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By Mistake

Megan Derr

Less Than Three Press

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By Megan Derr

Published by Less Than Three Press

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By Mistake

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What in the hell are *you* doing there?" a voice shrieked.

Shimari grimaced, still nauseous and disoriented from the summoning. He shook his head in a futile attempt to clear it and squinted while he waited for the acrid, pale blue-violet smoke to clear.

The shriek became a wail of despair as the speaker said, "Wrong, wrong, all wrong."

When Shimari could finally see, he found himself unimpressed. The summoner was a bloody child, and really, to judge by the poor penmanship that had written out the summoning circle, the idiot should be nowhere near magic. The more Shimari studied him, the less impressed he became. Had wizards discarded dignity and self-respect in the years since he had last been summoned? The poor thing was pathetic.

His hair was short, a red-brown color that made Shimari think simultaneously of mud and rust. Unfortunately, it was just long enough that it was able to stick up every which way—and it definitely had found one hundred different directions to stick up in. There were spectacles perched on the slightly overlarge nose, but they were crooked. Freckles were scattered like dirt across his face, all the more livid for the unhealthy, unappealing paleness of his skin.

He was dressed in clothes that had clearly seen better days. Really, Shimari thought, what was the world coming to?

Yellow-brown eyes the color of cheap, thin beer stared at him, wide with panic. "What in the hell—I didn't summon you!"

Shimari lifted one brow at that, then glanced down his nose at the poorly scrawled runes on the floor. "As a matter of fact, you did. Excellent summon work for an idiot, except that you clearly did it by accident."

The pale cheeks flushed. "I just wanted to summon a fairy, that's all. A helper."

"A familiar," Shimari corrected automatically. "Summoned creatures are called familiars."

Flushing darker, the idiot replied, "I know what they're called."

"I'm impressed you know anything at all," Shimari replied. "Given the poorly drawn runes, that at least half of them are incorrect, and you are the saddest wizard I have ever..." He trailed off as the wizard dropped his head in an obvious show of guilt. A sudden horribly realization came to him. "You're *not* a wizard, are you? Of course you're not. A real wizard would not summon a demon instead of a fairy, and

he'd have better handwriting. Nor," he added, "would he look like he was two steps from the poorhouse."

The nonwizard went pale, and so much pain flashed through the yellow-brown eyes that Shimari almost felt bad for being so blunt. Except if the idiot was not a wizard, he should not be summoning or practicing magic at all. Magic was dangerous. So he refused to feel bad.

"One step, actually," the idiot said, looking hard at the floor. "I wanted a fairy because I need help packing, since I've no friends to call upon."

Shimari frowned, but still refused to feel bad. "Who are you, idiot nonwizard?"

"Andrus Bothwell," Andrus said faintly, talking to the floor.

"Bothwell?" Shimari echoed. "Surely *you* are not a Bothwell. They're accomplished wizards; I remember Lord Sendrus Bothwell was extremely talented with summoning."

"My great grandfather," Andrus replied, still talking to the floor. "It was his notes I was trying to use."

Shimari glanced at said notes, piled haphazardly on a rickety table. The notes were not in much better shape—the papers were loose from the bindings of the books they had once been a part of, the sheets wrinkled, torn, even burnt in some places. No wonder the summoning had gone all wrong, when that mess was combined with the mess of a summoner. "So why are you so abysmal, when he was so exceptional?"

"Because no one ever taught me magic!" Andrus snapped, a fire flashing in his eyes for one moment before it died like a snuffed candle. "We're no longer allowed to learn magic."

Shimari's brows shot up at that. "Since when are the Bothwells forbidden magic?"

"Since Sendrus was hanged as a traitor. My parents and grandparents were stripped of their magic, and I was never allowed to learn it," Andrus said, speaking to the floor again. "They died two years ago of illness. I've been trying to pay off the family debts, but I've failed. They're coming to take the house in three days. I just wanted someone to help me pack up the few belongings I have left."

It was when he saw Andrus turn away to hide and hastily wipe away tears that Shimari almost began to feel bad. The kid's problems were not his, but still, he had not *needed* to mock him; it had just felt good at the time. "How old are you, Andrus Bothwell?"

"Nineteen," Andrus replied, his back still to Shimari.

Yet he had summoned Shimari, a class five demon—by *accident*. The world would end, someday, due to an idiot doing something by mistake. Sighing, Shimari stepped out of the summoning circle and snapped his fingers, banishing the last traces of smoke. Then he willed on clothes, a scarlet tunic with black leggings and under tunic, and he tied back his long, blue-black hair with a scarlet ribbon. Last, he settled a pair of spectacles on his face that would hide the demonic glow of his red eyes, make them brown instead.

Andrus slowly turned as he heard Shimari approach, wiping hastily at his eyes. "I am sorry for my mistake, demon. You should be free in five hours, though."

Shimari sighed, annoyed all over again. "No, I won't be—you wrote it for five years, not five hours. You really are quite awful at magic, especially considering that Bothwells *used* to have a natural knack for it. Pathetic, really, that it only took two generations for that talent to vanish."

Making a rough noise, Andrus turned sharply away again, not quite managing to muffle a sob as he left the room, leaving Shimari alone. He pinched the bridge of his nose and told himself to curb his tongue unless he wanted nothing but tears and sniffles for the next five years. Honestly, nineteen was too old for tears. And they would not help all the tragedy that had apparently overtaken the Bothwell family.

A traitor. He could not comprehend that; it did not seem to fit. The Bothwells were always too much into magic to be bothered with something as ridiculous as politics. The game of politics was for lesser creatures who lacked the brains to follow higher paths.

What a bother it was already proving to be, being summoned after so many years. Shimari wished he had resisted it; as pathetically weak as Andrus' magic was, he probably could have. Ah, well. He had answered without contest, and so he was stuck here for five years.

Sighing, he headed out the door through which Andrus had fled, then down a dark, narrow hallway to some stairs that led up to the house proper. So he had been in a basement.

Looking around, Shimari thought he had never seen such a sad-looking home. House, really. There was nothing that seemed to indicate it had ever really been a home. He had been here before, he thought, but only to the front rooms where guests were entertained. These backrooms, strictly for the family and close friends, would not have been accessible to him.

