Dylan.

“Is he your boyfriend?”

Oh, good grief.

“Yes I am,” Dylan assured her.

“Yeah, we can go,” I growled even as I kissed his forehead.

The Everetts accepted the dinner invitation happily, and I called Ryan to get him to add more people to the reservation. I knew he was smiling on the other end.

“What?” I snapped at him.

“You’re happy, Malic,” he sighed into the phone. “Who knew you even had that emotion in you?”

“I—”

“So then what? This guy... he’s your hearth right? You’re claiming him.”

It was time just to say what I was certain he already knew. What everyone did. “Yeah,” I said, trying to sound

irritable and annoyed but failing miserably. I was too damn happy.

“You don’t fool me a bit with this tough guy act of yours. I know you’re in love, asshole.”

“Nice.”

“I can’t wait to meet him, your hearth; I’m really looking forward to it.”

And he was. He truly was. Christ.

Walking between Dylan and Sophie, each one holding a hand, I tried not to strut. It was hard though, knowing that to the little girl, I was her hero, and to the man at my side, I was the reason for his joy.

I never thought I would mean anything.

“God, Malic,” Dylan sighed beside me, “what would I do without you?”

He was never going to have to find out.

MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will so not happen. She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work. She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.

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