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Dance with the Devil

In a supernatural world filled with demons, vampires, werewolves, alchemists, imps, gremlins, and more besides, it takes a unique individual to solve the mysteries that crop up from time to time.

Christian White is a paranormal detective for this supernatural world, willing to take on any case - from strange rituals and runaway vampires, to fighting sorcerers and confronting demon lords - so long as it is interesting.

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Case #313: The Devil's Consort

"They call her the Devil's Consort."

Chris snorted softly. "How cute. What earned her that name? The dress or the hair?"

The woman in question wore a floor-length red dress that left very little to the imagination. Probably satin, but at a distance it was hard to tell. The matching heels gave her a good three inches, putting her just at chin level with her date. Her hair was a decorative mess of braids and ribbons, twists and knots. Whoever arranged it must have wanted to commit suicide or kill her.

"I think it has more to do with the way she treats men," Douglas said, pushing his glasses up his nose. "But the hair was a fair guess." He reached into his tux jacket and pulled out a small, leather-bound notebook. Flipping it open, he began to tick off what he'd learned while waiting for Chris to arrive. "Phillipa McGovern. Second-eldest child and only daughter to George McGovern - he's the one paying us. Fond of garden parties, fast cars and the wannabes who drive them. Said wannabes she tears through much like a dog through a steak. I'd say fond of money, but I figure that goes without saying."

Chris rolled his eyes. "And we're needed here because?"

"Lately she's been ditching all of the above and hanging around after-dark fetes only. Hardly leaves her house anymore until it gets dark."

"If she's a vampire, I'm dropping this case."

Douglas rolled his mismatched eyes at Chris. "You can't still be sour about the last case."

"Wanna bet?"

"Well, she's not a biter so there's no need to fear, oh brave and noble leader."

"Shut up and tell me what else you've got."

Douglas shrugged, "Not much really. We only got this case what, five hours ago? And you only bothered to show up two

hours ago. So far as mannerisms and stuff go, she's the same as ever. It's just she hates going out in the daytime suddenly. She's also apparently started taking off after midnight."

Chris mused over that, rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he contemplated the woman in the red dress. "Little chance of vampirism, then. They usually get cranky. Same with other species of biter. Any word of cults? That'd fit the after midnight bit."

"It's possible, but her father hasn't been able to figure out where she goes and if her friends know, they aren't giving the info up."

"Right. Possession, you think?"

"That or seduction. Would certainly explain the dress. Maybe an incubi is getting to her."

"Could be, though usually they stick to the bedroom." Chris sighed. "Go put yourself to use and see what you can sniff out. Meet me back here at eleven."

Douglas raised his eyes to the ceiling but did not argue the order. "You're just miffed because you had to come to the party."

"I hate parties," Chris muttered. Shooing Douglas away, he fussed with his own tuxedo in an effort to stall on joining the crush downstairs. The deep blue of his vest brightened the ocean-blue of his eyes. His tux was simple, understated - a stark contrast to the ring on his left ring finger, a large square cut diamond set in white gold. It matched the smaller diamond stud in his right ear, mostly hidden by his longish bright blonde hair.

He narrowed his eyes at the crowded ballroom, making note of the people he wanted to avoid like the plague and picking out those he would need to chat with.

Hopefully he could finish it up in a night and sleep in tomorrow.

Descending the stairs, he let his gaze focus on the man to whom Phillipa was clinging.

And narrowed his eyes again, pausing halfway down the staircase. He didn't recognize the guy. Tall, hard to tell how tall from a distance, but probably taller than his own 5'9". Sandy blonde hair, handsome in a spoiled brat sort of way. Chris wanted to punch him just on principal. But that'd get him yelled at and he really wasn't in the mood. Plus it wasn't a good idea to punch potential suspects before you could prove they were suspects. Ah, well.

He caught a flurry of movement from the corner of his eyes, smirking briefly as he watched Doug move through a crowd of people that saw him only when Doug wanted to be seen. His human guise shifted for a moment, hard to maintain perfectly when he was using other spells. But it reasserted itself a moment later, as Douglas sidled up to a young brunette woman and began to charm her with his honey-brown hair and profusion of freckles, his shy smile and disarming glasses. Chris racked his brain for a name, finally coming up with Elise. One of Phillipa's friends. Looked like Doug would have her picked clean in a half hour tops.

He hated parties. The longer he was here, the higher the numbers for this job were going to go. Luckily Phil's daddy was more than happy to pay whatever.

All because his little girl was probably hitting parties she shouldn't be anywhere near. If this turned out to be a normal case, the price was doubling.

At least it wasn't vampires. Forcing himself to stop sulking and get the night over with, Chris joined the throng and started making his way toward the fountain in the center. The party was a birthday party for Sable Brennus, one of the city's more prominent businessmen. Which meant this party was going to go all night. The ballroom was actually the lobby and most of the first floor of Brennus' most prestigious hotel. It was almost more of a greenhouse; there were so many plants and fountains around. The focal point was the large fountain in the center, depicting several beautiful women in beautiful robes holding the usual jars eternally spilling water.

Chris slowed to a halt as the crowd parted to reveal Phillipa and her date. A very pretty picture they made, but Chris wasn't very impressed. Now he just needed an in.

"Ah, Mr. White. So good to see you could make it after all."

Chris smiled as George McGovern came at him, hand extended. He shook it and smiled pleasantly. "Yes, I just managed to clear my schedule. Some less than happy clients, but they understood you were my priority."

"I'm flattered, sir." George, looking much like a prosperous businessmen should, silk and diamonds and a watch that could probably pay for Chris' house. He stroked his graying beard and motioned with beefy fingers toward his daughter. "Have you met my daughter? Phillipa, my dear, come meet my new friend."

Phillipa, Chris could see, was less than thrilled at being pulled away from her circle of admirers to meet a friend of her father's. But her impatience vanished as her gaze latched onto Chris. "Phillipa McGovern," she smiled with all the charm a school could teach a girl and extended her hand.

Chris accepted it, bowing slightly and kissing the knuckles. "A pleasure, my lady."

Her delighted laughter was pretty, clear as crystal and no doubt addictive for most. "Such a quaint gentleman! Daddy, who is this?"

"Chris White," Chris said, releasing her hand.

"He's a detective, sweet. But keep that quiet. He's helping me investigate a business matter. I'm only telling you so that you'll cooperate with any questions he asks you - no matter how strange they seem. All right?"

"Oh," Phillipa said, immediately disinterested. "Whatever you say, daddy." She started to say more, but her date appeared at her elbow and murmured quietly in her ear. "Excuse me, please. It was nice to meet you, Mr. White."

"Chris, please. The pleasure was mine." Chris smiled until she vanished onto the dance floor, and then turned to McGovern. "Asking her what she's up to at night is hardly going to be within the realm of a business investigation."

McGovern shrugged, "It's all I could devise for why you'll be around my house and business so much."

Chris refrained from a comment about leaving the devising to those paid for it and merely nodded. "I'm sorry I was out of the office when you stopped by. My assistant filled me in on the basics, but I would rather hear it all from you. If we could talk?"

"Certainly. Sable won't mind my use of his office, we can talk there."

Nodding, Chris motioned for McGovern to lead the way. They were nearly out of the overcrowded room when they were intercepted by the host and guest of honor.

"McGovern, my friend. I've been trying to get to you all night. You've been so popular, I'm starting to get jealous." Sable Brennus winked, storm-cloud eyes bright with amusement. His thick, dark curls had been rigorously tamed to lay neatly around his head, softening the hard lines of his sternly handsome features. He quirked a fine black brow at the man beside McGovern. "Mr. White, always a pleasure to see you."

"I'm sure," Chris responded. "If you'll pardon us, Mr. Brennus, Mr. McGovern and I had something we needed to discuss."

"Of course, of course. I did not mean to keep you from business. But George, do not try to leave without coming to speak with me. If I'm abandoned to the women all night long, I will hold you responsible for the wretchedness of my birthday party."

McGovern laughed. "I'll be back shortly, Sable. You can last a few minutes more, can't you?"

"A few - but no more than that."

"Understood," McGovern said with another laugh, clapping Brennus on the shoulder as he guided Chris from the room.

In Brennus' study, Chris moved to take the leather seat behind the desk, motioning McGovern to take the seat on the opposite side of the desk. He leaned back, folding one leg neatly across the knee of the other and steepled his fingers. "Start at the beginning and tell me everything. I cannot emphasize the importance of that enough. What may seem trifling to you could be of crucial importance to me. Leave no detail out. Begin, please."

~~*~*

"I see you managed to survive the ordeal, fearless leader."

Chris didn't deign to look at Douglas. "Do you want your wings clipped, smart ass?"

"Not particularly, no."

"Then cease with the smart ass and start with the helpful."

"Somebody's snippy tonight. Miffed you're not getting any?"

"Miffed because it looks like I get to shadow the broad all night instead of going to bed early and sleeping in for once." Chris gave him a look. "Last warning."

"Things are getting weird. It's like everyone's totally oblivious to her strange behavior. Only her dad has seemed to notice - and he's only noticed that she leaves at midnight. I even asked about her not being around her usual hangouts and they came up with perfectly normal, acceptable reasons. It's like her dad's a nutcase."

Chris sighed. "A parent sensitive to workings against his child." He rubbed his chin, leaning on the balcony railing and staring down at the party that was still going strong after four hours.

"Not terribly sensitive, if all he notices is that she keeps weird hours suddenly."

"Yeah, well. If he knew more then our job would actually be easy and heaven and hell forbid that actually happen."

Douglas gave him a look, resurrecting an old argument. "If you hate the job so much, why not quit?"

"One, he'd be too smug to live with. Two - I love this job." Chris winked. "I just like bitching about it more. Did you learn anything about her date? I don't recognize him."

"There's no reason you should - he's a guest in the hotel, a visiting businessman from Germany. He and Phillipa met a couple days of go and they say the Devil's Consort is utterly enamored of her latest toy."

"Interesting. That's probably relevant, but it doesn't help me at the moment. Now let's get a move on. You're going to follow her and lead me to where she's disappearing at night."

"Why do I do all the hard work?"

"Because I'm the boss and you're the lackey."

Douglas muttered something beneath his breath.

"What was that?" Chris narrowed his eyes.

"I said yes sir, right away sir." Doug smiled, the picture of obedience, and led the way from the ballroom.

A man dressed in the elaborate burgundy and gold uniform of the hotel stopped them at the doors. "Mr. White, I was told to give this to you." The man bowed and departed without another word.

Chris muttered a few choice words and ripped open the heavy, cream-colored envelope. Tilting it, he tipped out what turned out to be an earring to match the one he was already wearing. "Bastard."

Douglas peered around Chris, pushing up his glasses as he looked at the earring. "Oh, neat. Someone's getting impatient with your sleuthing."

"Shut it." Chris warned, stuffing the earring into a pocket. "Let's hurry up and get this over with."

Snickering softly, Douglas nodded and they continued on their way outside. "So you just want me to follow? When should I contact you?"

Chris grimaced. "Wait for me to contact you - unless it's too dangerous and then warn me before it gets to that point."

"You don't think they'll sense me? Once we're away from the crowds and stuff?"

"Not unless you're getting fat and lazy. Unless it's something of a higher caliber than I'm thinking - and I'm thinking bored children playing games they ought not be playing - then they wouldn't notice you if you started chanting benedictions."

"And if there is something stronger than that involved?"

Chris rubbed his chin, thinking. "Follow anyway. If you get into trouble, you know how to reach me."

Douglas grumbled. "I had better get a bonus for this."

"Like you don't have full access to the stupid bank accounts already. Give yourself whatever bonus you want. Within reason."

"Right!" Douglas suddenly looked much more enthusiastic. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to go have a look at the house - and her bedroom." Chris held up a key ring. "Daddy trusts me way too much, I think."

"I think perhaps you came highly recommended."

"Shut it," Chris said in warning.

"I'm gone." Douglas sauntered away into the parking lot, headed for Phillipa's car.

Chris waited until Douglas vanished into the vehicle before turning to head for his own car, a plain black SUV that he stubbornly refused to get rid of despite repeated urgings to do just that. Inside the car, he fumbled around to change out of his monkey suit and into jeans, a blue t-shirt and the soft, worn brown leather jacket he clung to more relentlessly than the SUV. He glared at the earring given to him by the hotel employee. "Don't need your help," he muttered, but shoved the earring into a jean pocket anyway.

The house was dark when he reached it, and a brief examination showed only a couple of guards. The McGovern estate relied mostly upon electronic security.

Which meant this would be a breeze. Chris parked a couple blocks away and walked up to the house. Still a few yards from it, he vanished.

Intangible he passed through the walls and across the lawn. He walked easily through the door and into what turned out to be a kitchen. Continuing on, he made straight for where McGovern had said his daughter's bedroom would be. That was the best place to start - everyone kept their secrets in their sanctuary.

The room looked as it should for a twenty-something rich girl with too much money and leisure. Pastel silk, lace, and so much clothing he was hard-pressed to determine the color of the carpet. He didn't bother to turn a light on. Returning to tangible, he set quietly to work picking through the messy room for things that didn't belong.

And came up empty. Chris glowered at the room, supremely displeased. This was not how he'd wanted to spend his evening. It wasn't how he was supposed to be spending tonight. Losing all patience, he dug out the earring he hadn't really wanted. Fastening it to his left ear, he then lifted his hand to sketch a symbol in the air. It shimmered silver, then glowed bright red and vanished. Around him, the entirety of the room began to take on a faint red glow.

"Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!" Chris continued to curse as he left the house, not bothering to go back the way he'd come but simply passing through the wall and lowering himself to the ground below. Still intangible, he made for his car.

Once solidified and in the car, he touched the diamond earring in his right ear. "Douglas!"

At first there was no response, and Chris began to worry despite himself. "Douglas!"

"Sorry, sorry. Wasn't exactly able to reply, Chris. You may want to hurry up and get out here. There's some weird shit going down. Reminds me a lot of when you--"

"Why don't you tell me where you are? That'd help a lot."

"Park. Couple miles east of the lake campground. You can't miss it - chicks dancing around in a demon fire."

"Stay safe, Douglas. Run if you have to."

"No worries there. Should you call for help?"

"No!" Chris shouted. "I don't need his goddamn help."

"Yeah, yeah. See you in a few."

Chris muttered and grouched to himself as he drove to the park, words growing more colorful as he parked and began walking from the campground in the direction Douglas had given him. He sensed it before he saw it.

For the rest of his life - and probably beyond - he would always be sensitive to the presence of demon fire.

He slowed down as the feeling grew stronger, going partially invisible to decrease his chances of being seen without using more of his energy than he had to, and approached the clearing with caution.

"Not impressed," he muttered softly, watching the spectacle in the clearing. "Not impressed at all."

"Yeah, these young ones have no class at all. Nothing like when you danced. I didn't even recognize it for what it was at first."

Chris turned to glare at the figure that dropped down soundlessly beside him. Though how he managed the feat, Chris didn't know. It wasn't as though Douglas in his true form was a creature typically given to silence. "I gather you know who the demon is now?"

"Yeah. It was so obvious once I got here, I had to agree with you that this is scarcely worth our time." Douglas shifted on his feet, impatient. His normally bright, glowing eyes had been muted to a dim green and pale gold.

Smiling faintly, Chris examined his assistant. When he'd first found him, Douglas had been nothing but skin and bones and despair. Now the dark gray flesh was filled out with trim muscle, the neatly folded leathery wings now fully functional. And his horns were growing back; though at present they were little more than short, small pointed knobs, in a few more years they would be the proper horns of a mature imp. His heavy tail swished the air as he continued to shift impatiently from foot to foot. "Let me crash the party. You cover, because I have no doubt that someone is going to try something stupid and I've already wasted enough time on this stupid case. I'm so charging him triple for this idiocy."

"Like you need the money."

"That's not the point."

"Of course not."

Chris ignored the tolerant look he knew Douglas was giving him. "Cover me, smart ass."

"I will."

Nodding, Chris stepped from the cover of the forest and approached the idiocy going on in the clearing. He felt the wards set up around the perimeter and bypassed them easily, the earring in left ear shimmering.

Idiocy was really the only word for it. But no - debacle worked as well.

Seven figures occupied the center of the clearing. Five stood at what were the points of a star - a pentacle. Though Chris had no doubt these yahoos liked to call it a pentagram or some such nonsense.

This particular pentacle was probably just dug straight into the earth, then filled with demon fire. All around them the demon fire - this particular fire bright scarlet - burned in a high circle. In the very center of the pentacle two people writhed in what Chris was certain they considered dancing.

Atrocity was more like it, but kids always did what they wanted. He snorted softly at himself, acting like an old man when he was only thirty-one. Forcing his mind to the matters at hand, he started clapping loudly to get their attention.

Seven startled faces turned to look at him, the dancing figures none too pleased. Phillipa frowned, clinging to her date. "What are you doing here?" Her voice, when she spoke, was as hard as ice, completely unlike the honeyed, distracted voice she'd used at the party.

Chris sighed. "Let me guess - this group got into things they shouldn't, you possessed Phillipa and now you're getting too strong to stay in the mortal world undetected."

The woman frowned and said nothing, though her eyes had turned the same scarlet as the fire that burned all around them.

Stuffing his hands in the pockets of his jacket, Chris stepped closer. "Getting too strong and so you thought you'd take a consort. I thought demons were supposed to be smarter about this sort of thing. Or maybe I'm just lucky and know the few smart demons that exist."

The demon narrowed her eyes, releasing the man she'd been clinging to and faced Chris fully. "Who are you?"

"Tsk, ts, honey. If you live in this city, by now you should have heard of me. The disrespectful call me a spook detective. I prefer paranormal investigator. Phil's dad asked me to check out what his little girl was up to at night. You're really sloppy - then again you are young and stupid. Next time you try something like this, keep in mind that most parents are sensitive

when it comes to their children. You should've used a stronger spell than what you're using on them." he motioned the five women standing blankly at the points of the pentacle, distantly recognizing Elise. "And really - you're not strong enough to take a consort. You should've just stuck with spells for a few centuries."

The demon stepped out of the very center of the pentacle, though she didn't leave the circle of fire altogether. "How would you know?"

"It doesn't take a genius, sweetheart." Chris yawned. "First and foremost, only demon lords are strong enough to warrant and take consorts. If you were that powerful, you wouldn't have to hide in a forest and use humans as batteries for the spell. Second, taking a consort requires a lot more than lust and desperation. Given that neither you nor the esteemed Phillipa seem to understand anything beyond that, I won't waste my time explaining why you're doomed to fail. Last but not least - a consort should not be someone as lazy and spoiled as William Claus. There are responsibilities that come with the position - it isn't one that should be given lightly. And it looks like your toy of choice isn't even a willing participant." William's eyes were indeed blank, the man was as unmoving as the five women now that the ceremony had stopped. "Very, very stupid on your part."

Breaking from the circle, the demon launched herself at Chris in a blind rage. He laughed softly as she passed right through him, spinning around to watch as she picked herself up off the ground. "Give it up, baby cakes. You can't touch me."

"What the hell?"

Chris laughed. "Douglas!"

The imp came from above, having hidden up in the trees while Chris talked. In no time at all he had the demon pinned, grinning. "This really isn't much of a demon."

Chris crouched on the balls of his feet, arms propped on his knees. In the light of the demon fire, the diamond on his ring seemed to almost glow silver. He ignored the way the demon's eyes widened, as she caught sight of it. "Nah. She can't be more than a few decades old - otherwise my little trick wouldn't have proved troublesome for her. And look how easily she went down before an immature imp?"

Douglas grumbled at being called immature but did not argue. "So what now?"

"Tie her up or something and then take her back to the office. We'll exorcise the demon in the morning. I'll disperse the rest of this idiocy."

"Sure thing."

"Good. Then I'll see you tomorrow at about nine - make that ten."

Douglas smirked. "Sure thing."

Ignoring the smirk, Chris turned on his heel to take care of the mess created by an impatient, panicky demon. "Children..."

It was hours before he was finally able to return to his apartment. A glance at his watch only depressed him further. Three in the morning. This was so entirely not where he was supposed to be at three in the morning. He combed a hand through his hair, staring miserably into the full-length mirror on his closet door.

The mirror shimmered, rippled, and Chris stared at it a moment before smiling faintly - and stepping through it.

A minute later he stepped out of a larger mirror, into a room that was so simply done it could only be obscenely expensive. Beyond the wide expanse of floor-to-ceiling windows opposite him was a view of the city he called his own. There were so many lights it was hard to believe most of the city slept.

To his right was a massive bed, raised up on a dais. He'd tripped on the steps leading up to it more than once - luckily the bed made for a soft landing.

A fireplace was the focus of the opposite side of the room, casting light on the black leather couches and chair clustered around it. And just out of the light, leaning against the back of the couch, was a man still dressed in the tuxedo he'd been wearing earlier that night. His storm cloud eyes glowed pale silver in the fire-lit room as he stood and approached Chris. In his impatience he had disheveled his hair, causing the neatly arranged curls to cascade wildly around his head and in his face. "Christian," he said by way of greeting, before pulling Chris close and kissing him like a starving man.

Chris didn't protest, merely kissed him back like his life depended on it, tasting wine and something indefinable that always made him think of magic. When the kiss ended, he tilted his head back to give access to the warm mouth that nipped and

licked at his throat. "Sable..."

"I know you don't like parties, beloved, but this was a little much." Rising to his full height - a good four inches taller than Chris - Sable sighed. "I was hoping the earring would speed things along." He went back to nibbling at Chris' throat.

"I've told you before not to interfere with my cases," Chris said irritably, not mentioning the fact that the earring had cut his work in half - it would have taken him a lot longer to figure out what the demon possessing Phillipa was up to without it.

Sable shrugged. "I was rather impatient for you to finish."

"I'm sorry," Chris said, irritation fading beneath his guilt. "I can't exactly say no to someone who needs my help. And did you really want another demon and consort floating around your territory?"

Sable laughed, the sound vibrating in his chest. "They thought they could reside in my territory? How amusing. Children are so foolish. You should have told me, beautiful, I would have dealt with the matter and we could have celebrated my birthday properly."

"You're over five hundred, Sable." Christian shook his head in exasperation. "One would think you'd be bored with birthdays by now."

Sable smiled softly, the expression oddly gentle for a demon known to be anything but. "They were boring - until I found a consort to celebrate them with."

Christian's gaze softened and he leaned up to wrap his arms around Sable's neck, silently begging for a kiss that Sable gladly gave. "I'm sorry."

"As you should be," Sable said with a teasing grin. "But I'll forgive you if you'll come to bed and make it up to me."

Rolling his eyes, Christian never the less smiled and allowed Sable to take him to their bed. "I stopped them in the middle of the dance, Sable. It was atrocious - nothing like ours."

Sable's eyes faded to a soft, shimmering gray as he recalled their dance in silver demon fire. "We shall have to dance again, sometime. We've not done it for too long."

"Tomorrow," Chris said, and drew Sable back to the matter at hand.

Case #131: Devoured

The apartment was on what the norms considered the poor side of town. A good five blocks of city that for all intents and purposes was going, as more than a few cops had said on their routes, 'to hell in a hand basket.'

It was more accurate to say that its occupants had *left* hell, but no one living there ever saw fit to correct the cops.

The shoddy-looking neighborhood kept most of the humans out, and that kept both the humans and the 'night creatures' happy.

The apartment in question was on the very outskirts of the neighborhood, stopping just a block shy of the river. The neighborhood was often the victim of flooding during the wetter seasons - if the rain didn't stop in another day or so there would be plenty of flooding - but again that meant humans were in no hurry to visit.

Chris' office and apartment were at the opposite end of the neighborhood, right at the edge where poor began to meet rich. But most of his time was spent further in; he knew the streets better than he knew his house sometimes.

"You're Mr. Chesnee?" he asked as he stepped inside, water dripping from his hair and beat up brown leather jacket. He slicked his bright blonde hair back from his eyes, and motioned for Douglas - even more wet than he was - to get his notebook out.

The imp complied, puling out a notebook that was only slightly damp around the edges.

"You're White? Shall I take your coats? Would you like something to drink?"

Chris shook his head. "Just the facts, Mr. Chesnee. If a murder is involved, time is of the essence."

The man bobbed his head up and down, twisting his hand nervously as he led them out of the hallway and into the living room. "Call me Chez, please."

While from the outside everything looked shabby and rundown, the inside was a display of wealth and comfort that never failed to amuse Chris.

Because night creatures usually did very, very well when they played at being humans. Mostly because even Imps lived for many centuries and more than a few creatures were immortal. So outside was nothing but rot and decay, but inside there was silk and velvet, Turkish rugs and butter-soft leather.

Chris remained standing. He cast his eyes about the room, making note of the nervous, unhappy occupants. An older woman with gray hair and pea-green eyes, small round glasses perched on her beak-like nose - a goblin. Beside her on the couch, a young man with half a dozen earrings and an ash-blonde goatee, hair sprayed into stiff spikes, dressed in leather and buckles and mesh - a free vampire. Probably unregistered - he'd have to check that later. Despite the roughness of his appearance, the vampire was still dangerously attractive - but he would be a poor vampire if he wasn't.

Two beautiful young women, twins, with white-blonde hair and clear green eyes, sat in the leather chair opposite the couch. Rather, one sat in the chair and the other sat on an armrest. They were holding hands and looking somber, but upon seeing Chris they brightened considerably. "Chris!" The one on the armrest spoke first.

Her twin spoke next. "We didn't know he called you."

"Well now we feel better."

Chris' lips twitched. "Splish. Splash. How are you?"

"We've been better."

The man who had called Chris looked between the detective and the twins. "You know the river nymphs?"

"Yes," Chris nodded. "They helped me find a necklace, once." He shook his head. "Back to business. You said the owner was murdered in a locked room. Start from the beginning and tell me everything. And I do mean *everything*."

The man nodded, running a hand through his thin white hair. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed at his small, flat nose - problems or a nervous gesture, it was hard to tell. But he was a brownie; the murder of the 'family' he'd latched onto was, to say the least, upsetting. "Gent invited over a few of his friends," he motioned to the others in the room as he spoke. "To see some new books he'd purchased. They arrived, one by one, and by three o'clock everyone was here and waiting. Gent had arranged the get together for three, but it's not unusual for him to occasionally run late when he has no books. We didn't suspect anything until it got to be four o'clock. When we finally forced the door open he was gone. Most likely dead, given what's left..."

Splish, the twin sitting in the chair, spoke up. "He was a collector, Chris. Always collecting this or that book on his favorite subject of the week."

"I see," Chris said thoughtfully. Beside him, Doug's pen flew over his notebook as he made notes on what was said, who said, where they sat and whatever other details he could fit on the pages of his small notebook. "And what species was Gent?"

There was a slight pause, then Chez gave a slight cough. "He was human."

"What?" Chris asked, and even Doug's furious writing stuttered to a halt. "He was *human*? Living here? You're his friends?"

The goblin woman pursed her lips in disapproval. "And what about you, Mr. Detective?" "You're nothing more than human. Why do you consider it strange that we would be friends with a normal?"

"I don't consider it strange," Chris said. He shot his assistant a warning look and Douglas ceased laughing. "What concerns me is his death. Murdered humans means normals have to get involved in it."

"Not with Gent. He's been out of the normal loop for ages."

"Was he a witch? An alchemist?"

Chez shook his head. "Just a book collector. And he liked us more than humans. There was nothing else special about him."

"Hmm Chris exchanged a look with Douglas, then turned back to the witnesses. "So. He was locked in his study, and an hour after you had all assembled someone finally decided it was weird he was standing all of you up to hole himself up in a locked study?"

Splash shrugged. "It's not too unusual for him, especially with something like this. He'd just acquired some new books and wanted to show them off. But before he ever shows anyone anything, he examines and catalogues everything."

"That requires locking the door?" Chris asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes," Chez said. "Those books are worth several million dollars, monetarily. But their real worth is much, much greater. Alchemical manuals, spell books, grimoires - all of them rare, hard to find, a few almost legendary. You can imagine the value."

Chris winced.

"Exactly," Chez said. "So he disguised the books and catalogued them according to his own special system. So trying to find the book you want is impossible except for Gent."

"What a headache." Chris sighed. "So after you five sat here for an hour, it finally occurred to you to open the door?"

"Yes."

"All right. I would like it if you all remained here, for further questioning." Chris motioned for Douglas to follow him. "Come on, Doug."

Still clutching his notebook, Doug followed quietly behind Chris. He ignored the curious looks of the other creatures in the room, especially the curled lip of the goblin woman on the couch.

Inside the book room, Chris closed the door. "Early thoughts?"

Douglas shrugged. "It's possible someone out there is responsible, but I doubt it. Nymphs and vampires have no need of such things, and it doesn't seem like a goblin's style." He frowned, thinking. "Assuming it was somehow an outside job - why kill him? It would be easier to wait until he was asleep or out of the apartment."

Chris was examining the perimeter of the room. "It doesn't make sense, that's for certain. It's also peculiar that any one of them could have used magical means to check on him - but they didn't. They forced the door open manually. I wonder why? Remind me to ask them."

Douglas pulled out his notebook again and then tucked it away as they began to explore the small room in earnest, his mismatched eyes intent on picking out anything strange or out of place.

It was probably intended to be a bedroom, but the deceased Gent had crammed it full of floor-to-ceiling bookcases, all but one neatly filled with books of various color, shape, size and condition. Chris laughed softly as he read the visible title on one. "I wonder which book he decided to disguise as *Call of the Wild*. A bestiary, you think?"

"Or a practical guide to something," Douglas said with a laugh. "Maybe something to do with werewolves."

"Hmm hope he's more creative than that." Chris looked around the room, rubbing his chin in thought. "See anything?"

"No, actually. Except, you know, for the blood and the finger."

Chris nodded, finally taking a longer look at the old leather chair behind the desk set in the middle of the room. "If I didn't now any better, I would say someone ate him."

"The goblin?" Douglas muttered, shoving at his glasses.

Chris smiled faintly. "Nah. A goblin would make a huge mess, but it would never leave a piece of dinner behind. I suppose I should be wondering where she gets her meals."

"Better not to ask, for now," Doug said regretfully. "Sides, as much as I hate to say it, Chris - she doesn't look the type to eat a friend."

"Well, we've more or less established that none of them killed him. As per usual with a locked room, it's always something so painfully obvious you don't see it."

Doug rolled his eyes. "Like what? A book?"

"Not that obvious," Chris said with a snort. He gingerly pushed the chair aside to examine the papers and miscellany scattered across the desk. Set just off the center of the desktop was a ledger full of nonsensical writing - no doubt the catalogue. "I'm confused."

"It took you this long to think there was something weird going on?"

"Shut it," Chris replied without heat. He picked up the ledger and flipped idly through it as he spoke. "But think about it. A perfectly normal human - as normal as they get anyway - collects magic books but clearly has no interest in *practicing* magic. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say he also forbids its usage in his house. Even his brownie didn't seem inclined toward using magic to maintain the house - this place has the smell of cleaners and air freshener about it. A good brownie doesn't need such things."

Douglas nodded. "And it's obvious magic had something to do with his death."

"Confusing, to say the least." Giving up on the incomprehensible ledger, he set it down exactly as he'd found it and picked up a smaller, leather bound volume. Flipping it open revealed it was an appointment book. "Meticulous in all things. This guy was rather busy for a stuffy old collector." Thoughtfully Chris flipped back to examine everything Gent had done starting a month ago. He paused when he came to the day before, looking up at Douglas. "'Shipment due,' this says. 'Four o'clock.'"

"Suppose that's the shipment?" Douglas nodded toward a stack of two small boxes on the side of the desk nearest him.

Chris stepped around the desk to examine them for himself. "Probably." He looked at the appointment book again and turned a page until he was at the 'notes' section for that month. "Yeah, here it is a second. This says *three* boxes due at four o'clock and he made an addendum that all went well, beyond their arriving an hour late.

"So where's the third box?"

"Exactly." Chris flipped back to the calendar page and looked at the notes for that day.

"Showing for friends: SS, VT, RG, SB." Chris' idle curiosity narrowed to focus on a single point. "Why are there five people listed?"

Douglas shrugged. "Maybe one couldn't show?"

"Let's go find out." Keeping the appointment book, Chris stalked back into the living room.

The assembled night creatures sat quietly, murmuring in low voices as though anything truly audible would offend or incriminate. It would have been eerie, to see them so stone-faced and apparently uncaring, except that Chris was long used to the stoic way night creatures dealt with such things. Sobbing and wailing and crying would have been offensive, tacky.

It showed how fond they were of a simple human, that they treated his death with such dignity. "Which one of you is VT?"

The goblin woman looked up from the cup of tea in her long, spidery hands. "I am. Vena Tetler."

Chris nodded. "RG?"

"Me," said the vampire. "Ron."

Chris eyed the twins. "I'm going to hazard you two are 'SS'."

The twins nodded.

"All right. Then who is 'SB' and why is he not here?"

His brows went up when everyone in the room jumped. Vena shook her head slowly back and forth. "We didn't know he was coming. He's usually too busy."

"This says he was expected."

"Then he may have come and gone before the rest of us."

Chris looked. "You would know, brownie. Did he drop by?"

Chez shrugged. "Mr. B comes and goes as he pleases. Sometimes I know it, sometimes I don't."

"What did I say before?" Chris snapped, annoyed. "I told you to *tell me everything*. Everything is *not* the same as 'almost everything.' It is slightly more than very important to tell me that Gent was known to have a visitor who came and went as he pleased, sometimes observed, sometimes not. Would anyone like to tell me why this B is allowed such free reign when it's obvious to me you're not allowed to use magic on the premises? And while you're explaining things to me, explain that."

The twins looked contrite. Splish spoke up first. "We're not really supposed to talk about him. He's high class. You never see his sort on this side of town - he lives in the city proper."

Splash nodded and picked up where her sister stopped. "He's not really a friend of Gent's. More, he gets - got - Gent to find things for him. Sometimes when Gent obtained a particular book, he'd purchase it. That's how Gent could afford all this." She waved her hand around the lavish room. "And more books."

Doug interrupted. "Can I ask why a human so avidly collected magic books when he had no interest in practicing the arts?"

Chez gave a long, tired sigh. "His wife was a witch. She was actually the one who started collecting grimoires, but she died when a spell went wrong one night. After that, Gent banned magic but started collecting the books."

"I see," Chris said quietly. "Where can I find this Mr. B? A full name would be helpful as well."

Ron started laughing. "Sure man - only don't let him kill us, yeah? We're not really supposed to know he comes by."

"I'll do my best," Chris said, growing annoyed. "Now who is Mr. B and where can I find him?"

Chez sighed. "His name is Sable Brennus - and I'm sure that's all you need to find him."

Chris swore.

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"So how exactly does one ask a demon if he committed murder?" Douglas asked as they stood just outside the Sunrise, the most impressive of four luxury hotels owned by Sable Brennus. "Well, a particular murder."

Chris muttered a few curses as they stepped under the overhang and shook out his umbrella, which really hadn't succeeded in keeping him from a soaking - there was simply too much rain. "From a distance?" he asked sourly. "How do I get caught up in these things?"

Douglas looked around the lobby as they entered, eyes wide behind his glasses as he took in the large fountain at the center, the profusion of smaller fountains and lush plants, the glittering guests and sharp-looking employees. "Demons don't usually acquire *this* much affluence. And is all of the staff night creatures?"

"Seeing as at least half the guests are night dwellers, it only makes sense. And no, normal demons aren't usually quite this affluent." Chris' demeanor soured further. "Brennus, however, is a demon *lord*. The city and land for several miles around is his territory. It's bordered on three sides - by another demon to the west and south, a werewolf pack to the north and a vampire clan to the east."

"Hmm Douglas shifted restlessly. If he'd been in his true form, his wings would have flapped agitatedly on his back. "So this is probably a bad idea?"

Chris snorted. "To say the least. But he fits the murder, assuming we can deduce a motive. If he's half so old as I think he is, then he's looking for a cover, which would explain his interest in the books Gent collected."

"A cover?" Doug's brows furrowed in confusion. "Oh. You mean a consort." He blinked. "I didn't even think about that."

"He's powerful, wealthy, reclusive and buys obscure magic books from a human," Chris said dryly. "I'm going to hazard he's growing desperate for stalling mechanisms before staying here without a consort becomes impossible." He ran his fingers through his wet, messy hair. "Now let's quit chatting and stalling and get this over with."

But inside he slowed to a halt. "Stay down here, Doug. It's going to take more than smiles and charm to get in to see him and I don't want both of us getting flayed alive by an annoyed demon."

"And how am I supposed to know if things go well or not?"

"If all goes well, I'll come downstairs healthy and alive." Chris rolled his eyes, lips twisting in a reluctant smile. "If they don't go well, I'll have more in common with my father than ever."

Doug smothered a laugh. "Gotcha, boss. Until then?"

"Poke around, see if there aren't any interesting rumors about our friend Brennus."

"Will do."

Nodding, more to himself than Doug, Chris turned on his heel and climbed the stairs from the lobby to the second floor, turning down hallways until he found an empty one.

And immediately dropped completely out of sight. Invisible, intangible, he backtracked to the elevators and rode up as far as he could. On the forty-fifth floor, he switched to the stairs, passing through the door and climbing easily until they stopped at the fiftieth floor.

Passing through, he found himself in a hallway far more subdued than the lavish red and gold of downstairs. Here everything was blue and silver-gray, with dark plants and near-black wood for accents. Soft lights lit the hallway in which he stood, and Chris felt like he was in the middle of the rain clouds still soaking the city outside. From the double doors behind him he could just barely hear a woman talking rapidly on the phone - probably a secretary or something, as this had the feel of an office.

Another set of dark double doors was before him, bare of even so much as a nameplate - or doorknobs.

Good thing he didn't need them.

Chris passed through the doors with ease, faintly feeling the tingling of wards that could not affect something that was not really there.

His limited abilities weren't good for much, but they were good for enough.

Rain pounded against the wide expanse of windows that looked down over the city below, a steady drumming that should have been soothing but instead only echoed the pounding of Chris' heart.

He was a simple detective; in the five years since he'd turned solo his biggest case involved a pup from a werewolf pack - and that had been a simple matter of finding something stolen. His encounters with demons had been limited to passing them in the street. Demons, werewolves and most vampires simply didn't mingle with lesser night creatures.

It wasn't often someone dared accuse a demon of murder, except in jest. Demons could do whatever the hell they wanted. Few would dare to try, and less than that would succeed.

There was clearly someone in the large chair behind the massive desk straight ahead, but he was turned away, watching the rain-drenched city.

But as Chris stepped closer, the chair spun around. "Someone is here."