He could see where things had hung upon the wall once. Likely, they had all been sold in a futile effort to pay off debts. The floors were likewise bare, all dusty neglected wood, the carpets and rugs long gone. There was barely any furniture and certainly no ornaments.

Dreary and depressing was the only way to describe it.

Where had his forlorn little master gone, Shimari wondered. Was there a garden for him to cry amongst dried and withered roses?

The sound of someone pounding on a door drew him, and he followed the sound until he came out at the farthest end of the entryway, shadowed by the great winding staircase. He lingered there, seeing Andrus in the entryway.

He watched as Andrus opened the door, then immediately tried to close it again—but not in time, and a man slipped inside. Shimari narrowed his eyes, immediately not liking the man. There was something slimy and sibilant about him.

"Andi," the man said, entirely too familiar in the way he shortened Andrus' name. He reached out to touch Andrus's face.

Andrus jerked away then stepped back. "You are not welcome here, Grell. I've told you that time and time again."

"Of course I'm welcome here," Grell said, smirking. "In three days, this house will be mine."

"W-what?" Andrus said. "You didn't—"

"Oh, but I did," Grell said. "No one else is going to want this hovel, and certainly the government has no desire to hold on to it, not when they can sell it to me and start collecting taxes again. That is why I have come to see you, pet. I thought I'd sweeten my offer to you. Accept my offer, and of course you can stay here. Show me the secret rooms, and I'll—"

"I do not care what you'll let me do," Andrus said coldly, drawing himself up, though he was far too slender and ridiculous looking to ever intimidate anyone. "I will never accept your offer. Bothwells do not whore themselves out to Farthings."

Grell sneered. "It is the best offer you will ever receive, Andi, face the truth. The Bothwells are no more, and the Farthings own half the city. You will never do better than me."

"Whoring myself to strangers for a pence a go is still doing better than you," Andrus said coldly.

Snarling, Grell backhanded him, sending Andrus reeling, crashing into the entryway table then tumbling to the floor. But Andrus said nothing, merely picked himself up and wiped the blood from his mouth, and glared hatefully at Grell. "This is still *my* house for three days, Grell. Get out."

"Make me," Grell challenged.

Shimari had seen enough. He stepped from the shadows and said, "He told you to leave, Farthing. If you do not go, *I* will make you."

Grell jumped and whipped around, glaring at Shimari. "Who the hell are you?"

Sweeping him a mocking bow, Shimari said only, "An old friend of the family. I have been out of the country and only very recently returned to discover the desperate letters sent to me. I have arrived late, but not quite too late, to be of assistance. Get out, unless you want to find out what happens to sniveling cowards who hurt me and mine."

Frowning, obviously furious, Grell nevertheless went. "Take my offer, Andi, or you'll regret it," he said in parting, and then at last was gone.

Andrus turned and walked into what proved to be a salon. Shimari thought he recognized it, though when he had seen it, the room had been richly appointed, the scent of violets and vanilla on the air and laughter and chatter echoing through it.

Now there was only a sad little bed made up on the floor, a stack of old books and papers beside it, the remains of a fire in the fireplace.

"Thank you," Andrus said stiffly, staring at the fireplace, sitting on the pile of blankets. "I am sorry that I botched the summoning and dragged you into this mess. If you prefer to spend your five years as far from me as the spell permits, by all means."

Shimari opened his mouth to say something acerbic, but then closed it again. He simply could not continue to be caustic, not after that display in the hallway. Andrus was obviously downtrodden, and he had crumpled before Shimari in the basement—but he had been all steel and fire standing up to Grell. The spirit was dampened, but not extinguished entirely.

He wondered now how much of an accident his summoning had been. No doubt to Andrus it was an accident—but magic and the subconscious had ways of doing what they wanted, with complete disregard for what the conscious mind desired.

So Shimari's purpose at present was this broken little Bothwell. He supposed it could be worse—he could be stuck with the likes of Grell. Sneering at the memory, and thinking of all the things he could do to a snake like that, Shimari wandered into the room and sat down beside Andrus.

He glanced at the fireplace and flicked his fingers.

Andrus jumped as the fire suddenly burst into existence. He was silent a moment, then said, "Thank you."

"So why is Grell so interested in you?" Shimari asked.

"Because I'm a Bothwell," Andrus said. "The last, really. All our relatives cut away from the main branch and will have nothing to do with me. Grell finds it amusing, and befitting him, to keep me as his plaything." He smiled bitterly, but when he spoke, only managed to sound sad.

Shimari hid a wince, thinking of his own recent comments, his recent *thoughts*. Andrus was no beauty, no diamond, but if he were well fed and better dressed and not so broken, he would be decent enough to look upon.

"So why was your great grandfather accused of treason?"

Andrus looked up at him then looked away again. "They say he murdered Prince Kolik."

Shimari frowned. "How did he supposedly kill the Prince? The royal family has always boasted extremely powerful wizards. Even a Bothwell could not have murdered one easily."

"Placed a curse on a ring that he gifted to the Prince," Andrus said flatly, staring at the floor. "It was a powerful curse; not many could have managed it. My great-grandfather definitely could have. He didn't, but we've never been able to prove it."

"Curses come with a cost," Shimari said. "Curses taint. Surely the fact he lacked that taint was evidence enough."

Andrus laughed, and it was so bitter that Shimari almost winced. "My great-grandfather worked for the crown in secret; he was rife with curse taint. They say he was bought by enemies and turned traitor. They hanged him almost before they finished the trial. My mother says her parents cried and cried. After

that day, the Bothwells slowly began to collapse. In three days, I lose this house to Grell, and that will be the end of Bothwell."

"Where will you go?"

"What does it matter to you?"

Shimari did not reply, brow furrowed as he thought. "Why does he want your house so badly? Surely, two generations later, it should not matter to anyone."

Andrus sighed. "He's trying to find my great-grandfather's secret room, where he supposedly conducted all manner of magical experiments, some legal, some not. Everyone has been after that stupid room. They've offered me fortunes to show it to them."

"But you won't?" Shimari asked, equal parts aggravated and impressed. Smarter to hand over relics and take the sorely needed money, but it spoke of his integrity that he did not.

"I wouldn't," Andrus said, "but the truth is I *can't*. The door won't open for me." He lowered his head, face flushing, the shame and humiliation pouring off him in waves.

Shimari fought a sudden, annoying urge to soothe. Honestly, what had happened to the days of being summoned by great and glorious wizards, casting magnificent spells by day, indulging in magnificent sex by night?