And Chris was so shaken by that voice, so startled by what he saw, that he forgot to hold his ghostly form.

The demons he'd glimpsed from time to time had never caught his eye. They'd been handsome, interesting, but never half so *beautiful* as the one sitting so calmly behind a desk. And it shouldn't surprise him, because if vampires used beauty to catch prey then why not demons? But no vampire - and those he saw plenty of - had ever been so activating. Stern looking, a solemn sort of beauty seen only in paintings. And his eyes echoed the clouds outside, a gray that was a mix of dark and light, framed by thick, black curls. And Chris distantly recalled his name was Sable, and wondered if his hair felt as soft as that.

Chris' mother loved concerts, loved to sing. All her chants and prayers were sung as clear and pure as a bell, and thanks to her obsession with song Chris had heard more famous singers by the time he was thirteen than most people saw in a lifetime. But no voice ever affected him the way this one did. Three simple words and his heart pounded faster than ever, in his throat, and he *ached* to hear it again.

Brennus obliged, curiosity coloring the rough velvet timbre of his voice. "And who might you be, beautiful? An early dinner?" Slowly he rose to his feet, walking around the desk and toward Chris.

The word dinner restored some of Chris' senses, and he fought the urge to take several steps back as he forced his mind to the case. "I've come about Gent."

"Gent?" Brennus paused. "Why are you here about Gent?"

Chris began to feel more stable as his job reasserted itself in his mind, though the demon's voice took effort to ignore. "Someone or something ate him. My investigations have led me to believe *you* were the last person to see him."

Brennus frowned. "I was the last to see him. Or at least what was left of him. What are you, some sort of detective?"

"Yes. Chez, Gent's servant, asked me to investigate his death."

Brennus laughed, and Chris fought the urge to shiver. He took a step back as Brennus reached him. "So you've come here to accuse me of his murder?"

"Yes."

"That's a pity."

Chris realized the door was in his way when he hit it and stifled a curse. He narrowed his eyes up at the demon looming over him. This wasn't going exactly as he'd planned. "Do you have an alibi? A good excuse? You said he was dead when you saw him - any idea what happened?"

"Of course I know what happened. I warned him to be careful, but humans will do as they please."

Losing patience, seriously annoyed, yes annoyed, with the demon's proximity, Chris reached out to shove him away—

--And instead found himself even more thoroughly pressed back against the door. "Let me go."

"You invaded my office, accused me of murder and now just tried to assault me--"

Chris snorted.

"--And you think I should let you go?" Brennus laughed, eyes turning dark, heated, when Chris failed to repress a shiver. "Sorry, beautiful. You wandered in here - accept the consequences."

Chris fought to ignore him. "How did Gent die? What did you do?"

"Me? I did nothing except take the book away. Feed it too many times and bad, bad things begin to happen."

"Feed Chris blinked. "What are you talking about? Books don't eat!"

"Now, now, beautiful. Only so many questions are free and you've reached your limit."

Chris muttered a curse about losing his wits and dropped to his intangible form.

--Then realized it wasn't working. "Shit!"

Brennus laughed again, hand tightening on Chris' wrists where he had them pressed up against the door. "Fascinating. How is it you're able to do that? Only ghosts are capable of such things."

"None of your business," Chris snapped. "How is it you're able to hold me anyway?"

"One does not live to be almost five hundred without picking up a few tricks, beautiful"

"Stop calling me that!"

Chuckling, Brennus ducked his head to chuckle in Chris' ear. "Why? Gold hair, eyes like an angry sea, skin damp with rain ou are quite, quite lovely." His tongue flicked out to lap at Chris' still-drying skin.

"Let me go!"

"For a price, beautiful. And if you pay generously enough, perhaps I'll tell you what happened to Gent as well."

Chris said nothing, merely jerked his head away from the teeth at his ear, shivering and hating himself for it. "Let me go," he repeated mutinously.

"Never," Brennus replied, and then he was kissing him and Chris wished suddenly that he'd ignored the damn phone just like he'd wanted and not let Douglas go ahead and answer it.

Because Brennus' lips were soft and his mouth hot, flavored with fine whiskey and something else, tangy and sharp, and

Chris thought dizzily that if magic had a flavor that would be it. And then he realized he was free, or maybe caught more than ever, because Brennus' hair was as soft as his namesake implied and the hands stroking him felt more right and welcome than he was comfortable admitting.

He broke away; desperate for air and a clear head - though looking up into storm-cloud eyes he thought perhaps the latter was a thing of the past. But his wits gathered enough that he was able to go intangible and slip away, though stupidly he went forward rather than back, meaning he had nowhere but deeper into the room to go.

Brennus licked his lips. "I had no idea spook detectives were among the highly edible."

Chris got pissed. "I am *not* a spook detective; why the *hell* does everyone call me that? Damnation, all I wanted to do was determine a cause of murder. Stay over there so I can think."

Brennus approached. "Gent was eaten by a book. A very hungry, very dangerous book that I told him not to mess with. He ignored me and obtained it anyway. I asked him to wait until I arrived to examine it but ..." He shrugged. "Humans will do as they please."

Chris attempted to head toward the doors again, but realized he was being herded toward the eastern-most wall. "What manner of book eats people?"

"A very hungry one. And I shouldn't get too close to those bookcases, beautiful, else you'll get nipped."

Chris glowered. "No, that's if I get too close to *you*."

Brennus threw his head back and laughed. "Yes, but I won't take a fatal bite. That book will. It can only be opened by demons, as it was a very angry, very hungry demon from which the book was made. It devours whoever else tries to touch it."

Chris stayed away from the bookcases, still trying to make for the door. "Fine. Case closed. Thank you for your time, have a nice day." He dropped to invisibility and barely resisted the urge to run.

Brennus caught him anyway, and Chris resentfully resumed his normal form. "No fair being able to do that."

For answer, Brennus simply kissed him dizzy again, hard and deep, bruising his lips. Chris was torn between wanting it to stop and wanting it to continue.

"Give me a name, beautiful," Brennus murmured. "And I'll let you go for a little while."

"You'll let me go name or no name," Chris protested, but it was a weak one.

Brennus laughed, fingers seeking and finding the flesh beneath Chris' damp clothes. "So are you saying you want to stay?"

"Damn it," Chris managed, twisting away - though only because Sable let him. "Christian," he bit out. "Christian White."

Brennus reached out and gripped his chin, dragging him close for one more kiss. "A pleasure to meet you, Christian." He let Chris go. "You may call me Sable."

Chris said nothing, merely turned and fled. Brennus' voice caught him at the door. "I'm letting you go for now, Christian. But the next time you enter my hotel, I plan to keep you."

Unable to form a reply, Chris dropped to invisibility and escaped.

Downstairs, he ignored Douglas' questions until they were nearly back to the apartment where Chez and the late Gent's friends waited. "So what happened, boss? Did you get an answer?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Chris said tightly. "Not until I reach the liquor cabinet back at the office."

Douglas' eyebrows hit his hairline at that. "Demon scare you that bad?"

"Something like that," Chris muttered.

Case #322: Family Matters

"For the love of all that is holy and unholy shut her the hell up."

Douglas cast his boss a withering glance. "Oh, yeah. And what would you like me to do after that? Bring harmony to the relationships between all normals and abnormals?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

Douglas threw his pewter paperweight at Chris' head.

Chris ducked, ignoring the dent it left in the wall behind him. It was already so dented one more wasn't going to make a difference. He slammed a fist down on his desk. "Enough! Stop talking!" He glared as the chattering stopped. "Good. Now stop breathing."

"You're always so mean to me," Phillipa pouted.

"Yes," Chris said pleasantly. "I keep hoping it will drive you away."

Phillipa waved his words away with a delicate flick of her manicured nails. "I'm not that easy to get rid of."

Chris bit back a reply, but only just.

"I'm made of stronger stuff, and I'll not give up until you give in to me."

She was hard to take seriously, not least of all because of the pink tank top, a skirt that looked like someone had spilled rainbow cake sprinkles across it and matching stilettos. Chris was willing to concede that at least she could walk in the damn shoes - but that didn't excuse the fact she was wearing them. And there was no excuse - or physical explanation - for the mix of curls, braids and twists in which her hair was piled atop her head. He glanced down at the report he was attempting to write for their last case, but Phillipa was as hard to ignore as she was to take seriously.

Valiantly Douglas stood to start filing away old reports and cost sheets, as the two of them struggled to ignore the mix of tirade and adoration that was rapidly become Phillipa's two o'clock speech.

"You really should put those flowers in water," she said by way of a finish, frowning in disapproval at the way Chris had left the bouquet of tiger lilies she'd brought him laying on the sofa that was straight across from Doug's desk. Chris' desk was between Doug's and the couch, directly opposite the main door. He wondered if he could clear the desk and shove her out before Phillipa caught on.

Probably not.

"Men. You think they'll live just because they belong to you?" Muttering her severe disapproval, Phillipa set about putting the tiger lilies she'd brought Chris in water, dumping out the gardenias she'd brought the week before. The vase, a heavy crystal piece, belonged to her. She'd brought it after she realized neither Chris nor his assistant had any intention of purchasing a vase in which to properly display her flowers. "Honestly, you don't just leave gifts lying about. Flowers should be nurtured, given lots of attention."

Chris' brows went up; the words were completely out of synch with the girl uttering them.]

"Much like a young woman."

His surprise vanished. "We've been over this before, Phil--"

"You even gave me a nickname! And not 'Philly' either." Phillipa wrinkled her nose. "That one makes me sound like a horse. I've told Daddy time and time again to stop calling me that, but does he ever listen?" She gave a long sigh, shaking her head as though she carried a heavy burden. "No. And so everyone thinks I'm a horse."

Chris smothered a laugh. "I seriously doubt anyone would mistake you for a horse, Phil."

"More like a pecking hen," Doug muttered, but only Chris could hear him.

Coughing, Chris looked pleadingly at Phillipa. "Please, Phil. Go home. We've got work to do and it's hard to do it if you're in here chatting and getting in our way."

"Then I won't get in your way," Phillipa said smoothly. She strode to Chris' desk and set the vase of flowers down, tweaking a few and then stepping back, pleased. "Would anyone like some coffee? Tea?"

Douglas looked at her, startled. "You know how to make coffee?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I order it from Perfect Perc."

"Do they deliver?"

"No."

Chris smiled and slammed a twenty down on the desk. "Then by all means go get us coffee - Doug prefers Thai, though. I'll take a cappuccino and get yourself whatever you like."

"All right!" Phil beamed, grabbed the money and vanished.

Silence fell, as they watched the door. Doug blinked. "That was awfully easy."

Chris frowned. "Yes, it was."

But before he even finished speaking, Phil had barged back into the office. "There! I sent William to get us coffee."

Chris banged his forehead against his desk for a good minute or two. Finally he sat up with a long sigh, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his aching head. "Phil, this is an office. We work for a living. Not all of us have your leisure time. If you're going to insist on pestering us to death every single day, you're going to have to learn the rules and abide by them. Is that understood?"

Phillipa blinked. Nodded. Waited for him to continue.

Warily, more than a little surprised - for the past three months she'd cheerfully ignored him whenever he tried to order her around - Chris continued. "The first rule is - no servants. We do our own work. If you want to get us coffee? Fine. From now on you get us coffee. When you visit? William stays at home."

Clearly the young woman wanted to argue but rather than immediately launching into the sort of obnoxious argument to which they'd grown accustomed, she chewed on her lip and thought. "What other rules?" she asked at last.

"Um Chris exchanged a startled glance with Doug, who held up his hands to signal Chris was on his own. "You can't just hang around and talk. If you're going to stay here, you have to help. Tidy up the office, answer the phone assist Doug with the filing. Things like that."

"You want me to work?" Phil asked, horrified.

"Yes."

"Any more rules?"

Chris nodded. "You do what I say. This isn't a safe job, Phil. We got lucky with the demon that possessed you. There are risks; a very good chance you'll get harassed or chased, bitten or a lot worse."

Phil's bitter laugh startled both men, and they exchanged another glance. "I've had worse done to me by human men - and I won't say I didn't deserve some it." In a flash she'd gone back to her normal, more upbeat self. "So if I listen to the rules does that mean you'll let me stay and try to win you over?"

"You can't win me over, Phil. I told you - I'm taken."

"Yeah, yeah. By a man that never calls or visits. Heard that one before." Phil winked. "So what do I do now?"

Chris grinned. "How about you learn the fine art of fetching food for yourself? Doug will be happy to show you where our favorite bakery is. After that you can go on your own. When you get back, he'll show you the ropes around the office."

The look Doug sent him behind Phil's back was nothing short of murderous. "And where are you going, boss?" Doug asked pleasantly.

"Duty calls," Chris said smugly, rubbing the diamond earring in his left ear.

"I'm sure." Doug stuck his tongue out. "And I'm so giving myself a bonus for this."

"You give yourself a bonus for everything," Chris groused.

Doug grinned. "It's more like a continuing bonus for putting up with the likes of you."

"Out," Chris ordered. "And bring me back something with berries." He took a deep breath and released it slowly, enjoying the blissful silence of his empty office.

At least until the phone rang.

Chris let fly with several curses - some of them harmless, some of them potentially lethal. He picked up the phone ready to send the caller screaming in fear -- but stopped short. "Mom? What's wrong?"

Five minutes later he grabbed his jacket and ran from the office, flying down the street for the opposite end of town.

"Doug," Chris spoke aloud to the air, not waiting for the imp's reply. "Take care of the terror and then get to my parents' house. Some sort of problem, my mom wants our help."

"Got it boss," Doug's voice said in his ear.

Chris phased through the iron gate of his parents' home, not phasing back until he was through the front door as well. He nearly ran through his father, who'd been waiting for him in the hallway. "Dad? Where's mom? What's wrong?"

His father's concerned expression turned to relief when he saw his son. "Chris."

"Dad? Is mom okay?"

"She's fine. Calm down. They're in the sitting room."

Chris nodded and followed his father through the wall, into the family room at the back of the house. It was his second favorite room in the house.

Everything was black. From the soft suede couch, the matching loveseat and chair, the soft carpet - as a child he'd called it the squishy carpet - and even the side and coffee tables. The walls, the trim - everything was black. But then his mother had gone through and added bright lamps with stained-glass shades. Lights set in the ceiling caught on special sun catchers and cast flecks of color everywhere. Over the couch was a bright red blanket, over the loveseat a blue, and a brilliant yellow had taken over the chair. By the time his mother had finished with her 'rainbow sitting room' it was hard to tell the room had started with a black base.

It was the one room in the house reserved exclusively for the family - even his mother's closest friends were not permitted in the rainbow room.

Except now there was a stranger. "Chris," his mother said when she saw him, relief flooding her face. The woman in her arms looked up at him, and Chris felt as though he'd been punched.

Because as much as she was a stranger, she was also incredibly familiar. Though her hair was white, her face lined with wrinkles, the woman in black slacks and a knit purple sweater was the spitting image of his mother.

Glenys coughed, and managed to smile despite whatever was upsetting her. "Chris, this is Trina. Your grandmother."

"What's going on here?" Chris asked coldly.

His mother's smile faded. "Chrissie..."

"You called me over here in a state of panic to help her? Why?"

His father's ghostly touch whispered across his shoulder. "Calm down, Chris."

"Make me."

"Chris."

"No," Chris said vehemently. "I won't do it. She comes crying for help and you expect me to forget some thirty-odd years of being ignored? Of seeing you cry when you had to do your rituals alone? When no one called or wrote on your birthday? Of the dead silence we got in reply to cards and letters and pictures? Three decades they spent pretending we didn't exist. And now you call me over here to help her? Forget it."

Glenys' angry frown was the mirror image of her son's. "And you think your leaving them to die is going to make things better? Will undo what they did? Make it better? No, Chris. I raised you better than that. Pain is not eased by more pain, it is eased with care."

"Not always," Chris muttered.

"That's enough." Glenys turned pleading. "For me, Chris? Please? Do it for me."

"God damn it." Chris ignored the look his father sent him, for using such language in front of women. "That's. Not. Fair." But he moved further into the sitting room and sat in the armchair. "Wait until Doug gets here."

His mother nodded.

Just as the tense silence began to grow unbearable Douglas appeared in the doorway, red hair disheveled from the speed at which he'd been running. He took one look at the woman beside Glenys and then moved to stand beside Chris' seat, silently pulling out his notebook.

"You...you're not human, are you?" Trina asked slowly. "Your glamour doesn't hide your aura."

Douglas was impressed despite himself. "You can see auras?"

"Can we get down to business, please?" Chris snapped.

A moment of silence, and Glenys glared at her son.

Chris stifled a sigh and spoke more calmly. "This is Douglas, he's my right hand. If you have any problems with him, this meeting is over."

Trina nodded in understanding. "Please, continue."

"Tell me what happened, leave no detail out. No matter how small, how silly it seems to you. Tell me everything."

"It started about a month ago," Trina said slowly. "A couple was passing through, clearly moving, not married very long. The young woman was a witch, and they'd been on the road for some time so we invited her to one of our meetings. She seemed a nice little thing, and here husband was wholly accepting, friendly – a professor of literature. And she enjoyed it so much, and they seemed to fit right in, that they decided to stay on."

Chris nodded, as Douglas' pen flew across his pages. Glenys held her mother's hand, soothing the obviously strained, exhausted woman. "Everything seemed perfectly normal for the next couple of weeks." Trina closed her eyes. "Then little things started going wrong – items missing, witches accusing each other of silly, petty little things. It would start to ease, then suddenly take a turn for the worse. Two days ago, three of my oldest sisters broke code and got into a nasty fight. And then last night I was accused of practicing black magic – all because I came down hard on them."

"...But they can't simply accuse you of black magic. They must have some sort of circumstantial evidence."

Trina nodded. "Pictures," she said. "Pictures of Gleny, and you. The letters your mom's been sending me over the years."

Chris was silent. "Tell me more about this couple."

"There...there isn't much to tell really. They're completely innocuous."

"And that doesn't strike you as strange?" Chris shook his head. "Never mind. You mentioned you could sense auras – what were their auras like?"

"Her aura was perfectly normal; that of an average witch. His was a bit gloomier, but I think that had to do with his being sick."

Chris glowered. "His being sick is a detail I asked you not to leave out. What's wrong with him?"

"They weren't sure. That's part of the reason for their move – to find a cure. They thought it might be the environment where they lived. A big city, all the smog and pollution and noise. They wanted to move to a smaller city – big enough for good jobs but not so crowded and noisy. This city is perfect. But they liked our small town so much..."

Chris steepled his fingers, thinking. "What sort of items went missing?"

"Just some minor trinkets. The sort that mean a lot to one person, but aren't valuable otherwise. Knickknacks, old costume jewelry, things of that nature."

Douglas had stopped writing, his pensive frown a match for Chris'. "Boss..."

“Yes,” Chris said grimly. “Tell me again about the young witch’s aura.”

Trina looked at him in confusion. “Like I said, it was perfectly normal. Nothing remarkable about it.”

“And she was pleasant? A good witch? Perfectly amiable?”

“Yes. What are you getting at?”

Glenys tilted her head, looking at her son. “What have you figured out Chris?”

“I’ve figured out this isn’t a job for a detective,” Chris said heavily. “Your town was put under a spell the moment that couple entered. There was no way you could ever have seen it coming or prevented it.”

“Ridiculous,” Trina protested. “I would have noticed someone casting a spell on my entire town.”

“Not if they did it well before they arrived, and not if it was a sorcerer strong enough to create and control zombies doing it.”

“Zombies?” Glenys repeated in real fear.

“Yes,” Chris said flatly. Soulless dolls created and manipulated by skilled sorcerers. A sorcerer who knew his business could make them indistinguishable from real people. “And my guess is that he’s attempting to make your town a power base.”

Trina and Glenys frowned. “Why?” Glenys asked. “You must be mistaken, Chris. There’s nothing for a sorcerer here, not with a demon...” Her eyes went wide. “Oh.”

“Yes, oh.” Chris stood up. “Stupid f—sorcerers.” He ignored his father’s warning look. “One more question – how did you get out? His spell should have made it impossible for you to even think about escaping.”

Trina reached up to touch something beneath her dark purple sweater.

Chris frowned, touching his right earring briefly. He narrowed his eyes at her, surprised. “You’re wearing a black magic amulet. Not much black magic...probably too little for the sorcerer to sense or care about...why?”

With heavy reluctance, Trina pulled the amulet beneath her sweater free.

Chris’ stony expression turned carefully blank. He turned away. “If that damn – dratted -- sorcerer thinks he’s going to get a foothold in Sable’s territory, he’s got another think coming.” The diamond on his left hand glimmered in the light. “This isn’t detective business. This is—” He looked at Trina defiantly. “This is Consort business. I’ll be back. C’m on, Doug.” He didn’t waste time with the doors, but passed directly through the wall back out into the hallway.

They were silent as they hit the streets. “She doesn’t seem a bad sort, really...” Doug said at last.

“Drop it, Imp.”

“What was that weird little amulet she had? I’m surprised it had any power at all.”

Chris’ expression remained blank, though barely, as he recalled the silly, childish looking amulet his...Trina had been wearing. He’d made it from plaster in third grade, so proud to make things for everyone in his family. It was shaped like a pumpkin and clumsily painted with orange and green paint – he’d worked really hard on painting the stupid little pumpkin stem. He’d told his mom to tell ‘grandma’ that it was a good luck charm. “Nothing.”

Douglas rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. So what do you think Sable’s going to do when he hears there’s a sorcerer attempting to take over his territory?”

“Nothing, because we’re not going to tell him. I can handle it just fine.” Chris shot Douglas a look. “My mom’s old hometown is right at the edge of Sable’s territory. He wouldn’t be as strong there – I will be. And he’d just get carried away anyway, you know how he is.”

“Possessive?” Doug grinned. “He’ll probably get involved anyway.”

“Only if you open your big mouth.”

Douglas laughed. “So how are we getting there?”

“If you don’t shut up, you can fly us there. Otherwise we’ll just take the easy way – though we’ll still have to walk a bit as

appearing too close will give us away and I don't want him knowing anything until it's too damn late for him." Chris stared at his ring, focusing intently until the deep, underlying glimmer of magic faded and his ring looked like nothing more than an overlarge, no doubt overly expensive diamond. He did the same to his left earring, then reached out to grab hold of the sleeve of Doug's jacket.

They vanished.

They reappeared a couple miles south of a small village Chris had grown up hearing about – enough that he knew where it was – but had never seen, except in the two scrapbooks his mother had taken with her when she'd left.

In silence they began walking toward the village. "So how are we going to explain being able to get through whatever barrier this sorcerer has set up?" Doug paused. "I suppose we should have bothered to get his name or something."

"No point," Chris said idly. "I don't plan on knowing him long enough to warrant learning his name."

Douglas grinned. "You're as possessive as Sable is, when it comes to his territory."

"It's Sable's domain," Chris shot the imp a warning glance. "It's my job to help see to it that no one problematic gets his greedy little claws on it. Especially a cowardly, lazy sorcerer who uses a clan of witches to form the beginnings of his attack force or whatever." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "He probably wants them for healing properties and such. Which is actually pretty smart of him – most don't think to cover defense first. Useless, in the end, but still pretty smart." He was silent a moment. "So far as getting past the barrier goes, we'll just let him think that was all your doing." Chris touched his right earring, muting it like he had his other two diamonds.

"Does that mean I can look like myself?" Douglas asked.

Chris smiled. "You know I wouldn't care if you walked around without your glamour."

Doug dropped his glamour, stretching his leathery, dark grey wings with relish. "I know, but whenever people realize you've got an imp for an assistant—"

"A protégé," Chris corrected sternly. "You're my protégé. I'd trust you to find me if I went missing."

The imp beamed, the expression strange but oddly sweet on his smooth, dark gray skin. His glowing, mismatched green and yellow eyes were bright and happy. Chris reached up to lightly touch one of his horns, which were long enough now that they were beginning to curve up and slightly back. "Another couple of months and you'll reach your maturity – then anyone that laughs at you can be sent straight to a smoldering oblivion."

Douglas laughed. "I don't think doing that would be good for business..." His steps were nearly soundless on the road along which they walked. Doug was oddly quiet even for an imp, a race which, though not purposely given to noise, usually could not help it with their large wings and heavy tails – and their magic, which was impressive for a creature considered fairly low on the totem pole of abnormal creatures. When Douglas finally reached his maturity, his magic would triple, possibly quadruple, in power. Their magic, even immature, was adept enough that many humans with the knowledge and ability to catch and entrap them often referred to them as a 'poor man's genie.' Others, with less skill or patience, simply captured them and sawed off the horns that contained an imp's power.

Luckily, he'd gotten to Douglas before things got that bad. "It might actually improve business, as it would get rid of all the idiots asking me to find their lost pets."

"Don't count on it," Douglas said with another grin. "Is that our sorcerer's den, up ahead?" He reassumed his glamour.

Chris nodded, face tensing. Still a few dozen yards from the first large group of buildings that marked the city proper, the pair felt a brief wash of cold as they stepped through a magical barrier with ease.

The small town was quiet – way too quiet. It was much like any other small town Chris had visited, despite his efforts never to leave the city if he could help it. People milled about, the shops and cafes about as crowded and busy as was typical for a Saturday.

Perfectly normal.

"Where is he?" Chris asked tightly, not liking the vibes he could sense even with all his magic talismans muted. It made him want to ghost, and stay invisible as long as possible.

Douglas frowned, concentrating. "There," he said at last, pointing down a street as they reached the corner. "A house that way. I can't pinpoint where exactly yet." He looked askance at some of the natives who were watching him while

surreptitiously going about their perfectly ordinary lives. “How many zombies are there, anyway? I can sense at least fifty just in this area.”

“I’m sure by now he’s got at least every witch and most of the normals. It really is aggravating the way witches don’t permit abnormals within their cities.”

“Isn’t it a bit much, the way they call themselves normal?”

“Don’t get me started on witches.” Chris looked around them as they continued walking.

Douglas abruptly turned. “This way.” He led the way down a street crowded with houses, some old, some new, a mixture of brick and side paneling and so many colors it made his eyes hurt to look at them all at once. He stopped in front of one painted a comparatively boring light blue with white shutters.

Chris could just barely feel the black magic that emanated from it, as if the house was leaking from an over saturation of it. He started to speak when beside him Douglas whirled around, tail lashing as he resumed his true form. Chris turned, and regarded the man who had not been there a moment ago. “You must be the sorcerer.”

The man in question was neat and tidy – shirt and slacks pressed, leather shoes shined, brown hair neatly trimmed. He frowned at them over his frameless glasses. “Who are you? I assume the imp is what got you through the barrier?”

“My name is Chris White,” Chris said amiably. “This is my partner Douglas. We’ve come about a complaint. You’re causing trouble here and we’d like you to leave. Immediately.”

The man shook his head. “I’ve every right to be here.”

Chris dropped all pretense of pleasantness. “Not if you’re making zombies.”

The sorcerer narrowed his eyes. “Just who sent you?”

“My mother,” Chris said sourly. “But I would have come anyway, the moment I heard a sorcerer was here. You’re not welcome, and I’m ordering you to leave immediately.”

“You can’t make me.” The sorcerer snapped his fingers and was suddenly holding a small book – the sort of journal anyone could buy for a few dollars at a bookstore. But Chris had no doubt the spells and incantations within it were the sort anyone involved in black magic would pay handsomely for. “Now I’m telling you to leave, before you find out the hard way just what it is you’re involved in. Go home, human.”

Chris laughed. “And what are you? A better human? I’d say don’t make me laugh but it’s a little late for that.” He stopped laughing. “Do not threaten me, sorcerer. I came here to ensure you left, and while I’d prefer to do it peaceably I’ll remove you by force if I must.”

The sorcerer returned the laugh. “And what could an imp and a human do to me? Nothing. Do your worst.”

Chris smiled in a way that, though the sorcerer wouldn’t know it, was eerily reminiscent of his lover. “I’ll say this one last time, sorcerer. Leave. If you leave now, you’ll live. If you insist on staying, and defying me, I cannot guarantee your continued existence.”

The sorcerer sneered. “I don’t know why anyone sent you, though I’m sure your imp is very powerful and that you know quite a few good spells, but you’re no match for me.”

“Looks like someone thinks he’s special because he made a few dozen zombies,” Doug muttered underneath his breath.

Chris smirked as he stepped forward. “Have it your way.” He pulled his left hand free of the pocket of his old jacket and held it so that the sorcerer could not miss the ring. Dull, it began to glimmer as he spoke. “I invoke the name of Sable Brennus, the demon Cadfael.”

The sorcerer started.

“And in his name, as his Consort, I banish you forthwith from his territory. Should you ever enter it again, your life is forfeit. If you do not leave in an hour’s time, your life is forfeit. You are banished.” The last word sealed the spell – one that would not have worked had the sorcerer been left much longer to grow in strength and power.

The sorcerer went from pale and frightened to red and angry. “We’ll just see!” His book opened as if on its own power, pages flipping as the sorcerer began to recite a spell.

He never finished it.

Sable stared contemptuously at the sorcerer's body. "Idiot. What good did he think attempting a death spell would do?"

"What are you doing here?" Christ snapped. He swore loudly. "I've told you a thousand times before not to interfere in my work!" He glowered as Sable approached, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I only came to watch," Sable replied. He tilted Christian's face up. "You know what it does to me when you invoke my name and use all that power I've given you."

Chris' scathing reply was lost in Sable's mouth, as the Demon hungrily kissed his consort. "Are you done here, Christian? Can we go home?"

Doug laughed.

"No, we can't." Chris sounded disappointed despite his best efforts to remain annoyed. "First we have to clean up the mess here, and then I have to go see my mother again. She's the one who made me do this...on behalf of her mother."

Sable frowned and pulled Christian into his arms. He kissed him softly. "I'd offer to come along for support but I don't think I'd help matters much."

"Oh, she already knows." Doug grinned. "Chris made it very clear where he stands with the resident demon."

"Shut it, imp." Chris warned.

Over Chris' shoulder, Sable smiled. He pulled far enough away to give Chris another kiss. "Then you should go talk to your family, so we can go home that much sooner."

Chris pulled far enough away to shake his head. "We can't leave yet. We have to take care of the sorcerer – you really shouldn't have just killed him, Sable. And we have to restore the souls to the zombies."

"I'll take care of it." Sable held Chris' head in both hands and kissed him until he was in no condition to protest anything Sable said. "Run along. Speak with your family."

Smothering a laugh that would get him killed, Doug latched onto Chris and dragged him away from Sable. Muttering under his breath, Chris vanished them both back his parents' house.

He halted in the yard, startled to see his mother was already waiting for him, arms crossed and the lines of her face pulled tight with unhappiness. "Mom?"

"The thing about being a black witch," his mother spoke slowly. She used the term ironically -- a black witch was technically impossible, as the nature of witches was to reject black magic in all shapes and forms. "Is that I sense your magic whenever you use a great deal of it. The sorcerer was quite a threat, wasn't he?"

"But young and stupid. It didn't even occur to him I might be more than I appeared. A good sorcerer would have known that Sable had a consort and that I was a detective of sorts."

Glenys nodded. "I still do not like your going into danger, even after all these years and even when I'm the one sending you straight to it." She stepped off the porch and met her son halfway across the yard. "I am sorry, Chris. I know you didn't want to do it." She reached up to smooth his messy hair and trace his cheek.

"Has she changed at all?" Chris asked even as he hated himself for it. He caught his mother's hand and squeezed it gently.

His mother shrugged. "She unbent enough to come here for help, didn't she?" She sighed. "My mother isn't going to change, Chris. Asking her not to be a witch is like asking you not to be part ghost. It just isn't possible. She's spent her entire life – from the moment she was born to this very second – a witch. There's no undoing that. If you're conflicted, think about how she must feel. Not only did her daughter abandon her way of life, she went to live with a ghost, bore his child and now her grandson is a demon's consort. I have no doubt that she loves you as much as she loves me—"

"That is to say, she loves us enough to come to us for help but not to speak to us otherwise."

Glenys sighed again, looking tired and sad. "I wish I could make you understand, Chris."

"I understand that the only people to accept you and dad and me are all the people she refuses to so much as acknowledge until a sorcerer visits. I know I upset you, and I wish I could just nod and smile and go inside and make nice."

But I can't and I won't. We tried for years to draw her in. I have you, dad, Sable and Douglas. I don't need her anymore."

Glenys hugged him, resting her head against her son's chest. "I know. I'm sorry."

"You've nothing to be sorry about, mom." Chris hugged her back, smiling faintly. "I'm certain dad will be more than happy to point out that it's my behavior which needs apologized for. Where is dad anyway?"

"Inside, attempting to talk to her. I think she's more scared than anything." Glenys pulled away. "Do want to come inside?"

"No," Chris hugged her once more then stepped away. He motioned to Douglas, who had stood silent the entire time. "We've got work to do and—"

Douglas grinned. "And Sable would like a word with his consort."

"Quiet, imp." Chris glared at him.

Glenys' lips twitched. "I see. I'm surprised he's not here."

"He's finishing up for us," Chris explained. "And he's probably trying to be considerate for once. If he appeared here, he'd give your mom a heart attack." He smiled fondly at his mother. "Not every witch is as adept at coping with black magic as you."

Glenys smiled and leaned up to kiss his cheek. "Well, get going then. Will you come for dinner tomorrow night? And Sable and Doug?"

"Sure, mom. Tell dad I said hi and that I'm sorry for my rude behavior."

"Of course." Glenys waved them off, and the two vanished.

Sable waited for him in their room, half sitting on, half leaning against the bed. He tugged Chris gently into his arms. "You cannot stay angry forever, Christian."

Chris frowned against Sable's chest. "Watch me." He pulled back to narrow his eyes at Sable. "Why do you care, anyway? It's one less person to steal away my time with you."

Sable stroked his cheek, then slid his fingers back through Chris' hair. "I do not like to see shadows in your eyes, beautiful. Making reparations would do much to take those shadows away."

"I have my parents. I have Doug. I have you." Chris pressed closer to Sable. "That's all I need. Just drop it."

"For now. But ignoring a problem is not the same as solving it."

Chris tensed. "I'll solve it when I feel like it. Could we please just drop it?"

"Of course," Sable replied soothingly. Then he smirked. "Though honestly, it's hard for me to hate a woman who puts you in enough of a snit you'd actually use your authority as consort." He kissed Chris again, and there was nothing soothing or comforting left in his manner. "Invoke my name again, beautiful."

Case #134: Sweet Dreams

Chris ran, his feet splashing in muddy puddles, soaking his boots and jeans. He was tired, sore, really sore and rapidly losing patience.

But a job was a job and he'd do it right even when the patience ran out.

At least it was late enough and dark enough that even the busier sections of town were dead.

He cursed as he reached a T-intersection, looking first toward the hotel in front of him and then to either side - no sign of an eight, greenish-brown, seriously pissed off troll presented itself.

Then he was shoved hard from behind, barely going intangible soon enough to avoid the worst of it. Spinning around, he stared at the troll that had snuck up behind and avoided thinking about how it'd managed because he was already in a bad

enough mood as was. Launching himself at the troll, he solidified at the very last second, sending them both the ground and in a perfect position to pin the troll down.

But his weight wasn't enough and the troll sent him flying up and back - again he barely managed to change in time.

He was more tired than he'd thought, if his reactions were that slowed. A split lip, black eye and bruised shoulder probably weren't helping matters, but thinking about them definitely wasn't.

"Damn it, Doug!" Where the hell had the imp gone?

But a second later a large, gray shadow dropped down on the eight foot troll and threw it off balance. They crashed to the street and several second of struggling had the troll pinned by both of them. Red-faced, panting and utterly exhausted, Chris shifted to reach his jacket pocket.

The troll sensed his chance and sent them both flying. Doug hit the side of a building with a sickening crack and fell to the sidewalk. Chris failed to go intangible, seeing black and stars as his head connected with what he thought must be brick behind him.

He slumped forward on the sidewalk, silently ordering the street to stop moving, and watched helplessly as the troll bore down on him. "So quadrupling payment for this." Slowly, painfully, he pushed himself up, determined not to die on his knees.

And looked up, to see the troll had frozen in place.

Chris blinked.

Rubbed his eyes, and blinked again.

Though the troll's eyes were moving, the rest of him seemed incapable. Utterly confused, Chris glanced around the intersection for something that could have messed with a creature impervious to most magic.

And swore colorfully. "What in the hell are you doing here? Never mind." Ignoring his unexpected rescuer, ignoring the way the street wouldn't stay still, Chris slowly made his way to Doug.

Gingerly he examined the imp's wings and back, legs and arms, and lastly his neck. Finding nothing wrong, he flipped Doug over and examined his front as well. He let out a long, slow sigh of relief. Only a few scrapes and bruises and a knot on the head that wasn't nearly as bad as the one inflicted by a goblin a few months back.

Still ignoring his now smirking rescuer, Chris limped toward the frozen troll. Reluctantly he turned toward Sable - Brennus - and pointed to the troll. "Will he stay like that?"

"As long as you like, beautiful."

Chris snorted in contempt of the ridiculous adjective, but stopped when he realized that made his head hurt more. Fumbling for a moment, he finally pulled a syringe from his jacket pocket and stuck it in the troll's arms.

Several minutes later he caught a boy of no more than twelve in his arms and laid him carefully on the street.

Fuck he hurt. So not fair that everyone got to pass out except him.

Hands settled on his shoulders from behind and for a split second Chris started to lean into them, attracted to the warmth and strength in them.

But then he remembered to whom those hands belonged, and forced himself to pull away, shoulders stiff as he examined the boy for serious injury. All was well, two for two.

Now he had to figure out how to get the boy back to his mother, and then himself and a six-foot one unconscious imp back to his ramshackle office.

"Would you like some help?" The hands landed on his shoulders again, supporting him.

And that was so not fair, because he was cold and sore and really tired and in no condition to resist that rough velvet voice or those hands. He wanted to say yes, and close his eyes and lean back-

But he wasn't going to because any sort of interaction with a demon was a bad idea. And no one did his job for him. Especially not a demon. Especially not Sable Brennus. "No, I'm fine." Chris made himself pull away again and started to bundle the boy in his arms.

And there the street went spinning again.

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Chris opened his eyes.

Then decided he preferred them shut. He spoke aloud, eyes still closed. "I don't know where the hell I am, but I know I'm not awake. So someone tell me what's going on."

"You're the detective, aren't you? The one that helps paranormals?"

"That would be me, yes."

"I need your help."

Chris opened his eyes and finally acknowledged the strange world he was in. Around him was an imitation of his office - the scuffed, worn desks he and Doug used, the beat up couch that with the desk formed a horseshoe around the front door. The threadbare maroon carpet, the barely matching curtains.