Well, it was what it was, and if his master was a bit pathetic, at least he was no coward. "We'll deal with that in due course," Shimari said at last. "At present, I suppose we must secure your home."

Andrus looked up, and Shimari was momentarily startled by the way his eyes looked like gold coins in the fire light. They had not looked like that in the basement.

Shimari looked away, disconcerted and annoyed. "Well, it will be difficult to do anything else if we are living on the streets. Certainly," he drawled, "it will be impossible to accomplish anything when you're only a pence a go."

"I didn't—" Andrus scowled as Shimari turned back to smirk at him—but the smirk died as he was struck again by eyes that looked like newly minted coins and a mouth that was more pout than scowl, and the rest of Andrus might not be remarkable, but that mouth was extraordinary.

Annoyed, Shimari abruptly stood up. "All tasks should begin with a good meal. What have you in the larder?"

"Nothing," Andrus said flatly. "Since when does a demon need to eat?"

Shimari lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "I will be back shortly."

Leaving the house, he slipped into the street and muted himself, bypassing pedestrians wandering about late as well as the footpads skulking in the dark waiting for suitable prey.

Stealing coin from a few pockets was easy enough, and finding a shop open late was easier still. In a very short amount of time, he returned—

To find Andrus dead asleep on his sad little pallet on the floor. Sighing softly, Shimari set the food aside and pulled up the blankets, built up the fire, and sat against the wall wondering what exactly he had just gotten himself into.

And how exactly he was going to sustain himself. Usually his masters provided, but he was not even confident Andrus knew that demons fed on wizard energies. Or the way that demons typically took that energy.

He eyed Andrus, sleeping as only the exhausted could, and tried to imagine doing to Andrus all the things he had done to wizards of the past. To his shock and dismay, the images came with ease and clarity.

Shimari jerked away from those thoughts and decided to figure out sustenance later. Right now, he had his hands full just sorting out what to do about this mess into which he had been summoned. The only thing to do, it seemed, was to prove that Sendrus had not been a traitor.

Unless of course he *had* been a traitor, but Shimari would deal with that problem only when he must.

His immediate concern was for the house. Rising, he moved to the papers stacked next to Andrus' bed and held down by books. It took him a few minutes, but he did at last find what he sought—a very detailed accounting of all the money owed, to whom, and the deadlines. Andrus seemed the type to keep such paperwork and keep it very well, even if his handwriting really was abysmal.

Shimari frowned as he read, growing angry. Some of these debts should have been forgiven after the persons owing the money died. The rest should not carry the interest rates they did, and the crown never should have allowed such knavery.

It was obvious that Andrus was being punished for sins committed before he had even been born. But why? This was beyond all logic, and even beyond typical human behavior. Andrus was only nineteen; he knew nothing about the matters that had concerned his parents, his grandfather, and certainly not his great-grandfather.

The entire affair was a debacle, and several people should be ashamed of themselves.

Shimari pursed his lips, thinking. Money was the first order of business to legally buy back the house and pay off the remaining debts. Honestly, it would have made Andrus' life so much easier if he had simply fled, cut his losses, bought passage on a ship, and started a new life somewhere else.

Instead he was sleeping in the salon, bound for the streets in three days, and had tried to summon a fairy to help him *pack*. The entire situation was nigh on laughable. Except Shimari could not laugh when he looked at Andrus, sad and broken even in sleep. Shimari reached out—then realized what he was doing and yanked his hand back, then stood up.

The hour was late, but there was still plenty of night left. More than enough time remained to obtain the necessary funds. Money was always easy to obtain. Nodding, not looking again at Andrus simply because it annoyed him he wanted to, Shimari vanished.

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"Good morning," Shimari greeted.

Andrus flushed

and hastily sat up. "Uh—good morning. I didn't—that is—I should not have fallen asleep. I've too much to do."

"Nothing is accomplished by starving and exhausting oneself," Shimari admonished. "As to that, I suggest you eat. You've a lot to do today, and it will go all the better if your stomach is not growling."

"You brought me food?" Andrus said, clearly surprised, and smiled at him.

Shimari looked away from the smile and said sourly, "Well, it is not as though I can let you starve."

Andrus flinched, but said nothing, only stared at his food as he slowly ate through the bread, cheese, and fruit.

Stifling a sigh, Shimari said, "So what else do you have to wear? You can hardly go around settling debts looking like a vagabond."

"Only one other outfit, and it's not in much better repair," Andrus said, flushing and looking ashamed again.

"Slightly better is still better," Shimari said. "I would magic your clothes, but even the lesser wizards will sense it, and I need not spell out even to you the reasons no one can know you've summoned a demon."

"I'm not stupid," Andrus said, scowling at him briefly, before looking away again.

"You're young," Shimari said dryly, "which amounts to the same thing."

Andrus ripped a piece of bread from the loaf, shadows falling over his face. "I'm not that young."

Shimari looked at him and conceded with a slight nod. "No, I suppose you're not."

"What did you mean, about settling debts?" Andrus asked suddenly.

"While you slept, I gathered the funds you need," Shimari said. "That will take care of immediate problems, and then we can move on to the greater."

Andrus dropped the apple he had picked up and stared at him. In the morning sunlight, his eyes had that same gold-coin quality. Lit by that very same sun, his skin took on a warmer tone, and the freckles seemed less like dirty spots and more like marks to—

Shimari bit back a snarl of frustration and wondered what in the hell was wrong with him. This new master was nothing but an irritation, one to be endured for a mere five years. Once these bothersome problems were sorted out, he could keep a low profile until his term of service was ended. Hopefully the next time he was summoned, it would be by a more worthy master.

"How did you gather so much money?" Andrus asked, looking near to tears again. "You shouldn't even be able to wander..." He trailed off and looked down, looking so wretched that Shimari wanted to smack him or hug him, which just annoyed him all over again.

"You tried to summon a fairy and failed miserably," he said, being harsher than he should but honestly, Andrus was the one vexing *him*. "Thinking you were summoning a fairy, you obviously did not lay out the protections you would have for a demon."

"So I gave you far too much liberty," Andrus said, cringing.

Shimari nodded. "I am honestly surprised you've not gotten yourself killed before now." Andrus said nothing, simply went back to his favorite activity of staring at the floor. "You had best get dressed," Shimari said. "We've a long day ahead of us, and then begins the real work."