It was bad enough he had to look at the sad place awake. "What's going on here?" He eyed the creature standing a few feet away. Her skin was white and he had no doubt whatsoever it was as smooth and soft as any interested man could want. Her lips were dark pink, full and with the slightest hint of a pout - almost enough to distract from the small, sharp fangs. Her eyes were a clear blue, the lashes around them long, her nose small and elegant. Dark pink ribbons held her hair loosely back. No doubt it would be easy to pull the ribbon and send the long, brown tresses streaming over her shoulders. The pink dress she wore teased at her figure but did not show it.

A very good succubus, this one. "I need your help."

"Yes, I got that part." Chris sighed. "Elaborate."

The succubus licked her lips nervously, smoothing the front of her dress before clasping her hands to force them to remain still. "There's a human I've been feeding on." She spoke in a sudden rush, "I'm not going to kill him or anything--"

"One problem at a time," Chris said. "Something is preventing your feeding on him?"
The succubus nodded. "But I can't figure out what - and Tommy can't or won't tell me."

"Perhaps he's tired of being preyed upon by a succubus?" Chris asked.

"No, he's not! It isn't like that! He-" the succubus began to blink rapidly, her blue eyes suddenly too bright. "He wanted to find a way to put me in his world. But lately he has trouble just reaching mine - nothing I do anymore draws him in." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "It's almost like he's ignoring me but I know he's not! He wouldn't!"

A succubus with romantic woes. That was a new one on him. "What's your name?"

"C-Cordula."

"My name is Chris." He scoured his brain for something to distract a crying woman. "How did you bring me here? Succubi have no effect on me and clearly that's not how you did it anyway."

Cordula sniffed, bringing her tears under control. In seconds she was once more a cool, collected succubus. "I made a deal with a dream guide. He gave me the spell scrolls I needed to find you here and I'll help with a mortal he's fond of."

"Interesting. Do you have any more of those scrolls?"

"One. I had to use two of the three he gave me to bring you here."

Chris nodded. "Then can you use one to bring my assistant here? His name is Douglas; he's an imp."

Cordula hesitated and then slowly nodded. "I can if he's asleep. But if not, there's nothing I can do."

"Of course. But try for me. I detest doing a case without him."

The succubus reached into empty space and pulled out a small roll of paper. It was silver-colored, fine and delicate. Unrolling it, she laid it out flat on one of the desks and held out a gold pen. "Write his name on the top line, and focus on

him as you do so. It should be easier for you to bring him, as you know him, than it was for me to bring you."

Nodding, Chris accepted the pen and signed Douglas' name with a flourish to the indicated spot. As he finished, the scroll rolled itself up and vanished.

Several minutes later, a very confused imp stood beside the dream version of his desk, blinking between Chris and Cordula.

Chris explained.

"Interesting," Doug said with a yawn when he finished. He sat down at his desk and dug out a notebook and pen.

Sitting at his own desk, Chris motioned for the succubus to take the couch. Leaning back in his seat, he crossed his legs and steepled his fingers. "Now, Cordula. Start from the beginning and tell me everything. Leave nothing out."

"I first visited Tony a year ago, and started to feed like always. But--" she was starting to cry again. "He never got upset. Never seemed to mind. It threw me, how happy he seemed that I just visited. Half the time he didn't even seem affected by my skills...he just liked talking. So we talked, and I fed only as much as I strictly needed. And one day he said he loved me, and that he wanted me to be with him for real - even though I told him I wouldn't be pretty outside of his dreams." She pulled a handkerchief from the air and dabbed at her eyes and cheeks. "He said he didn't care. And then a couple of weeks ago I started having trouble getting to him. Yesterday I couldn't reach him at all. And I know he wouldn't start ignoring me, so I'm worried something else happened to him!" She buried her face in the handkerchief.

Chris and Doug looked at each in uncertainty. "What's his name?" Chris asked finally, figuring it was better to stick to business than try and comfort.

"Tommy Fitz." Cordula sniffed. "He lives on the south side of town, on Apple Street, right by the river."

"Apple Street." Chris grimaced. "Got a house number?"

"201B. The second floor of the Madison Building."

Chris nodded, while Doug's pen flew. "Any idea who or what might be threatening him? Perhaps another succubus?"

"No," Cordula said firmly. "We don't intrude on one another's territory. As for outside..." She shrugged. "He's just a lonely schoolteacher who dabbles in alchemy. Barely talks to the other teachers or the kids, because they all think he's strange. His neighbor, a black witch, is the only one he gets along with, and all they do is talk from time to time. Sometime she fixes him dinner, and he fixes her car when it needs it."

"Hmm..." Chris barely kept from rolling his eyes at hearing the man's neighbor called herself a black witch. "What is her apartment number? And he's done nothing unusual since all of this started? No new hobbies? No strange alchemical experiments?"

"Only the one he's using to take me outside. But he talks about that all the time. There's no danger involved for him until the end - and that wouldn't cut him off. It would leave him trapped here. She lives in 201A.. I believe they share a kitchen."

"Think hard," Chris said sharply. "There must be something strange that would help explain why you can no longer reach him. Are you certain he hasn't found a real life lover?"

Cordula glared. "He loves me - and if he had a real life lover I would no longer be able to reach him."

"True. So it probably some other outside force." Chris fell silent as he thought. "Is there anything else you can think to tell us?"

"Nothing. I wish I could help more, but I've told you all I know."

Chris nodded and stood. "All right then. We'll investigate further once we wake up. Assuming all goes well, you'll know when we've succeeded."

"And what is your fee?" Cordula smoothed her dress. She looked up at Chris. "I will pay whatever you ask, rest assured."

"Fees will be discussed when I've succeeded." Chris smiled. "I don't accept payment until I've solved the problem." He paused. "Any idea how to wake us up?"

Cordula laughed and spoke a word Chris didn't know - then the dream world faded out.

He opened his eyes, closed them again. Made himself sit up, then opened them again. "Maybe I should have stayed asleep."

"You've slept for nearly an entire day," a familiar voice said from across the room, where he sat on a deep leather couch before a fireplace. His back was to Chris, for which he was grateful. He was still far too sleepy to deal with Sable Brennus.

He looked around the room and wondered how he got himself into such messes.

A bedroom. He was in Sable Brennus' bedroom. That was it. Chris threw back the covers - really soft, warm, horribly appealing covers - and damn near killed himself when he realized the massive dark walnut canopy bed was on a raised platform. He let his hands catch his fall, all but avoiding eating wall, not trusting himself to be strong enough yet to use his intangibility.

He tensed as he felt and heard Brennus reach him, turning to smack away the arms that were reaching for him. "Where are my clothes?" He tugged at the dark blue silk he was wearing. "These aren't mine. Give mine back."

"Temper, temper." Sable lifted one brow, clearly unamused for once. "Given that I could have left you to rot, one would think you'd at least say thank you." Reaching out, he touched the front of the silk shirt, murmuring softly for a second, and Chris was suddenly in his own clothes.

Chris grit his teeth, ignoring the headache throbbing at his temple. "Thank you." A thought occurred to him. "What were you doing there, anyway?"

"Hunting for a troll, oddly enough." The demon's amusement was returning. "A few of the lesser creatures mentioned the thing running around, and when the vampires started complaining I thought perhaps it was time I did something about it. No one told me my spook detective was already taking care of matters."

Chris got pissed again. "Paranormal Investigator thanks. And I'm not yours."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Huh?" Chris asked stupidly, taken by surprise.

"Are you feeling better? You took a pretty nasty beating."

"I-I'm fine." Chris shook himself. "And I have to go. I'm on a case."

"The boy is fine. His mother came and picked him up hours ago. And she said she will pay whatever fee you ask."

Sable moved so that Chris could not get by, trapping him in the space between bed and wall.

Chris glowered. "Not that case. A different one. I've been hired to find out what's wrong with a man on Apple Street." Giving up, Chris grimaced and climbed onto the bed, then ghosted and moved through it out into the bedroom proper.

Brennus caught him before he got far. "How can you have a case? You've been asleep. Surely you're not so desperate to get away you make up poor lies?"

Snatching his hand away, Chris shoved at Sable. "Don't flatter yourself. I was hired by a succubus to find out what's wrong with her lover."

"Succubi don't have lovers."

"That's what I thought. I was wrong. So are you. And if you'll excuse me, time is of the essence...where's Douglas?"

"If you're referring to the imp, he's in one of the guest rooms. I've got my secretary keeping an eye on him."

Chris forced his teeth to unclench. "He's not 'the imp.' His name is Douglas and he's my assistant."

"I meant no offense," Sable said levelly. "It little matters to me who or what you work with. He was remarkably strong for an imp, or at least much stronger than any imp I've ever seen." Sable's grip loosened as he spoke, though it was clear he still didn't plan on letting Chris go anywhere. "Most people would have killed the troll."

"You would have."

Sable shrugged. "I hadn't decided what to do. Finding it was proving difficult as was, oddly enough. I could have killed it instead of freezing it."

With a stiff nod Chris conceded the point. "I have to go."

"Then come back after you're done. We'll have dinner."

"What?" Chris asked, startled. "Why?"

Sable laughed. "Because if you don't agree, my only other option for keeping you around is to bind you and I don't think that would go over well."

"Don't even try it," Chris hissed. He jerked free and backed away, focusing hard on all the reasons he should be giving Sable a scathing no and running for his life - for his sanity. "Leave me the hell alone."

"Why do you dislike me so much?" Sable asked idly.

"Because!" Chris replied. It was hard to think straight with him around. It was so tempting to seek comfort. To go back to that bed and pretend he was fine and worry free. To drag the far too sexy Sable with him. "Why are you so determined to keep me here?" He was really starting to hate the way he wound up pressed up against things with a demon looming over him.

"You're the most interesting thing I've seen in ages, beautiful. Half-ghost, a detective who helps the paranormals, and brave enough to wander into my office and take me to task." Sable's lips brushed against his brow, his cheek, and lingered at the corner of his mouth before he finally kissed Chris properly.

Chris wished he could tell himself later that he resisted, but the truth was far from it. He broke away, breathless, and glared at the floor. "I thought it was only vampires that had this effect on humans."

"They are," Sable said, amused and pleased by what Chris had unwittingly admitted. He turned Chris to look at him again. "No tricks, Christian. I don't play that way when I play for keeps."

Chris shoved him far enough away he could slide free, ghosting to give himself an illusion of the strength he didn't seem to have around Sable. "No one ever said we were playing for keeps."

"We? I hadn't realized you'd agreed to play at all, beautiful." Triumph gleamed in Sable's eyes.

Swearing up a storm, Chris headed for the door in hopes of reaching it before Sable reached him. He wasn't surprised when he failed miserably.

"Have dinner with me," Sable said softly. "It can't hurt anything."

"I sincerely doubt that," Chris said sourly, looking up to glare but instead only sighing. "Fine. Dinner. Where and when?"

"Downstairs, I have a private table." Sable reached up with his free hand to brush aside strands of Chris' blonde hair. His thumb and forefinger pinched firmly at Chris' ear, and when he let go Chris felt something heavy there.

He reached up to touch the foreign weight. "What the hell did you do?"

"A minor jewel," Sable replied. "It will permit communication between you, Douglas and myself should you need it."

Chris narrowed his eyes and pulled away. "One night, short term, long term or permanent, you'd better learn not to interfere in my work. I neither need nor want your help."

"Of course, beautiful." Sable spoke indulgently, smiling faintly. "I merely thought it would be easier than calling me. I detest phones."

"Whatever. May I go now? I've got a job to get done." Chris looked anywhere but at Sable, desperate to get back to the world where he could actually function and not go to pieces. Warm lips brushed his cheek, and turned his head until he was once more kissing Sable, tasting whiskey and the tang of magic, and something right that shook him to his core. He broke away, fumbling with the door handle. "Bye," he managed, desperate to escape.

"Your imp should be waiting for you downstairs. See you later, beautiful."

Chris fled, eschewing the elevators in favor simply going through the floors. He reappeared in the lobby beside Douglas.

"There you are," Douglas said calmly, long used to Chris appearing out of nowhere. "You look shaken up."

"Are you all right?" Chris asked, ignoring him. "You took a nasty beating from the troll."

Douglas shrugged. "A few scrapes and bruises and I had a nasty headache for a bit. But I'm good. Are we ready to go? What kept you so long?"

"Demon," Chris said shortly, leading the way out of the lobby. He was unsurprised to see his old SUV waiting outside a hotel valet holding the keys for him. "Mr. White."

"Thank you," Chris managed, silently calling Sable every nasty name he could think of.

Douglas grinned as the drove off. "So he's still interested, huh?"

"I'm sure he's just bored," Chris said tightly. "He'll wander off to someone or something else eventually. Can we stop talking about me and discuss the case instead?"

"Apple Street," Douglas said. "Not often we go that far. Wonder why a humble teacher slash alchemist decided to live on Apple Street."

"Dirt cheap?" Chris posed. "And nobody, not even the normals, looks twice when something weird or slightly less than legal goes down. The secret to uniting normals and abnormals - a penchant for illegal activities."

Douglas nodded, thumbing through his notes. "I hope we're up to handling a black witch that isn't your mom," he said thoughtfully. "I'm not really familiar with their tricks. Nice earring by the way. That a gift from the demon you don't like?"

"Shut it, imp." Chris spared him a glared before returning his attention to the dark, crowded city streets. He parked in front of a run down building and they climbed out. He reached up to touch the earring that hung like a lead weight from his ear. "He said it would help us communicate, and I didn't know what the repercussions would be for removing it." He glowered at the absent demon. "I can sense a great deal of magic in it."

Douglas examined it more closely. "It's quite a rock. I don't know anything about diamonds and I know people would cheerfully kill to have that in their possession. I know a lot of abnormals who would do a lot worse than kill to have a diamond with that much demon-level power in it."

"A diamond?" Chris all but squawked in outrage. "Why in the hell did he give me a diamond?"

Laughing, Douglas moved out of hitting range and made for the apartment building that was their destination. "Because they're quality magic conductors and demons only tolerate the best of everything?" He paused, blinking. "Wow, he must really like you."

"Shut up, imp." Chris strode past him into the building, bypassing locked doors with ease while he left Doug to magically work through them. He waited outside room 201B until Doug caught up. "Ready?"

"For a nap, yes. For this? Not so much. Shall I knock?"

"By all means."

Doug knocked, and they waited.

And waited. Frowning, Doug knocked again. He tried the door, which was predictably locked. "I think maybe you'd better have a look inside."

"Oh, fine." Chris gave a long-suffering sigh. "Make the half-ghost do all the work." Dropping to invisibility he passed through the door and unlocked it. Without waiting for Doug he continued invisible into the apartment.

Several minutes of searching later confirmed the apartment was empty. He resumed his regular form and looked toward Doug. "Shall we ask the black witch neighbor?"

"We probably should have just started with her," Chris said, rolling his eyes. "But I keep hoping it isn't that obvious."

Doug grinned. "Now wasn't the first thing you taught me that the most obvious answer is usually it? It's just no one can see what's right in front of their face?"

"One can always hope I'll be wrong," Chris said sourly and opened the kitchen door, striding through the narrow space and into the apartment beyond.

They paused in the living room, which was best described as cozy and inviting. Chris realized with surprised that it reminded him of parents' house. An old couch, covered by colorful, hand-made afghans, was pushed up against the far wall directly

opposite the kitchen door. The coffee table had been shoved aside so the plump woman kneeling beside the couch had more room. She was tenderly wiping sweat from the brow of the man who was stretched out underneath two afghans; even from a distance his shivering was obvious.

"What's wrong with him?"

The witch replied calmly, as though she had known they were there. "He's been taken by a Succubi fever."

"A what?" Chris repeated, incredulous. He narrowed his eyes, angry. "Is Cordula behind this?"

"No," the witch said softly, setting her cloth aside and hefting herself up. Her graying brown hair was pulled back in a neat bun and she wore a violet floral skirt with a matching knit top. Chris noticed she looked immensely tired. "Another succubus is behind it. And my name is Trudy. I bet you're that detective I've been hearing so much about lately. The one that saved the boy."

Chris nodded absently. "Normally a person with a love interest isn't prey for succubi. There's no weakness there to provide an opening." He tapped his chin, thinking. Finally he grimaced. "We overlooked the obvious," he said. "The love interest has to be real. An anchor, so to speak, to the real world. Cordula is still, for all intents of purpose, a dream. There's plenty of fear and loneliness to prey on there - fear that his plans won't work, fear that he's being manipulated for all that he loves Cordula. And loneliness because it must be depressing to only find happiness in your dreams."

Doug shared Chris' grimace. "I think we're losing our touch." He grinned suddenly. "Well, I'm still relatively new to this. Maybe you're distracted by your daydreams."

"Quiet imp, or you'll be dreaming for a long, long time."

"Did I hit a nerve?" the imp asked, unfazed.

"Anyway," Chris said loudly. "We need to save him." He frowned in thought and tapped his chin, moving to stand beside the witch and examined the sleeping Tom. He was handsome in an unassuming way - probably the sort that looked amazing when he smiled or laughed.

Doug joined them by the couch. "Why wasn't Cordula aware of another succubus?"

"Succubi and Inccubi are independent creatures, and they never feed on one another's victims," Chris answered. "It probably never occurred to her. Maybe why it never occurred to us. But she stopped treating him like prey a long time ago, and the situation they're in has made him appetizing to another. I doubt she realizes all of that."

"That still leaves us with the dilemma of what to do," Doug said, eyeing Tom. "He doesn't look so good. I'd imagine this had been going on far too long."

"Well most victims do wind up dead by the end," Chris said dryly. "The trick is to repel the bad succubus without harming Cordula in the process, since she's lurking still in his mind to a no doubt large degree." He looked at Doug. "The spell should be a fairly simple one for you..."

"But using it will kill Cordula as well as the problematic succubus," Doug finished for him. "I don't know how to kill one and not the other."

Chris frowned in thought.

"Make the one real?" a voice asked idly in his ear.

Ignoring the strange looks Trudy and Doug cast him, Chris swore aloud to the air. "What did I tell you? Stay out of my cases! Goddamn you!"

Doug tried and failed to suppress a laugh. "I think I know to whom you're speaking."

"Shut up. Both of you."

"Would you like to know the spell?" Sable asked again, this time audible to both Chris and Doug.

"Yes," Doug said before Chris could speak.

Sable laughed. "And what will I receive in payment, imp?"

Doug grinned. "I'll make sure he wears the blue sweater. It does wonders for his eyes."

"You're fired, imp. Fired. And you, thrice-damned demon, stay the hell out of my cases." Muttering darkly to himself, Chris reached up and removed the earring from his ear, shoving it deep into the pocket of his jacket.

"It's a good thing he told me the spell before you did that." Doug made a face. "Honestly, you would have just asked someone else for help. What's wrong with getting it from him?"

Chris glowered. "I just fired you, so I'm under no obligation to answer."

"Yeah, yeah." Doug snorted and knelt to cast the spells relayed to him.

Trudy looked as though she was dying to ask why they'd be talking with a demon, but held her tongue at the expression on Chris' face.

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"This is a bad idea," Chris said flatly.

Doug quirked a brow at him. "Boss, you never struck me as a coward."

"I'm not," Chris said tightly. "But I also pride myself on not being stupid. Dallying with a demon qualifies as stupid in my book." He glared at the sleeve of his dark blue sweater, a gift from his mother a few months ago. The diamond earring felt as though it was burning a hole in his pocket. He hoped it left marks when he threw it at Sable's head.

The imp looked at him sympathetically. "You know, I heard a story once about someone who acted just like you're acting now."

"Where in the hell would you hear such a story?" Chris asked, not really paying attention. "This is a bad idea. What the hell was I thinking?"

Doug smirked. "Your mom told me all about meeting your dad. She said the night she went to cast the spell and everything, she was so terrified and angry at herself for being stupid that she could barely even make herself actually do it for all that it was exactly what she wanted to do."

"That isn't funny," Chris said faintly. "This is nothing like my mom and dad."

"I'm just saying, boss. You remind me of what she told me."

Chris glowered. "I hate you. That's a really low blow."

Doug grinned. "I also remember the night you saved me, and what you told me. But your parents didn't get it easily, did they?"

"No," Chris conceded. "He's a demon."

"Your dad's a ghost."

"Shut up. Go do paperwork." Chris turned away and strode toward the hotel across the street before he gave himself more time to think.

Case #138: Dance with the Devil

Chris didn't trust him.

He wasn't sure why...no, that was a lie. He knew exactly why.

The man was too perfect. About late-thirties in age, handsome, a touch of the paranormal to him but nothing that made Chris's senses twitchy. Handsome but not especially, dark brown hair and hazel eyes, a perfectly pleasant expression on his face. Neat blue suit, dark maroon tie, shoes polished to a mirror shine.

Chris didn't trust perfect. Not a bit. Unfortunately, with his bank accounts pathetically empty, he couldn't afford to throw the man out quite yet.

"This is the White Detective Agency?"

"Yes," Chris replied, barely avoiding rolling his eyes. That was what the sign on the door said, why did everyone feel the need to ask? Were they all illiterate? Or just stupid? "I am Chris White, this is my assistant, Douglas. How can we help you?"

The man nodded politely. "I am Mortimer Winston, head librarian for the west district library." Meaning the paranormal library. A librarian. This was either going to be an interesting case or a dead boring one. "I would like you to find a book for me."

Chris lifted one brow. "Mr. Winston...my skills are varied and wide, but it seems to me you would be more suited to finding a book."

Winston did not look amused by the light jest. "It is a personal belonging, Mr. White, not a library book. It was stolen from me a few months ago. My own efforts at locating it have been in vain, and I am at my wits' end. A neighbor suggested giving you a try, though I will be honest and say I am not terribly impressed by detectives and you do not give me reason to change that opinion."

Fucking hell, the things he did to avoid being made to take money from his parents or lover. Chris wanted badly to punch the damn bastard and then tell Doug to show him the door. "Your opinion is, of course, your own. I am more than willing to help you, but if you feel another might best serve your interests then you are welcome to leave."

The man frowned - even that expression was perfect - at him, then gave a minute, condescending shrug. "What is your fee?"

"It is decided upon completion of the case," Chris said firmly. He'd lost more than one client with that policy - though it was always the ones who could have afforded to pay any price. Not that he'd had many of those, yet. Enough that had walked away. Christ, he was going to depress himself. "That is non-negotiable, though I will negotiate the price if you take serious issue with it."

After what seemed to be an eternity, Winston at last grimaced - perfectly - and gave a reluctant nod. "Very well. As I said, a book of mine was stolen a few months ago-"

Chris held up a hand to stop him. He leaned back in his seat and steepled his fingers, distantly hearing as Doug flipped open his notebook. "Start at the beginning. Tell me every detail, leave nothing out. Only facts, not suppositions. I do not care how trivial or insignificant the detail, I want to hear it. Do you understand? Then begin, please."

Winston nodded, and for a moment he almost seemed to approve of the orders. "It was three months ago. Late at night, I had been in bed for perhaps an hour, just reading. I keep all my books in a library of my own, and it is locked every night. Many of my books are original printings, some the only copies remaining...and I have several handwritten sorcery tomes. It is one of those which was taken from me."

"Which one?" Chris asked, the hairs on his neck prickling. He always got nervous when the subject of sorcery books came up. Ever since the matter of a book had led him to the demon lord who was now his lover.

He really hoped the book he'd be hunting down didn't eat people.

"The Book of Dances," Winston replied.

Chris frowned. "That is not one I have ever heard of before."

A perfectly condescending and patronizing smile curved Winston's lips. "I would imagine not. The book is of little interest to those who do not possess powerful magic. Do you know anything about magic?"

"Enough," Chris snapped.

"The Book of Dances is a book of some of the most powerful spells in existence. If you know 'enough' then you would know that dancing is crucial to high magic."

Chris hadn't known that, had never heard anything so ridiculous in his life, but if the man wanted to try and play him for a fool then fine. He could play along for a bit. "I didn't know that, actually. So no ordinary paranormal would want such a book, and obviously they must have been of significant skill to sneak into your no doubt well-guarded library."

Winston sniffed. "Precisely. They left no clues. I would not have noticed there was a theft but for a shuffling sound and the

glaring absence of the book when I investigated after finding the door open."

The bastard was hiding something, though Chris couldn't say precisely what tipped him off to that. Winston gave none of the usual signs and indicators, but something in his manner screamed he was lying or hiding.

Damn it. Did he really need the money? Yes. Did he really need the headache? No. Did he really need to solve as many cases as possible to build his reputation? Yes. Fuck. The yeses were winning.

Stifling a sigh, Chris continued to press the obnoxious man for every detail and scrap of information he could get. When they finished nearly two hours later and Winston finally departed, Chris closed his eyes and finally released the long-suffering sigh he'd been holding back.

"I think this case is probably a bad idea, boss," Doug said after several minutes. "Something about this doesn't vibe."

"Something about him needs to go take a long walk off a short pier into the river. After he pays up for the headache he's given me." Chris made a face and stood up. "Come on, let's go learn more about this book. That's the sketchiest part of this whole thing. What was all the crap about dancing?"

Doug slid him a pensive look but said nothing.

"What?" Chris demanded. "I've never heard of such a thing. Why have I never heard of that?"

"That sort of thing is generally the exclusive realm of demons."

Chris groaned. "I might have known the bastard would find a way to insinuate himself."

Doug laughed. "So that's what this is all about. You're in a bad mood because you haven't seen your boyfriend in four days."

"You're fired."

"Fine. You look for the book all by yourself. That lady on the corner bakery has offered me a job twice this morning already."

Chris rolled his eyes. "Ha. Doug making muffins. That I'll believe when I see it. Fine. You're rehired for the duration of this case." He dragged a hand down his face and sighed in resignation. "I guess if it's a demon thing..." He shot a nasty glare at Doug, who had started snickering. "What?" he snapped.

"You really do miss him, don't you? Looking for any excuse to go see him...you don't need a reason, you know."

"Shut up, imp," Chris said, taking his beat up jacket off the coat rack and shrugging into it. "Go speak with the usuals, see what you can glean about other book thefts. Contact me if you come up with anything. I'm going to go see if I can't find Sable." Wherever the bastard was, that he couldn't be bothered to return calls or come out of hiding for so much as a single fucking second. Some lover. Chris was starting to suspect he'd been dumped, and it only annoyed him further that the thought hurt.

A lot.

Shoving away the gloomy, disconcerting thoughts, he focused on the case, searching for possible clues - or signs Winston was indeed lying.

Outside the weather was particularly dreary, the sky so black it looked more evening than midday. The rain was a light mist, but a full on storm loomed, the sharp, cool taste of it heavy on the air. Zipping up his jacket, Chris buried his hands in the pockets and walked briskly toward uptown and the three hotels that crowned it.

"He's not in right now, Mr. White," the secretary said apologetically.

Chris felt sick. What sort of demon lord 'wasn't in' to his 'beloved' for nearly four days running? Not even a word of explanation. His throat felt tight. That would teach him to believe anything a demon had to say. "Do you know when he'll be back?"

The secretary shook her head, and Chris had to admit she really seemed to be upset. "No. He wasn't certain. Gave strict orders not to be disturbed by anyone; his work is quite delicate, he said. I will of course notify him immediately upon his return that you want to see him."

Whatever. He wasn't born yesterday. "That's alright, doll. I know how to take a hint. I won't bother him again." Chris turned sharply on his heel and stormed back to the elevator bay, ignoring the secretary's cries.

So, he was out one demon. Where else could he ask around for information on obscure books? Was Doug having any luck?" Absently Chris reached up to touch the diamond in his ear - he scowled as he realized what he was doing and what he was touching. The earring from his ex-lover.

Biting back a curse, damn it why did thinking like that hurt so goddamn much, Chris took the earring out and shoved it in his pocket. Stupid. He never should have gotten involved with a demon. What had he been thinking?

Morosely he was forced to admit he hadn't been thinking at all. Sable was all too good at making thinking impossible just by walking into the room. Chris had never pegged himself as so easily suckered...obviously he was even dumber than he'd thought in his blackest moods. He wished he knew what about the damnable demon did it for him so he could get the hell rid of it.

Scrubbing at his face, Chris stepped off the elevator and went invisible, passing quickly through the lobby and back out onto the street. He was suddenly in no mood to be seen by anyone. Once across the street and down the block, he turned and tilted his head back to stare up the length of the Tantalus. The tallest and grandest of Sable's three hotels, and the one Sable called home. Of late, Chris had found himself becoming far too comfortable there, spending less and less time in his own little room above the agency.

Focus. He had a case. Find the stolen book. Or figure out what the client was hiding.

Reluctantly Chris dropped his ghost form, then continued on back to his office. Winston was hiding something. Chris glowered as he walked, forcing his mind to go over and over everything Winston had said. Something was niggling...

Ah. There it was. They'd been focused on the theft itself, he had not yet bothered to ask how the feat was accomplished.

Winston had said his library was heavily warded, and had ticked off a handful of wards and spells that would have made Chris wince had he not been completely immune to all of them. One or two would have given even Doug a hard time.

That immediately eliminated most of the paranormal species. Precious few actually dealt in any amount of magic worth noting - if they dabbled in magic at all, it was only insofar as they possessed magical items. Offhand, if the perfectly annoying librarian wasn't lying about the extensiveness of his wards, Chris could only think of a few up to the challenge of the theft - mature imps, vampires, pixies, faeries, an unusually talented werewolf, a highly skilled alchemist, or a demon. Of those, imps and vampires had plenty magic of their own. They didn't waste time on tomes written by lesser species.

Werewolf, alchemist, or demon then. The culprit, if there was one, could be something else entirely but those were his best bet. Demon...why did it seem that books and Sable were inexplicably intertwined? He never had gotten the bastard to tell him why he had that collection of spell books so heavily warded and enchanted. Sable was obsessed with the things. Hunted and hoarded the things.

Stupid bastard. He would run off when Chris was actually willing to ask for his help.

Damn it all, could he not go five minutes without thinking about his...without thinking about that stupid demon?

Continuing to swear, Chris abruptly changed directions and made his way toward the east side of town, a few blocks east of the river to the apartments and condos where Winston lived. Once inside, he turned invisible and made his way up to the seventeenth floor.

Halfway down the hallway was condo 17A. Passing through the door, Chris bypassed the kitchen, dining room, and living room before finally reaching two doors - one turned out to be the bedroom, so he passed through the last door.

A tingle ran over him, signaling he'd passed through the wards, and he stood invisible in the middle of the room.

He was no expert, not by any stretch, but dating a certain stupid, book-obsessed, entirely too touchy-feely demon had taught him a few things. At a glance, the books in this room were plenty enough to kill for - at least, some paranormals would see it that way. Come to think of it...

...Yes, that was the thing bothering him. Chris swore. He was stupid. Completely and utterly so fucking stupid he couldn't stand himself.

Why would anyone go to all the trouble and effort to break into such a hard to reach condo, through complicated wards, only to steal one book. With a rucksack, it wouldn't be difficult for a paranormal with that much talent to carry off several

books. At the very least, a book bag or tote could carry off a bare minimum of five books.

He could sell any one of these and retire. If he'd been the thief, he would have carried off several and set himself up for the next ten lifetimes. Any thief worth his salt would have. Chris started to speak to Doug - then remembered he'd taken the earring off.

"Goddamn it, Sable!" he swore to the air. He strode from the library and retraced his steps back out to the street. Stupid demon lord. If the bastard was going to vanish, then he should have to vanish completely. From his thoughts and everything.

Swiftly he made his way back to the agency, slamming the door behind him and stomping into the office.

Ramshackle. Pathetic. Sad. Someday, though, his agency would shine. All he had to do was forget about Sable and focus on the bastard trying to trick him into locating an obscure spell book, which was obviously the game.

"Hey, boss," Doug said. He sat behind his desk; a weird sight, to see something as fearsome looking as a nearly-mature imp sitting casually behind a scuffed and wobbly desk. "Tried to get in touch with you earlier..." He looked meaningfully at Chris's ear.

Chris ignored him. "Learn anything of interest?"

"Yeah, apparently book thefts are down this quarter. Pie thieves are on the rise, so you might want to keep a closer eye on the strawberry masterpiece your mom sent over."

The words took a moment to register. Chris looked up, feeling happier than he had all day. "My mom sent over a strawberry pie? Really?"

"Really," Doug answered. "With the stipulation that you share it with me and Sable."

Chris's brief happiness died. "I'll share it with you. That demon hasn't been around so he's not getting anything. At all. Ever."

"You're a very cute pouter. I can see why you got away with so much growing up."

Chris rolled his eyes. "I liked you better when you were meek and mild and obedient. This smartass thing you're doing has got to go."

Doug snorted but otherwise said nothing. He flipped through his notebook, and Chris could hear the idle thumping of his heavy tail on the floor. "No one has heard anything about book thieves. My bakery hook up says someone lifted a pie while she was in the back. A couple of pickpockets, someone tried to break into that jewelry store up on Rhubarb Blvd. That's about it. Could be isolated?"

"Tell me something," Chris said slowly. "If you were a highly-skilled, magically powerful thief, and you managed to sneak your way into a library that would make paranormal bibliophiles embarrass themselves, what would you do?"

"Clean the place out," Doug said promptly. "Take as much as possible, which in my case is quite a bit. Hell, just a few would go..." His eyes widened as comprehension dawned. "There's no way I'd take just one, no matter how valuable that one was. He's lying."

Chris nodded. "Yes, but what precisely is the lie? Did he lend it out? Did he never have it? Why send us on this ridiculous goose chase?" He steepled his fingers and glared into space.

Doug drummed his fingers on his desk top. "He didn't smell much like magic. Must have gotten someone to do the warding. Possibly he reneged on payment? The abnormal who did the work might have taken it in revenge?"

"That's certainly a possibility," Chris said, quietly impressed with his assistant - who had come so far in just a year and a half. Clearly Doug was meant for this work, at least for the time being. It was startling how surprisingly painful it was to think Doug might want to move on someday.

Fucking hell, what was with him today?

Chris shoved away the answer that tried to rise up, not willing to dredge up thoughts of that demon again. "It's also possible he knows the book's location but can't get to it."

"But in that case wouldn't he just try to play that he saw something of the thief? To lead us in the right direction? Hell, he could have come up with something that would explain how he saw the thief. Maybe a quarrel or something." He made a

face. "Like Pollock."

"I don't think this guy is as smart as Pollock, which isn't saying much really," Chris said. Pollock was the man from whom he'd taken Doug. "Maybe we should go ask him if he's seen any books around lately."

Doug snorted but otherwise made no reply.

"So my best guess," Chris said finally, "Is that he wants the book but can't get it. He's trying to trick us into getting it for him. So really the crux of the case hasn't changed - we need to find the book. Then we'll figure out the rest of it."

"You need to ask Sable," Doug said.

Chris glared into his cup of tea. Normally the dark house blend went a long way toward improving his mood, but lately everything tasted like dust to him. "That would be the Sable who has now been 'indisposed' for the past six days with nary a word to me as to why? Forget it. I know when I've been dumped and I'm not asking the bastard for help."

"How do you know you've been dumped, Boss? It's entirely possible-"

"I don't want to hear it!" Chris snapped, slamming his hand down on the table. Disgusted with himself, he drained the long-cooled contents of his cup and then stood up. "Even at my worst, I never just ignored a lover for six days running." He scowled at the look Doug was giving him. "Look, I'll go check out his office. That's where he keeps the most important volumes. If anyone in this city is likely to have it, it's him." The rest were carefully stored elsewhere; Sable had a collection that paled Winston's room thrice over.

Doug rolled his eyes. "You do that. I'm going back to the office to look over our notes and see if we missed something." Which translated as 'I'm getting sick of your snarling and am going to go enjoy the peace and quiet while it lasts.'

"Fine," Chris said. "I'll be back later."

Outside he quickly made his way to the Tantalus, ghosting a block away. Inside, he took an elevator up to the floor two down from Sable's offices at the top, then took the stairs the rest of the way.

At the desk, the secretary remained oblivious to his presence, and Chris passed through into Sable's office.

Dropping his ghost form, he crossed the lavish office - oddly dark in the light of a few lamps, the curtains strangely closed - to the bookcase in the corner. It was tall, containing six shelves, and appeared wholly normal until close proximity revealed layers of incantations and curses that would make even the strongest magical creatures wince in pain. Doug would go nowhere near the bookcase if he could help it. Only Sable could get through the deadly layers of spell work.

Never had Sable explained to him why he so carefully guarded a bunch of spell books. There was a lot Sable never bothered to tell him, something that had been getting to him more and more...and now the bastard demon had vanished.

Damn it, did his mind never shut off? Forcing away thoughts of the stupid demon, Chris focused his attention on the bookcase. The titles on most were hard to read; the lettering faded, the leather itself cracked and worn, completely torn and split on a few volumes.

There. Sure enough.

Stupid bastard. If he wasn't so busy hiding, he could have helped Chris solve the case two days ago. Not that he wanted Sable helping him in any way, but still. Now he had definitive proof that bastard Winston was lying. Sable hadn't added any books to this case since the man-eating one.

Then again, he'd thought just maybe he and Sable were the real thing and that little theory had proven to be horribly flawed.

The soft brush of the door across carpet brought him jerking around. Chris blinked.

"Beautiful, I didn't think I'd see you again quite this quickly." A pleased smile curved Sable's mouth and he stalked across the room toward him.

Chris exploded. "Where the hell have you been? I could have solved my case two days ago if you'd been around! Always in my way when I don't need you and vanished when I could actually use your help and if you wanted to end our relationship you could have found a better way than vanishing for six days you goddamn ass." He glared as Sable's smile turned into a confused, concerned frown. "Stay the hell away from me. I only came to see if you had the book."

Sable reached out for him, ignoring the threats Chris hurled. "Christian...Beloved, why on earth would you think I want to end our relationship? I have said you belong to me and I meant it."

"Yeah, right," Chris replied acidly, jerking back, away, cursing when he collided with the back of a sofa. "Lovers don't vanish without leaving a note for six whole days. If you're tired of me, fine. I just wish you'd found a better way to-" He was cut off by a hard, bruising kiss, Sable immediately taking possession of his mouth, not releasing him from the drugging torment until Chris had forgotten what precisely what he'd wanted to say. "Don't do that again," he finally managed.

In reply, Sable simply kissed him again, leaving Chris gasping for breath, struggling to recall he was angry. "You're a bastard, Sable."

Sable sighed softly and drew him into a tight embrace. "I am sorry, beloved. I did not expect the work I was doing to be so demanding. I thought to be gone a few hours, and did not realize days had passed until my secretary told me."