"What is that?" Andrus asked.

"Clearing the Bothwell name."

Andrus jerked his head up, surprise and delight filling his face. "You—you can do that?"

"I can try," Shimari said slowly. "If he is guilty, he is guilty—"

"He's not!" Andrus said. "We would never betray the crown. Even when the crown abandons us, we do not betray the crown." Shimari looked at him, the sadness that filled Andrus' face as he said the word 'abandon', and wondered just how many people had abandoned Andrus.

Damn it all, what was it about Andrus that was turning him into a perfect idiot? He stood up—then sat down again, feeling dizzy. Gathering obscene amounts of money had apparently taken more energy than he had realized.

"Are you all right?" Andrus asked, reaching out to gently grasp his arm.

"Fine," Shimari bit out and wondered how the hell he was going to deal with this situation.

But Andrus surprised him by saying, "You must be sapped, doing all that you did, and immediately after the rigors of being summoned. I can get dressed and wait, while you go replenish."

For the first time in his very long life, Shimari was not certain what to say. All masters assumed, and rightly, that they would provide for their demons. It was part of the bargain struck. But, he realized, fairies did not feed the way demons did, and so a sustenance bargain would not have been drawn into the summon. He should have realized that sooner, but it had not even occurred to him.

Still, pride alone should insist a wizard feed the demon he summoned.

"That is ... unusual," he finally said.

Andrus stood up, laughing in a way that did not quite convey the amusement he was obviously hoping it would. "I am hardly appealing to a demon," he said and turned away. "I am going to get washed and dressed."

Something twisted in Shimari's chest—something he did not like. But a wizard was a wizard, even if he was terrible at it, and while all wizards could stand to be stripped of their pride now and again, no wizard deserved to be stripped of his dignity. Especially not by his demon, even if said demon was only accidentally summoned.

Standing, Shimari strode across the room and grabbed Andrus' arm, spun him around, and kissed him. It made Shimari tremble, the unexpected energy that poured out and was offered up free for the taking, warm and sweet. He had never known *any* wizard to offer so much, so freely. It was the nature of wizards to hold back; it was instinct. But this awkward, incompetent wizard did not even possess that.

Shimari took it, took enough to last him the day then tore away, shaken. "Get dressed," he snapped and strode off to find somewhere to clear his head.

He found himself in a garden, of all places. Like the rest of the house, the garden was derelict except for the gazebo back in one corner. Someone had gone to great lengths to keep it clear of weeds and care for the wood. The rest of the house was all but falling down around them, but the gazebo looked as though it could be brand new.

Curious, Shimari strode across the weed-racked garden and up the steps into it. Once inside, he could see easily why it was of such importance—from little hooks, all around the inner circle of the gazebo, hung crystals. Wedding crystals, wizard crystals, scholar crystals. Each one was inscribed with initials, runes denoting the occasion or accomplishment, and inside each would be a magically captured image of the person to whom the crystal had been given.

Shimari turned in a slow circle, examining every nook and cranny, every knot in the warm-gold wood. Something ... he could feel magic now, muted but there, strong beneath the bland surface.

But what was it? Frowning, Shimari looked around, extending his magic, wasting precious energy—then he found it. A trap door sealed by magic. Breaking the seal was easy enough, and he pulled open the door, lowering it carefully so it did not bang hitting the floor of the gazebo. Stairs led down, and Shimari took them, alert for traps.

The steps led to a short hallway, at the end of which was a door. Unfortunately, the door was sealed beyond his ability to open. It required a Bothwell and ... Shimari frowned then pursed his lips. That could not be right. If it *was* correct ...

But it could not be, because they would have said something and proved the innocence of the Bothwell easily. Perhaps not, though, he thought in the next moment. Not if the Bothwells had been banned from practicing magic and had more immediate concerns than dealing with this room that was no doubt the source of so many of their troubles.

Wanting to know whatever Andrus could tell him, Shimari left the secret passage and strode back to the house.

When he returned inside, however, it was to find Andrus in the entryway again, in a repeat of last night's encounter with Grell. Honestly, why did Andrus even bother opening the damned door? Growling, Shimari stalked toward them and yanked Grell away. "I believe you were told to go away," he said coldly. "Let me go one step further and say that you are not welcome back here ever."

Grell jerked away and stared up haughtily. "I beg your pardon, whomever you might be, but this house is shortly to be mine."

Shimari bared his teeth. "No, it is not. I told you, I am a family friend, and I have come to help. I have the funds to pay off the debts and the taxes owed on the property. We go today to take care of the matter; this house will remain in the hands of the Bothwell for a long time to come. Remove yourself immediately, or I shall remove you."

"I do not know who or what you are, *sir*," Grell said, drawing himself up even more, "but you will not speak to me in such fashion! I am a peer of this realm and in *very* good standing with the throne, and I will see you—unhand me at once!"

Ignoring the squealing, Shimari yanked the door open and threw Grell outside, snickering as he landed in a puddle of mud.

"You will pay for this!" Grell snarled, heaving to his feet, eyes flashing as he called up magic and threw it at Shimari—

Who dispersed it without effort. Then, refusing to waste energy on a rat, he swung, catching Grell on the jaw, sending him crashing right back into the mud puddle. "Get off Bothwell property, and stay off it, or you will regret it, *sir*."

"We will see who winds up with regrets," Grell spat and stormed off, the effect largely ruined by the trail of mud and water that followed him and the squelching sounds he made as he walked.

Shimari laughed and closed the door. "That was a sight, eh?"

Andrus only looked more miserable than ever. "You should not have done that."

"Che," Shimari said. "He deserved it, and he cannot do a thing to us. Trespassing is trespassing, and the moment we told him to leave and he refused, he was trespassing."

"But, you don't understand—" Andrus looked dangerously close to tears. "Now *he'll* come."

Shimari quirked a brow. "Who?"

"The Constable," Andrus whispered, looking so wretched that Shimari did not know what to say. Andrus turned away, raking a hand through his hair in obvious agitation, sending it in a hundred different directions.

Unfortunate, really, because until then he had looked rather sharp. The formal clothes were worn, obviously heavily mended, but Andrus looked handsome in them all the same. Shimari had not been quite accurate in his earlier assessment—cleaned up, well fed, and free of despondence, Andrus would not be merely passable. He would in fact be quite stunning.

Shimari was reminded, like a hit to the gut, of the kiss he had taken earlier, how warm and sweet the energy had been. How much sweeter, and hotter, would Andrus be if Shimari were to go all out to feed?

Damn it.

He shook himself, getting his head back in order and called after Andrus, "I can handle one lowly constable."

Andrus stiffened, but did not turn around as he replied, "I do not want you *handling* him. I do not want him here at all."

Shimari lifted one brow at that. "Is he better or worse than Grell?"

"Worse," Andrus said, voice nearly a whisper. "Much, much wor—"

He broke off at the sound of a key turning in the front door lock. Whoever it was fumbled briefly upon realizing the door had already been unlocked. Both of Shimari's brows went up as he wondered who the hell else would have a key.

Then the door swung open, and a man stepped inside. Handsome—beautiful, really. His hair was the color of old gold, fashionably cut to just short of reaching his shoulders, bits of it woven into small braids, fastened with beads and charms. He wore the dark cobalt tunic of the Royal Guard, the dog and moon crest emblazoned in black and silver. A badge was affixed to it, marking this man the Royal Constable. His features were all clean, elegant lines, and his eyes were only a few shades darker than the tunic he wore.

At his waist was a sword, a dagger, a ring of keys that could only be master keys to the city, and pouches to hold coins and other such necessities. His magic was muted, hidden to all but the most powerful wizards—and demons. Shimari hissed, because he knew that magic. If this man was merely the Constable, then Shimari was a fairy.

The Constable paid Shimari no mind, his attention solely for Andrus. "Andi," he said softly, "I saw Grell. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Andrus said stiffly, not turning around. "Go away."

Shimari looked between them and wondered if it would be more appropriate to roll his eyes, laugh, or throw up his hands and walk away. Andrus had said he had no friends, but it sure as hell looked as if he had a *Constable* in love with him.

Worse than Grell, indeed. Looking at the Constable, he said, "I took care of Grell. Do I need to take care of you?"

The Constable's eyes finally snapped to him and widened in shock, then narrowed. "Where did you come from?"

Shimari smirked and tossed his hair. "I'm an old family friend, only very recently arrived."

"Balls," the Constable said. "If you're an *old family friend* then I'm a priest."

Looking the man up and down slowly, liking what he saw, Shimari finally met the blue eyes and drawled, "You're no priest. You're no constable either."

"You're no human."

Shimari grinned. "Not even a little, Highness."

Andrus whipped around, furious and pale-faced. "What do you mean—"

The Constable winced. "Andi..."

"You're a *prince*?" Andrus demanded.

Shimari stared in surprise. Not because Andrus had not known—of course the idiot had not known, that would be too easy. No, he was surprised because he had not realized until now that Andrus was in love with the Constable. The Prince. Whatever. Because it was painfully obvious now.

He was seriously about to throw up his hands and go sulk in the gardens.

"I cannot fucking believe you're royalty!" Andrus shouted, looking very much as if he wished he had something to throw. "Were you ever going to tell me, Oresti? Or were you hoping I'd give up something about the secret—"

Snarling, he turned sharply away and stalked off. A couple of minutes later, Shimari heard a door slam.

He slid his gaze toward Oresti. "My apologies, Highness."

"It's all right," Oresti said with a sigh. "I should have told him a long time ago. But, he's so prickly as it is that admitting I was royalty really didn't seem like it was going to help my cause. Not when the Bothwell are not even allowed on palace grounds."

"He told me he had no friends," Shimari commented idly.

Oresti flinched. "He won't accept my suit, not until his name is cleared, he says. He won't accept my help either, because he's a stupid, stubborn idiot." Any sting the words might have held were completely obliterated by the affection and fondness in the tone.

Shimari rolled his eyes. "Why is a prince masquerading as Constable?"

"Good way to get around the city," Oresti replied. "I do a lot of covert work for my family, a spymaster, if you want to slap a melodramatic title on me. Being Constable gives a great deal of freedom."

"I see," Shimari said, thinking of things that Andrus had earlier told him.

"How in the hell did Andi summon a demon?" Oresti asked. "I love him madly, but he can't even charm a pencil without disaster striking."

Snorting in amusement, Shimari replied, "He meant to summon a fairy to help him pack."

Oresti laughed then fondly repeated, "That idiot." He stared at the space where Andrus had been standing, expression turning sad. "I wish I knew how to make his problems go away. I wish the stubborn idiot would let me help."

Shimari thought of what he had seen on the hidden door. "I think you are exactly the help we need to clear the Bothwell name."

"What do you mean?" Oresti asked, turning to him.

Shimari only smirked. "First, we must go retrieve the idiot."

"Easier said than done," Oresti said, but he sounded almost cheerful. "But I have ways, even if he professes to hate them."

Something hot coiled down Shimari's spine, pooled in his gut, as he recalled warm, sweet kisses. How would Oresti taste, he wondered? How would their flavors mingle? He eyed Oresti thoughtfully and wondered how all of this might end.

Oresti met his gaze and lifted one brow, clearly amused. "Demons."

Shimari said nothing, only smirked then turned to go find where Andrus was sulking. "So how did you two meet?"

"I helped him one day when he was being harassed by some people who should have had more class," Oresti replied. "They'd roughed him up pretty thoroughly by the time I stumbled across them. Took care of them, helped Andrus home. Brought him food and stuff, kept coming by to visit..." He drifted off and smiled softly. "One night, I brought him dinner. He tried to keep me out, which was when I knew for certain the feelings weren't one sided. But I've never been able to get him to unbend."

"That just means he'll bend all the easier under the right pressure," Shimari murmured, images flicking through his mind, body going tight as he thought of the energy such a thing would bring. Two wizards were always better than one, but wizards were usually a stand-offish, suspicious lot. They did not like to share, especially with each other.

Not to mention that one was of royal blood ... and he already knew how sweet Andrus tasted. Shaking himself, he tried to pull his mind from the sudden temptation assaulting it and focus on the matter at hand.

"So how long are you here, demon?"

"Five years," Shimari replied. "He meant it to be for five hours. And my name is Shimari, please."

"Shimari," Oresti repeated. "You already know it, probably, but the name is Oresti Valdivisio, fourth son of his Majesty and the late Queen, god rest her soul. A pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure and honor are mine, Highness," Shimari murmured.