"What work?" Chris asked, hoping he didn't sound as plaintive as he suspected. Damn it. He was not caving and letting Sable get away with his shitty behavior just because he'd badly missed the sight and feel and smell and taste and damn it all to hell.

Hands traced with too-knowing familiarity up and down his back, caressing and soothing that would make Chris even angrier than he was if it didn't feel so damn good. "Something that concerns you, actually," Sable murmured, moving one hand from Chris's back to his face, forcing him to look up. "Though I believe you mentioned something about a case?"

Chris jerked away. "You're still in trouble, you damn demon. Six days, Sable! Six days! The last time a guy vanished like that, I finally found him making out in the park with someone new."

Sable yanked him back and held him so tightly Chris could barely draw a breath - and any thought of breathing immediately fled as he was treated to another of those dizzying, horribly distracting kisses. Right from the first those kisses had been his undoing. "You are mine, Christian. I am hoping forever."

"What?" Chris asked, blinking.

Releasing him, Sable strode over to the bookcase and quirked a brow at him. "What was it you needed from me, beloved? You were looking at my books..."

"My sanity would be nice," Chris muttered, then with a sigh joined Sable. Solve case, then go home and let the bastard suffer. For seven days. See who liked it then. Tersely he explained the case to his lover, careful to stay out of touching range.

Sable shook his head when Chris finished. "You are, of course, quite correct. I've had this book for years. I bought it from a young man who didn't understand what he'd inherited from his uncle - and had no desire to ever understand. If he wants it, I can only say it is then imperative he never gets it. That particular book was actually written by an enslaved demon; it contains spells no mortal should mess with." His face darkened. "Demon summoning included."

Chris cocked his head, curious. "You've never spoken about your books before, Sable. Why are you now?"

"My books are boring, beloved. At least so long as they stay locked up. There are far more interesting things to do." He grinned. "Especially when you're around." He reached out and snagged Chris's wrist, dragging him forward, holding fast when Chris attempted to slip away. "So am I going to be in trouble for very long?"

"Yes," Chris said, frost in his voice. "How would you like it if I'd vanished without a word for six damn days and then came back and said 'oh, I didn't realize'?"

Sable grimaced. "You have won your point, beloved. If I show you what I was working on, perhaps you will start to forgive me?"

"I'm still mad at you for what you and my mom did over dinner," Chris retorted.

"That is true," Sable said with a soft chuckle. He ran a hand through Chris's hair, tousling and then smoothing it, then dipped his head to lick and tease at Chris's lips before finally taking a proper kiss. "You were a very cute child, Christian. Why does that always upset you?"

"Because!"

Sable laughed and finally let him go. "Come, beloved. I will show you why I have been gone six days."

"It had better be a good reason," Chris grumbled. He made a face. "Though perhaps it should wait until I take care of my reprehensible client." He fought a sigh. The money he could have charged would have covered the bills and actually given him a bit of leeway. Ah, well. They'd just have to make do until a good case came along.

A dark expression took over Sable's face. "I will deal with him. It's entirely possible I've encountered him or one of his blood before. They all tend to be from the same greedy, selfish, uncaring crowd."

Chris lifted his brows at the oddly vehement words.

Sable caught his look and sighed. "The summoning of demons is hard work. Harder than most people believe. I was enslaved for a long, long time before I finally broke free...and in that time the man who'd bound me tried and failed to summon ten other demons. After me. I don't know how many before me. They all died, or arrived...incomplete and I had to kill them. I won't complain that I'm here; I have no desire to leave...but I'm in no rush to see humans annihilate countless of my brothers for power they will never understand."

"Sable..." Chris reached up and kissed him softly, sinking a hand into the wicked-soft curls of Sable's untamable hair.

"It would seem I'm a bit more tense than I thought," Sable said when they finally broke apart.

"Tense about what?"

Sable smiled and led him out of the office and toward the elevators, down to the third floor and through a dimly lit hall to what Chris knew was the Grand Ballroom. Each hotel had one, but the one in the Tantalus outshone all of them. It was green and gold, a lavish display of velvet and silk, the ceiling dripping crystal chandeliers that shone just the right amount of soft light down upon the dance floor.

Chris drew a sharp breath as magic washed over him upon entering the ballroom. It was....different. Magic filled every inch of it, pouring from the...whatever it was in the center.

A star. More precisely, a pentacle. It took up the majority of the ballroom, leaving most of the actual dance floor in the very center...and it was formed with silver-gray flames. Like flames made of moonlight, as dark as storm clouds at the base. The lights had been turned off, leaving Chris with the impression that they were indeed surrounded by flickering moonlight. "What..."

Sable came up behind him, one hand sliding around his waist to rest on his abdomen, the other tangling with Chris's hand. "Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful...what is it?"

"Demon fire," Sable said softly, breath warm against his cheek. "Oddly enough, this is one of the spells which that book your former client sought speaks much of..."

Chris drew an unsteady breath, suddenly feeling terribly anxious. "What spell?"

Sable drew back and turned Chris around to face him, caressing the lines of one cheekbone. "To make you my consort."

"Your what?" Chris stumbled back, away, panic washing through him. "That's...no way, Sable." Consort. That was so over his head it was ridiculous. "What are you thinking? Surely you're not so desperate to stay on earth that you'd take me to consort..."

"No," Sable growled, surging forward, grabbing him by the shoulders and dragging him close enough to kiss hard, leaving his lips bruised. "You are mine. That means you are to be my consort. I want you to dance with me because it's you. No other reason, beloved." Sable's face softened, his grip easing. "That is the irony of it all, in the end. To stay here and not be forced back into hell I must have an anchor...but finding you, I care about none of that. I love you, Christian. That is all that matters to me."

Chris shook his head, more shaken by the words than he was able to admit. "But that...that's a lot of...power, responsibility." He knew roughly how it worked - the consort was bound forever to the immortal demon, sharing his power, life. A consort helped keep reign of the territory, and took care of the problems that extended beyond the territory, which a demon lord could not leave. He would be Sable's equal, Sable's representative beyond his territory.

The worst though...if one of them died, so too would the other. Meaning if he screwed up, Sable would suffer. What did he know about being a consort? He was just a barely-getting-by detective. Sable was something else altogether...someone far above him. "Sable-I'm not fit to be a consort. I...that kind of power...what if I do something wrong?"

Sable smiled one of his rare, soft smiles that always made breathing tricky, and cupped his face in one hand. "I think the only thing I could say at this point, beloved, is 'shut up, stop worrying, and come dance with me.'"

Chris tried to glare, but he was simply too nervous and overwhelmed to manage it. Words spilled from him without permission. "I don't know how to dance."

Sable laughed, muffling the sound of it by burying his head in the hollow of Chris's shoulder, chuckles almost hot against his neck. A moment later Chris felt a butterfly-soft kiss pressed to his skin, and then Sable rose to his full height. "Do you love me, Christian?"

With a sigh Chris gave up. Hopefully they would never learn the hard way this was probably a mistake. "You know I do, Sable - though you're still in trouble."

"Of course," Sable said with a smile, then bent to kiss him. It was gentle, slow, the sort that left Chris feeling as though he were pleasantly melting. "Come and dance, beautiful."

Chris swallowed, wanting to turn and run, but at last nodded and followed Sable through the flickering moonlight flames. They felt hot and cold, soothing and tormenting, and then they were through and in the center of the pentacle. All around him he could feel the weight of complicated magic...and in it he could feel Sable. Rather, Sable's energy, his signature brand of storm-based magic. He'd never felt it so...intimately before.

Sable stood in the very center, waiting patiently for him to adjust to being in the center of such a fierce and complicated spell. Chris felt dizzy, short of breath. He finally looked directly at Sable, soothed by what he saw in those storm-cloud eyes. When Sable held out his hand, Chris placed his own in it. "Teach me how to dance, Sable."

"Yes," Sable said, drawing him close, kissing him one last time before he began to show his soon-to-be consort how to dance.

Case #095: Poor Man's Genie

Chris buried his hands deeper into the pockets of his beat up brown leather jacket, and tried to pull his head as far into it as he possibly could, but even it and the heavy wool sweater underneath couldn't keep out the biting chill of the snowy afternoon. Only two-thirty and already it looked as though it were six o'clock at night. He knocked on the door and stood huddled and shivering on the steps of a house just on the outskirts of town, wishing for his drafty office because at least the draft didn't come with snow.

Hopefully this latest case would be a lucrative one. He would gladly help anyone who asked, but he wished occasionally somebody wealthy needed his assistance. Or at least someone wealthy and willing to share. Maybe this guy would be one of those.

The door opened slowly to reveal a figure that immediately dashed all his hopes. Thin, wrinkled, and rigid-looking despite the age that forced him to use a cane, he looked exactly like someone who resented spending money in any way, shape or form. Chris sensed the man wasn't nearly so aged and frail as he appeared. Something in his posture and the cruel twist to his mouth, the hard and unflinching dark brown eyes. "What do you want, boy?"

"My name is Christian White. You requested my services?"

"You look a mite young to be playing detective."

Chris narrowed his blue eyes, temper beginning to simmer. "I do not play at anything, Mr. Pollock. If you deem me inadequate then that is your loss. Good day to you, sir." He turned to leave.

"Wait one moment, boy."

"Detective or Chris will suffice," Chris said icily. "Boy will not."

"Do come in, Detective," Pollock waved him inside and closed and locked the door behind them. "Would you care for some tea?"

"No, thank you." Chris said more levelly, shrugging off his coat and hanging it on the coat rack by the door when Pollock motioned him to do so. "You mentioned something had been stolen from you?"

"Yes." Pollock led him into what turned out to be a living room, as stiff and unwelcoming as the man who owned it, all black and gray and metal. He pointed to a black bookcase, which was filled with knickknacks and other miscellany - not a book to be seen anywhere in the room. One shelf, the middle of seven, was empty. "I had a life clock there."

Chris whistled. "No wonder you didn't want to speak over the phone."

"Precisely," the man said sharply. "I am trusting you to retrieve it for me and not simply take it for yourself."

"I've no interest in such things, Mr. Pollock." Chris scoffed. "One does not run a successful detective agency by stealing from clients."

"Hmmm," Pollock murmured in disbelief. "I'm sure your fees are highway robbery, like most of your lot."

"My fees are determined after the case is successfully concluded," Chris replied, proud that he managed not to roll his eyes. "I never charge what my clients can't easily give."

"And if I dislike your fee?"

Chris sighed. "It is always open for discussion."

Pollock was silent for so long Chris started to think he'd fallen asleep standing.

"Very well."

Chris again fought the urge to roll his eyes. "Then start at the beginning and tell me everything that occurred. Do not leave a single detail out."

"Oh, I have no idea exactly what happened. I wasn't at home when the robbery occurred. If I had been, you can be assured it would have been a failed attempt."

Chris reminded himself, several times, that it was bad policy to strangle clients. "Then there were no witnesses?"

"There was one," Pollock said, sounding both irate and bored. "I'll summon him." He pulled out an old, antique pocket watch and flicked it hard with his fingers.

"Thank you."

When the person did finally enter, all Chris saw was red. A bright, obnoxious viridian, all of it focused on Pollock.

An imp stood in the door way. A tall one; if he stood to his full height he would probably be over six feet. His wings, which should have been folded neatly and ready to catch the wind at a moment's notice, instead hung like dead things around his shoulders and chest. It was not unlike a child wrapped in a ragged, comforting blanket. On his arms and legs, and what he could see between the thin membranes of the wings, were a multitude of bruises, welts, and scars. His claws had been cut back all the way to his fingers, makings hands that should have been fine and elegant instead appear clumsy.

Worst of all was his forehead, where the horns that gave an imp his magical strength had been sawed off. Chris could see where the poorly done job had grazed skin. He looked into the imp's eyes, which were mismatched, one gold, one green. They should have been bright, glowing with magic and power. Instead they were dim, filled with shadows and fear.

Chris couldn't stand it. He knew all too well what it was like to be bullied, put down, mistreated simply for existing. That nearly all of the abnormal races abused imps simply because they were gentle by nature enraged him. This was not the first maltreated imp he'd seen, but it was one of the worst.

He kept his temper, but only just barely. "This is your witness?" he asked.

"Yes. I should have known better than to leave it home alone. Generally I take it with me, but honestly it gets tiresome having to lug your servants around all the time."

One punch was all it would take. Chris held himself in check. "Then if you will excuse us. Witnesses talk better without an audience. If there is a problem, I will let you know."

Pollock nodded and held out the old pocket watch. "Take this; he'll do whatever you say."

"However did you acquire a poor man's genie?" Chris asked, using the somewhat mocking term for imps. They were second only to demons when it came to versatility of magic, nor were they too far behind in power. There were some who

said a mature imp could probably equal a demon of moderate power. But no one knew for sure, because imps by nature were not aggressive for all that they looked like fierce gargoyles. They were, in fact, generally given to peaceful, submissive behavior.

Unfortunately, over the years this had led to other races ruthlessly abusing them. The popular thing to do was to bind imps, make them magically-bound slaves - all the power and ability meant imps could do a great deal, and it had become something of a joke to call them a cheap version of real genies. Able to do everything except grant wishes. A poor man's genie.

Pollock grinned. "I'm very good at acquiring things." He made a face at the imp. "Though you, for all your power, are not quite what I would have chosen if I'd had more choice."

The imp said nothing, merely stood quietly, staring at the floor.

"Behave, imp," Pollock said, and Chris didn't trust the look he sent the imp. It screamed the man had something to hide. Which really came as no surprise.

He waited until Pollock was gone, then dropped the pocket watch on the coffee table and sat down in an armchair. Crossing one leg over the other, he steepled his fingers and eyed the imp. "What's your name?"

"I don't have one," the imp said. He was staring at the pocket watch, eyes flicking briefly up to Chris, then back to the watch.

Chris grimaced. "That figures. How long have you been imprisoned?"

"A long time," the imp said. "To Pollock, nearly thirty years. Before that, I changed hands quite a bit." Something resembling a weak smile appeared briefly on his face, but it vanished almost immediately. "I'm not a very good poor genie, I suppose."

"Your eyes are mismatched," Chris said. "That's not terribly common."

The imp shrugged. "Nothing special; my mother was from the southern regions, my father from the north. Slightly different magic."

"So you're especially versatile."

"Yes."

"Yet he abuses you like that? Why?"

The imp shrugged again. "I tend not to be as obedient as he likes, I guess." He flicked his eyes up again, ever so briefly, then once more stared at the watch. "That doesn't control me quite like he expected. I...can still voice opinions."

"I see," Chris said, impressed. A bound imp generally had very little ability to do as he liked - even when and where he walked was restricted to his master's will. "He hasn't simply increased the power of the binding?"

"Tried. Doesn't take. He would have to free me and then start fresh." Another shrug. "Won't risk it."

Chris nodded. "So tell me about the night of the theft." He sat back, fingers still steepled, and closed his eyes. "Tell me everything, leave nothing out."

"I think my master did it," the imp said softly.

"What?" Chris opened his eyes again.

The imp was hunched over, wings up as if to protect him though they were in such poor condition they wouldn't protect against much. He was clearly waiting to be struck, and Chris did indeed feel like striking someone - just not the imp. Mismatched green and yellow eyes watched him with trepidation.

"That really doesn't surprise me somehow," Chris said dryly. "But how do you figure?"

The imp hesitated. "Are you...you don't...I'm not supposed to speak against him."

"Start at the beginning and tell me everything."

"Are you...really a detective? Like in the books?"

Chris's eyebrows went up. "Not quite that exciting, I assure you. But yes, I really am a detective. Normals don't have much

use for me, but I plan on being one of the best in the field for abnormals." He dropped his hands and leaned forward in his seat. "You're interested in detective work?"

"Our neighbor reads mysteries, and she always throws the books out after she's done. I...hide them in the attic and read after master goes to bed." On his back, the imp's wings fluttered agitatedly.

"Interesting," Chris said, hatred of Pollock continuing to increase. "So tell me why you think Pollock is the one responsible."

The imp looked at him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Nodding, the imp snapped his fingers and was suddenly holding a small notebook, spiral-bound across the top. He flipped it open and then held the notebook out for Chris to see.

Chris whistled. "Wow. I'm going to guess he doesn't know you do this?"

The imp shook his head. "No. It...started out as something to do. Taking notes like detectives always do."

"I don't," Chris said, flashing a brief smile. "Too lazy, I think. Prefer to just remember it. This is impressive. You even recorded pieces of the conversations."

"He argued with her, finally drove her away. She was furious - claimed Pollock stole the life clock from her grandfather. Started out peacefully enough, but Pollock was demanding an unfair price. She warned him she wasn't finished yet. Three days later the life clock was stolen, but I don't think by her."

Chris nodded as he continued to flip through the pages of meticulous notes the imp had made. All manner of details had been included - times, clothing, what was said, who had been standing where, literally everything, all of it in a small, neat hand. "You do this for fun?"

The imp ducked his head, wrapping arms and wings around himself. "I used to write down just ordinary stuff - what I did for the day, what master did, who visited, who called, just...playing." His wings fluttered. "Pretending to be a detective. That's why I wrote down the fight over the life clock. Then the robbery happened, and I thought I could solve it by myself. But I realized almost right away that Pollock was behind it..."

And he couldn't do anything against his master. Even now, he was only able to say and do all he was because control had been partially handed over to Chris for the interview, and Pollock was separated from the controlling pocket watch.

"Hmm...." Chris sat back in his chair once more, legs crossed, fingers steepled, eyes closed. "So in all likelihood, he set up the 'theft' to frame the woman threatening to take it. Even if that didn't work, he can legitimately claim he no longer has it and you're the only one who can prove that isn't true." He opened his eyes. "Why on earth did he let me speak to you?"

"He doesn't realize I know this much." The imp looked at him, his dim eyes beginning to glow the slightest bit. "I can't do much, but I don't have to answer questions he doesn't ask. He knew I saw the fight three days ago; it never occurred to him to wonder if I might know more."

Chris smiled. "I think it's time we had a little chat with Pollock, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see, and I know this is hard thing to ask and I have no right, but trust me." Chris moved to the door and was unsurprised to see Pollock skulking around in the hallway. "If you want to come in, I think I know what might have happened."

Pollock frowned at him, looking as though he'd swallowed a lemon. "Oh, really. That quickly?"

"Yes, actually." Chris stepped aside so Pollock could enter the living room and motioned for him to sit. "According to my research, sir, you are responsible for the theft."

"That's preposterous. Why would I steal something in my own living room? I don't need to steal it if I already own it."

Laughing, Chris began to lay out what he could see happened from the imp's notes. "You got into an argument with Ms. Wilson, who claimed to be the rightful owner of the life clock. From what I know of life clocks, she was probably correct. You must be distantly related for the clock to work at all, as they are made to work for a specific bloodline only. So your claim, while weak, is valid. This sparked the argument between the two of you, and Ms. Wilson vowed the matter wasn't finished.

No doubt she was planning to return with plenty of evidence and documentation to settle the matter. To avoid that, you arranged for the clock to be stolen - ostensibly to frame Ms. Wilson, but that won't hold for long when she fails to produce the clock. So, at the very least, she can't harass you for what you no longer have." Chris laughed. "Something that wasn't terribly hard for me to figure out. Why on earth did you hire a detective when you knew there was a risk he might actually solve the case?"

"You were supposed to decide it was that bitch," Pollock said. "Since when is a detective in this area worth more than the cost of his bribe?" He stood up and snatched the pocket watch from the table. "Besides, if you don't do what I need, it's easy enough to get rid of you and hire another. All I need is a detective who will state that the bitch did the stealing." He gripped the pocket watch hard and barked at the imp. "Get rid of him."

"Master..."

"Now!"

It was obvious the imp was struggling to resist, but orders were orders.

Chris laughed as the imp attacked, choosing to attack physically rather than magically - even under orders, it seemed he wouldn't do anything worse than he strictly had to, and physical fighting would give Chris a chance.

The imp fell right through him, and Chris laughed at the expression on both their faces.

Pollock's face took on a peculiar shade of red. "You're a ghost. But that's impossible."

"I'm no ghost." Chris kept his intangible form, knowing how disconcerting it was to be able to see right through him. He winked briefly at the imp, then returned his attention to Pollock. "I'm actually only half-ghost. Weird things happen when humans play around with black magic. Go ahead, keep trying to hurt me. You won't get anywhere. I can vanish before the imp finishes a spell, and you can't do anything without your slave."

He smirked as Pollock seethed in silence. "It really was dumb of you to hire me. Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to declare this case unsolved and walk away from it. No one will ever hear from me that you stole your own artifact to keep it from its rightful owner. If she comes knocking at my door, I plead ignorance. In return, you'll pay my fee for wasting my afternoon and then we ignore one another's existence."

"What's your price?"

Chris pointed. "Give me the imp. I'll make more use out of it than you, and you said yourself he's not a very good one."

"Do you know how hard a powerful imp is to come by?"

"You have his horns, what more do you really need if he's as annoying as you say?"

Pollock narrowed his eyes, looking more like a confused old man than an actual threat. "Why would you want him?"

"Make a good assistant. I'm half ghost, but that doesn't stop everything, does it? Let me have him, or I'll make sure everyone knows you have the life clock stashed somewhere in this house. I could probably find it without too much trouble." Chris grinned. "Not much you can hide from a ghost, is there?"

"Fine," Pollock said. "I never much trusted that rat anyway." He threw the pocket watch at Chris, who caught it easily. "Now get out."

"Pleasure doing business with you," Chris said, pocketing the watch and motioning for the imp to follow him.

Outside he started laughing, and pulled the watch from his pocket. "Do you know how to break the ward?"

The imp frowned. "Depends on whether or not you want to keep the watch."

"Not really. It's kind of ugly, don't you think?" He held it out. "Here, do whatever you want with it."

"Why did you ask to keep me?" The imp took the watch as if it was made of glass, or a living creature.

"Because it was the easiest way to get you out of there," Chris said, pulling up the collar of his beat-up jacket to keep the worst of the snow off. "So how do I break the ward?"

"Destroying the watch will destroy the spell. It's why I was sort of surprised you just left it on the table."

Chris shrugged. "So destroy it."

Instead of hesitating, as he'd thought the imp would, the watch was immediately crushed in hands that were far stronger than they looked. Chris grinned. "Hungry? My mom would love to fuss over you, and if you're looking for a job I could use an assistant. Pay isn't great, I'm barely making ends meet right now, but once I start acquiring a rep that'll change. What do you say?"

"You...you don't want to bind me?" He was the saddest thing Chris had ever seen, a bedraggled, beat up imp slowly being covered with slushy snow, tail twitching nervously, wings shifting with an urge to fly and it must hurt the imp badly that his wings were so torn and ill-treated that flight was impossible. Never mind the horns...if it was the last thing he did, Chris wanted to see this creature healthy and happy.

"My mother would flay me alive if she caught me enslaving creatures. Never mind my father, the ol' stick in the mud." Chris rolled his eyes. "Like a ghost has any fucking right to bitch about anyone else's ethics when he's got a kid running around."

The imp surprised him by laughing. "That's powerful black magic."

Chris smiled fondly as they turned down a small street. At the end of it, half-lost to the snow that was rapidly growing heavy, was an old, beat up manor. Even from a distance it was obvious the massive front gate was old and rusted. "Yes, it was. My mother hasn't tried anything like it since, though if anyone could qualify as a black witch, it would be her."

"She's married to a ghost?"

"Only in a commonwealth way, since there's not a priest alive - that we've found - that'll marry them properly." Chris looked at his parents' house, the lights on in the front room and in their bedroom, and he knew his mother would have already set a place for them, somehow always knowing. "It's hard to find what they have; I keep hoping I will but I have my doubts." He winked. "Being a detective doesn't leave much room for dating. It'll be nice to have an assistant, if you're willing."

The imp smiled - hesitantly, briefly, but his eyes were already far lighter than they had been, and free of the binding they even had a bit of their magic glow back. "Mas-Pollock won't just let me go, I think. He's far too nasty."

"Let him try something," Chris said lazily. "I'll show him to mess with me. I've been in nastier fights than anything he can offer." He stopped suddenly, then laughed. "It occurs to me I never really introduced myself, did I?" He held out his hand. "Christian White, paranormal detective. Most call me Chris."

The imp shook his hand slowly. "Um...nice to meet you."

"I guess you need a name, huh?" Chris laughed. "Any ideas?"

"Not really," the imp said quietly.

Chris frowned in thought, pausing briefly as they reached the gates of his parents' house. "My parents used to be friends with a cop - completely normal, until he helped my mom out one night, wanted to ask her out, and long story short met my father. He sort of freaked, but they all became good friends." Chris looked up, snow catching on his lashes, then finally pushed the gate open and led the way to the house. "He was killed a few years ago by a goblin. But he's the one that got me into detective work - said not to join the force, that he always wished he'd opened his own agency. His name was Douglas - how does that sound?"

"I like it." Douglas smiled.

Case #329: Phil's Case

Phil made a face at the door as it closed behind Chris and Doug.

Men.

What do you mean you work here?

You're still too new.

You're 100% human, it isn't safe.

Some other time, when we have an easy case. Maybe.

On and on and on. Honestly. Phil rested her chin in her hand and played idly with a gold pen, frowning at the top of Doug's desk. She answered the phone often enough stupid Chris could at least give her a desk of her own. Then again, the jerk apparently hadn't noticed she'd been doing most of his office work for the past six months.

Did they think she showed up everyday just for her health? Certainly not her sanity. And only she could stumble across a detective agency run by two gay, paranormal men. Phil rolled her eyes and leaned back, resting her knee-length, spike-heeled red leather boots on the corner of Doug's desk. Her skirt, red silk overlaid with cream lace, slid down her legs a few inches.

At least they were out of her hair. The peace and quiet, plus no Chris, would give her a chance to study the books his mother had lent her - books on witchcraft, alchemy, black magic and the various abnormals inhabiting the human world.

Normal generally referred to humans who had no clue the abnormals existed. In her city the normals and paranormals were roughly divided by Sable's hotels. Everything south of the hotels and right up to the river tended to be populated by paranormals. If there were normals at all on the south side, it was largely believed that they weren't paranormal yet. This had once been the case with her.

Abnormal referred to all nonhuman creatures - demon, imp, vampire, werewolf, goblin, gremlin, and so many others it made her head hurt. She wondered, sometimes, how she'd managed to skip all the lesser abnormals and gone straight to being possessed by a demon.

Paranormal referred to both those humans involved in some way with abnormals, and the abnormals. The two words were frequently interchanged, the only real point being 'not normal' - as in not properly a part of the human world.

Why so many of them preferred to live where they didn't belong, she hadn't quite figured out. The general impression was 'better, much better,' which seemed adequate as answers went. For the time being.

Opening her leather satchel, which she'd dropped on Doug's desk the minute the imp had vacated, she fumbled around for a book on abnormals and technology.

Most books on the subject, like this one, were hand written or typed and poorly bound. This one was hand-written and poorly bound, making it an all around fun read. On technology.

Rather, the glaring lack thereof. Funny how she'd never noticed that the technology she saw whenever she traveled outside the city wasn't present in the city. Abnormals and most technology just didn't get along. Some stuff, like ovens, refrigerators, would often work. But not much beyond those basics. Everything else went funky, went bad, and went into the garbage. Unless, like Chris's SUV it was kept long enough that it learned to run on magic. Or, like Sable's hotels, were made to use magic - something the visiting normals never noticed.

So she knew all that, had known it, but that didn't make her fit to start trying the whole detective thing. She was just fit for fetching coffee, answering the phone, and harassing them.

Typical office girl.

Jerks.

Closing the book with a snap, Phil gave up on studying and just let her mind wander. What were their other reasons for not letting her do anything?

Vampires. She wasn't immune or otherwise protected against what they could do. Nobles and tenants - those vampires living within a Noble's realm - were safe enough. Peasants, those vampires that refused to pledge fealty, were far more vulgar. They weren't, in fact, much better than goblins. Their victims usually wound up dead, the opinion being that humans were food and nothing more. As opposed to Nobles, who saw humans as more than food. But all used their beauty to hunt; over the centuries, it had proven the most effective method.

Chris and Doug talked about it like that was a remarkable way to go about things. Hello, did they think she dressed well to impress herself? She was confident, not narcissistic. Looking good went a lot further than looking bad. If she were a vampire, she'd prefer charming to scaring her dinner too.

Men.

Phil stood up and settled her skirt back in place, then reached up to make sure her hair, tightly French-braided and wrapped in a tidy but cute bun, was still neat. Smoothing the front of her silk blouse, she pondered whether or not to bother

with her coat for the two blocks round trip for coffee.

The door opened almost soundlessly. But all of Sable's money and Chris's continued efforts could not make the door stop creaking completely. She's asked him once why he didn't just replace it, but that had gotten a typical man response if ever she'd heard one. "Can I help you?" Phil asked pleasantly.

Her visitor was an old woman - abnormal, but Phil could not sense more than that. But at least she could sense that much. A month ago she wouldn't have known a normal from a paranormal. The old woman wore a faded blue and yellow shawl over her thin shoulders, a dark blue floor-length dress and wielded her cane more like a weapon, though it also looked like she could barely do so. "This is the detective agency?" she asked, voice croaky but otherwise clear.

"Yes, ma'am, this is the White Detective Agency," Phil replied. "My name is Philippa, I'm the detective on duty right now." Small lie, couldn't hurt. It would allow her to get information for Chris and Doug, and maybe then they'd let her help more. "Please, call me Phil. Take a seat, and tell me how we can help."

The cane rapped sharply on the floor, once, twice, thrice as the woman gave her a sharp look with green eyes that were far from old and feeble. "Don't you try to sweet talk me, girlie. You a detective or not."

Phil smiled. "Yes, ma'am. No more sweet talk." Just like her grandma had been. "I'm in training."

"Any good?"

"Yes, ma'am." Phil rolled her eyes "Plenty good when the boys aren't around to tell me otherwise."

The woman nodded, understanding completely. "I suppose we'll see, but you look all right to me. Bit fancy, but that's okay I s'pose."

"Why not take a seat?" Phil said, and scooted over the deep leather chair usually in front of Chris's desk. Pulling open the top right drawer of Doug's desk, she helped herself to one of his notebooks and one of the cinnamon candies he was always hoarding. Flipping the notebook open, she grabbed a pen. "Now, ma'am. What's your name?"

"Lorna Stephens. I live on Peach Avenue, in the apartment building of the same name. Number 302."

Phil nodded. "And what's the problem?"

"I'm being harassed," the woman said. "But I can't catch the thing doing it. Driving me mad and it keeps stealing stuff. I want you to figure it out."

"Of course," Phil said, breathing a secret sigh of relief. This didn't sound too hard. Exactly what she needed to prove she could handle being a detective. She could do this, and then Chris would have to shut up and let her help. "Start at the beginning," she said. "And tell me everything. Every detail helps, so leave nothing out."

The woman nodded, as if approving Phil's words, then began to speak. Phil wrote as fast as she could. The woman certainly seemed to leave nothing out.

"Wonderful," Phil said with a smile. "I wish all our clients were as thorough as you. I will see to this at once. Am I accompanying you back or shall I meet you elsewhere when I've resolved the matter."

Another nod, and this time the woman gave a gentle smile. "You're a good girl. I'll be waiting at my sister's." She rifled in her purse a moment then pulled out a small, pale green business card. "You can call this number, or come to the shop when you've gotten rid of whatever it is."

"Yes, ma'am." Phil tucked the card away in the pocket of her blazer as she slid it on. It was the exact color of her skirt, though they hadn't come as a set. Crossing the room, she shrugged into a waist length wool coat of a much darker red, wrapping a cream scarf around her neck. "Shall I walk you to the café?"

"No, dear. I should be fine." The old woman patted her shoulder. "Thank you very much. I had no idea someone like you worked here; I might have come sooner."

Phil smiled, for once not certain what to say. It wasn't often anyone thanked her for anything but a good time, and she had not had one of those since Chris had saved her from a demon.

Ever since that night, the paranormal had been her life. It had started as a crush on Chris, but rapidly faded to something else entirely. Which was just as well, as even she never stood a chance against Sable Brennus.

Chris couldn't dress well to save his life, but he did have excellent taste in men. Though she suspected that good taste had forced itself upon a recalcitrant detective. Someday she'd get Doug to give her the details.

Shaking away the errant thoughts, Phil walked the old woman to the corner and then turned east toward Peach Avenue. It was right on the dividing line between the north and south areas of town. A mere block and a half up from Lorna Stevens's address was Star Road, the dividing line and the street on which all of Sable's hotels lie.

Phil pondered what she knew of the case as she walked, pulling her scarf up to cover her head, shivering in the cold. At least it was only a chance of snow, instead of sleeting like it had been all of last week. Her breaths were white puffs in the chilly, early winter air.

Something was wreaking havoc in the woman's house. Knick-knacks went missing, most but not all reappearing in odd places around the apartment - under the sink, in the flowers on the windowsill, in the fridge...Other items, mostly dishes, were broken and the pieces scattered. Yet all her spells had not turned up the source of the problem, or even hinted at what it might be. Phil bit her lower lip, thinking.

Nothing came to mind, at least not any of the creatures she was familiar with. That could prove problematic, though if the worst it did was break dishes and hide trinkets then it probably wasn't a creature she had to worry too much about.

Her thoughts scattered as the sound of a mewling scream and Phil paused at the end of an alleyway. At the far end, against the wall of what she knew was the back of a bakery - they made the best cinnamon rolls on the planet - were three paranormals. What kind, she didn't know for certain. But two of them were drop dead gorgeous and on the south side that usually meant only one thing. Vampires. The third was less attractive but certainly not hard on the eyes; he could be anything. Phil cursed her lack of skill.

But more pressing was what they were doing; which near as she could see was torturing the poor little creature in the hands of a blonde-haired vampire. What it was, she didn't know, but its pitiful scream had turned into the most heart-breaking sobs she'd ever heard. "Just what are you boys doing?" She asked, using the tone of voice learned from her father. It had sent more than a few scurrying from the boardroom in terror, and was the reason for at least five resignations.

The men did not seem perturbed, though the non-vampire at least had the grace to look faintly guilty.

"I said, what are you doing?" Ignoring the voice that said going into the alleyway would be stupid, Phil stalked toward them, heels clicking on the pavement. Her breath misted as she added more steel to her voice. "I thought the likes of you were more interested in humans, not..." she eyed the thing in the vampire's hands, oddly entranced.

It was the cutest thing she'd ever seen. It looked like a tiny gargoyle, with a flat, squashed-looking nose and the biggest blue eyes she'd ever seen. They looked too big for its face, which was currently covered in tears and snot. Its skin was similar to Doug's, but with a bit of a greenish cast to it. Tiny claws on its miniature hands and feet and it wore a tiny sleeveless shirt and ragged pants. But the wings - the wings were beautiful. Translucent, colored like a misty rainbow. They made her think of faerie wings, as they'd been portrayed in the picture books she'd read voraciously as a child.

And these jerks were making it cry. Phil curled her hands into fists and leveled a gaze on the three men - then realized they were watching her with no small amusement.

Oh shit. Vampires. She wasn't immune.

But the creature...

"We do prefer humans," the second vampire, a pretty boy with nut-brown hair and blue-green eyes, said in a lazy drawl. "And you'll do quit nicely, pretty little thing that you are."

Phil knew she was being drawn in, could feel the vague fuzziness taking her over as she locked onto how beautiful he was. But she'd also dated more assholes than she liked to count, and it saved her. "Pretty little thing? Go to hell."

The vampires and their cohort laughed, and in that moment the creature they'd been harassing raked his claws across the arm of the blonde vampire. Screaming in shock and pain, the vampire threw it. The creature fumbled for a split second, then suddenly Phil found her arms full.

But she didn't stop to figure it out, merely held on, turned and ran.

She could hear them following her, and on this side of town no one was going to interfere in the business of peasant vampires...and whatever the other creature was. Suddenly she didn't want to know. Hopefully she wouldn't do something stupid, like break a heel. Only the fact she always wore high heels allowed to run in them as she was. "Oh shit oh shit oh

shit-"

In front of her a door flew open as a young man stepped of a store. Phil barely slowed down enough to make the sharp turn into the store, but was forced to stop as she realized she was in a cluttered antique shop. Weaving her way through the chaos, her eyes flicked to the window - the three were right outside - then to the backroom. Blowing past the polite-looking old man at the counter, Phil ducked into an even more crowded backroom and hid behind an old bureau.

The place was dim and dusty, and there was a faint odor of mold. Phil wrinkled her nose, but so long as they didn't find her she'd gladly sit in a vat of rotten eggs. What had she been thinking? Would the shop keeper give her up? Would she get him hurt? No wonder Chris always bitched about his cases, if he had to deal with unrelated problems like this whenever he went out somewhere.

Then again, Chris was a Consort. If something annoyed him, he could just set it on fire or whatever. She doubted he'd ever been in a situation like this. Though right now, she just hoped she'd live to get into another mess.

To keep from trembling, Phil focused on the creature in her arms. All the reading she'd done and the hundreds of pictures she'd looked at, she didn't recall this one anywhere. She definitely would have remembered the wings, if nothing else. The creature really was cute. It should have been ugly, and certainly the snot smeared across its tiny, pudgy face wasn't attractive...but she still didn't think anything could be more precious. "Shh..." she soothed quietly, murmurs barely audible. "It's all right now. I won't let those stupid jerks hurt you." Suddenly it occurred to her that they had been hurting it, and gingerly Phil began to look it over. But even the wings seemed all right, if slightly...wrinkled. She wanted to touch, but wasn't sure if that would hurt it or not

"You're a mess," she said with a smile, and fumbled around in her coat for a handkerchief. In the old days, she would have had a purse, but walking about the south side it was easier when you didn't have extraneous things to keep track of. Far too many creatures liked to steal, and most of them just for the hell of it. Murmuring more soft assurances, Phil wiped the creatures face clean and carefully rearranged its skewed clothing.

Voices broke the silence of the back room. Phil tensed and hugged the creature close, feeling it tremble in the hollow between throat and shoulder. Uncertain where to touch it, she carefully ran a finger up and down the narrow space between its wings. "Shh, baby. It's okay."

Bite hurt. Sorry.

"What?" Phil whispered, then bit down hard on her lip to keep from screaming in pain.

The creature had bitten her!

Sorry sorry sorry.

"Why?" She whispered, more hurt by the fact it had bitten her than the bite itself.

Can't hurt now. Bite fix.

"Miss! Miss!"

Phil whirled as the shopkeeper found her, trying to stand but tripping instead, banging against an old bookcase before landing untidily on the floor. Muttering a few choice curses, Phil ascertained the creature was okay before clambering to her feet. She set her clothes to rights, frowning at the dust that had accumulated on her skirt. "Bother it."