Oresti snorted. "I can see you are already anticipating what *pleasure* I might bring you, greedy demon."

Shimari smirked. "What can I say? I am a demon, through and through. I am here to serve, I see no reason I should not take my pleasure where I can. If you are my master's pleasure, why can you not be mine as well?"

Laughing, Oresti climbed the stairs and strode down the hall, pausing outside a particular door, "Shameless, demon."

"You are being redundant," Shimari replied.

Oresti laughed again then rested a hand against the door and murmured a quiet spell of unlocking. Then he pushed the door open and slipped inside.

Shimari waited a moment then followed, sliding inside and lingering by the door, staying out of the way until he was needed. This was not his problem to fix; all jokes of pleasure and greed aside, he would do as Andrus wanted, first and foremost. He might be reluctantly summoned, but summoned he was, and he would do as his wizard bid.

Andrus sat in a window seat, scowling at the street below. He turned his head as Oresti approached, scowl turning into a full-fledged glare. "Do not touch me. Get out of my house, *Highness*."

Oresti winced. "I'm sorry, Andi—"

"Don't call me that!" Andrus bellowed then recoiled. When he spoke again, his voice seemed small. "I can't believe you're a prince." He turned away again, head resting against the window, reflection a picture of misery.

Reaching out, Oresti grasped his chin then grasped it more firmly when Andrus jerked away. "I wanted to tell you, I was *going* to tell you, but I can barely get you to speak to me as it is. What would you have done if you'd known I was really a prince?"

Andrus said nothing, merely tried to keep glaring. Oresti made a rough noise. "Exactly. You would have had nothing to do with me, and I love you far too much to tolerate that, Andi."

"Shut up," Andrus hissed.

"No," Oresti said and yanked him up, grasped his arms, and pulled him close enough that Andrus had no room to struggle free. "I will keep saying that I love you until you believe it and admit you love me too." Before Andrus could reply, Oresti bent and kissed him.

Shimari had been right—that was a *very* pretty picture. He leaned against the wall and folded his arms across his chest, content to wait for the squabbling to end before he drew them back to other matters.

"Will you forgive me, Andi?"

"No," Andrus replied, but his tone said that he would, if he had not already. "I can't believe—" He broke off as Oresti kissed him again. "Stop doing that!" he hissed and tried to pull away.

Oresti smirked. "No. I never get to kiss you as often as I'd like, so I'll take them where I'm able."

Andrus flushed. "Behave! You're still in trouble, *Highness!* I can't—you should not be anywhere near me, Oresti! Highness! Whatever the hell you're called!"

"If you call me Highness one more time, I'll beat you," Oresti said. In reply, Andrus only glared. Oresti smiled and reached out to stroke Andrus' cheek in a way that seemed far more intimate than even the most thorough of kisses.

Andrus jerked away. "Stop it!" he snapped. "Just stop it. Prince or Constable, the answer is still no. I *can't*, Oresti. I've nothing to offer you, nothing—"

"I don't care," Oresti replied. "Prince or Constable, I've more than enough for two, and I'll fight my own father if that's what I must do. Anyway, your smarmy little demon says there's a way for me to help."

Shimari pushed off the wall and sneered. "I resent being called *little*."

Oresti looked at him, one corner of his mouth tilting up in amusement. "Just little?"

"Smarmy underestimates me slightly, but is not wholly inaccurate," Shimari replied. "If you two lovebirds are done making up, I believe we have a reputation to restore."

Andrus flushed darker still. "You were there—what do you mean 'a reputation to restore'?"

Shimari smiled, slow and predatory. "Of course I was here the whole time. Greater demons than I would kill for the opportunity to draw from two wizards."

Oresti laughed. "You're awfully certain that's what you'll be doing, Shimari."

"I already know he doesn't mind my kisses," Shimari replied and met Oresti's gaze, mouth curving in a challenging smirk. "And I've toppled greater wizards than you." He turned and said over his shoulder, "Now, come. The resolution of this matter is long past due."

He did not give them a chance to reply, simply left the room, strode back down the stairs, then out into the garden and straight to the gazebo where the trapdoor remained opened, and he waited only for them to appear before vanishing down the secret staircase.

At the end of the dark hall, he snapped his fingers and summoned magic fire, cupping it in one hand and flaring it bright enough that they could clearly see the symbols etched into the door.

"Oh, my god," Oresti said.

Andrus frowned. "What? I know I'm not much of a wizard, but I have been through every book I can possibly lay hands on, and I've never figured out that damned mark. I know my grandfather's private mage seal, but I've never found that one."

"You never will," Oresti said quietly and traced the intricate feather and crescent moon sigil. "It's *my* symbol—rather, I've inherited it. Every youngest son of the royal family takes up the mantle of spymaster. This symbol is the crest of that post. We're the only ones who use it; there is only one seal which can make the crest, and I have it. He traced it again then the one beside it—a goblet and rose. "The spell cast upon them, however, I do not know. It's old magic, whatever it is."

Shimari cast his fire into the air, leaving it to hover there, out of his way but still lighting the dark passage. "It went out of fashion well before even your great grandfathers' time. They called it a Safeguard spell, once. It was also called a Split Key."

"Oh!" Oresti exclaimed. "Is that—but what is it doing *here*?"

"What are you talking about?" Andrus asked, sounding hurt.

Shimari sighed. "What is the magical world coming to when illegal wizards can summon demons and no one knows of the old spells?"

"Are you always this haughty, demon?" Oresti asked.

Ignoring him, Shimari explained, "A safeguard spell is set in place so that only certain persons can open a door, but there's a catch to it. See, to first activate the spell, all parties bound to the spell must be present. Then, ever after, one or the other can come and go through the door as he pleases. But in times of danger, either party can trip the spell so that both are required to unlock it again. It guarantees that only those with permission are able to get inside. This one was obviously set up to admit only those who use these sigils—your respective great grandfathers."

"So...they trusted each other," Andrus said slowly. "They were friends."

"Yes, but that's not really what matters here, not exactly," Shimari said. "From what you have both told me, they were both involved in covert work. And just reading the spell, I can see that upon the death of one, the spell resets to require *both* to open it."

Oresti swore. "So the moment one of them died, opening this room became impossible."

"Precisely," Shimari said.