"Are you all right?"

"What?" Phil's head jerked up, and she looked in chagrin at the shopkeeper. "Yes, I'm fine. I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to just barge in like that; I was a bit panicked."

"Understandably so," the shopkeeper said gently. "But I ran them off; not the first time I've had hooligans like that running amuck. You look as though you could use some rest and a cup of tea, and I am happy to offer you both if you'd like."

Tea sounded wonderful, even if she was more of a coffee drinker. Phil dredged up a smile. "Thank you. I apologize for my behavior. Tea sounds wonderful, but I'm afraid I'm in the middle of a job."

The old man nodded, eyes huge behind thick glasses. He was dressed in faded black slacks and a black and grey checked shirt. They hung on his tiny frame, almost looking as though they weighed more than he did. His hair was tufts of gray, obviously brushed to hide as much of his baldness as possible. "What did you do to make two vampires and an ogre so angry?"

"Ogre?" Phil repeated faintly. "Uh-oh." It looked as though she'd been very, very lucky. Ogres didn't have a taste for humans, but they weren't opposed to beating one up if they were told. It must have been under the control of one of the vampires.

"New to this, love?" The old man asked gently. She loved most old men. When they called her darling or baby or love, they either meant it as an endearment or knew how not to sound like they were being an ass.

Phil made a face. "I guess I couldn't have made that more obvious if I'd tried."

"Were they after you or the pixie? If you'll pardon an old man his curiosity."

"Pixie?" Phil looked at the bundle cradled in her arms. "Is that what you are?"

Pixie! Jester!

"Is...is it normal for me to hear him in my head?" Phil frowned. "Or have I lost my mind?"

"They're telepathic." The old man gently grasped her upper arm and guided her through the back room and up a flight of stairs. Phil went, though part of her mind was screaming about how she obviously hadn't learned her lesson with the vampires. "Seldom do they choose to talk to anyone, though. And they aren't quite as...developed as other paranormals." He gave her an amused smile. "I am guessing you don't know what that Bite is either. You should thank your pixie and see what sort of fruit is his favorite." He pushed her into an old armchair that smelled like room freshener and dust.

"Um...I really have to be going," Phil said. "I have a case to solve and the woman is counting on me...what do you mean my pixie?"

"Tea doesn't take long," he said, and patted her hand before vanishing into what was probably the kitchen.

Phil touched her neck, frowning as her fingers came away bloody. But beyond the initial chomp, it didn't hurt at all. "Have I just been cursed or something?"

Laughter spilled from the kitchen and a moment later the old man reappeared with a small tray laden with teapot, cups, a small plate of sugar cookies and tiny bowl full of fat green grapes. "Here we are," he said and set the tray down.

"Umm..." Phil tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. "Would it be rude of me to ask what you are?" She hesitated, then frowned at her lap. "I'm afraid I still can't tell."

"All it takes is practice," the old man said. "And you'll have an easier time of it now that you've been Bitten. My name is Mortimer; I'm a brownie. You, my dear, have been given a Pixie Bite." He chuckled and held a grape out to the pixie, which grabbed it and eagerly began to eat. Phil smiled, enchanted by the way the small thing ate something bigger than both its hands.

A brownie. That explained why the old man - Mortimer - was so nice. Phil relaxed, realizing she was in no danger. "So what exactly is a pixie bite?"

"Pixies are fairly harmless creatures. They're rather childlike, really. Small pranks, meant in fun, are the worst they'd ever do. They like to tease, and they also like to help. I would be willing to bet, if the vampires were after it, that it probably stole a shiny trinket or put something in their hair." He chuckled as it held its hands out for another grape and motioned for Phil to feed it.

Phil did so, and listened raptly as Mortimer continued to explain.

"Pixies are also quite powerful - not magically, of course, though their magic is nothing to sneeze at. Their greatest asset is their resistance to things. Vampire beauty, siren calls, enchantments, curses...they're immune to all of it. No one knows quite why, they simply are. And they can pass that immunity on by way of a special bite. A Pixie Bite." Mortimer laughed. "It's like being bitten by a snake but with a completely opposite result. Panacea instead of venom."

"So he bit me? And now I'm immune to all that?" Phil stared. "No way."

Mortimer laughed again and urged her to drink her tea. Phil did so, but reflexively. "You must have done him a huge favor."

"The vampires and ogre were hurting him," Phil said, absently rubbing the top of the pixie's head. A thought occurred to her. "Jester. I think that's what he said." She looked down at the pixie. "Is Jester your name?"

Pixie Jester!

Now that she was growing used to the voice in her head, she could hear that it was sort of sing-song and a strange mix of mature and childish. "Thank you, Jester. You will have to tell me what you like to eat." She looked at Mortimer, asking silently.

"They're fond of fruit. Each has its favorites, obviously."

Berry! Berry! Blue! Black! Raz! Straw! Cran! Lots Black!

Phil couldn't help but giggle, and picked Jester up to hug him. Tiny hands hugged her back, claws catching in the wool of her jacket.

On the wall, the clock chimed three. Phil jumped, then leaped to her feet. "Oh! I really must go! I'm so sorry - how can I repay you?" She looked unhappily at Mortimer, wanting to stay but needing to go.

Mortimer smiled and stood. "I would be honored if you'd come and visit. I don't have many guests anymore."

"I'd love to," Phil said, and meant it. "Thank you for everything. Tomorrow? Around lunch?"

"That would be splendid. Good luck with your task."

With a last thank you and a wave, Phil flew down the stairs and back out of the shop. She looked warily around but saw no sign of her would-be assailants. "Come on, Jester. We have an old lady to help." Humming softly, Phil strode quickly down the street to the address Lorna had given. "Here we are. Peach Avenue Apartments. Now we go up." Using the key Lorna had given her, Phil made her way into the building and up to the third floor.

The apartment was cute and a little overwhelming, something out of a supermarket magazine. Phil shook her head and stepped further inside, laughing softly at the profusion of ruffles and patterns, gaudy lamps and too many trinkets to count.

How the heck had Lorna noticed anything was missing? If the old woman felt like it, she could open up her own shop. Then Phil thought of her own room, and the closet of nearly-equal size. She would notice in a heartbeat if someone had so much as breathed on her clothes. So she had no room to talk. Laughing at herself, Phil began slowly to examine the apartment.

"So what do you think, Jester?"

Smell funny.

"Oh?" Phil sniffed the air, but smelled only roses - probably from a candle or potpourri oil.

Smell funny thing. Jester squirmed from her arms like a restless kitten and flew into the air. He zipped back and forth across the living room, through the dining area into the kitchen, then back across the living room and vanished into what was probably the bedroom. A couple of minutes later, he reappeared and flew across the room to settle on Phil's shoulder, one small hand curling into a bit of her braid to keep from falling. He pointed his free hand toward the bedroom. Funny thing.

Wondering what on earth constituted a funny thing, Phil took a deep breath, smoothed her thoroughly wrinkled skirt, then made for the bedroom.

It was just as opulent and ridiculous as the rest of the house, done in such a profusion of lemon-cream that Phil thought she might throw out anything of that color in her closet. "So where's this funny thing?" She examined the room more closely, eyes finally settling on the long dresser. Made of dark pine, with a mirror so covered in painted daises there wasn't much by which to see a reflection. The top of it was covered with more knick-knacks. Tons of them. All sizes and shapes.

Frowning thoughtfully, urged on by Jester's restless Funny! Funny! Phil began to poke more closely at them. A pair of porcelain swans, made to curl lovingly into each other. A family of foxes, a man with a fiddle, a bouquet of flowers on which perched a delicate faerie...tons more, and she almost missed the one tucked back in the corner. It was remarkably dark and plain compared to the others. It was a statue of a gargoyle and if it hadn't been so small Phil would have sworn it had been stolen straight from a cathedral roof. It was dark gray, and the edges had been smoothed with age. Phil reached out to pick it up, then thought better of it.

Funny funny funny!

Jester's voice was like a child given an entire bag of sugar. Phil wracked her brain for all that she had been taught, most of it by Glenys. Humans couldn't do magic, not really. Alchemy and white magic were the closest they got. The former was a

bad idea, and the latter said that nearly all magic was a bad idea. But even white witches would use certain spells to identify magic when it was too weak for them to simply feel it. Glenys had been teaching her a few of the simpler spells over the past couple of months. Taking a deep breath, Phil brushed a finger over the statue's nose as she murmured the words of one of those spells.

On the dresser, the gargoyle shimmered with a faint blue light. "I did it!" Phil cheered. Then comprehension dawned. "She must not be a magical-using paranormal if she didn't realize one of her figurines was enchanted. So what to do?" Phil bit her lip, shoulders sagging as she thought. On the bright side, at least the case wasn't hideously complicated like several of Chris's tended to be - no matter how often he bitched about how boring most of them were. "Should I take it? Destroy it?"

Inside no no. Outside! Play!

Phil frowned, puzzling over Jester's simplistic speech. "It...wants to be outside?"

Stuck inside. Mistress says. Wants out!

That was easy enough to figure out. Ownership was a serious matter to paranormals. Many of the 'lesser' paranormals usually wound up in service to the stronger, or even other lesser. Imps were a prime example of this. If Lorna, whatever she was, didn't know the gargoyle was enchanted - in this case either a spirit bound to the statue or a statue given life - then she also couldn't know she was its master. But bought and paid for, and Phil bet it was a recent acquisition, meant she did indeed own it. If she had placed it in her house, then it couldn't leave.

And had been trying, as best it could, to tell her it wanted out. Phil smiled and patted the creature's head. "I'll let her know. Just behave until she gets back, all right?" She reached a hand up to touch Jester. "What does he say?"

Be still if can go out. Not still long.

"That will do." Nodding, pleased with herself, Phil let herself out of the apartment and hit the street, thrumming with energy and pride.

But not even a dozen steps away from the apartment building, rough hands grabbed and then Phil saw stars as her head connected with brick wall. "Shit!" She forced herself to turn around and glared at three all too familiar faces. "Bastards," she hissed. "Go the fuck away."

"Give us back the pixie and we promise not to drag your death out," the blonde vampire said. Phil snorted - she knew a liar when she saw one. She glanced at the other two, not liking her odds. Fuck.

Scary scary!

Phil held Jester close, feeling the way he trembled against her, and scrambled to think of something that might help them both. But as she watched the vampires, who must be giving her a moment to consider her options, she realized that what Mortimer had said was true - they struck her now as nothing but good looking men.

Which meant they were nothing more than assholes. If they were going to suck her dry, they were going to get a fight first. "Sorry, the pixie is mine. He says you're too goddamn ugly." Phil braced herself.

Nothing happened. One minute they all looked ready to kill her, and the next they just...fell over.

"I hate vampires," Chris snarled. "What the fuck is so hard about staying a tenant?" He made a face at the unconscious vampires. "I should torch them all, including that ogre." Shifting his ire to her, he simply glared.

The man really needed to learn how to dress, but for all that his clothes were an eyesore, the rest of him made it pretty clear why the resident demon lord had seen fit to make Chris his consort. Chris was blonde hair, blue-eyed gorgeous, especially when he scowled. He shoved strands of blonde hair from his face and waited impatiently for her to speak.

Phil grimaced and stepped away, reaching up to take Jester from where he clung to her neck and bundle him in her arms. She kissed his tiny cheek and murmured softly, then turned to face Chris. "What are you doing here?"

"I stopped by the Green Teahouse for something to drink," Chris said dryly, "and an old goblin stopped me to say she was most impressed with my newest detective. Imagine my surprise. I came here to make sure you hadn't gotten yourself killed. You're nothing but trouble. Why the hell do you have a pixie?"

"They were hurting it," Phil said, and pointed to the vampires and ogre. "He was crying; I couldn't just walk past..." She hugged Jester close. "Besides, he Bit me. I think that means I get to keep him."

Chris heaved a long-suffering sigh. "I think this story is going to require copious amounts of alcohol."

Phil sniffed. "Only because you're always such a grouch."

Demon loved. Lots magic. Not funny.

Phil smothered a laugh, but it earned her a glare anyway.

"What?" Chris snapped.

"Jester says you're not funny. And that you're demon loved."

It was the hardest thing ever not to burst out laughing at the way Chris's cheeks turned pink at the mention of being demon loved. Honestly, it really was sad she'd never had a chance. But she'd given up that battle long ago.

"Whatever," Chris finally managed. "Are you all right?"

"A little tired, and my feet are killing me. Do you know how hard it is to run in these shoes?"

Chris looked at her high-heeled boots and snorted. "You could try wearing practical shoes."

"Practical shoes," Phil retorted, "will be burned if I see them anywhere near my feet. I don't waste my money on practical." She sniffed. "Unlike some people."

"Right. No discussing clothing. Have you caused enough trouble for one day or did you want to go find a troll and pick a fight? Maybe piss of a faerie?"

Phil pretended to think for a moment. "No, I think I'm good. I need to go to tell the old lady that I figured out what was wrong."

"Oh?" Chris's brows went up. "What was wrong? In fact, just tell me everything." He motioned for them to start walking, and listened without interruption as Phil explained all that had been occurred. "Probably just made to come to life," he said finally. "I bet it was to amuse a child or something at one point and then just changed hands several times. I never knew a goblin to collect things before. Huh."

"She's a goblin?" Phil stumbled to a halt. "She could have eaten me?"

"Doubtful. A few goblins, like her, actually avoid eating humans ninety nine percent of the time. If they eat any, they try to choose criminals. Something like a weird religion with them, but don't ask me more about it." Chris sighed, and it sounded as though he were giving up. "You're going to get yourself killed one of these days if something isn't done with you. Honestly, hired by a goblin, attacked by vampires and an ogre, bitten by a pixie - what the hell kind of upbringing did your father give you?" He ran a hand through his hair. "Just do what I say, all right? Doug too, because I really don't feel like putting up with your father if I get you killed. I need a drink."

It took a moment for his words to register. When they did, Phil stumbled to a halt. "Wait. You mean. I can. You'll actually let me help? With cases?" Shrieking in delight, sending Jester into the air in a surprised panic, Phil launched herself into Chris's arms. "Thank you thank you thank you!" She kissed his cheek. "I'll be as good as you and Doug, just wait and see."

Chris hugged her awkwardly back. "Probably, if only so my mother can say 'told you so' for the next ten centuries." He rolled his eyes. "Now let's get back so you can talk to the goblin and wrap the case up."

Phil laughed and gave Jester a gentle hug as he settled back in her arms.

"I swear to god if that damned pixie tries to steal or hide anything, I will pin it to the wall by its wings."

"You'll do no such thing," Phil said with an offended sniff. "He says demon loved not funny anyway."

Chris glowered at them both, and grumbled all the way back to the office.

Case #331: Stolen Hearts

The man appeared suddenly, abruptly, as smooth and quiet as Chris was when dropping back into visibility. "Lord Brennus," he said with a nod of greeting. His voice was smooth, deep, not a trace of any accent. He was about mid-forties in

appearance though his real age was no doubt upwards of seven hundred or more. Beautiful, for of course they always were. Beauty was their greatest tool and this one had honed that tool to a fine edge. His dove-gray hair was neatly trimmed, close and soft around his head. Pale green eyes watched them, seemingly relaxed but as sharp as a hawk. He wore a white shirt and soft-grey vest, his jacket slightly darker, the silver gleam of a pocket watch chain just visible. His tie was dark blue and he wore soft-looking kid skin gloves.

"Dracula DeLovely," Sable said in reply, setting down his glass. "An unexpected pleasure."

The vampire lord nodded again. "I wish I could say the feeling is mutual, but I'm afraid my motives are somewhat the opposite."

Sable frowned and motioned to the remaining seat at his table. They were downstairs in his private dining room sharing breakfast while Douglas related their most recent cases, as Chris was always somewhat reticent, ever mistrustful of Sable's penchant for interfering in his cases by any means possible. "Have a seat, please. What is the problem?"

"I would prefer to stand for now. But I thank you." DeLovely visibly relaxed, but it was obvious he was still quite tense about something. "I have heard your consort is something of a detective for our circle of the world. I was wondering if I might enlist his services. I will gladly pay whatever fee, and of course I would be in your debt."

Sable looked regretful. "If Christian were here, he would gladly help you. Alas he is away on business for me."

"Of course," DeLovely said, shoulders sagging slightly.

"However," Sable continued. "Douglas here is his assistant and protégé. Christian trusts him implicitly; indeed has said that he would trust Douglas to solve his own murder or hunt down his kidnappers, whichever came first." Sable's lips quirked as he recalled the conversation.

Douglas smothered a happy smile, striving to look professional in front of Dracula DeLovely. "I would be happy to help, my lord."

"I would gladly accept your help," the vampire said in obvious relief. "The problem is that last night someone stole my wife's heart, and since that attack my son has been missing. He is nowhere on the premises or our surrounding territory. I know only that he's left it. Beyond that, I have no idea where he is. I can handle the matter of my wife's heart - I need you to find my son before someone else does."

Sable let out a faint hiss. "The Alucard DeLovely is missing? Do the werewolves know?"

"Not yet," DeLovely said tightly. "I do not think he would wander into Howler's territory. I would hazard he is somewhere in your domain; that is why I thought to ask for your assistance."

Douglas pulled out his small notebook and a blue pen. "Start at the beginning please," he said, falling easily into the rhythms of his job. "Tell me everything that occurred, from the beginning to the end." He looked up, expression intent, a strange sight in the young, boyish face he favored when he assumed a human form. "Leave out no detail, no matter how irrelevant it might seem to you."

"If this is the student," DeLovely murmured, eyeing Douglas then turning to Sable. "Then I would dearly love to meet the master."

Sable smiled, pleased. "They are both quite good at what they do. I believe I will leave you to the investigation. Perhaps when the matter is concluded we can all have supper together."

"I will look forward to it."

Sable departed, leaving Douglas alone with the vampire lord. "Have a seat, please. It will be easier to talk that way."

"You are not human," DeLovely said idly, almost as an afterthought. "You're able to shape shift, which limits what species you could be, but I cannot tell which of those you are."

Douglas nodded. "I'm not human," he agreed. "Now if you don't mind - start at the beginning and tell me everything."

"Very well," DeLovely conceded. "I suspect it all stems from the argument my wife has been attempting to have with our son for some time."

"...An argument she's been attempting to have?" Doug repeated.

DeLovely smiled. "Perhaps I should start a bit further back. My son is three hundred years old; quite young for a vampire. He's always been an obedient boy. Never a lick of trouble at all. Quiet, polite; I've received so many compliments on his decorum and demeanor that I could not count them if I tried." He sighed. "He's never protested or fought anything. He would do anything I asked and more besides." DeLovely rubbed his eyes, as if weary. "It has long troubled my wife and I. Though we of course think it wonderful to have such a son, we worry for him. It is not normal for a boy to be so unprotesting. We fear that he will wind up severely unhappy later in life."

"A couple of years ago a Dracula several territories over proposed marriage between our children. Rosette, his daughter, is wonderful and sweet. When I posed the idea to my son, he instantly agreed - with all the fervor and interest one shows in choosing socks. This upset me, but he did not seem unhappy. I stipulated they should be engaged for a few decades and hoped matters would work themselves out."

He sighed. "My wife was not so complacent. She is ever trying to spur our son into some contrary action; to make him realize that he is not as happy as he appears. My son merely brushes her aside, insisting he is happy - and certainly there is no overt evidence to the contrary. The marriage especially upsets her. She is a romantic and hates that there is no romance at all between them." He smiled faintly. "Even I admit that the two seem more like brother and sister than betrothed."

"Anyway - I believe last night she finally broke him. I heard them both shouting, and my room is some distance from the salon where I heard them arguing. But as I was about to go and investigate, the shouting stopped. I went back to work, assuming one or the other would find me if they felt the need. An hour or so later I heard the shouting resume, then again a dead silence. I thought nothing of it until my clock chimed midnight and I realized my wife had never come up to bed." He winced. "My own failing is that I get so wrapped up in work I do not pay as much attention as I ought to things. If I had been more alert, I might have prevented what occurred."

Douglas' pen flew across his paper and he nodded and muttered to himself, jotting notes alongside DeLovely's recounting. "Continue, please."

DeLovely nodded. "When I entered the salon, I saw my wife lying on the floor covered in blood. Her dress had been torn open and her heart ripped from her chest. I have her stabilized, as it takes far more than that to kill a vampire, but if I do not retrieve it soon..."

"But you said you needed no help locating the heart?" Douglas asked.

"No," DeLovely said firmly. "I can sense it is somewhere in my manor. I will locate it easily enough. But my son has vanished. I went to his room to find him but it was empty. A search of the house, later a more thorough spell search, revealed that he was gone. Nor is he in my territory, as I could find him if he were. I do not know if he is guilty or not; nor do I particularly care. I simply want him back. He has never wandered off like this before and I worry what will happen if the wrong people were to realize his identity."

"I'll find him," Douglas said. "But a name and picture might help. As would knowing all his interests, hobbies, favorite foods, anything of that nature." He grinned suddenly. "Though I guess favorite foods should be replaced by favorite kinds of human?"

DeLovely laughed. "My son's name is Zachariah; usually he just goes by Zach. He is rather fond of sweets - we need blood to live of course, but it is not the only thing we consume. Chocolate especially has always been one of his weaknesses. He likes music of almost any sort but mostly classical. He hates noisy places but is fond of watching people. At parties he often sneaks away to hide and watch, rather than actively participate. So far as feeding goes...he often feeds on people as quiet as himself. He never had a taste for the flare and flash that so many vampires adore."

"That will help a great deal," Douglas said, smiling approvingly. "Do you have a photo? Some sort of picture?"

DeLovely nodded. "My future daughter-in-law is quite fond of taking pictures." From inside his vest he pulled out a small photo and handed it to Douglas.

Douglas stared at the photo in silence for a few moments. "He is remarkable."

"Thank you," DeLovely smiled with pride. "I like to think that even in a race that depends on beauty for survival, my son stands out in a crowd."

"I've no doubt he does," Douglas said and pocketed the picture. "Have you any idea what sort of place he might have run off to? A type of restaurant? A friend's house? Anything of that nature?"

DeLovely nodded, obviously upset that he could not provide more help. "I wish I knew. But he seldom left the house and

then usually with my wife and myself or with Rosette. And she could not tell you more than I have."

"Well, if you think of anything else let me know? I will find him as quickly as I possibly can."

"I thank you," DeLovely rose and gave a brief, elegant bow. "If you need me, simply contact me." He touched gloved fingertips to Douglas' forehead, and Douglas could feel the minor spell thrum through his mind. With another bow, the vampire lord was gone.

Doug slouched back in his seat, allowing his anxiety to show. "Jeez, why did I have to get a missing Alucard as my first real solo case?" He stood, then took a deep breath. And another. "All right." Grabbing his coat and scarf, he vanished.

The water was cold where it lapped at his feet, even through his thick gray skin. Doug grimaced, then held his fingers to his lips and whistled loudly. The piercing sound carried across the calm water, breaking the still silence that always lingered at this largely uninhabited section of the river. He moved away from the water's edge and waited.

Several minutes later, two women began to walk out of it. They walked hand in hand, water making their clothes and long, white-blond hair cling to their shapely frames. But even with the small, sharp fangs that were visible their smiles were pleasant, green eyes alight with genuine pleasure at seeing who was waiting for them. They raced to embrace him, greetings lost amongst their happy laughter. "Doug! We haven't see you two in ages!"

"Speaking of which, where is Chris?" the river nymph on his right looked around.

"He's not here, tonight. Just me. How've you been, Splish? Splash?"

"We've been great," Splish answered, still holding onto Doug's left arm. "What's wrong?"

"Always so straight forward," Doug said with a smile. "Heard of any new beauties in town?"

Splash looked curious. "Vamps you mean? Not recently. When did he arrive?"

"Probably just today," Doug said. "So I guess you wouldn't have heard about him yet. But would you let me know when you do? You're my best lead at the moment."

The nymphs kissed his cheeks. "Of course. But only if you promise to come visit sometime, 'kay? You always come just for business."

"I'm sorry," Doug said sheepishly. "We'll come visit this weekend, all right?"

"All right!" The twins exclaimed together and with a parting kiss dived back into the water.

Shifting back into his human shape, Douglas left to do some searching of his own until the river nymphs turned up something.

Two hours later the twins found him in a coffee bar, walking arm and arm, perfectly content to be damp on the chilly autumn night. He greeted them with a smile and kissed their damp cheeks. "You look like kittens that caught a canary. Or maybe fish that got the cat wet."

Splish laughed. "Your missing beauty is causing quite a stir, Doug. Rumors are already flying about him. Some say he's an Alucard, even. How silly is that?"

"Very silly," Doug said, lips twitching. "How do you find these things out so fast?"

Splash shrugged. "Wasn't hard, really. Humans always notice vampires, and they're easy to get info from if you're a soaking wet, half-naked woman."

"Where might I find him?"

"That French place on Plum and Green."

Doug winced. "That figures."

Splish and Splash laughed. "So what's our reward for helping out the great sleuths?"

"What do you want?" Doug asked with a grin.

"Oh, if it's going to be like that..." Splish winked.

Her sister winked as well, linking arms with Splish as they prepared to leave. "We'll think of something and let you know tomorrow."

"Why do I sense I'm going to regret my generosity?" Doug walked them out, then turned right as they turned left. "Try not to cause me too much trouble, ladies." He grinned as they walked away laughing.

His humor faded as the job at hand reasserted itself in his mind. A few minutes was all it took to walk the five blocks to the corner of Plum and Green streets, and the small, simple but stylish restaurant that Douglas and Chris had avoided like the plague ever since a hunt for a dogai got out of hand.

"Figures Chris would miss this..." Douglas grumbled softly, entering the restaurant with no small trepidation. He accepted the glare of the host with good grace, and steeled himself for a fight. "I'm looking for someone."

"How nice for you," the host replied. "You can look from here."

"You're being ridiculous," Doug said with a withering glare of his own. "Let me find him, talk to him, and I'll be gone. I'm only looking for a vampire; there won't be any trouble."

The host blinked. "That nice boy at table twelve? He's got nothing to do with your sort. Leave him alone."

"My sort?" Doug frowned. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Mouthy imp."

"Wannabe human."

"Get out."

Doug dropped his voice to a barely-audible whisper. "After I get the Alucard I was hired to find before the werewolves do."

Whatever the host had readied as a retort died on his lips. He looked at Doug in disbelief. "You're going to bring werewolves in here? Don't you dare!"

"He will if I don't get him out of here. It's only a matter of time before they find out."

"Get him and go. You have five minutes."

"Fifteen."

"Ten," the host said with finality, and pointed in the general direction of table twelve before busying himself with other things.

Barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Douglas went where he'd been directed. The picture he'd been given was in his pocket, but he wouldn't need it. His eyes flit around the room, making note of everything he saw while he looked. An interesting mix of paranormals. He spared the goblin in the corner a second glance, not liking the way she was picking at her food while watching the room. She caught his eye and looked swiftly away. Doug cast his eyes elsewhere.

How he hadn't seen him right away, Doug didn't know. He should have. The Alucard DeLovely was far more beautiful than his picture. More than a few in the restaurant were sneaking glances; Douglas almost felt sorry for the humans that didn't realize they were already half-snared.

He was the image of his father, a tall, slender, aristocratic beauty. The only differences were age, for Zach did not look more than mid to late twenties, and Zach's hair was black, long and straight. The sort of black that almost looked like a dark blue. Eyes looked up from a cup of tea as Douglas approached, dark green and clearly troubled. "You're here for me," the Alucard said calmly.

Douglas nodded. "Your father hired me to find you and take you home."

Hesitation filled Zach's face, clearly warring with the compulsion to do as he was told. "I don't want to go home yet," Zach said.

If there existed a man who was capable of resisting that voice and face, Doug wanted to meet him and prove him a liar. He didn't know what it was, but something about the vampire tugged at him. "May I sit?"

"Oh!" Zach looked chagrined. "Please do." He looked at Doug's forehead, briefly reaching out to touch the sigil that DeLovely had placed there earlier. "You haven't contacted him yet, have you?"

"Not yet, no..." Doug resisted the urge to shake his head, confused by the way he could still feel Zach's touch. "I won't, yet, but I cannot delay for long. I was hired to find you and return you home safe. I have to stick by my job."

Zach nodded. "Of course," he said politely, tucking a stray strand of blue-black hair behind his ear. "What is your name?"

Doug smiled sheepishly. "Douglas. I'm a detective with the White Detective Agency."

"Dad has mentioned it before. Lord Brennus' consort is tied to it."

"Chris owns it," Doug said with another grin. He returned to the matter at hand. "Why don't you want to go home?"

"Because they don't want me to be there," Zach said unhappily. "I heard the whole thing. I did exactly what they wanted. I'm not going home. Not yet." His left hand clenched and unclenched in the table cloth, and he stared hard at the small candle in the center of the table.

Unconsciously Douglas reached out and covered Zach's hand with his own. He squeezed it reassuringly. "Why not explain to me what happened? Things are never so bad explained as they are in your own head." When Zach remained silent, he prodded a bit more. "Your father mentioned you and your mother had an argument."

"It was what she wanted," Zach said. "To see me lose my temper, get angry, pitch a fit...then they wanted to shock me into running away. 'Wake me up' was how they put it." His shoulders sagged. "So that's what I did."

Doug felt like he was being left out of the conversation. "I'm not quite following."

"Forgive me," Zack said. He smiled weakly. "I am still feeling rather upset by the whole affair."

"Understandable. Start at the beginning and explain everything to me. Slowly, take your time. But do not leave anything out."

Zach nodded. "It was a few days ago. I was planning on joining my mother and betrothed for tea but had taken longer talking to my father than I had anticipated. So I arrived a few minutes late. Before I stepped in, their conversation struck me and I, however shameful, decided to listen rather than admit myself." He kept his eyes on the flickering candle. "They were discussing me, and their concern that I was secretly unhappy and how I wouldn't realize it without something to wake me up." He dared a brief glance at Doug, but shied away again. "They were detailing their plan to do exactly that."

"What was the plan?" Doug asked, suspecting that he knew and that he must be crazy to believe such a thing possible.

"They argued a bit over what exactly to do to 'shock me into action'. I didn't listen long enough to learn upon what they decided. It was rather a nasty shock to see the lengths to which they went. He sighed. "I went along with the arguing, and the getting upset - then went back to finish things and be 'shocked into action.' I was not expecting to see that my mother's heart had been stolen. At that point I just wanted to leave the whole thing behind. So I left. Do you suppose that is suitably shocked into action?"

"I'd say so," Doug replied. "Your mother and betrothed arranged the entire affair? And you let them?" He shook his head. "Why?"

"So that when I finally returned home they'd believe I was satisfied and leave me alone."

Doug fell silent, thinking.

"I thought," the icy voice of the host broke in. "That you were here on a case."

"I am on a case," Doug snapped. He followed the direction of the host's pointed stare.

To where he still held Zach's hand. He snatched his hand away as if burned. Nearly knocking his chair over in his haste, Doug stood up and motioned to Zack. "Come, we'll talk elsewhere." As he left, he cast the goblin in the corner another suspicious glance.

Zach's voice was low as he spoke. "The goblin thought I was competition. She's been watching me all night because she wants one of the waiters for dinner." He grinned suddenly, looking very boyish. "But I fed recently enough I don't need to eat, and the waiter wasn't really my taste."

Doug laughed. "I see. Well, that's good to know. I was half afraid she was keeping tabs on an Alucard." He led the way down the street, making sure Zach walked on his left side, away from the street. "So do you think your mother and betrothed will be content after this?"

"I hope so," Zach said.

Though he knew it was overstepping his bounds, Doug could not keep himself from speaking. "If you were happy, they wouldn't constantly press you."

"If I say it, I mean it." Zach said. "They should leave well enough alone."

Doug took his elbow and guided Zach as they turned a corner, down onto the main street. Sable's hotels drowned out the stars several blocks away. "So when are you planning on returning?"

Zach shrugged. "How long does it take for someone to realize they're happy?"

"If you have to ask, clearly you've never been happy."

The vampire was silent. When he finally spoke, his voice was sharp. "My happiness," he said, looking Doug in the eyes. "Is not your concern."

Doug felt like he'd been slapped. "Of course," he said. Realizing he still held Zach's arm, he let it go and buried his hands in his pockets.

Silence reclaimed the conversation, this time filling it with tension and awkwardness.

"I am sorry," Zach said several minutes later. "It is wearing to constantly be reminded that you are not happy. I know everyone is concerned - but telling them the truth would make them far unhappier than I am now. Better to leave me in peace than press it and make things worse."

"I'm sure it's not that bad, whatever it is." Doug said.

"Yes, it is. I'm an Alucard. Certain rules and traditions must be followed. To break them would upset my family greatly. It's not worth it."

Doug frowned. "Shouldn't you let them help you make that decision?" He started to say more, but the wind carried toward him a scent he didn't like at all. "Werewolves."

Zach tensed. "Here? But...surely they're not..."

"Here for you? Of course they are, Alucard. But how did they find you so fast?"

A voice like wet gravel answered the question, as a creature stepped from the shadows and into the street. It was a strange cross between wolf and man, as though the craftsmen could not decide how he wanted his creation to look and so settled on an awkward in-between. A mongrel wolf, rather than a purebred. He pointed up. "We just used a couple of yours."

Doug didn't bother to glance up, knowing by the mongrel's words exactly what he would see. Imps were second only to demons in the diversity of their spells, and search spells were amongst their repertoire. "Have werewolves become so weak they have to use slaves do their job for them? Nostrils too filled with the stench of your own cowardice you need an imp?"

The wolf only laughed, as others like him slunk from the shadows to gather in the street. "Give us the Alucard, little imp, and we'll let you stay free."

"Let me?" Doug laughed. But even as he continued to jeer, he began to cast a spell that would protect Zach. "The Alpha must want to be rid of you, to send you to fetch an Alucard from the center of a demon lord's territory. Leave now and I'll let you live. You have no right bringing your feud here."

"The Alucard is the one who came here."

"Leave him alone," Zach interrupted. "If you want me-"

"Shut up," Doug snapped. "Don't make my job more difficult."

Zach stared at him. "I'm trying to help."

"Then be quiet - do not bargain with werewolves. You're a noble, you don't do that. Let me handle this."

Though he looked as though he wanted to argue, Zach watched Doug a moment more and then relented with a nod. "Fine."

"Good." Doug cast the spell he'd been preparing, throwing the spell over him much like a net. "Don't move from that spot until I tell you."

The mongrel with the wet gravel voice laughed again. "Protecting your master, imp?"

"No one is my master," Doug snapped.

Then the gathered wolves were attacking, snarling biting moving faster than the normal eye could follow.

Doug singed one, filling the street with the acrid smell of burning fur and blood. The mongrel got past his defenses, and Doug hissed in pain as the werewolf's claws raked down his arm, leaving a large gash. He threw a spell in retaliation, smirking in satisfaction at the howl of pain as the spell hit. Abandoning his human shape, he launched himself high when the werewolves backed off just long enough to regroup.

Only to be thrown to the ground by a spell from behind. He hit the ground hard, just glimpsing the two imps who had hit him - the picture of misery but obedient no matter what. Because it was in an imp's nature to be submissive and obedient. Especially when their horns had been sawed off.

Infuriated, both for and at the imps, Doug forced himself up, barely missing the werewolf that had launched himself directly at the fallen imp. Instead of imp, he wound up eating an ice spell and Doug threw himself back into the fight.

A hasty spell stopped the bleeding of his right arm. Doug went for the mongrel leader, who was attempting to break through the magic net protecting Zach.

Where the hell was Sable? Bastard was probably enjoying the entertainment.

Folding his wings down, he engaged the leader, slowly drawing him away from Zach, who watched them angry that he could do nothing more.

The werewolf fell with a groan some time later, right arm bleeding profusely. Doug looked at the blood dripping from his claws with distaste.

"Doug!"

He whipped around, and snarled to see that the imps and a last werewolf were working against the protective spell he'd cast. "Get away!" he shouted, and threw out a spell that sent all three to the ground unconscious.

Doug dropped to one knee, feeling a bit dizzy. Looked like he'd gotten a bit carried away - but he'd do worse to anyone that tried to touch Zach. Forcing himself to his feet, he reassumed his human shape as he approached the vampire. With a word and motion he broke the spell protecting him. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not." Zach snapped. "But you're a lot worse off than me." His ire faded. "I should have just gone home." He reached out to hold Doug's arm, gingerly examining the deep gash left by the werewolf. "I'm not worth this much trouble."

"It's fine," Doug said with a smile. "I've had worse than this. And of course you are..." He hesitated, not quite sure what he was trying to say. "You're the Alucard DeLovely." Somehow that explanation didn't sound quite right. Whatever. "Come on, we should get you back."

"I should just teleport," Zach said.

"Nah. I think we'll be all right now." Doug looked around at the various bodies lying in the street. "Stupid werewolves."

Zach followed along beside him, and they walked in silence for a bit. "I didn't know you were an imp."

Doug tensed, and much of his satisfaction at successfully protecting Zach faded. In all the excitement, he'd neglected to keep him human shape. He waited for the remarks that usually came with the realization he was an imp.

But Zach startled him by smiling. "You don't act like any imp I've ever seen. If they all acted like you, I bet they could put even a few of my folk in their place. Mom's always trying to coax the ones in town into a rebellion or something. They just sort of look at her."

Though he racked his brain, Doug could think of nothing to say. He smiled and continued to walk toward Sable's hotel, and didn't pull his arm from Zach's worried grasp.

"It figures things get interesting the minute I leave," Chris grouched as he handed Doug a glass of whiskey. "Only the boring stuff ever occurs when I'm around."

Sable chuckled from where he sat in an armchair directly across from the couch on which Doug sat. "Only you, beloved, would consider that incident with the sirens boring."

"It was boring. I've never seen anything so idiotic in my life, except maybe for the last time we dealt with vampires. But those were peasants, I should have expected as much."

Zach smothered a snicker, and focused on bandaging Doug's arm. "I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused."

"I told you," Doug said. "It wasn't any trouble."

"And he probably brought it on himself anyway," Chris said, smirking at his partner. "I really wish I'd gotten back sooner, just to enjoy your fight firsthand."

Doug stuck his tongue out. "We were on the main strip, with plenty of streetlight. If you were back, why the hell didn't you come to help?" He glared at Sable. "And where the hell were you? I guess I lack the proper blue eyes and blonde hair?"

Sable laughed, and held onto Chris to keep him from adding to Doug's injuries. "There are certain fights," he said, giving Doug a look he didn't understand. "In which even I won't interfere. If things had truly been dire, I would have assisted. However, I will be sending Christian to 'chat' with Alpha Sandalio tomorrow. I am clearly getting slack if werewolves think they can carry their personal feuds into my territory." He frowned in thought. "And it is well-known that I and the Dracula DeLovely are old friends. Well, never mind. It will be dealt with tomorrow. For now we should see the young Alucard gets home."

Zach nodded and finished his work on Doug's arm. "Thank you for helping me. The DeLovely owe you a great debt. I should not have run away from home."

"All children do it at some point," Sable said idly. "I'll have to tell you what I know about the time Christian ran away. Or I could just invite his parents, at that..." Reflexively he blocked the smack aimed at his chest. "You've nothing to be terribly upset about. Just say you're sorry and the matter will no doubt end."

The words seemed to have no effect on Zach's guilt. Reaching out, he touched his fingertips to the sigil on Doug's head. It flared then faded. "Thank you again," he said quietly.

A heartbeat of silence and then the Dracula DeLovely stood before them. "Zach," he said in relief, opening his arms and embracing his son when Zach stepped forward. "I'm so glad you're all right."

"I'm fine, dad. Sorry to have caused so much trouble."

DeLovely just shook his head. "You," he said dryly. "Are not the one who needs to be apologizing. I thought your mother had given up scheming when we married. Clearly she was just saving up her energy. There is a bit of explaining to be done when we get home."

Zach only nodded, still looking contrite.

"Lord Brennus - Sable - I appreciate your assistance." Sable nodded, and DeLovely turned to Doug. "And you, Master Douglas. Words cannot express my gratitude. Especially as I can see the night did not go flawlessly."

"A trivial encounter with mongrels, Dracula." Doug stood up. "I was happy to help. I hope all problems have been satisfactorily concluded."

DeLovely gave his son a pensive glance. "Very nearly all." He turned to Chris. "And you must be the Consort about whom I've heard so much."

"And just what exactly have you heard?" Chris said, shooting Sable a look.

Sable looked innocently back. "I said not a single word."

"No, you probably said several." Chris retorted. Moving away from Sable, he addressed DeLovely. "I am sorry I was not

here to help. But I trust Doug was more than up to the challenge."

"Of course." DeLovely nodded in acknowledgement to Doug. "Whatever we can do to repay you, let me know. And now if you'll pardon our hasty departure, we've a few matters left to resolve back home."

"Of course."

Doug watched them, still standing in front of the couch. He caught Zach's eyes and was unable to look away, confused by the way Zach so intently watched him back.

Then the vampires vanished, and Doug was left feeling confused and...bereft. "...Why do I feel like I did something wrong?"

Sable smirked. "Children. Pay attention. This is what you were supposed to do." And he dragged Chris close, kissing him deeply, possessively.

Doug felt suddenly as though he'd lost the fight with the werewolves, as all the pieces collected during the course of the odd case fell into place. "I'm an idiot."

"Yes," Sable said as he ended the kiss, looking smug at the slightly dazed expression on Chris's face. "But you're young, so it's forgivable. And fixable."

"Fixable how?" Doug asked as more pieces fell into place. Namely the pieces that said he was an imp and Zach was an Alucard. "Vampire rules on marriage and family are pretty strict, given the whole one child thing. I might be bolder than most imps, but that's a line I'm not sure I can cross. Besides, how do I know..."

Chris smacked Sable's roaming hands away. "If you're about to ask how do you know if Zach was just an interested as you didn't know you were - I'd say you and his father were the only two that didn't notice how he was looking at you. Children."

"I'm three times your age!"

"In imp years, you're barely out of your teens."

Doug muttered beneath his breath.

"Anyway, you're in the wrong place to be bitching about things being impossible. There's no such thing as half-ghosts, right?"

"And it's impossible for imps to be anything but subservient." Sable grinned. "An independent imp who fights like a demon? Ridiculous."

Doug nodded. "I think I missed my chance though."

"Let the DeLovely work out problems which have clearly been stewing for some time. If that look Zach gave you is any indication, there's something he hasn't been telling his parents. So give it time and then pay a visit. But for now I think you should go write up your report."

Douglas grinned. "Yeah, I should. I'm sure Chris has his own 'report' to give you." He laughed as Sable didn't give Chris a chance to reply, and left.

Outside, he opted to walk the five blocks back to the office rather than simply teleport or fly. Tired as he was, he wasn't ready to get behind a desk. The sky was cloudy as ever, but the rain had yet to break so the early morning hours were pleasantly cool. Not that he would have noticed if a tornado suddenly tore through the city. His focus was only for a certain vampire and his own stupidity. Amusing that he'd been envious of what Chris and Sable had, and yet the minute a chance for it was shoved right into his face he'd not even noticed. But that was all right. Now that he knew, it was only a matter of time. Let Zach work out the problems with his parents first. He could wait a bit.

Case #332: Breaking Rules

"You're either a brave or a stupid werewolf to come around here these days," Chris said. He watched the werewolf sitting in the middle of the room idly.

Though he was far from idle. Doug barely kept himself from snorting in amusement. More than a few would-be customers had misinterpreted Chris's laidback manner, which combined with his blue eyes and blonde hair could, if he chose, give him a very sleepy, distracted air. A spoiled consort playing at detective.

The last one to fall for it, a particularly nasty goblin, Doug had literally thrown out of the building while Chris laughed and Phil cleaned up broken glass while she scolded both of them.

"How about desperate?" the werewolf asked, no small amount of bitterness in her voice. Werewolves were at the least forthright, more often outright aggressive. But this one only looked at her hands, white where she clutched a small, pink beaded purse.

Chris conceded the point with a nod. Doug jotted down a few notes, exchanging a look with Phil across the room. It looked like they would probably be taking the case, though the ramifications of working for a werewolf after the Stolen Hearts case were not good.

Stifling a sigh, Doug made himself pay closer attention. If he missed a single thing, Chris would give him hell for a month straight.

"Start at the beginning," Chris said, leaning back in his chair and steepling his fingers. "Tell me everything, no matter how silly or inconsequential the detail."

The werewolf nodded. "My name is Myra. When I was young, I was involved in an accident that left me incapable of bearing children." She looked up then, showing a quiet pride that until then had not been apparent. It was a pride born of endurance; pride of those who had little else. "As you can imagine, this has not endeared me to the pack."

Chris nodded. Doug's pen flew. "But I met someone who didn't care about that. Three nights ago he was murdered."

Doug's pen faltered.

"You were having an affair with Second Candidate Vale?"

Myra nodded. "Yes."

"I'm impressed," Chris said with a smirk that was reminiscent of his lover. "He really was a rarity among werewolves."

Again she nodded. "He should have been First Candidate."

"His views on vampires kept him from it," Doug said. "Right?"

"Yes. He was hoping to put an end to the feuding with at least one clan. The night before he died, he told me he was getting close to the first step toward that." She lowered her head, and Doug could see her chest rising and falling in the manner of those who were consciously taking deep, calming breaths. When she looked up again, her face was as composed as ever. "I would like you to determine the vampire family with which he was communicating. His murder is no mystery; I am more afraid that his hard work will die with him. He would want someone to continue what he began. But Vale was careful to keep the matter private; he would not tell even me. If there is any way you can determine the identity of those vampires, I will be in your debt so long as I live."

Chris was silent for several minutes. Myra and his assistant were equally still, waiting for what he might say. Doug smirked slightly, sharing another look with Phil, who rolled her eyes and fed her pixie a bit of fruit.

"Very well," Chris said at last. "We'll accept the case. But I'll warn you now that we could figure it out quickly, or it could take us several months if not more."

Myra nodded. "Of course. I thank you. You've only to name your fee."

"That will be decided upon completion of the case," Chris said. "Is there anything else you can tell us?"

"I'm afraid not. When Vale wanted to keep a secret, he kept a secret. Even from me."

"All right. You are welcome to stay within Sable's territory for the duration of the investigation, however none of your kin will be welcome no matter the motive for their visit."

Myra looked startled, then bowed her head gratefully. "Thank you. And I highly doubt any of my kin will come looking...at least not for any good reason."

Chris nodded. "Phil, take her to the Seventh Circle. Then hit the peasants downtown, see what rumors you can dig up about vampires and werewolves who aren't fighting."

Phil nodded and stood up. On her shoulder, the pixie lifted itself into the air until she was standing, then resettled himself to ride while she walked. Phil reached up briefly to touch the small bite marks just below her right ear, where Jester had bitten her several months ago. The Pixie Bite gave her immunity to such things as the beauty of vampires, allowing her to do a great deal more than she would otherwise be capable.

"Doug," Chris looked at him. Doug waited, not certain what to make of the barely-there smirk on his face. "Speak with the families closet to Sable's territory." Doug felt his heart begin to beat faster. That was why Chris was smirking. "Start with the DeLovely, as we're friends with them. If they're not the family we're looking for, they'll be more than happy to gain you access to other families in the area." His smirk became more obvious. "Don't get too distracted."

Muttering under his breath, Doug nodded and fetched his coat and scarf. "Meet back here when?"

"Tomorrow," Chris said. "I'm going to do some investigating on the murder itself, see if I can't find the source by working backwards from there. We'll all be busy for the day, so we'll meet back here this time tomorrow. Actually, make that the Seventh Circle. I don't want Myra more exposed than absolutely necessary."

Phil and Doug nodded, and in minutes the office was empty.

The DeLovely Estate was everything the word Estate implied. Sable was fond of his towering, flashy hotels and everything that went with them. The Estate was the sort of place made for candlelight, women in long dresses and men in waistcoats and cravats.

But the door was opened by a woman in a long denim skirt and a shirt that, for all that it was flowy and lacey and delicate, was clearly of modern design. She smiled pleasantly. Doug blinked, surprised to see another imp. "My name is Douglas, I'm with the White Detective Agency. I was hoping to speak with the DeLovely."

"Come on in," the imp said pleasantly. She continued to smile at him as she led the way through the lavish house. He was amused to note that while the house had electricity, it was arranged to look as much like candle and oil-lamp light as possible. "I've never met another free-working imp," she said suddenly. "I was only hired a couple of weeks ago. It's different; I keep expecting to have a binding cast."

Douglas smiled. "I was bound for decades; being free is a nice change. You're the only other free imp I've met. And your glamour is excellent."

"Thank you," she said simply. "My name is Maria, by the way. If you need anything, just ring. The Dracula and Lady are out right now, but I believe the Alucard and Lady Rosette are upstairs. I'll notify them at once."

Doug nodded and looked around the blue salon in which he waited, not really seeing it. Sternly he told himself to focus on the case, but his attention was lost.

It had been three months since their last case. He'd heard not a word, waiting for some sign that it would okay to do something. Though he was still trying to figure out what that something should be.

The door opened.

Zach was as beautiful as ever. His blue-black hair was everywhere, as if he'd been running. Doug wondered if he dared hope. Pale green eyes, drawn out by a shirt of similar shade, stared at him as though he were a specter. "Doug?" Zach asked, sounding as though he had in fact been running. "What are you doing here?"

Nervousness got the better of him. "I'm on a case."

"Oh," Zach said levelly. But his eyes dimmed, just a bit.

Doug wanted to smack himself. "I mean-oh, hell." Taking a page from Sable's book, tearing it out quickly before he could think about it too long, Doug crossed the room in two quick strides, grabbed Zach's shoulders and tugged the vampire close enough to kiss him. It was better than anything he'd imagined. Zach tasted like dark chocolate and just the slightest bit coppery.

"Oh," Zach said again, this time dazedly. "I was...ah...I've been...It's..." He frowned.

Laughing, feeling so light it was a wonder his feet were on the ground, Doug leaned in and kissed him again. "I am on a

case," he said at last. "But that's not the only reason I came. It was more just a good excuse."

"I'd resigned myself to it being entirely one sided." Zach leaned in close, arms tightening around Doug's waist. "I'm glad I was wrong."

Doug felt the last of his worries drain away. "Me too."

"You're hard to read. The whole time-I could barely stop looking at you when you first walked in." Zach didn't look at him as he spoke, content to rest his head on Doug's chest and stare somewhere between the wall and floor. "At the restaurant, I mean. And then with the werewolves-but I didn't know what to do or say. And my parents..."

The reality of the situation dimmed Doug's mood a bit. "Did you talk to them? Finally work things out?"

"Yes," Zach replied. "We're still working things out, but they know. Though I didn't tell them about you specifically, just because I wasn't sure..." He dared a look up, smiling shyly. "But I guess I can tell them now."

Doug ducked his head to taste that smile. "It's still a wonder to me you want anything to do with an imp."

"Are you ever going to drop your glamour?" Zach asked. "Speaking of you being an imp, I mean."

"If you want." Doug said it faintly, disbelievingly.

Zach burrowed against his chest again. "I like your real form. I've never seen a mature imp - even Maria is still immature, though she's almost a hundred."

"That's because her horns were cut for so long. Give it twenty years or so. Why did your family hire an imp?"

"So..." Zach pressed closer, as if hoping by doing so he'd feel braver. "I didn't know much about imps. I wanted to learn."

Doug held him tighter than ever, not certain what to say.

"I, uh...I guess if you're on a case...I should ask why you're here?" Zach attempted a more businesslike tone but made no move to step out of Doug's embrace.

But the words reminded Doug that he was supposed to be working. "Unfortunately." He pulled away a bit. "We've been hired by a werewolf," he began, ignoring Zach's frown and explaining the case.

"Wow." Zach said when he finished. "Every vampire I know, myself included, would be happier to never see another werewolf. Werewolves, especially the pack from which Vale hales, are responsible for killing at least thirty of my blood kin. Given that vampires can only have one child...by the same token, my ancestors are responsible for at least that many werewolf deaths. My father killed one when he dared to assault my mother's carriage when she first journeyed here to meet her betrothed. Similar stories abound between vampires families and werewolf packs."

Doug sighed. "I can see ferreting out those who would change things will take time. What about you? If someone proposed a truce to you, what would you do?"

"Wonder when the werewolves were going to stab me in the back," Zach said. "I've seen what they do all my life. And I won't forget that those stupid mongrels tried to kill you." He looked away from Doug's frown, resting his cheek against his chest again. "It would take a long, long time for me to begin to trust werewolves."

"At least you'd be willing."

Zach's fingers tightened in his sweater. "It would be nice to walk around the city with you and not worry about being assaulted."

"We can do that now," Doug said. "The Alpha Sandalio won't be so quick to piss off Sable again, not after what happened last time."

"...What happened?"

Doug smirked. "They made Sable mad, and when Sable is mad Chris is mad. Let's just leave it at that." Doug winked and stole a quick kiss before finally disentangling himself. "So it's unlikely your family was the one working with Second Candidate Vale?"

"My parents can keep secrets, but that wouldn't be one. So I highly doubt they were involved."

"What about the other families in the area? Any ideas come to mind?"

Zach shook his head. "No. Rosette's family is the same as mine. I don't know the other families as well, so I suppose something is possible...but I just can't picture any of them sneaking off to secretly rendezvous with a werewolf - especially one who was a Candidate for Alpha.

A frantic knock at the door startled them both, before Maria burst into the room. "Alucard! Your parents. Rosette! Front hall!"

"What?" Zach asked, taking in the anxious expression on her face. But as he spoke he was moving toward and out the door, dragging Doug along by the hand.

A crowd of people were standing in the front hall. Doug's eyes went wide to see that Chris and Phil were amongst them. Reluctantly letting go of Zach's hand, he approached. "What's going on?" He noticed that a young woman was sobbing into an older woman's arms - they must be Rosette and Zach's mother.

Chris looked troubled. "Dracula Farshire and his wife were found murdered this morning. DeLovely came to see me only an hour after we parted ways. Werewolves did it."

Dracula DeLovely nodded, leaning more heavily on his cane than usual. "We had gone to visit Rosette's parents..." he glanced at his son. "To discuss certain matters. We found them dead. I went to fetch Chris, and then we returned home."

Doug pulled out his notebook and began to fill pages at lightning speed. He looked toward Chris. "Related to our present case?"

"Most likely. The murders have details in common. There's an impression of warning about them." He hesitated, looking unhappily at the sobbing girl. "I suspect at least one of her parent's was a contact."

A broken voice spoke up, muffled at first by the silk of Lady DeLovely's dress. "No," Rosette said. She sniffled and wiped her eyes, but the tears kept falling. "I was talking to Vale. My parents had nothing to do with it. Neither did anyone here." She refused to look at the DeLovely family, though Zach's mother still held comforting arms around her. "V-Vale and I met a few months ago...in...in church. The old cathedral down the way. W-w-we got to be friends. And started talking about how things would be better..." she dissolved into tears again. At first she stiffened as Lady DeLovely pulled her back into an embrace, guilt warring with her need for comfort, but then she collapsed entirely, her sobs worse than ever.

The group stood in grim silence. "Let me handle things here," Phil said at last. "Jester and I can handle whatever problems might crop up. You and Doug should go back to the house and see what you can learn."

Chris smiled at her, proud of his newest assistant despite everything. "That will work. Notify us immediately if something should occur." He scowled at the pixie. "And make sure that rat with wings behaves."

Phil stuck her tongue out. "Be nice."

"No." Chris motioned to Doug. "Let's go before more problems crop up." And Doug was the only one who caught his whisper of a smirk, and the flitting of his eyes to where Doug and Zach had been holding hands before they'd reached the crowd.

They vanished a moment later, reappearing in front of a house as lavish as the one they'd left, but darker and more severe. Rosette's family home was as austere as Zach's had been warm.

It was also swarming with werewolves. Chris swore and his diamond ring sparkled as he loosed the power he typically preferred to keep banked.

The ripple of power did not go unnoticed. In the house and in front of the house before them the assembled werewolves froze. From amongst them one stepped forward, clear of the pack.

"Sandalio," Chris said. "What in the fucking hell do you think you're doing?"

The Alpha grinned, and every inch of him was wolf despite the fact that he was in human form. His eyes were the color of dried blood. A long scar, more new than old, cut through one eye, across his nose and down the opposite cheek. From when he'd gotten rather pissed at the message Chris had delivered on Sable's behalf. "The demon's whore. This has nothing to do with you."

"Anything that affects the DeLovely family affects Sable. We warned you once not to mess with our friends."

"This is werewolf business, devil slut."

Chris tensed as the anger in the air grew. Beside him Doug resumed his natural shape. "This goes beyond killing a werewolf and vampires for daring to attempt a truce."

"That is none of your business, demon-"

"If you call me a name one more time, you won't live to do it a fourth." The ring on his hand shimmered, seemed to glow. "Didn't we already have this chat, Alpha? When are you going to stop being stupid?"

The Alpha snarled, the wolf in him barely beneath the surface of his skin. That he wore a pale gray, hand-made suit seemed both absurd and surreal. A sheep skin. "Tell your demon and his vampire lackeys that we have every right to kill those who attempt to intrude on our space."

"Except that you killed the wrong people. And one of your own to boot."

"It's none of your affair, human."

"I was hired to do two jobs. You are interfering in both my cases. And this house does not belong to you. Why is your pack in it?"

The Alpha grinned, baring teeth that even in human form looked as though they would gladly tear Chris to pieces. "It's ours now. Would you like to kick us out, human whore of a sniveling demon?"

Chris's reply was a laugh. Cold and loud, echoing across the yard and stilling the werewolves that shifted impatiently behind their leader. His ring flashed bright. "I warned you, Alpha. But because I'm not a murdering scumbag, I'll warn you one more time. Do. Not. Call. Me. Names. Nor will I tolerate your deriding of my demon. Shut your mouth and get off this land."

"It is my land now, and if I want to call you a whore and that demon a sniveling coward-"

He didn't get the chance to finish, but fell howling in pain to the ground, his face dripping blood from a gash inflicted by magic. For a moment, everything froze.

Then the scent of their Alpha's blood drove the werewolves into a frenzy, mongrels and purebreds mingling as they all succumbed to their wolf forms.

"Fuck!" Chris said.

Doug glared at him even as he cast protective spells to reduce the amount of damage he would take. "You could have just ignored him."

"Shut up." Chris's earrings shimmered and a barrage of magic hit the nearest three wolves. They yelped, faltered, but did not back down. "We can't stay."

"But the house!"

"To hell with it. Something is going on here that we-" Chris lashed out with a spell that left one werewolf on the ground, bleeding profusely. "Don't understand."

Doug swore as a werewolf bit his arm - the same arm he'd injured not too long ago in a similar battle. He threw himself toward Chris as the other man spoke the words that teleported them away.

An hour later everyone was assembled in Sable's living room. The demon clung possessively to Chris, who for once didn't look on the verge of knocking him upside the head.

"All right. I'm confused." Doug said into the silence. "This started out as a case to figure out which vampire wanted to work things out with werewolves. Somewhere in there Chris was hired to also figure out who murdered the Farshire." He looked briefly at Rosette, who sat curled up against Zach. Doug looked away. "How did this turn into what feels like a war against werewolves?"

DeLovely glowered at the crackling fire casting warmth on them. "The werewolves have been itching for a fight for some time. It is in no small part why I was terrified when Zach ran off a few months ago. I do not know why; for all that we keep tabs on the werewolf packs, we seldom are privy to their inner workings."

"It..." a voice spoke hesitantly from the door. "It's because of the Alpha wars," a young woman said. Every vampire looked up, a mixture of anger, dislike and uncertainty in their faces. Except Rosette, who did not look up at all.

Myra pressed on, having only just arrived to join them. There was no small amount of trepidation in her voice. "Alpha Sandalio is the only purebred Alpha for miles around. Every other pack in the southeast has some amount of mongrel blood in him. Mongrel blood is...less stable than pureblood." She hovered in the door way, hands fisted at her side. "They've been fighting a great deal. Alpha Sandalio is working to take over all the southeast packs - but he can't do it if the territories are spread out. So he wants to eliminate the vampires that are in his way. And really any excuse to hurt vampires..." she looked at the floor.

"So what are you?" Rosette asked, her voice eerily cold. Zach recoiled, stunned to hear a girl who was normally warm and sweet and sisterly, sound more like the wolves that had tried to kill Doug three month ago. "A spy? Sent to get rid of the demon that protects the DeLovely? Because of course the second largest pack in the region lies to the east of DeLovely land, right beyond the Freelands. Have you come to play your card now?" She stood and strode over to the werewolf. "Trying to kill us all now?"

Myra frowned, hands clenching - but not in fear. "No. I know you don't like me. I wouldn't expect you to. But I loved Vale, and Vale wanted peace so that's what I'm going to do."

"Peace? After they tore my parents into little pieces? Forget it. Maybe Vale had me convinced it was possible, but I can see now it was nothing but madness."

"No it wasn't!" Myra snapped, growing angry rather than afraid. "Don't you dare dishonor him like that! He died because he was talking to you! He believed in you enough to risk that! To leave me alone! Don't you dare give up now, you spoiled little brat!"

Rosette slapped her. "How dare you!"

Myra glared murder, then punched Rosette hard.

Sable started laughing, but it was abruptly cut off by an elbow to his gut. With a grumble of complaint and a brief motion, he stopped the two women. "Promise to behave and I'll release you." He laughed again at the epithets hurled his way. "Then stay that way awhile."

"So what do we do?"

"There's nothing we can do, at the moment. We could try to take back the land the werewolves have stolen, but that would escalate skirmish into a full fledged war." Sable held Chris close as he spoke; it was clear the presence of his consort kept the demon calm.

Doug fought the urge to join Zach on the couch. He still had a fiancé, and while his parents might be more tolerant of Zach's preferences than most Doug was still willing to bet they wouldn't be too thrilled about their son wanting an imp. "So we let them have Farshire property?"

"For now," Sable said. "There is nothing to be gained by picking a fight with what amounts to every pack in the area. The Farshire are dead, save Rosette. And she is safer with the DeLovely." He looked at Myra. "And will you continue to stand with us? Be an ally?"

"Yes," Myra managed. "I've no love for most of my kind. Vale was all that ever mattered to me."

Sable released her. "Rosette?"

"Rose..." Zach said softly.

Rosette began to cry, and fell to the ground as Sable released her. Braced for a resumption of hostilities, the group instead watched as the two girls embraced and cried together. Lady DeLovely and Phil escorted them from the room.

"So we're at a stalemate," DeLovely said. "We let the werewolves have their way."

"For now," Sable reiterated. "Demons and vampires in the area will not take kindly to such uncouth behavior. Perhaps we lost the Farshire, but the werewolves will be put in their place soon enough. None of us are dumb enough to allow Alpha Sandalio to take control of every pack in the area."

Chris shook his head against Sable's chest. "Whatever's going on, it's not going to end well."

"Well I'd call this night over and done with." Doug sighed and pulled away from the window he'd been leaning against. "I'm going home to my bed." He resisted the urge to look at Zach. There were enough problems with the vampires without forcing Rosette to give up her fiancé as well. And there was a host of other problems that came with an Alucard wanting a male imp for a lover. He also ignored the looks Sable and Chris were giving him, hunching his shoulders as he left. "See you tomorrow." He assumed his true form as he reached the hallway, wings coming up to hide him from his surroundings.

Instead of down, Doug went up, itching suddenly with the need to fly. But on the roof, he hesitated. He could fly all night and it wouldn't solve anything. His tale lashed with indecision, discontent.

"Why are you avoiding me?" Zach asked from behind him.

Doug spun around, dropping his wings to avoid the wind. "Zach?" It came out rough, and he cleared his throat. "I'm not avoiding you."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not...it's not because I want to. It just...didn't seem right. Not with...everything." His wings came down, wrapping around him like a blanket. "And this a bit different than that little room, isn't it? There are ramifications..."

Zach frowned. "I didn't think you cared about what other people thought."

"I don't," Doug said tightly. He clenched his hands into fists to keep from reaching out. "But I care about you. And it doesn't seem right to throw my mess right into the middle of everything that's going on. Rosette and you and your parents have enough to deal with."

The wind snatched at Zach's hair, sending it flying everywhere. Futilely the vampire snatched at it, but he wasn't able to get control of it until the wind died down. Leaving it in a tangled, haphazard mess obscuring his face.

Doug laughed softly and stepped forward to help him set it back to rights, claws carefully combing his hair back into order... and lingering there. "It doesn't seem right to steal you away."

"Technically you wouldn't be," Zach said. "I never got a chance to tell you what my parents have been doing."

"Which is?" Doug stood still.

Zach smiled. "They're disowning me."

"Why are you smiling about that?"

Laughing, Zach explained. "When you arrived this morning, my parents had gone to talk to the Farshire about Rosette. DeLovely is a more powerful family than Farshire, which is why they wanted their daughter to marry me. But for obvious reasons, I can't in good conscience marry Rose. My parents figured if we were breaking one rule, we may as well keep breaking them until everything evened out. In apology for the broken betrothal, my parents wanted to adopt Rosette and make her the Alucard."

"Women can't be Alucards."

"Like I said," Zach replied. "My parents were going to break rules until everything came back around to level. If the Farshire said no, they would have just found a vampire somewhere of adequate blood to adopt. My parents want the name to continue, the blood itself doesn't mean as much."

Doug shook his head. "Your parents are a rarity among vampires. Bloodline is everything amongst the nobility."

Zach shrugged. "My parents always said there are more important things." He smiled shyly at Doug. "It just wasn't until I met you that I was willing to start believing them. And they're not literally disowning me - it's more just a stripping of the Alucard title. Beginning tomorrow I'll simply be Zachariah DeLovely. And Rosette, if she decides she still wants to do it, will become the Alucard DeLovely. Though I'm sure plenty will be fighting the move if they're not too busy with the werewolves." He looked anxiously at Doug. "So..."

Doug held out a clawed, dark gray hand. On the roof even the lights of the hotel didn't reach them, and he looked like little more than a large, winged shadow, though his mismatched green and yellow eyes glowed bright. "It really doesn't bother you I'm an imp? You'll be harassed the rest of your life for having an imp as your lover."

"I think you're beautiful," Zach replied, and ignored Doug's hand to step forward and throw his arms up around his neck. When Doug was in human shape, they were nearly matched in height. As an imp, Doug was several inches taller. Zach

kissed him hard, as if hoping by doing so he would overcome his shyness.

Startled into stillness, Doug rapidly recovered himself and began to return the kiss. "You can't be real," he said softly against Zach's mouth.

"I can if you can," Zach replied.

Doug laughed. "That sounds fair."

Case #407: Wolves and Demons

Sable sat up, moving before he was entirely awake.

He woke angry. Angry about something in the dream that had driven him into consciousness, and angry that he'd also woken up feeling scared.

Shoving haphazard curls from his face, he lay back down and stared at the ceiling. Moonlight filtered in between the heavy curtains that blocked out the city lights. Scrubbing his face with his hands, displeased that he was so unsettled, Sable tried desperately to cling to the shreds of his dream, but they slipped away and left him feeling only angry, scared and restless.

Turning on his side, Sable reached out and ran his hand down Christian's cheek, across his shoulder and down the length of his body, reassuring himself that his consort still slept soundly at his side. Realizing what he was doing, Sable snatched his hand away again and turned to climb out of bed, locating and putting on a pair of black silk pants.

A thought revived the fire as he sat down on his leather couch facing it. Though the room was cool, Sable did not feel it. Outside, beyond the windows, the city was also oddly still. The occasional ripples of abnormal power but nothing unusual. It was three in the morning. Save for a few more nocturnally inclined, the city slept. In bed, Christian was fast asleep. Only Sable seemed to be at odds with the world.

Annoyed with himself, Sable wandered to the windows and jerked the curtains back. Light spilled into the middle of the room and he gazed down at the city far below. Throughout most of it the buildings were dark. Only Sable's hotels shone brightly, offering far more to its guests and city natives than mere room and board. From the top of the Tantalus, he could easily see the shining red lights of the Seventh Circle and the cool blue of the Seraphim. Once the three buildings had been his dearest treasures. Far more than hotels, the triad of buildings was the palace at the center of his territory. Everyone for miles around could see them. They were something to be proud of, but they were no longer his greatest joy.

"Sable?" Chris said from the bed.

He let the curtains fall shut as he turned, storm-cloud eyes easily spotting his lover in the dark. Always a breathtaking sight, his consort. His. Christian had always been beautiful, the way he radiated that strange combination of energies - palest gold mixed with purest black. Now, though, those two colors were suffused with Sable's own silver-gray. To all demons, and those few other creatures that could sense the energies, Christian was marked brightly and loudly as belonging to Sable. "Yes, beautiful?"

"What are you doing up?"

Sable moved toward the bed, pressing Chris down before he could get up. "I woke up and could not settle. I didn't mean to wake you." He brushed Chris's lips softly. "Go back to sleep."

"Come back to bed," Chris said in reply.

"I'm not tired," Sable protested. "I'd just keep you awake."

Chris smirked. "I never said anything about sleeping. And later maybe you'll tell me why you're upset."

Sable laughed as Chris kissed him, allowing himself to be dragged back into bed. "As you wish, beloved." Then proceeded to make sure Chris forgot everything but his name.

"So how long will you be gone?" Sable asked with a frown.

Chris kissed the corner of his mouth, then darted away to finish dressing. He pulled on a red t-shirt and brushed his hair. Diamonds sparkled in his ears, at complete odds with his casual appearance. "I should be back by lunch," he said tolerantly.

"I don't see why you have to go at all. Nor do I like it."

"It's just to talk to a witness." Chris shrugged into his beat up leather coat, forestalling the protest Sable was about to make. "Just a few hours, Sable."

Sable shook his head and dragged him close, kissing Chris hard enough to bruise his lips. "Fine. But be back by lunch. You weren't supposed to be working today."

"I know," Chris said, suddenly letting his weariness show. "But its best if I do this. It shouldn't take long." Sable let him move away. "I'll be back soon." He stepped close again, reaching up to give Sable a deep kiss goodbye. "I'm sorry, Sable."

Sable sighed. "You've nothing to be sorry for, beloved. It's my own problem if I don't want to share you."

Chris laughed. "Only my time, Sable. The rest is yours."

"Yes, it is," Sable said, folding his arms to keep him where he belonged a moment longer. "I'll see you for lunch then. Try not to cause too much trouble."

"I never cause trouble. It just finds me." Grumbling about the sort of trouble that always found him, Chris departed.

Sighing again, never quite comfortable when his consort was away, Sable forced himself to get on with the day. Downstairs in the main lobby of the Tantalus he fell into dealing with the day to day problems of his hotels, tending to guests both normal and abnormal.

At ten o'clock one of his assistants brought him something to drink. Sable reached out to take it, but at the last moment missed. The sound of shattering glass filled the spacious lobby and startled everyone into silence. Scattered around him were broken pieces of glass and dark red juice.

Sable didn't notice. A heartbeat later the silence was shattered by his scream. "Christian!" His terrified scream turned into one of rage. Power rippled, echoing his fury, and throughout the hotel and nearby buildings normals and weaker abnormals dropped unconscious the floor. Even several stronger abnormals fell to the ground or stopped short from sudden weakness and a heavy sense of dread.

Outside, the normally gray weather turned nasty, thunder rumbling hard enough to shake buildings, lightning splitting the sky and striking wildly, dangerously.

With a snarl Sable vanished from the hotel, rumbling thunder chasing him as he appeared at the far northwest end of his property.

Alpha Sandalio waited for him just beyond the point that Sable could go.

Sable barely noticed, eyes only for the unconscious form of his consort, his energies dimmed, barely glowing, trapped in the most complicated spellcage he'd ever seen. Too complicated. Demon level magic. Werewolves shouldn't be capable of magic even a fifth so strong. "You will die," he vowed. "More horribly than you can possibly imagine."

Sandalio laughed. "Stupid, foolish, arrogant demon. What can you do to me? You can't use your power outside your own territory." His eyes flicked past Sable, to the four figures that had appeared with a faint ripple of imp-magic. "If the whore's lackeys try anything, I'll kill him." He sneered. "Which will send you straight back to hell, demon. So don't waste time with empty threats."

"It was not a threat," Sable said softly but with chilling certainty. "You will die slowly, screaming in pain and begging for mercy, and I will stand here and laugh. Only a fool would dare to mess with a demon's consort."

"Empty threats," Sandalio said contemptuously. He sneered.

"What do you want?" Sable asked coldly.

"Surely you already know that," Sandalio said. "What does everyone want from you?"

Sable relaxed slightly, lips curving in a contemptuous sneer. "As if a werewolf like you could make full use of it."

Sandalio laughed. "You've got one hour, demon, to bring me the book. If you're so much as a second late-"

"Then you'll never get the book," Sable interrupted, thunder overhead rippling with his words, the fine mist in the air becoming a light shower. "No one but I can take books from the case where it's kept. If you force me back to hell, you'll never get it. And you will suffer, make no mistake about that. Even fools do not anger demons." With a last snarl, power rippling, Sable vanished.

He reappeared in his rooms at the top of the Tantalus, Doug and the others alongside him.

"How?" Doug asked.

Sable raked a hand through his damp hair, sparing the imp a brief look, attention solely for his consort. "I don't know. That spellcage must have taken years of work."

"So they've been plotting this for a long time. Is a book really that valuable?" Doug replied.

"Yes." Sable stopped before a tall bookcase tucked into the corner of his office. The shelves appeared completely ordinary - until he drew close, and then even Doug winced slightly at the power which emanated forth. Sable murmured the words that deactivated the ward spells, then reached in and stroked his fingers along the spine of an old book, the leather cracked and worn, lettering faded. It warmed beneath his touch.

The Book of the Angel Raziel was what it said, or would have if the wording was still legible. Despite the age of the outside, the words inside would be near-perfect, as if they'd been penned only minutes ago. This was the book Sandalio wanted. The book more than few had wanted in the past. He'd hunted long for it, had refused to settle into a territory until he had it.

This was the book that had brought him forth, made him a slave for two hundred years, trapped in a mirror to do the bidding of the human who had managed to summon him. But most humans were foolish, and the magician had slipped up

By then, however, the book had long since gone to other hands, and too many demons had been incorrectly summoned, damaged by the process. One other demon besides himself had been summoned before Sable had finally managed to secure the book, ensure no one else could use it.

That other demon also sat on his protected bookshelves, kept company by spell books more than a few paranormals had died trying to obtain and use. Sable let go of The Book of the Angel Raziel and reached for a different book. It was made of soft, smooth as silk leather and dyed a rich, creamy color that resembled fresh butter. No words or images decorated it; it could have been anything. "Asenath," Sable murmured softly, "this may finally be your chance. I'm sorry for it, but there's no other choice." Beneath his fingertips the book seemed to thrum, vibrate, and from the center of the cover ink seemed to spread like blood from a fresh wound, soaking the book until it looked as though Sable held The Book of the Angel Raziel.

Holding the book lightly, Sable turned back to the rest of the room. Patiently, though obviously that patience had long ago worn thin, faces strained with worry, confusion, Doug, Zack, Myra and Phil all waited for him to explain what was going on, and why their lead detective was currently being held by werewolves. "Myra," he said, addressing the werewolf who was the latest to be adopted into Christian's detective agency, "if there's anyone is Sandalio's immediate pack you would prefer live, you had best figure out soon how to warn him."

"The only wolf I cared about it dead," Myra said flatly, her cold expression at complete odds with her delicate, pretty features. Dressed in a pale blue sweater and flared jeans, black boots, hair loosely gathered, she looked gentle, like a school teacher or as though she should be serving tea. But the hard lines set into her face as she spoke of her former pack betrayed her werewolf blood. "Sandalio has hurt Chris, and in so doing angered a demon; let him suffer the consequences. Merely leave those who had no part in this alone."

Phil shuddered beside her, hugging Jester tight. "I like it better when we all we have to do was figure out who stole what and why. Is Chris going to be okay?" She buried her face as Jester chattered at her, his rainbow wings fluttering. "Demon-loved hurting," she whispered, repeating Jester's words to her.

"Not for long," Sable said, voice filled with grim promise. "Werewolves should learn to do their homework. Raziel is not the only book I own." He looked at them. "You are to stay here. Once I set this book loose, there is no controlling it. Beyond that, the sight will not be a pleasant one." Sandalio should never have hurt Christian. "Stay here. You will know when Christian is safe." With that he vanished.

He reappeared at the edge of his territory, Sandalio and his wolves looking as though they had not moved so much as an inch since his departure. "Here you are," Sable said, and tossed the book to them.

Sandalio bared his teeth in a vicious, triumphant smile and motioned for one of his wolves, a cruel looking half-breed with dark fur and large, filthy teeth, to fetch the book. His face was expressionless as Sandalio sent a wolf to retrieve it He watched as the wolf gripped the book. "Asenath," he said softly. "Your binding I break. Fulfill the strictures of the spell cast

upon you."