Andrus looked on the verge of tears. "So—so there's no way my great grandfather would have killed the prince."

Shimari nodded. "Precisely."

"I don't—why—why has no one ever realized this before?" Andrus asked. "My parents—my grandfather—I don't understand." He slumped, looking like nothing so much as a kicked puppy.

Utterly confounding how he could be all fire and claws arguing with Oresti, cold, proud noble when facing down Grell, and yet so forlorn the moment anyone brought up the family scandal. Shimari scoffed and said, "I doubt anyone came down here after they were banned from doing magic—and I doubt you're the only one who was harassed about finding and seeing your great grandfather's fabled secret room. I'm sure they wanted the past in the past and hoped the future would improve."

Andrus nodded, but said nothing, and he must have been truly shaken not to protest it when Oresti slid an arm across his shoulders.

"So can we open it at all?" Oresti asked.

"Possibly," Shimari replied, studying the marks critically, running his hands over them to analyze the spell again. "That is why I said we would need you. You are each direct descendants of the men in question. Oresti has followed in his grandfather's footsteps, and..." Shimari drifted off and looked critically at Andrus, then said, "Well, you *are* a wizard, if only barely, and illegally."

Andrus flushed, but scowled. "I summoned you." His tone implied he was still trying to decide if that was a good or a bad thing.

Shimari smirked. "Then give it a try, Master, Highness."

He stepped back, out of the way, as Andrus and Oresti crowded into the space, but when Andrus placed his hand over the seal, Shimari stepped up behind him, pressed against him, and covered Andrus' hand with his own. "How about I help you, so we don't all wind up turned into frogs or something?"

"Shut up," Andrus muttered, making Shimari laugh.

"I like you better when your teeth show," Shimari murmured, then continued before Andrus or Oresti could reply, closing his eyes and feeling out Andrus's magic, weaving his own into it, guiding Andrus' magic so that everything went as it should.

And he could feel it there—that sweet, warm power, the untrained nature of it, the reason that so much always went so wrong. Easy enough to fix, given enough time and opportunity for training.

For the time being, however, he controlled Andrus' magic, guiding it through the opening of the seal of Bothwell. He smiled in slow, hot satisfaction when the seal gave way as beside them Oresti broke the royal seal.

The door creaked, and fell open about a finger's width.

"Let me go," Andrus muttered when Shimari made no move to step back. Ignoring the command for the moment, Shimari dragged his sharp teeth along the exposed back of Andrus' neck, tasting soft, warm skin, feeling the magical energies that were not as tamped down as they should have been.

A veritable feast for the taking, this one. Shimari marveled that Andrus was so untutored, that no one had ever taught him to bank his energies and better control them—even if he was not allowed to practice magic, someone should have instructed him on energy control.

Oresti laughed, drawing his attention. "Later, demon."

"I do not take orders from you," Shimari retorted lazily.

Smirking, Oresti replied, "If you want to feed from two wizards, you will." Then he pushed the door open and led the way into the room.

It actually proved to be two rooms; the immediate one was, as rumor had suggested, a workshop. Books, papers, and tables neatly lined with equipment and apparatus. There was also a desk whose drawers were locked with the same safeguard spell as the door.

"Look at this," Oresti called, and Shimari and Andrus left off examining the front room to follow him to the second.

Shimari's brows rose as he took it in. "This is a love nest," he said. "They weren't just friends, but lovers."

"Lovers?" Andrus echoed. "But—Prince Kolik was married, wasn't he?"

Oresti shook his head. "Engaged, actually. At that point in his life, he was slowly pulling out of and retiring from espionage. He'd been engaged for a year, and the wedding was just three months away. It was a highly anticipated wedding, I believe. If he'd been caught with a lover ... even if that lover was a Bothwell ..."

"Scandal, disgrace, and a whole host of other unpleasant things," Shimari finished. "But it would have made more sense to kill the lover, not the prince."

Andrus made a pained noise, causing both men to turn toward him. He looked at them, wide-eyed, and said, "What—what if that's what they had meant to do? The ring, the cursed ring. It was a gift, from my great grandfather to yours. What if whoever laid the curse didn't know that until too late?"

"It's possible, certainly," Oresti said. "I suppose we'll never know for certain, but there is enough here to establish reasonable doubt as to your great grandfather being the murderer."

Shimari pursed his lips and asked, "As to that, it seems to me that only two parties would have the most invested in the wedding—the royal house and the bride's family. Obviously the royal house did not kill one of their own, unless this matter was more complicated than I surmised. To whom was your great grandfather engaged, Highness?"

Oresti frowned in thought. "A distant cousin to the throne, actually. The whole cousin bit was more being polite, than fact. Lady Millicent Hawking, she was from a branch of the Farthing line." His own words sunk in, and he stared at them in turn. "Surely not."

"It is a line of inquiry worth pursuing I would say," Shimari said dryly.

"One I will pursue relentlessly," Oresti replied. Then he burst out laughing suddenly and grabbed Andrus' arms, pulling him close. "You know what this means, Andi?"

"What?" Andrus asked.

Oresti snorted and kissed his nose. "It means that your name will be clear, and your place restored, and you will no longer have any reason to refuse me."

"Common sense," Andrus retorted, but he did not protest overmuch when Oresti kissed him.

Beaming as he drew back, Oresti said, "I'll go speak to my father at once—this is marvelous, Andi—" He turned, then stopped short. Shimari smirked. Oresti rolled his eyes. "Yes, I guess I had better do something about you."

"You better," Shimari said lightly, though the matter was not an idle one.

While it was true that they had more than enough with which to cautiously clear the Bothwell name—and probably would truly clear it over time—the fact remained that Andrus was still forbidden to practice magic, and his having summoned a class five demon would work strongly against what gains they had made with their discoveries in the secret room.

Shimari cocked his head and drawled, "So what are you going to do about me, Highness?"

"I can think of several things I should do," Oresti said dryly. "Knocking you off that high pedestal on which you so grandly perch chief among them."

"Greater wizards than you have tried," Shimari replied, even as his pace quickened.

Oresti smirked. "I think you underestimate me, demon."

"We shall see."

"Indeed we shall," Oresti murmured, then grasped Andrus and tugged him close. From his belt, he drew a dagger. "Andi, I need you to bring me into your demon binding, so I can then take it over."