A moment later the screaming began.

What had been a book was now a strange, monstrous specter - a shadow given solidity, teeth and claws flashing as it attacked the wolves, devoured them piece by piece, oblivious to the blood and screams, working with eerie, silent efficiency.

Sable watched impassively, unmoved by the massacre.

After a few minutes, he cast his eyes about, searching for and immediately finding Sandalio at the far edge of the field, unable to go anywhere as the wolf in him went crazy at the smell of so much blood and death. He watched as a blood-crazed Sandalio attacked the specter - and laughed loudly as the specter won, devouring the Alpha whole.

Sable laughed.

Everything seemed to still for a moment; even the air itself seemed to stop moving. Then the specter began to glow - faintly at first merely fading from black to gray, but then it began to glow bright white, then to a burning, brilliant gold that spread out and overtook the field, drowning everything out. Brighter and brighter the light flared, blinding in its intensity - then went out.

No sign of violence remained. Only a green field, the midday sun high above.

In the center of the field stood a tall man, so slender he was bony, not a spare ounce of fat anywhere on his frame. His skin was fair, as if the last of his tan was just fading away. He wore loose jeans and a tight, dark blue polo, a gold chain gleaming at his throat. His hair was blonde, as pale and rich in color as fresh butter, falling to his waist. Eyes the color of a setting sun fastened on Sable, and slowly he began to cross the field, Christian cradled in his arms.

"Cadfael," the man said quietly, and gently handed Christian over. "Thank you."

Sable bowed his head. "It is good to see you free, Asenath."

"It is good to be free," Asenath said. "I will be taking over the wolf territories, and will bring them under control. Take your consort home, demon of storms. We will speak later."

"Later," Sable agreed. He vanished, Chris held close.

"Please tell me my head hurts this much because I got drunk," Chris said with a groan as he slowly sat up.

Sable turned sharply from where he was standing in front of the floor-length windows that ran most the length of his bedroom and strode over to the bed, sitting down beside Chris and kissing him hard. "Christian," he breathed when he finally stopped.

"Not because I got drunk then," Chris finally said, and leaned forward to rest against Sable, wrapping arms tightly around his waist. "What happened? I remember going to the arranged meeting place, and I was on my way back when I saw Sandalio..." He shook his head. "Then I felt a lot of pain, like someone had ripped my spine out or something." He shuddered at the memory. "What happened?"

Sable ducked his head to nuzzle at Chris's bare throat and shoulder, breathing in the smell of his consort, tasting his skin, reveling in the energies that were slowly returning to full strength, his own silver-gray stronger than ever. "Sandalio trapped you in a spellcage." He turned Chris' head up and kissed him, stroked his cheek. "Just outside my reach."

"Why?" Chris asked, blue eyes dark with anger and fear as the full reality of what Sandalio had done washed over him. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, beloved, now that you're back where you belong." Sable kissed him again, then shifted, pressing Chris back down into bed, looming over him. "He wanted one of my books."

"To gain more power for his wolves?" Chris asked, though he knew the answer. He reached up and dragged Sable down, curling up against him, tangled in the silk sheets. "I'm sorry, Sable."

Sable nipped at his throat, hand searching out skin beneath the silk. "That is why I always press you not to bank your power, beloved."

"I know," Chris said. "I'm sorry. What did you do to them?"

"You don't want to know."

Chris glared. "Sable."

"They shouldn't have hurt you," Sable said, eyes flashing like lightning. "It was only Sandalio and his closest - not more than a couple dozen vile werewolves that did the pack more harm than good." His frown deepened as Chris only stared at him. "I'm a demon, Christian. They should not have harmed you."

"I'm your consort," Chris replied, pulling away and sitting up. "Getting hurt comes with that position."

Sable yanked him back, holding him close, taking his mouth and kissing him hard, fingers holding tight enough to leave bruises. "You're mine. No one hurts you. If Sandalio wanted the book, he should have stuck to form and not attempted to threaten me by hurting you."

"Sable..." Chris said softly, burying his face against the demon's chest. He looked up a minute later, blue eyes dark. "This is why I didn't want to do it, Sable. I don't want to know that something as stupid as putting me in a spellcage could kill you. You're mine too, you know. I don't want you hurt because of me."

"And I told you to shut up, as I recall," Sable said with a rare soft smile.

Chris looked disgruntled at the memory. "Yes. Bastard. No more mindless murdering just because I'm an idiot, all right, Sable?"

Sable sighed. "Whatever you want, beloved. Though if you want to avoid something like that again-"

"Stop banking my power, I know," Chris said with a sigh of his own. "I just don't..." He sighed again.

"I believe I told you to shut up then, too," Sable said with his more familiar smirk.

Chris thumped his chest hard, sitting up and glaring at Sable, batting away his hands. "Shut up yourself. It isn't funny."

"No, it's not. Use the power I've given you, Christian. The power that's rightfully yours as my consort. Then they won't get to you nearly as easily, which means they won't get to me as easily."

"That's not playing fair," Chris complained.

Sable laughed. "All's fair in love and war, isn't that how the saying goes?"

"Shut up." Chris sighed and laid back down, curling around Sable. "So explain everything to me."

"Later, beautiful," Sable replied, moving so that Chris was once more pinned beneath him, leaning down to take a hard kiss.

"Cadfael."

Sable bowed his head. "Asenath. You are looking well."

Asenath laughed, the sound sour, and swept loose strands of his fine blonde hair from his face, yellow eyes landing on Chris. "Cadfael's consort. You look much healthier than when I first saw you."

"My thanks to you for that, Asenath," Chris said, bowing his head.

"Alain," Asenath said. "That's my name now. Alain Townsend." He motioned to the land all around him. "I'll be taking over the territories claimed by the wolf packs. I'll bring them to heel, and they'll cause you no more trouble." His sunbright eyes gleamed, ensuring the words were not idle. "Thank you, Cadfael, for helping me break free."

"I owed you one, as I recalled. I am glad you are free of the spell. And you can call me Sable."

Chris tilted his head, looking curiously at Alain. "What were the conditions of the spell?"

"To devour five thousand abnormals," Alain said, expression as downcast as a cloudy sky. "The man who imprisoned me hated them all; he wanted to add more to the stricture, but he had not the strength. Five thousand was the most he could manage."

Sable grunted. "The wolves listen to you?"

"Yes. I have staked a claim on Third Candidate Grey. As he is the only Candidate still living, that makes him Alpha." Alain licked his lips, eyes gleaming. "Through him, I'll keep order. The wolves suit me."

"And Grey?" Sable asked, storm cloud eyes regarding the other demon thoughtfully.

Alain smirked. "He is mine."

"There's a tone and statement I recognize," Chris said dryly.

Sable chuckled and reached out to drag Chris close. "You dislike the tone, beautiful?"

"Only the insufferable arrogance behind it," Chris retorted.

"I know very well you like the arrogance," Sable said softly in his ear, nipping hard at his lobe. His eyes flicked back to Alain. "Go play with your wolves. I will send Christian to see you in a few days time. Thank you again for your help."

"You gave me a chance to set myself free," Alain replied. "I feel I still owe you a debt."

"Bring the wolves to heel," Sable said. "Farewell, Alain."

"Farewell, Sable. Christian."

Chris rolled his eyes. "What is it with demons insisting on using my whole name? Call me Chris."

Alain smiled briefly and nodded, then with a short bow - one of those odd mannerisms demons always seemed to carry - he vanished.

Sable and Chris vanished in the next moment, appearing in Sable's rooms.

In the sitting area, Chris's team waited impatiently.

All four had touches of Chris's own stranger energies - most especially Douglas, who was very much Chris's protégé. Even Myra had begun to take on hints of Chris in her mix of tame and wild energies, somehow blending smoothly into the rest of the team, adding her own unique skills to the strange group of detectives.

The strangest of the group was perhaps Phil - she bore little resemblance to the girl she'd been when first possessed by a demon. Very little, if anything, remained of the spoiled brat Sable vaguely recalled.

Zach too seemed to be flourishing as a paranormal detective, and if his peers had been giving him any trouble in that respect - the DeLovelys had not mentioned it. His mixture was the oddest - the cool colors of the vampires mixed with the warmer colors of Douglas, touches of Chris's dark and bright energies.

Unique energies everywhere, infinitely appealing.

None was more appealing, more perfect, than the gold and black of Christian saturated with his own silver-gray.

Already he was ready to be alone, to have what his consort to himself. He detested sharing.

Chris seemed to sense his mood, breaking away from his team and coming toward him. "You look like a thundercloud."

"Appropriate," Sable murmured, leaning down to steal a kiss. "Is everyone assured of your safety?"

Doug laughed from the far side of the room. "Demons."

Sable smirked at him. "Not all of us prefer to watch our lover feed, little imp."

Rather than look embarrassed, Doug merely returned the smirk, sliding his arm around Zach's waist, tugging the vampire all but in his lap. "Only because yours isn't a vampire."

"Men," Myra murmured from where she sat next to Phil on the large sofa.

Phil snickered. "So are you grounded now, Chris? Or are we just going to have to hire bodyguards until Mr. Protective and Possessive simmers down?"

Sable growled softly, hands tightening around his consort. "I like the sound of grounded."

Chris smacked him. "Well, I don't. I already said I'd stop hiding my power, you stupid demon. If you try to keep me confined-

Sable cut him off with a kiss. "Tempting, tempting, beautiful, but I'm not over five hundred because I'm stupid."

"Dumb luck," Chris muttered, but didn't protest another kiss. "It's going to be a lot harder to do my job when I'm flouncing around as your consort. Very few of my clients are going to be comfortable with that."

Doug snorted. "Chris, by this point everyone knows it anyway."

"That aside, beloved," Sable said, "that's why you have a team of detectives. They'll take care of the ones you make nervous."

"That would be all of them," Doug said.

Chris glared at him. "Watch it imp."

"Yeah, yeah," Doug said carelessly as he stood up and stretched. At this cue, the other stood as well, Zach sliding his hand into Doug's, the girls walking ahead of them to kiss Chris's cheek before they all left the room. "We'll see you..." Doug looked briefly at Sable, obviously smothering a laugh at whatever he saw. "Sometime tomorrow."

"Or the day after," Sable said.

As the door closed behind them, he finally allowed himself to relax. Outside thunder rumbled in the distance but it would draw closer. The permanently inclement weather was a sign of his presence - and his affinity was for storms. "Christian," he breathed the name against his lover's mouth.

In a rare soft moment, Christian had told him that he thought Sable tasted like magic - he'd denied ever saying so since, of course, but Sable not had forgotten it.

The draw for him had been that strange combination of energies, sunlight-gold and midnight-black, radiating from a man that was alive but had all the powers of a spirit. He'd been soaked to the skin from a rain shower. One of his storms come to life.

Impossible to tame, but Sable had an affinity for storms. "Beloved, I am glad you are safe."

"You would not let me be anything else, Sable." Chris sighed, but Sable knew when his lover was fighting a smile. Deft fingers began to work on his tie, but Sable captured Chris's hand and held him still.

"Does it truly bother you that much, beloved, to be so openly mine? I do not want you harmed again, but I will not have you so unhappy."

Chris stared at him, surprised. "Sable...you know I'll never be comfortable with your power. I grew up in a house that had holes in the roof and floors...it was only a few years ago that the last of the repairs were finally made. My only ability is to turn invisible - considerable but nothing like what you've given me. What comes so naturally to you." He leaned in close, unconsciously seeking comfort, support. "I'm not unhappy, Sable, never that." He tilted his head up, silently begging a kiss that Sable immediately gave.

He didn't need to press Chris further, knowing already his lover's thoughts - they would probably be the same for a long time. "You are my heart and soul, Christian."

"And you are mine, Sable. Always."

Case #413: Will O' the Wisp

7:00 AM - Sable

Sable woke slowly, never inclined toward rushing anything. Bit by bit he stirred, feeling first the warmth of his room, the soft sheets and blankets, the softer skin of the fine body tangled with his. When he finally opened his eyes, it was to drink in the sight of Christian still fast asleep, curled up against him.

One of the only times his consort was completely relaxed and unguarded, when he looked gentle and calm, nearly angelic.

Glenys had often said that nothing was more deceptive than her son fast asleep. Sable had agreed – well out of Christian's range of hearing.

Admiring the lines of his lover's body, the swirl of gold and black and silver energies, Sable slowly set to work waking his lover. Usually Christian was up first; those few days when Sable managed to wake up before him, he took full advantage.

Shifting, lying full on his back, he tugged Christian to lie on top of him, then slid his hands along the length of his body, from shoulders to ass. He teased at Christian's entrance, still stretched from last night, pressing lightly. A faint murmur came from the man in his arms, and Sable pressed a soft kiss to his jaw. Withdrawing briefly to slick his fingers, he then pressed one finger slowly in, free hand curling around one hip.

Christian jerked, rumbling sleepily, eyes blinking open slowly, lashes brushing faintly against Sable's skin before he levered himself up a bit. He hissed in surprise and startled arousal as the movement only drove Sable's finger deeper. He moaned low, and Sable drank it down, mouth sliding over Christian's in a slow, deep kiss. "S-Sable..."

"Good morning, beloved," Sable replied, one finger becoming two, his eyes never leaving Christian's face, those blue eyes unfocused, his lover tangled up in sleepiness and lust. Fingers slid over his shoulders, just barely touching him as they tangled in the sheets on either side of him, Christian riding his fingers now, panting slowly as he struggled to wake completely while lost to pleasure, his hardness pressed between them, leaking on their skin.

Christian's voice was low and husky as he spoke, lips just brushing Sable's ear. "Damn it, demon."

Sable chuckled, his free hand smoothing along Christian's skin, turning his head to take another kiss, lick and nibble at those fine lips. "Was that a request or an order, beautiful?" When Christian only swore in reply, he twisted his fingers sharply and then pulled them out.

"Sable!" Christian cried out sharply, struggling to glare and failing completely, muttering soft curses as he slowly leveraged himself up, bracing one hand on Sable's chest as he guided Sable's cock to his entrance, then slowly slid down it with a deep groan.

Rumbling in pleasure at the tight heat, Sable curled his hands tightly around Christian's hips as his consort began to move, eyes still glazed with lust, slightly dazed with lingering sleepiness, breath coming in quick, needy pants as he rode Sable hard, sliding up and down.

Sable gave a long groan of his own and began to thrust up in time with Christian's movements, one hand digging into a slender hip, the other moving to stroke Christian's cock with firm, hard strokes, crying out when Christian came, spilling heat over his hand, clamping down around his cock, pulling his own climax from him.

Christian collapsed on top of him, muttering softly about troublesome demons. When he sat up some time later, his blue eyes were bright and alert. "Sable."

"Good morning again, beloved," Sable said, dragging him down for a kiss.

"You're always so smug when you wake up first," Chris grouched.

Sable smirked, but wisely did not reply to that. "It's almost eight, Christian. You should probably get going, though if you want to stay..."

Christian pinched him and rolled away. "If you behave, you can get a shower with me."

"Define behave," Sable murmured, having no intention of doing any such thing.

10:00 AM – Chris

"Shut up," Chris said, seeing the look on Doug's face. "What's this 'sounds interesting' case you called about last night?" He stifled a yawn and took a seat in one of the chairs usually reserved for clients. His old desk had gone to Doug, Doug's to Zach, and a fourth added alongside Phil's for Myra.

Looking at his agency, his team of detectives, never failed to make him all but burst with pride. All he'd ever wanted and he had it.

Doug sniggered and flipped open his notebook. "It comes from a woman in that little town not far off from Ricky's stead. She called late last night about her son going missing."

"The really interesting part," Phil interjected. "Is that he's not the first disappearance in that area – just the first one to bother them."

Chris quirked a brow at that. He looked up as a mug of coffee appeared in front of him, and gave Myra a brief nod and smile. "Thanks."

"Sure, boss," Myra said, then moved back to her desk, propping her booted feet up on it, leaning back in her chair.

"Start from the beginning," Chris said.

Doug grinned. "I figured as you were running an hour and a half late, you'd want the short version."

"Shut up, imp, and tell me the case."

Snickering, Doug obeyed. "Apparently there is a path from this mountain town to the bottom of the mountain on the opposite side – just at the very edge of Sable's territory in that direction. It's primarily a place for semi-paranormals." Meaning superstitious normals who didn't know quite enough about things to be aware of abnormals and all. "So this path has always been considered haunted. The local legend is that it only appears at night. Apparently a will o' the wisp appears to guide whatever lost person is out and about – if the person is a good individual, the wisp guides them home. If he's bad, it leads them deeper into the forest and they're never seen again."

"This has been going on how long?" Chris asked, amazed he'd never heard the tale before. Then again, such things were often closely guarded. Even in the paranormal world, it was odd for people to go missing in such a fashion. Either the town was guarding a secret...or they had no idea why the wisp behaved as it did. If it really did dispose of 'bad' persons...many paranormals would see no problem with that. In a town of semi-paranormals, there would be a good number of genuine paranormals, though whether they were humans familiar with it all, or actual abnormals, he wouldn't know 'til he got there.

"For as long as anyone can remember. The disappearances don't happen often, this is the first one to vanish in at least a decade, our client said. People returned home happens much more often, as it's apparently quite easy for even those who have always lived there to get lost. The client said many believe the entire area is haunted, not just the strange path."

Chris nodded. "Very likely. What do we know about the wisp?"

"Nothing," Doug said. "I did some preliminary work yesterday and no one could tell me anything, except that it's been there forever. They seem to regard it as some sort of guardian."

"I guess they would," Chris said, finishing his coffee. "Let's go play on the mountain, then."

10:30 AM – Sable

Sable took his seat at the long table in the second-largest of his private dining rooms. People always felt so privileged and smug when they were invited to any of his private rooms. He wasn't sure why, exactly. He owned every room in the three buildings, and a good chunk of other properties in the city – both the normal and abnormal parts. They should be grateful they got to see any of it, not smug.

But they were amusing that way, really. The lower half of the city might know he was a demon lord and therefore controlled everything, but the upper half just thought him a business tycoon with a taste for flashy hotels – and an odd lover.

Thinking of Christian, and recent misbehavior in the shower, made him smile briefly. But as he settled into his seat, he resumed his somber expression. "Thank you for coming to brunch, gentlemen. I hope the Seraphim has met your every need."

"Yes, quite," one of the men murmured.

Sable kept back a smirk, keeping his expression cool.

One of the others spoke up, a trace of smug satisfaction in his voice. "I notice Leslie, Katy, and Melanie aren't here."

So quickly they came to the point. How disappointing. "That is because they are currently enjoying a two week vacation in the presidential suites of the Tantalus," Sable replied, finally picked up the juice his secretary had left for him. He seldom bothered to eat much, but was secretly fond of fruit punch. Christian had said more than once it was yet more evidence Sable was nothing but an overgrown kid.

Sable had decided to prove how very much he was not a child.

He calmly set his glass down, enjoying the mixed emotions flickering across the faces of his various employees – the heads of nine of his smaller businesses, drawing in money from national and international sources.

All of them normal. All of them very stupid.

"I see you're displeased with the arrangements made for the ladies," he said calmly.

"I would think so," another man snapped, face flushed with anger. "What is the meaning of this, Brennus?"

Sable opened his leather portfolio and spread several sheaves of paper out. "The meaning of this? Only that my ladies are hard, honest workers who do my name and themselves proud. They are reaping the rewards of that hard work. You nine have all been trying to steal money from me, in one way or another."

Around the table, nine angry faces went stark pale.

They all jumped at the sudden sound of rumbling thunder, and turned as one to the open floor-to-ceiling windows to see the sky had become much darker in the past few minutes.

Sable left his papers on the table; they were all copies. "You have until the end of the day to get beyond city limits. The further you get, the safer you will be. If by sunrise you are still where I can find you...well, I shall leave that to your imagination. Suffice to say, you had better be gone."

He walked quietly from the room, laughing softly as he heard them all explode into a nasty argument. Let them fight it out.

Humans, by and large, were stupid. He was a good leader, a fair boss, an excellent businessman – having lived 500 years on earth gave him a serious advantage. If they had kept honest, those men would have retired early with obscenely generous bonuses.

Well, their loss. Sable decided he'd hire more women; they seemed much smarter and more reliable. Hell, without his secretary he would never manage half so well. He should give her another raise.

Chuckling, he made his way out of the Seraphim and back toward the Tantalus. Above him, the stormy skies had tapered off to light gray, a hint of sun peeking through. It was early spring, so the air was crisp, and at this hour most people were working, leaving the streets relatively uncrowded.

He wondered what time Christian would be back for lunch.

11:30 AM – Chris

"There's definitely magic involved," Chris said as he looked up and down the single main street of the small town. Minus a few modern touches, the village looked like something that grabbed up pitchforks and torches to go slay evil lords in dark castles on stormy nights.

Snorting at the idea of that, because Sable would likely just buy them all drinks and con them into the blackjacks tables, he attempted to focus on what was off about the place.

If there was a will o' the whisper guiding people to either safety or doom, then it was definitely the work of a powerful ghost.

Most ghosts were like his father – confined to the place they'd died, or a place of extreme importance. In his father's case, Daniel had been murdered and run away to the house because it was important to him. He'd bled to death there, and become a ghost.

A select handful of ghosts were confined to a more general area – like a section of mountain. This often happened with hunters, hermits, and other such types who tended to wander a territory. In such cases, a ghost could only travel a certain distance from where his body was buried.

Chris frowned, thinking, trying to feel the magic that was so blatantly soaked into the town. He couldn't quite get a hold on it, though. It kept slipping away right before he could grasp it, like trying to hold on to mist.

This was, by and far, the strangest ghost he'd ever encountered.

"What do you make of it, boss?"

"Even Sable isn't this sly," Chris replied, frown turning into a glare. "I can sense it...but only just, and my power isn't banked."

Doug nodded. "I can't sense it at all, except in brief flashes every once in a while. Whoever, whatever, this ghost is – he's powerful."

Chris shook his head. "Well, we'll shelve this part of the investigation for now. Let's see what we can learn about this missing kid."

"Hardly a kid," Doug said with a snort. "He was twenty-three, the only son of the client. Going to school in the city, came home on the weekends."

"What was he studying?" Chris asked.

Doug flipped through his notes. "Business, and apparently was bragging about some extremely promising job prospects."

Chris rolled his eyes. "So he's quite talented or a liar."

"Given he's aspiring to the business world," Doug said dryly, "He could easily have been both."

"True enough." Pulling his sunglasses from where he'd tucked them into the collar of his white t-shirt, Chris slid them on his face and then walked back toward his SUV. "Let's go investigate the school, see if we can get anyone there to talk."

"You are the detective Ms. Fairweather called?" The voice was calm and smooth, elegant, with the hint of an accent Chris couldn't place. He turned around – and caught himself staring.

Only certain, uniquely male traits gave the gender of the individual away. Otherwise, he was completely androgynous. Utterly beautiful. His features were delicate, fine and sharp, skin a pale, dusky color. His almond-shaped eyes looked black, and his hair was the true blue-black of a raven's wing, long and fine, falling to his hips. He wore a long-sleeved dark red shirt, the sleeves coming down so far they covered his hands, the end of the shirt clinging to his hips, accentuating just how slender he was. His pants were simple dark denim jeans, loose without being too big for his frame. Like the shirt, they were overlong, the ends all but hiding his feet, which sported nothing more than a simple pair of black flip-flops. Around his neck, on a simple gold chain, was a small white stone.

"I am," Chris said slowly. Nothing abnormal emanated from the strange young man...but magic worked so oddly here, and was so peculiarly hidden, that he didn't doubt the man could be a low level demon. "Did you know her son?"

The man nodded. "He was...her only son, and her husband died not long after the boy was born. He turned out much like such children do."

"Spoiled, you mean."

Nodding again, making the simple movement somehow incredibly graceful, beautifully elegant, the man continued to speak. "Very much, so. He was studying in the city; that environment only exacerbated the problem. His mother...did not like to see her child's faults. She still will not see them. More than likely, the boy simply ran off to pursue his own goals."

Still Chris could not place his accent. He felt he should know it, but couldn't recall ever hearing it. Something niggled at the back of his hand, but much like the town's magic, it slipped away before he could catch a firm hold. "I see. No one else in town has mentioned that..."

"They respect Ms. Fairweather, and will not speak ill of someone who has vanished."

"You will, though?"

"I believe in not wasting time," the man replied, calmly meeting Chris's eyes.

Chris blinked, feeling...odd. As though he'd seen something, but it had moved too quickly for him to catch what. That seemed to be happening a lot, lately. Scowling, he gave the man a nod. "Thank you. We will certainly look into that possibility."

The man nodded, then turned and walked away. Every movement was refined, elegant. Chris had never met anyone who actually could be described as having poise. Shaking his head, feeling a headache coming on, he yanked open the door of his SUV and climbed inside.

"So off to the school, boss?" Doug asked, climbing in beside him.

Chris shook his head. "Lunch first, then the school. If I have to deal with that many idiots, I get food first."

"And sex?" Doug asked, laughing and ducking out of range of Chris's fist.

1:00 PM – Sable

Sable waved farewell to his secretary as his private elevator chimed, smile widening as he immediately bundled close the man inside, kissing him soundly. "Christian."

"Let me go," Christian protested, squirming uselessly. "I want food."

"Yes, Christian," Sable agreed absently, fingers slipping under the old t-shirt Christian wore, stroking warm skin, pushing until his consort was pressed up against the back of the elevator.

He grunted at the quick, sharp bite given to his jaw. "Did you even hear what I said, Sable?"

"No," Sable answered, and used the moment of aggravated distraction to yank the t-shirt away altogether, immediately attacking the fine, smooth chest now properly displayed, biting one nipple then licking to soothe the sting, catching the fists that came at him and pinning Christian's arms to the wall. "Aggravating case today, beautiful?" he asked, then dipped his head to suck up a mark on Christian's neck – high enough the t-shirt wouldn't hide it.

"I'm not—Sable!—telling you—anything." Moaning low, Chris gave up all attempts at protest as his jeans were opened, underwear pushed aside, Sable's hand wrapping firmly around his cock, stroking it hard.

Hands sank into Sable's hair, Christian dragging him back in for another kiss, twisting and writhing in his arms, begging for more with whimpers and needy moans. "Sable."

"Yes, Christian," Sable said, smirking as his lover came, shuddering in his arms, shouting his name.

He kissed Christian long and slow, laughing when teeth nipped sharply at his lips, pulling away. "You never stay pleasantly dazed long enough, beautiful. Perhaps I'm not trying hard enough." He pulled away just enough to pull out a handkerchief and clean his hands, meticulously putting Christian back to rights.

Minus the t-shirt, which he held just out of reach, grinning.

"What did I tell you about jumping me in the elevator, Sable?" Christian hissed, eyes flashing in that way Sable had loved right from the first. He made a grab for his shirt, but succeeded only in getting groped. Swearing, he stepped away again.

Sable smirked. "That I'd better put carpet down before the next time." He looked pointedly down.

Chris rolled his eyes. "You're twisting my sarcasm to suit your own purposes, demon."

"Yes," Sable said. "It's very nice carpet."

Chris rolled his eyes and then leaned up to give Sable a quick, hard kiss, managing to snatch his t-shirt back as he pulled away. He tugged it back on and smoothed it down.

Sable waited.

Lips twitching in an effort not to smile, Chris stepped close again. "I guess it would be a pity not to make use of it, then," he said, fingers going to the fly of Sable's pants as he slowly sank to his knees.

8:00 PM – Chris

"People are insane," Chris grouched. "And stupid."

"I tend to agree," Doug said, "but at least they gave us something useful."

Chris grunted.

Indeed they had.

It had taken them five hours and entirely too much walking, but they had eventually tracked down those persons who seemed to know what mattered when it came to Aaron Fairweather.

Buying drinks, walking miles, buying more drinks, enduring noisy cafeterias and smelly classrooms had, in the end, told them quite a bit about the missing young man.

He was a graduate student with excellent grades. Very good at charming faculty and staff, part of a prestigious fraternity, and a major asshole to everyone else. Information which didn't surprise Chris at all, especially when combined with the fact that Aaron wasn't lying about his promising job prospects.

"So he was going to work for someone who works for Sable."

Doug snorted. "Who doesn't work for someone who works for Sable?"

Chris rolled his eyes, not even attempting to try and argue the statement, especially as right this minute Sable was throwing a welcome party for the latest company to join his fold. He'd pointed out more than once that it was probably illegal for one man to more or less own every business in a city.

He'd given up when Sable pointed out that normals weren't overly fond of demons either, and that what they didn't know would keep everyone more or less happy. Arguing with Sable very rarely accomplished anything.

"What was the name of the guy who was apparently Aaron's big job?"

"Templeton," Doug answered. "Roger Templeton."

Chris grimaced. "Sable, do you know a Roger Templeton?"

Hmm...owns a resort company that's based here. He's recently joined the club. If you need to harass him, he's at the party. Not ten yards away. I thought you didn't want me helping with your cases, beloved.

"Shut up," Chris said. "Do you know his latest projects?"

He wants to put a luxury spa retreat type thing somewhere in the area. I know he's been eying the mountains for it, but not more than that.

Chris smiled. "Like possibly buying out a small village, so he doesn't have to spend so much money on making undeveloped land suitable?"

That would be the shrewd thing to do. Buy up all the property, or scare people away. Except in my territory, of course. I'm the only one allowed to bully people. Anything else, beautiful?

"Yeah. I warned you about leaving marks, you stupid demon." He touched the hickey Sable had left high on his neck. "It would serve you right if it got me a whole list of offers from all these young college students."

I can satisfy a hell of a lot better than those children. They'd better not have made offers.

Chris rolled his eyes. "No, Sable." Not offers so much as phone numbers that Chris had already tossed. "Stop leaving marks. Enjoy your party."

Not coming?

"I have to go tell a client her stupid son was in cahoots with a man who wanted to turn his home into a luxury spa retreat."

You get to have all the fun.

Rolling his eyes, Chris cut the connection.

Doug snickered. "Should we go harass Mr. Templeton, then?"

"No," Chris said, tapping his chin. "Resort company..." He steepled his fingers and stared out over the park where they'd stopped to eat their late dinner, not really seeing it. "We need to go back to the quaint little village and tell mommy why her boy vanished."

"These answers are always rather anticlimactic," Doug said with a sigh. "Though I guess we still have to figure out what's doing the vanishing."

Chris shrugged. "For our own gratification, maybe. She asked only that we determine what happened to her 'good boy' and why. We know what – he was taken by the ghost that considers itself a guardian. Now we know why."

8:30 PM – Sable

Finally breaking away from his conversation with Ms. Winnow, Sable crossed the crowded lobby to where Roger Templeton

skulked by the bar.

He signaled the bartender, an imp long in his employ, then turned to his unwitting victim with a smile. "How are you finding the party, Mr. Templeton?"

"Your parties are always perfect, Mr. Brennus, and I think you know it." He smiled in what was no doubt a charming manner.

Sable returned it, gratified when Templeton's smile faltered a bit. He loved confusing normals. Abnormals, sadly, always knew when they were in Big Trouble.

Not that this man had necessarily done anything wrong, but a few minutes of work by his secretary had turned up more than enough evidence that it was likely he would do something wrong.

Honestly, he needed to hire people to keep a better eye on all his other people. He just couldn't manage it himself, clearly. Embezzlers, now bullies... Sable sighed to himself and focused on fixing at least one problem tonight. "I hear you're looking to build a resort nearby."

He smiled a thanks as the bartender set his drink down, and Sable sipped at the whiskey as he listened to Templeton ramble about his spa. Sable made a note to give the ideas to Leslie later and see what she could do to improve them – and make them affordable. Rich people were boring. He liked nonrich ones much better. Maybe he could build a fourth hotel with a spa-resort type theme.

Nodding, decided, Sable made a mental note to inform his secretary to schedule a meeting with all the relevant persons tomorrow. He turned his attention back to Templeton. "What location were you thinking of? The mountains around here offer unlimited opportunity, and there's also the river." Ah, maybe he could do something with the river, rather than an entire hotel.

Well, he'd form a committee to decide that. Committees were fun, especially when he Imposed Deadlines and got to watch them panic. He made an additional note to come up with suitable panic-inducing deadlines in the morning.

"Well, actually, I found the perfect location the other day," Templeton replied, eyes gleaming with a look Sable recognized – he'd seen it for far too long in the eyes of the human who'd bound him.

Greed made all creatures ugly. "Do you mean Inglington?" he asked, smiling coldly when Templeton jumped. "You had a partner in that enterprise, didn't you?" Sable flipped quickly through the information he'd coaxed out of Chris during lunch. "Aaron Fairweather, right? I think I heard this morning that he went missing. His mother has been frantic. Is he actually missing?"

Templeton blanched. "I have heard no such thing. Excuse me a moment, would you?"

"Of course," Sable murmured, and sipped his whiskey as he watched the weasel run.

And there was no one around who would tell Christian he'd been Interfering.

Now if only Christian would come home so he could abandon the party and do much more interesting things.

10:00 PM – Chris

"Well, that went well."

Doug grinned. "We haven't been called hacks and charlatans in a long time. It was rather nostalgic."

"Yes, I missed it so much," Chris said, making a face. "She needs to accept her son was an asshole. Man, the shit mothers ignore...except mine."

"Yeah, Glenys always makes it very clear when you're being an asshole."

Chris ignored him. "So let's go wandering in the forest. I want to see this will o' the wisp for myself."

Doug cheered. "I was hoping you'd say that. I've never seen one; the only ghosts I know are those like your dad."

Muttering a few choice comments on how he doubted any ghost could resemble his father, Chris rubbed his sore cheek and wandered away from Ms. Fairweather's house and into the forest, moving randomly in, summoning up enough power that he could see in the dark.

Behind him, Doug moved soundlessly. He was still in human form, but his eyes glowed in a way no human's ever could.

"Are we lost sufficiently yet, you think?" Chris asked after an hour or so had passed.

Doug snorted and didn't bother with further reply.

Snickering, Chris stopped and leaned up against a tree, folding his arms across his chest. "Maybe it'll come anyway, if only to get rid of us."

"I hope it doesn't slap us," Doug replied, rubbing his own cheek ruefully. "For a normal, she's got a wicked swing."

Chris grimaced. "Just don't mention it in front of Sable."

"It's already gone into the blackmail folder," Doug said cheerfully.

"Shut up, I—look there." Chris stood up straight and pointed.

A few yards off stood a ball of silvery light, moving and bobbing, unaffected by the wind it moved against as it slowly made its way down a path that had not been there a moment ago. It was wide, just enough for two people to walk side by side, not so much as a tree stump in the way.

"Let's go," Chris said softly.

Doug nodded and the two quickly chased after the flickering ball of light.

Chris felt a tingle move up his spine, something niggling at the back of his mind...something about that ball of silver light...and that strange, muted magic was growing stronger.

It grew strong enough to give him a headache as they were finally led to a moonlit glade. Rubbing his forehead, Chris stared in frustration at the flickering ball of silver light. He summoned up all of Sable's power, softly whispering his demon's name.

Realization hit so hard it left him reeling. "No!" He exclaimed. "It's not a will o' the wisp!"

Doug never took his eyes off the flickering silver light.

"Not light," Chris said softly. "Fire." Closing his eyes, he reached out and finally latched onto the powerful magic that had woven a spell over the glade, over the town, over any who entered. It was so carefully crafted, so beautifully made...

With a strained shout, Chris tore down the illusion.

Abruptly the empty glade faded away, to reveal one filled with a small waterfall spilling into a tiny pond...and a beautiful, strange looking house beside it, made entirely of wood, with strange doors and windows covered in paper.

He'd seen such houses only in books...a book of supernatural creatures...

Out of the house came the beautiful, androgynous young man from before. The white stone around his neck glowed with silver light. "Show yourself," Chris said. "I do not want to force you."

The young man smiled. "Since I have come here, honored consort of the demon Cadfael, you are the only to discern my true nature. How did you come upon it?"

"Will o' the wisp look like lanterns," Chris replied. "Once I was able to remember that, it all fell into place. The only thing with such a silver light, and a resemblance to wisps, is..."

"Fox fire," the young man said softly. Silver light shimmered around him, flaring bright and dissolving slowly in a shower of what seemed like starlight. When the light finally faded away, the young man looked somehow more beautiful than ever.

His skin was white, as was his hair, which now reached his knees. On the top of his head were two delicate-looking, silver-furred pointed ears. He wore elegant robes, white embroidered with silver and gold. A kimono, Chris supposed.

And spilling out behind him, just brushing the ground, were nine long white tails.

"A kitsune," Doug breathed. "I don't believe it. I never would have guessed. How in the world did you come to be here?"

The kitsune smiled sadly and looked away, seeing something that no one else could. "I came here with my honored lord about three hundred years ago. His enemies chased him to this land, and eventually killed him. However, before he fell, he

grew close to those who eventually founded this village. In keeping with his vow to them, I have ever protected the village and its people."

"You got rid of Aaron because he wanted to turn it into a resort."

"Yes," the kitsune said softly, "though he is not dead. I merely bewitched him, and tricked him into going far away. He will be happy, and never return here. I am harsh, not cruel."

Chris held his hands up in defeat. "I was told to figure out why he vanished. I did. Your business is your own, until such time as you cross Sable. How did you know his real name?"

"I have been here longer than he; I am good at learning things." He pushed back a loose strand of hair, and somehow even that simple movement seemed beautiful when he did it. His fingers were tipped with short, sharp-looking claws.

"You led us here. Why?"

"I wanted to see if you would figure it out, honored consort."

Chris barely repressed avoiding his eyes at the honorific. "What's your name?"

The kitsune smiled. "The townspeople all know me as Takashi. You may call me Yume, the name my honored lord bestowed upon me."

"One more question, if you do not mind."

"You may ask," Yume said.

"How does a kitsune come to have a lord? To the best of my knowledge, they are fiercely independent creatures."

Yume smiled gently and clasped his hands together in front of him, the voluminous sleeves of his kimono falling over them. "How does a half-ghost child come to swear himself forever to a demon lord?"

"Then I am sorry you lost him," Chris said, bowing his head.

"Thank you," Yume said softly, the sad look flickering over his face for a moment. Somehow it did nothing to lessen his beauty. In the next breath, though, he was smiling gently again. "The hour is late, now, but I would be honored if sometime you would come for tea. Both of you, and his lordship would be a most honored guest."

Chris snorted. "You won't think so after the first five minutes. We thank you for the invitation, and gladly accept. If you pick a suitable time, you've only to let me know it."

Yume nodded. "Then I bid you good night." He turned and vanished back into his home, the door sliding closed with a soft clack.