"Take it over?" Andrus echoed. "Like you're inheriting him?"

Shimari was impressed, despite himself—not that he had any intention of saying so—but it was rather perfect, as he saw what Oresti was going to do. Wizards normally only summoned familiars for a short period of time—hours, days, week, sometimes months, occasionally years, rarely for more than a decade. Sometimes, however, demons or other familiars, *were* summoned for longer periods of time. On the rare chance a wizard did not live long enough to see through the end of the contract, it could be taken over by another wizard, most often a relative.

Andrus nodded, and stood still as Oresti slit open both of their palms, his only reaction to the pain a slight grimace. Tangling their bloody palms together, Oresti crooked a finger at Shimari. Amused by the

imperious summons, Shimari obeyed. "I hope you are prepared for being bound foremost to *me*, demon."

"I hope you know what you're in for," Shimari replied and placed his hands in their free ones. He was not required for this bit of the spell, as it was really only a transference of contract and the contract did not really get a say in the matter, but his inclusion would make it easier and faster.

His eyes slipped shut as Oresti began to chant the spells that normally would have been done by Andrus, however, none of them wanted to find out what would happen if Andrus tried to do it. The shifting of ownership was a tugging deep in his gut as he felt the thrum of Andrus' warm, sweet energy drain away to be steadily replaced by something that crackled and flashed and *struck* like lightning, making him jerk.

But then Andrus' energies returned, albeit in a smaller portion, and Shimari realized what Oresti was doing—rewriting the damned contract.

He could have interfered, then, since he had the right to negotiate his contract at this point, but Oresti's audacity was amusing, and the terms were not displeasing, even if he should be annoyed the length of his term was being significantly extended.

Fifty years, now, not merely five. And his primary directive was to serve as a guardian to Andrus. That was clever. Anyone who realized he was a demon would feel that Oresti owned the contract, and that Oresti had summoned Shimari to protect his lover. Such things were not infrequently done, especially where royalty was concerned.

No one would look twice, or ever suspect that Andrus had been the one to summon him in the first place.

And now Shimari had full license to feed from them both—one who was like a warm summer day, one who struck like a summer storm. Shimari all but purred as he opened his eyes. This contract had begun rather rocky, but it was turning out rather well. He liked being in the middle of two such contrasting energies, the way the mix of it warmed his blood and crackled along his skin. Oh, yes, he did like this development.

Oresti met his gaze and smirked. "Well, demon?"

"Not unimpressive," Shimari said, tossing his hair.

Andrus scowled. "You didn't have to do all that! Fifty years, Oresti? That was excessive. And I don't need someone looking after me!"

Shimari and Oresti both snorted at that, earning them a withering look.

Oresti laughed and stole a quick kiss, then turned to Shimari. "Well, demon, you're still lacking energy. Take your fill, before I depart, and let us see if this triangle will actually work."

Growling softly, Shimari approached Andrus first. Wide, coin-gold eyes stared at him, but Andrus did not back down as Shimari took a kiss that was much like the first one he had stolen just that morning. He

drank in Andrus' energy, intoxicated by it, how freely it was offered up. He knew demons who would cheerfully level kingdoms to tap such a fountain.

A hand landed on the back of his neck, curled around it, and Shimari was pulled away from Andrus, forcibly turned, and magic like lightning snapped and crackled through him, making him gasp and grab fast to Oresti's sleeve with one hand, the other still holding on to Andrus.

He had taunted Oresti that better wizards had tried and failed where Shimari was concerned, but he was forced to privately concede that Oresti might be right. Shimari had vastly underestimated him. It made him shiver, the rush of energy being fed him making him tremble, and Shimari found himself with more energy than he had been given in a very long time.

Then something seemed to snap, to crack, slicing through him so hard he jerked back and nearly crashed to the floor. Oresti and Andrus, he saw, had felt the same damned thing. He stared at them, stunned to see that each one now had one red eye—his eyes.

Shimari did not need a mirror to know that his own eyes were no longer red—instead, one would be gold, one blue. Human-colored eyes. Mark of the perfect triad they had just formed. He had not known it could actually be done, had only heard stories that were too old to trust.

Imperfect triads existed, though they were rare. Wizards rarely chose to work together, never mind *closely* together. But when they did, and shared a familiar, the three powers could grow so close and comfortable that it became almost impossible to work apart. Such a triad was powerful, versatile, but because it took years to work towards and *could* in theory be broken up with no ill effects, it was called an imperfect triad.

A perfect triad meant they fit together like missing pieces finally brought together. It also meant that if the triad was now to be broken, they probably all would die. Shimari swore and glared at Andrus. "You really are nothing but trouble, I swear. If you ever again try to summon something, I will beat you black and blue."

Andrus flushed and looked at the floor. Oresti shook his head and laughed. "My father is going to kill me."

"Only if I don't do it first," Shimari snapped. "This is far outside the terms of our bargain."

"Oh, be quiet," Oresti said lightly. "You love the power and the rarity."

Shimari made a face, but did not argue, because how could he? Being so closely bound was not what he wanted, but Oresti was right—he liked being more powerful. He liked the rarity of it. He liked being the cooling breeze that eased the summer day and the wind that whipped up the summer storm.

Andrus looked between them then shook his head. "So what are we going to do?"

"Speak to my father," Oresti said. "He's either going to kill me or make our lives very difficult. I can only imagine all the uses he'd have for a perfect triad, even if it's shorting him a spymaster."

"Lovely," Shimari muttered. "That will teach me not to resist a summons."

"Quite your posturing, demon," Oresti said. "Or I'll make you."

Smirking, Shimari tilted his head back, chin lifting in challenge. "By all means try."

Andrus rolled his eyes and said sourly, "I really hope the king kills *both* of you, because the mutual posturing is driving me crazy." He turned and stalked from the room, no doubt to go off and sulk somewhere.

"He likes to mope," Shimari commented, sliding Oresti a sly look.

Oresti returned it with a mischief-laden smirk. "He does. I know a tried and true method for bringing him out of it though, and I can only surmise that with double the effort, it will work twice as well."

"Thrice as well," Shimari corrected with a murmur.

Nodding in concession of the point, Oresti gestured with a nod of his head. "Shall we go see? My father can kill me later as easily as sooner."

Shimari laughed and nodded then led the way out of the secret chamber and back to the house, eager to see what would happen next.