Chris laughed and turned away. "A kitsune. Here. Let's go home, imp."

Doug nodded, and together the two vanished.

11:45 PM – Sable

"Fascinating," Sable said, absorbing all Christian was telling him but far more interested in the way those lounge pants were barely clinging to his hips, the way his skin was still flushed from the shower, damp hair clinging.

He looked up in time to see Christian rolling his eyes. "A kitsune has lived here this entire time. If he's a ninetail, he's nearly five hundred years old. If he arrived here three hundred years ago, he was already pretty powerful. Such a powerful creature giving up his home to move to a strange land...Fascinating." He dropped his gaze back to the loose pants.

"You are hopeless," Christian grouched. "I'm exhausted, I'm going to bed. Keep your hands to yourself until tomorrow, demon." He drew close enough to give Sable a quick kiss, then pulled away and climbed up into their bed, pulling the blankets over his head, calling out a muffled good night.

Sable glanced at the clock and grinned, then went to find something else to do for fifteen minutes. Maybe he'd start that list of deadlines.

Case #421: The Priest

Chris opened one eye and glared in the general direction of the phone on the far side of the room. When it didn't obey his silent command to stop ringing, he muttered a few choice words and begrudgingly disentangled himself from warm blankets and clinging demon.

Beyond the floor to ceiling windows everything was still pitch black, or close enough to it he resented wholly being woken – and that Sable was still sound asleep. Damned demon.

Padding across the plush carpet, realizing belatedly he was completely naked and the room was chilly, Chris snatched up the phone and snarled into it. "What?"

Long used to her boss's consort and his manners, Sable's secretary calmly replied. "Mr. White, there's an Agency call for you."

Chris scowled at the clock over the mantel. 6:03. Someone was going to die, including Doug and Vincent for not being around to field the late night and early morning calls. "Fine."

A moment later the secretary connected the calls. "White Detective Agency," Chris said, forcing himself to speak with at least a modicum of patience and politeness. "Chris speaking." He pined for a cup of coffee. Clothes would also be nice. Going back to bed would be divine. He glared at the fireplace until the flames roared to life, his ring shimmering in the dark room. "How can I help you?"

"Yes...I'm sorry to be calling you at such an awful hour. I wanted to do it before I convinced myself I was being foolish. I'm sure it's all in my head, but Ms. Waverly insisted I call you... I really shouldn't have bothered, but it's been so frustrating and I don't like to think I'm crazy though I suspect I rather am..."

Chris rubbed his forehead and thought longingly of his pants. Or a cordless phone, but Sable hated them and they tended not to work as well in magic-infested areas. It was so beyond unfair and ridiculous to make him work both half-asleep and naked. The fact he wasn't certain which of those was worse proved just how not awake he was. Damned demons keeping him up all night.

He forced his mind to work whether it liked it or not. Waverly. He knew that name. A case...ah, an infestation of gremlins. That had been it. Millerton. Fifteen miles east of the city, right along the river where it curved. "Sir, calm down. It's perfectly all right. Let's go one step at a time." It wasn't alright, but a client was a client and they came first no matter how much he wanted to maim them and go back to bed.

The guy sounded young, but definitely adult. Mid-twenties or so, likely. "My name is Christian White. Chris, please. You are?"

"Oh. My apologies. I've been so off balance with all this... My name is Blake Saunders...Father Saunders, though you can certainly call me Blake. I lead the parish here in Millerton."

Chris snapped awake. Father. A priest. Bitterness tried to rise up, but in this one thing he would never give up. "What is your problem, Father?"

"I...to be honest, I'm not certain. This probably is going to sound incredibly stupid and I hate to trouble you with it but I'm at my wits end...I believe my garden is haunted. Ms. Waverly, the dear woman, actually listened to me ramble and then suggested I call your Agency.

"What makes you think it's haunted?"

"Things...move. They shouldn't, but they do. Plants completely change positions over night, and my furniture is always being rearranged. I know it's none of the local kids, I'd have figured it out already. Voices, too. I hear whispering when no one is around. Always I feel like I'm being watched when I'm out there and even occasionally when I'm inside. Drat, I really do sound as stupid as I'd feared. I apologize again for bothering you, Mr. White—"

"No," Chris said sharply. "You're not stupid or crazy. It sounds as though you may indeed have some sort of problem." Not a ghost, unless it was a particularly strange one, but something. Any number of things, especially as Father Saunders was obviously a normal...though not for long if he was noticing things most normals wouldn't see if their lives depended on it. Which gave him a chance...

"...You don't think I'm crazy?"

Chris almost snorted in amusement. "Far from it, Father, I assure you. This is precisely the sort of thing I do for a living."

He sensed Father Saunders was nodding on the other end of the phone. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Ms. Waverly was most sincere in her insistence upon my calling you. There was no deceit or mockery in her at all."

That was a peculiar thing to say. Perhaps this priest wasn't as normal as Chris has surmised. "I would need to know more details of your problem," he said. "How about I come out and see your garden? You can elaborate on the problem for me. Does nine o'clock sound okay?" Damn it, he'd hoped to spend all of today with Sable. Unfortunately, he wasn't so cruel as to sic Myra or Phil on a poor priest. Besides, this could be his chance...Chris shook the thought off and set it aside. He would deal with that when he'd done his job.

"Nine would be fine," Father Saunders replied, relief plain in his voice. "Thank you very much."

Chris grunted, mind already beginning to turn fully toward work. "Thank me when I've solved the problem. We'll discuss payment then as well."

"Of course. Thank you again. I will see you at nine." The phone went dead.

The soft swish of fabric was his only warning before Chris found himself draped in demon and wrapped in the bed's crushed velvet coverlet. He pressed back against his lover, humming as a hot mouth lavished attention upon his throat. "I have work, Sable."

"Not until nine," Sable murmured, teeth grazing his ear.

Chris shivered and reached his hand back to stroke Sable's thigh, the curve of his ass, absorbed by the contrast of warm skin against his palm and the rough-smooth crushed velvet against the back of his hand. "Then take me back to bed, you damnable demon."

Sable laughed softly and obeyed.

This far from the city, the storm clouds eased back and sunshine got through. As it was early spring, the temperature was perfect. Chris left his jacket in the SUV and took off his sunglasses as he approached the little cottage-looking house not far from the church proper. Quaint, old-fashioned little town, Millerton. Not too far away were the mountains that served as home to a couple of dragons.

He was halfway up the stone walkway when the door opened and a man who looked to be in about his mid-twenties stepped out, dressed in a dark brown long-sleeved t-shirt, faded jeans, and a beat up pair of flip-flops. His hair looked as though it had fought valiantly against a comb and not taken the loss gracefully, dark brown and wavy, falling into pale green eyes. Strange green eyes. That color nagged at him. Something familiar...

Chris blinked and forced himself not to stare. This was Father Saunders?

"Are you Mr. White?"

"Chris, please. I only get called Mr. White by people who get paid to do it. Father Saunders?"

Saunders laughed. "Blake is fine, really. I'm ever being told I'm too informal, but where I grew up we were only formal with the people we didn't like." He laughed again, an infectious sort of laugh that Chris bet went a long way toward making people listen to him. "Including the priests. They were the brimstone kind though. I'm more into picnics."

Chris fought a smile. "You sound far less upset now than you did on the phone." He held out his hand to shake Blake's as he reached the man.

"Now that I'm more awake and you don't think I'm insane? I feel much better."

"So show me the garden and tell me everything. Leave out no detail." Chris wished Doug were here, he was used to having the imp always with him – but if he dragged him away from the DeLovely estate now the vampires would kill him.

They walked around the side of the house to the backyard, and Blake led the way through a rickety gate in a high stone wall. The garden was beautiful, one of those old style ones never really seen anymore. About the only flower Chris recognized was one of the rosebushes. A small table and chairs were set up near the house.

"I just put those back this morning," Blake said, seeing where his gaze fell. "They were there last night, but when I woke up

they were over there." He pointed to the far back corner of the garden, beneath a magnolia tree.

Chris frowned in thought, taking a closer look at the garden. His mom had a garden, one he'd finally convinced her to let him pay for. One of the few things he'd vowed to do for her and had accomplished. She was so damned stubborn.

Flowers weren't his thing, but she'd tried to beat it into his head from time to time. Some of these flowers...he was pretty certain they weren't all compatible. Hell, he thought maybe one or two weren't right for the climate. Who knew? Not him.

He did know, however, what that might mean.

"Tell me, Father – Blake – did you plant this garden?"

Blake laughed. "Heck no. I take care of it best I can, but I bet I'm doing more harm than good. My predecessor died in his sleep about a year and a half ago. He loved this garden, or so I'm told, and I've tried to keep it up..." He shrugged and smiled. "Maybe the ghost is trying to tell me I'm doing it wrong."

Chris smiled briefly. "You may be closer to the truth than you think."

"So..." Blake tilted his head, causing his hair to flop into his eyes. He brushed it aside impatiently. "You're a...strange sort of detective, aren't you? I had no idea paranormal detectives really existed. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were scamming me."

"You said something similar on the phone," Chris said, suddenly recalling it. "Why do you say that?"

Blake looked embarrassed. "My mother always said I got it from my father. She said he could sense a lie from a mile away." He shrugged, discomfited. "I'm usually more careful about letting that slip. Perhaps this ghost has me more shaken than I thought."

Ah.

Now everything was falling into place. Chris blamed being slow on not getting his coffee soon enough. And demonic distractions.

He looked at Blake, those pale green eyes. As fine and pale as mist, but with the color of new spring. Of course. It seemed so obvious now. Chris smiled slowly. "Did you know your father? If you don't mind my asking. I intend no harm."

Blake stared at him for a long moment, and Chris could see the man reading him. "No," he said at last. "I never did." He shrugged again. "My mother said he was a nomad she met in the mountains. They spent two days together and then he was gone." A trace of sadness there, but oddly no bitterness. Either he was hiding it, or had let it go. His gaze never wavered from Chris's face. "You know something, though I've no idea how or what it has to do with anything."

"Not much, really, but enough." Chris smiled faintly then moved further out into the garden. His ring flashed in the sunlight as he focused his power to search...yes...such a tiny presence, he couldn't pick them out without looking for it. He turned back to his client and smiled again. "Blake, this isn't an ordinary garden." He waved his hand at the flowers. "I don't know much about flowers, but I'm fairly certain many of these shouldn't grow so well together. It takes magic to make it work...a very specific kind of magic."

"...Magic..." Blake frowned in thought. "This is all...hard to take...but I am nothing if not a man of faith. I also know you're not lying. Please, continue your explanation."

Chris nodded. "This is a faerie garden. It was made with the help of faeries. They keep it flourishing. However..." He moved back to stand with Blake. "Ordinary people can't see or hear them. They're too small; even I have to pay attention to feel them out. Faeries are delicate, and simple. They like plants, they like playing and tending those they consider under their care."

"Okay..." Blake looked horribly confused, but he was obviously trying hard to follow.

"Their most favored companions...are elves."

Blake stared at him, shock flitting across his face. "E-elves?"

"That doesn't surprise you?"

"I...my mother used to call me her little elf when I was a child. She stopped when I got older, but I never forgot. I used to like playing..." Blake shook his head. "I'm not an elf. I would say 'even if they really did exist' but I think I'm beyond that

point." He sighed. "So my garden is filled with faeries? Why do they keep moving things?"

Chris smiled faintly. "They've probably been trying to talk to you. If they were not so scared of me, as I sense they are, we could ask them."

"Scared of you?"

Chuckling, Chris did not reply, but cast his power out to reach the person who could help them. Faeries were simple, child like. They liked elves best, but would talk to another childlike creature...even if said childlike creature was a smartass. He spoke aloud, laughing at the confused look on Blake's face. "Hey, shopaholic!"

"Haha. Demon-loved still not funny. I'm at work and was here early, if that's why you're being obnoxious."

"Good. Grab that miscreant of yours. I need your help here."

"Where's there?"

"Here," Chris said, and reached out with his power to draw Phil and Jester to him.

Blake jumped about half a mile and stared wide-eyed.

Chris almost snickered as the man's eyes widened. Phil did nothing but drive him crazy. Most men, she drove crazy in an entirely different way.

It would seem poor Father Saunders was not entirely immune.

Of course, Phil was dressed in a clingy pale blue skirt and slightly darker halter top, with only a thin, cream-colored cardigan over that. Her boots were dark brown and only made her long legs longer.

In her arms, Jester stirred, stretching briefly before launching himself into the air.

Phil's laughter broke the silence. "Jester says he wants to play with the love-green. Half-elf should sit before fall."

"Half...elf..." Blake stared at Jester, eyes the size of saucers as he took in the miniature-gargoyle-looking creature with rainbow-colored wings. "What...what in the name of heaven in that?"

"A pixie," Phil replied fondly, holding a hand up to Jester, who fluttered down far enough to grip and kiss it briefly before zooming off to the trees. "His name is Jester. My name is Philippa – Phil, please."

Blake seemed to shake himself. "A pleasure to meet you. My name is Blake Saunders."

"Father Saunders," Chris interjected "He thought his garden was haunted."

"Ah," Phil said. She turned around, intricately braided blonde hair bright beneath the sunlight. "Jester!"

A moment later the pixie came zooming back to her, moving around restlessly, excitedly, then raced off right back into the bushes and trees.

Phil laughed softly and shook her head. "Love-greens vexed. New man no tea. Stuff wrong place." She looked around, her eyes landing on the table and chairs. "Stuff wrong place," she said again, then shifted to point to the back corner beneath the magnolia tree. Right place. Tea place."

"I think at this point I'd prefer something stronger than tea," Blake said with a long sigh. "So I should leave the table and chairs there?"

Chris nodded. "I am betting that to them, the furniture is a weird sort of plant and it 'looks prettiest' back there."

Blake nodded, then frowned. "So why do they keep moving the plants around?"

"To please you," Phil replied. "They've probably been trying to communicate with you for a long time. You're half elf, but all they see is the elf part. They've been trying to talk to you, and in their eyes you've been ignoring them...which they then take to mean that something about the garden must displease you."

Chris smiled briefly, pleased with Phil's progress. Amazing how much someone could change when they found their element. "See if you can't get Jester to talk them into coming out of hiding." He turned to Blake. "Focus like you do when you're lie-detecting someone, only instead of stopping like you would when you've figured it out, keep doing it. Try harder

than you ever have. Don't stop doing it. Watch the garden, and most importantly Jester, as you do it."

Slowly Blake nodded, and obediently turned to the garden, watching Jester as he came out several minutes later. He gasped. Chris could tell by the shimmer that appeared in the man's pale green eyes that it was working.

The man's mother had obviously known what his father was...why did she keep her son from the truth? Strange that Blake's mother had known but never told her son he was half-elf. Then again, she wouldn't be the first to resent a wanderlust elf for failing to stop feeling said wanderlust. At any rate, that was hardly his business. He'd solved the mystery of the haunted garden.

He couldn't ignore the lost look on Blake's face though, not when he knew all too well how that felt. At least his parents loved him enough to be honest.

"They're beautiful," Blake said softly, moving forward as though in a trance, holding his hand out as a group of faeries fluttered toward him, smiling like a little boy as one landed on his hand.

The faeries had light green skin and wings of translucent green-gold. Their eyes were dark gold, hair like the most delicate, twisting vines, decorated with tiny honeysuckle and periwinkle. They crowded around Blake, petting and fluttering, chattering quite clearly now that he could hear and see them...and hopefully understand. Like pixies, they were only understood by those they felt like letting understand them.

Chris smiled faintly. "They've probably been here as long as the garden, and I wouldn't doubt they adopted all your predecessors as part of the garden. Everything is some sort of plant or enemy to plants in the eyes of faeries. That you're an elf means they'll do anything for you – so long as you take care of them in return.

"Of course," Blake said, clearly offended by the implication that he wouldn't.

"As to you," Chris said, "Elves tend not to settle for very long. Three days is the longest I've ever see an elf stay in one place. I don't think they'd go longer than a week. I know someone who is passing friends with an elf who travels periodically through his territory. If you wanted, I could get him to let the elf know about you, and that you'd like to talk. The elf probably wouldn't mind, they're overall friendly and easy going. Just can't stand still."

Blake smiled gratefully, dragging his eyes away from the faerie in his hand. "I would appreciate that, if it is no trouble. This morning has left me completely overwhelmed." Another faerie landed on his shoulder and tugged playfully on his hair. Blake looked as though he wasn't quite certain what to do. He also looked as though he were in pain.

"Headache?" Chris asked.

"Yes," Blake said, startled.

"It'll ease. You're not used to using your abnormal abilities – what most folk call supernatural abilities. The more you do it, the easier it'll get. A week or so, it'll be as natural as breathing."

Slowly Blake nodded, obviously nervous and pushed to his limits – but hanging in there. "I truly thank you – for everything. Whatever I can do to show that gratitude, you've only to say."

"I'm not sure I've done you a whole lot of good in the end, and I hardly considered it work to point out faeries." Chris said. "However, I would like to try and ask you for a favor."

"By all means," Blake replied with a smile. "What is it?"

Taking a deep breath, steeling himself for an all too familiar rejection, Chris explained.

"Chris," Glenys said in surprise. Afternoon sunlight spilled in through the window behind her, brightening the green and pink of her 'private parlor'. Really it was just the room where she liked to enjoy afternoon tea while skimming silly magazines and talking with his father. Years and years ago he'd wondered how they never got bored just talking. It was no longer a mystery, though talking wasn't Sable's favorite activity. "What in the world are you doing here? Are you on a case? Did Sable actually have something else to do?" She smiled as she said the last.

Chris rolled his eyes. "I'm not allowed to drop in and visit my parents?"

Daniel mimicked his son. "You're up to something."

Resisting the urge to stick his tongue out, something only his father ever made him feel like doing, Chris rolled his eyes again and gave up. "As it happens, I have a surprise for both of you." He'd been working years on this surprise, trying and

failing for longer than he liked. The constant lack of success had been pissing him off for ages. Now, though...

"A surprise?" Glenys asked. "What on earth are you up to, Chris?"

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise," Chris said with forced patience. Damn he hated when people asked that. He crossed the room and took the delicate green china teacup from his mother's hands, then tugged her gently to her feet. At least she was dressed as beautifully and carefully as always. She'd have killed him if he'd come while she was still in her robe and slippers.

He turned to glare at his father. "You. No cheating."

Daniel gave him an affronted look and did not deign to reply. Only his father could manage to look so thoroughly intimidating while being transparent and standing in front of seashell pink curtains.

Fighting the urge to roll his eyes again, Chris kept hold of his mother's hand and led them through the house to the back. He threw the back door open with a flourish and motioned for them to precede him onto the wide porch.

Beyond the porch was the garden his mother had finally let him pay for – a gazebo, fishpond complete with little footbridge, more plants and flowers and trees than he had names for. It looked exactly as it had when his father had been alive.

All around the clearing before the gazebo were her friends, Sable, and Chris's detectives.

Blake broke away from where he'd been talking to Sable and took Glenys' hand. Dressed now as a priest, he bore little resemblance to the scattered young man Chris had helped only days ago. Blake kissed the back of Glenys' hand. "You must be the lovely bride. I can see where your son gets his looks." His eyes flicked to Daniel, and he bowed his head in greeting. "Sir."

Glenys stared at Blake, around the packed garden – then burst into tears and threw herself into her son's arms. "Chrissie! How—I can't believe—"

Chris hugged his mom tight and smiled in a way that few ever saw. He kissed his mom's cheek and held her, looking over her shoulder at his father, who merely smiled and nodded. Giving his mother another peck on the cheek, Chris finally pushed her gently away. "Come on, now. We'd best get started before somebody makes me find their lost cat or something."

"You!" Glenys reached up to kiss his cheek and tug fondly at a strand of hair. They waited on the porch a moment as everyone settled into place, then Chris offered his arm and led his mother to where Blake and Daniel waited at the gazebo.

Case # 667: Black Dog

Chris was in the library when they bothered him.

Having handed over the bulk of his prized agency to Doug and the others to run, he was left with those cases brought in by people who were not intimidated—or thought they merited—by Chris' being a demon consort.

It was his own fault for daring to relax. Every time he actually tried it, he was ambushed. He wouldn't mind so much, if the cases they brought him at least proved interesting. They were always boring, however. Too easy.

He set his wine aside and closed the book he'd been reading as the abnormal human across from him sniffled into her silk handkerchief once more. Behind her, her wealthy sorcerer husband scowled in a way that he obviously expected to have a certain affect upon Chris.

Chris ignored him.

"So everyone in your neighborhood is falling ill and close to death? You...want me to find the correlation?"

"No!" The woman said, then blew into her kerchief again. "I know what's doing it! That vile, nasty thing running around the neighborhood. Filthy mongrel!"

Something shivered across the back of Chris' neck, something that held the potential to be interesting enough he might stop

resenting being bothered. "Thing?" he repeated. "Mongrel?"

The woman sniffled again. "Y-yes. A big, black, filthy dog."

Intrigue raced across his skin. A Black Dog...could it really be? Those were notoriously rare, even according to supernatural standards. Why would a Black Dog suddenly appear around Sable's city? At the far end where the obscenely wealthy abnormal skulked?

It was the sort of question that he just loved to answer.

He snapped his fingers and caught the second wine glass as it appeared on his command, pouring the crying woman a glass and handing it to her. He waited impatiently as she murmured and sipped, then finally said, "Now, if you will please—tell me everything. Leave no detail out, I do not care if it seems trivial to you. If I am to help, then I must know everything. Now, start at the beginning..."

Two hours later, he was finally able to have one of the hotel workers show the couple out. He yawned and reached out blindly for his wine—and encountered a warm hand instead, tamping down on a smile as Sable lifted it to press a kiss to the palm. "Sable."

"Beloved," Sable greeted, moving around to sit beside him on the long leather sofa. "Did the case intrigue?"

Chris grunted. Sable had known damn good and well it would.

He pointedly ignored Sable's soft chuckles, and even managed to ignore the way Sable nibbled at his earlobe—but he jerked with a gasp when those teeth bit down hard at his throat. "You're nothing but trouble," he grouched, but went easily enough when Sable pushed him down into the soft leather of the sofa, reaching up to sink a hand into hair that was a thousand times softer.

Sable smirked and kissed him with slow thoroughness. "The best kind of trouble, the sort you could never resist."

"Ha!" Chris challenged, and abruptly shoved him off the couch, but his laugh was cut short when Sable reached up and yanked him down before he could scramble away.

There was a pained grunt as he landed. "You could watch the elbows."

Chris elbowed him again, just for good measure. "You could let me go to work on my newest case, instead of being a smug bastard who thinks giving me a potentially interesting case means you get sex."

Sable chuckled and nibbled at his throat, his jaw, then his lips, before taking a proper kiss.

Moaning, Chris shifted so he was straddling Sable properly, digging his fingers into the fine, broad shoulders, feeling muscle rippled beneath the smooth silk of Sable's shirt. He gave up another moan as knowing hands found his ass, drove their trapped erections together.

"Are you certain I can't have sex?" Sable asked, storm cloud eyes flashing with mirth and lust.

Chris rolled his eyes, and moved to Sable's tie. "Shut up."

Sable gave a husky laugh, and helped him with their clothing.

By the time Chris was able to leave to begin work on his new case, the sun had long past set. All to the better, of course—a true Black Dog was more likely to appear beneath the light of the moon.

Black Dogs...one of those rare abnormal known as Walkers. They could walk between the different planes with impunity. Heaven, hell, mortal, spectral, dream...any and all of them, the Walkers could travel between them as they liked. Rare were the races which could do that, and rarer still was the chance to ever see them.

Despite the prolific myths, true Black Dogs did not appear often. Those roads they guarded, they guarded quietly and unobserved. They tended to show themselves only when the threat was dire, and only to either guard or protect.

Not even demons knew much about the solitary Walkers, though that sprung in part from an old grudge—the enslaved

races had very little love for those who could travel wherever they wished, whenever they wished.

Even Sable could be a bit of a baby about it, for all he had very little ground upon which to stand, cozy little King of All He Surveyed that he was.

So the real question here was—why had this Black Dog appeared? If it was making all who saw it desperately ill, then it was likely on a quest for vengeance. Provoked by what? By who? The sniffing woman and her sorcerer husband had been remarkably unhelpful. Not unusual, but still aggravating.

Rich neighborhood. The kind of rich that didn't blink at the idea of staying in Sable's hotels for weeks or months at a time. The kind of rich that never told the truth, because the only thing more natural than breathing was keeping secrets.

Which meant the real question was not, in fact, why was the Black Dog around, so much as what were the good people of Rose Crest Park not telling him?

He walked the main street dividing the park in half, transparent but not invisible—it would make him less obvious to anyone who might glance his way. The moon was not quite full above him; two more days would make it fat and full and yellow. Tonight, however, it was silvery and not yet whole. Clouds blotted the starlight here and there, and the air held a hint of a chill but it was only early fall. No real cold yet.

The soft chuff alerted him just a beat before he felt the shift in the air, the presence of a quiet but immense power—it was not unlike the way he sensed Yume. Soft, subtle, but a nearly unbreakable strength.

He turned sharply, and simply stared.

The Dog was massive—it easily reached his hip, and was proportioned accordingly. It had shaggy black hair and glowing red eyes, and as it barked at him he caught a hint of teeth he preferred to keep well at a distance.

At least it did not yet seem aggressive, though Chris still was not feeling terribly relaxed as it approached him. Not that anything could hurt him, unless he let it, but still. When the Dog reached him, however, all it did was push its muzzle into his hand in a timeless demand to pet.

Chris frowned, confused, then obliged. He was not the type for pets, but he didn't hate animals unless they tried to bite him or piss on him or—in the case of six cats to date—jump on his back with claws fully extended.

The dog chuffed again, after a moment, then sat back on its haunches and stared up at him.

"What?" Chris demanded. "Why are you here, and what are the local idiots not telling me?"

In reply, the massive dog threw back its head and howled.

Chris jerked, barely resisting an urge to cover his ears, the eerie howl like nothing he had ever heard. It could not be mistaken for a wolf's, nor anything remotely normal. No, it was one hundred percent supernatural and redolent with a power no werewolf would ever possess.

Then he felt a prickling across the back of his neck, a sensation like someone lightly stroking fingers across his skin. Only one type of abnormal had that effect upon him. He turned around, following the feeling—and was both surprised and not by what he saw.

He stood at the intersection of the two main roads of Rose Crest—nearly all the houses belonging to that district ran along these two streets, with only a handful of smaller streets off them. The primary crossroads, where Black Dogs most often lurked.

Except it wasn't the only thing inhabiting this place. Chris was staring at a ghost. Not surprising; ghosts were common on roads.

Not, however, the ghosts of children.

Chris frowned and approached the child. It stared at him fearfully, despite the fact it should have been reassured by the presence of another ghost. He knelt down and extended a hand, but the ghost child only continued to stare, wide-eyed and terrified.

The Black Dog brushed against Chris as it walked past him to settle beside the child—which promptly turned and tried to bury itself in the dog's fur, crying piteously.

Not good. Children always made for poor ghosts—they didn't understand what they had become, not really, not the way an adult would. Chris' father was still the best example of a ghost he knew; he'd survived with all memories and functions intact. Most ghosts lost a little bit of themselves in the transition, but they retained the major bits, usually an ability to communicate if they could find someone living who could communicate with them.

Children, less often. Any child who died in so miserable a fashion as to leave a ghost...well, this one had died so terribly that its pain had called forth the Black Dog. That was no small thing, and Chris' anger grew as he wondered what in the hell someone could have done to let a child die in a way awful enough to rouse a Black Dog.

It made him sick just thinking about it, and he didn't even know what it was, yet.

The Black Dog chuffed at him, then focused on the child, soothing and calming it. Several minutes later, it turned back to Chris, red eyes blazing.

Chris nodded, and rose. The Dog could do much, but it could not do what Chris could—and the ghostly child was trapped in its dying misery. It would not be able to tell him anything; all it had been able to do was instinctively rouse the Dog, who in turn was making the people suffer.

Which meant it was the people who were guilty, at least in the minds of the child.

Turning away, Chris walked back down the street to the house he knew belonged to the couple who had hired him. He knocked upon the door, and waited irritably for someone to answer it.

That it took five minutes for someone to answer, and that someone wound up being an enslaved imp, did nothing to improve his temper. He glared at the sorcerer. "You keep an imp?"

The sorcerer shrugged. "He's treated well."

Chris bit back what he wanted to say, and focused on his job—for now. "I want to know about the child, if you please."

"Child?" the woman asked, and coughed into a silk handkerchief. The one she'd used in the library had been green silk; this new one was blue, and looked as though it had runes embroidered in it. Decoration, or an actual spell? Why? "What child? I have no idea what you're talking about."

Her husband shook his head, obviously irritated. "Now see here, detective—"

"Consort," Chris corrected icily, because if there was one thing these people understood it was power—and his power far surpassed theirs, and his rank paled theirs, and he did not want them forgetting that. Solving a simple case of a Black Dog was one thing—finding the ghost of a dead child was quite another.

The sorcerer's mouth tightened briefly with irritation, then his face smoothed out into a more cooperative mien. "Consort," he said with a nod, "we have no idea what you're talking about. What does a child have to do with the case we assigned you?"

Assigned him? Chris let that one slide, but only because it was too fucking funny to take seriously.

They were lying. He didn't need special demon powers to see that. He barely need good old fashioned detective skills to see it. "The child," he said flatly, "that died at the intersection and whose pain stirred the Black Dog which is making all of you sick. I cannot get rid of the dog if you do not tell me about the child. You can do it the easy way, and cooperate with me, or we can do it the difficult way."

He didn't bother to say that as Sable's consort, there were a thousand different ways he could do difficult.

It wasn't like him, he knew, to make such free use of Sable's power and authority--but they should not have hurt a child. Such cruelty was beyond his ability to endure.

"You can't mean that pathetic little thing that knocked on our door," the woman said dismissively. "We sent it away, of course. Someone else dealt with it."

Chris glared at her. "Who helped the child?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Whoever it bothered after us, I suppose. Someone. We didn't have time, a party to go to, you understand."

"I understand, all right, but I doubt we understand the same thing," Chris snapped. "What time did it knock upon your door?"

When she shrugged again, he lifted his left hand in warning, the diamond on it flashing in the light.

"It was a little before eight," her husband said, clearly more appreciative of the threat Chris posed if pushed too far. "We were running late, and she couldn't find her purse--the child knocked on the door, and getting rid of it made us really late."

Chris nodded, then turned and ghosted so he didn't have to stop to open the door. He heard someone shriek, but ignored them.

Outside, the Black Dog sat on the stoop. It chuffed at him, stood up and wagged its tail, then turned and walked halfway down the path. Then it turned to look over its shoulder, and woofed softly at him.

"What?" Chris asked.

He swore the dog gave him a disapproving look.

"I don't speak mutt," Chris retorted.

The dog barked at him.

Chris rolled his eyes, not certain why he reacted that way, but relatively certain for whatever reason that was the most apt response. "I need to go figure out who else that child tried to get help from."

Bobbing its head, the dog barked again, then strode all the way down the path to the sidewalk, and began to head down toward the next house.

"You know all the houses the child visited," Chris said slowly, beginning to understand what the dog wanted--Chris could do far more to help it exact the vengeance for which it had been summoned.

The dog chuffed at him, as if to say 'duh' and Chris glared at it. Giving him something which looked suspiciously like a grin, the dog woofed for him to hurry and follow, and made his way to the next house.

Chris knocked on the door. It was opened by a harried looking woman in an apron. "Let me speak to your boss," he said.

"Only if you take her with you," the woman muttered, then vanished.

Several minutes later, a woman wearing illegally imported furs appeared in the doorway. She smelled like a vat of perfume that had probably cost fifty times what it was actually worth. Chris sneezed. "We—" He blinked, realizing what he said, then gave a mental shrug. "We are searching for information on a missing child. Did one come by here in the past few days, knocking on your door?"

"We?" the woman asked, peering down her nose in amusement at Chris' obvious idiocy.

The dog growled.

She shrieked as she finally noticed the dog. "That thing made my son sick—he's still in bed, what in the hell are you doing with that nasty creature. Get it away from me or I'll call the cops!"

Chris smirked and brandished his left hand.

Abruptly the woman fell silent, mouth falling into a grim line. "Consort."

"That's right," Chris said. "Now, did you see a child in the past few days?"

The woman gave an irritable shrug. "Yes. My maid was out, so I was forced to answer the door. I told it to run along home. Honestly, what is the world coming to when brats are just left to wander about in decent neighborhoods like that?"

"You didn't help the child at all?" Chris asked.

"No," the woman said. "I was busy. I scarcely have time for my own children, even though they're grown. No time to waste on brats who should know better than to bother decent folk."

Chris turned and walked away before he gave in to a very strong urge to punch her.

At his side, the dog growled. The sound reverberated through Chris, almost seeming to make his very bones shake. But it wasn't a frightening sound—no, to him, it was similar to Sable's storms. Dangerous to most, but a comfort to him.

Though why he found comfort in the angry sounds of a Black Dog, he didn't know. Then again, most days he still couldn't figure out why a demon lord had chosen him.

He and the dog travelled through the entirety of Rose Crest Park. When they finished, perhaps only half a dozen houses had not been guilty of contributing to the child's death. Every other house on the street had turned the child away, on one excuse or another. The one thing all of them had said was Someone else took care of it.

Someone else.

It.

The vastness of their apathy, their selfishness—their inhumanness—made it hard for him to breathe. He wanted to scream, he wanted to punch them all in the face and demand to know what in the hell they thought—

The booming crack of thunder made him jump. He jerked his gaze up to gawk at the dark stormclouds which had gathered—right as they finally broke, and the rain came crashing down in a furious torrent. He summoned enough power to keep it off him and the dog, in no mood for a soaking right now.

He had not seen such a storm in months, not since the last time Sable had been in one of his dark, gloomy moods...

A warm, familiar power rippled over him as he completed the thought, and Chris stared as his lover appeared. "Sable? Is everything all right? What's wrong?"

Sable laughed softly, warmly. There was anger in his eyes, and worry—but only the latter emotion was for Chris. "That is what I've come to ask you, beloved. Why the storm?"

"That's your thing, Sable," Chris said, confused.

"No, Christian," Sable said, and pushed a hand through Chris' messy hair. "Since you were trapped by those damned wolves, you have been more accepting of my power. The bond grows stronger all the time, the more comfortable you become with it. This storm is all you—and I want to know right now what has you so angry and anguished."

"Oh," Chris said, and in the back of his mind felt vaguely stupid for not having realized that—but the rest of him was angry and miserable, and he didn't protest as Sable drew him into a tight embrace. The beating of Sable's heart was as sure and unrelenting as the pounding of the rain around them, and he was shockingly warm against the increasing cold of the night.

Sable kissed the top of his head. "Tell me, beloved."

Chris simply nodded, unwilling to move from his position, and let Sable rifle through his mind as he pleased.

The thunder which cracked then was deafening, and seemed to make the entire world shake. He felt more than saw lightning flash, heard the sound as it struck something, destroyed it.

"Go home," Sable said.

Chris pushed away slightly at that, frowning. "No. Sable, you're not—"

"I said go home," Sable cut in, eyes flashing lightning. "This is for me to deal with, Christian."

"No," Chris replied. "Damn it, Sable, this is my case."

Sable jerked him forward, and kissed him hard, not letting go until Chris was dizzy with the need to breathe and his lips were bruised and throbbing. "Go home," Sable said softly against his mouth. "Let me deal with this, Christian."

"You said you wouldn't hurt anyone over me again," Chris countered.

"No, beloved," Sable said, stroking his cheek. "I said I wouldn't kill anyone."

Chris glared at him. "You can't—"

"I'm a demon," Sable interrupted quietly, but with force. "You are mine. No one hurts you."

"That isn't—"

In the very next breath, Chris was back in their room at the top of the Tantalus. He was still for a moment, then began cursing in every language he knew, furiously trying to go back but unable. He slammed one hand into the glass of a floor-to-ceiling window, and wondered bitterly what the hell he had been thinking.

Then he remembered the terrified child, and how cold and uncaring all those people had been.

Stripping off his clothes, he went to get a shower.

Half an hour later, he dropped down into the leather couch on the sitting room side of their bedroom, staring moodily at the carpet, the roaring fire doing nothing to warm him.

A soft chuff made him look up. He blinked. "What are you doing here?"

Sitting back on its haunches, the dog made a low, sad sound that wasn't quite a howl, but neither was it a whine. He didn't know what it was—but he rather thought he understood the meaning, anyway. "The child?"

The dog woofed and bobbed its head, then made that noise again.

"Will he be all right?" Chris asked.

He received a firm woof.

Chris nodded, and some of his tension eased. He didn't think too long on why Sable wasn't yet back, as that would just spark his anger all over again, and he was too fucking tired. "So what are you doing here, if the child is all right?"

The dog gave him a grin, then padded forward and rested his head on Chris' thigh, casting him woeful puppy eyes.

"You are nothing like what I thought a Black Dog..." Chris muttered, even as he gave in and obediently scratched the dog behind its ears. "You're nothing but an overgrown puppy."

The Black Dog growled low, in a lazily reprimanding way that really only confirmed what Chris had said. "So what do you do when not avenging children and all?"

Whatever reply might have been forthcoming was forestalled as Sable reappeared, soaking wet and eyes still flickering with lightning.

Chris snarled and threw himself off the couch, at Sable, only growing angrier when he was caught up and kissed hard, held too tight to do anything more than bite furiously at Sable's lip before finally giving in to the bruising kiss. "You're a bastard. I didn't let you know what had happened just so you could—"

Sable kissed him again. "Beloved, I am a demon. You belong to me. No one is allowed to hurt you without suffering in their turn. That aside, this is my territory. Such cruelty will not be tolerated, not unless I am the one inflicting."

"That's a double standard," Chris said irritably, even as he leaned forward to lick away the blood on Sable's lip from where his teeth had cut it. "You are the single most infuriating creature I have ever encountered. Stop going all fury of hells just

because I'm upset, you goddamn demon."

"No," Sable said.

Chris sighed. "What did you do to them?"

"I cursed them," Sable said, a finality to the words.

Reluctantly, Chris let it go. He could just go back over there later and deduce the nature of the curse himself.

Sable kissed him more softly, finally easing his almost painfully tight grip. "Are you all right, beloved?"

"No," Chris snapped, then sighed again. "But I will be. I shouldn't have let you do that, but..."

"But nothing. You were in pain. Now, who is your new friend?"

Chris glared at him for the unsubtle change of subject, but let it go for the moment. "What—you mean the Black Dog? I don't know what he's doing here."

Sable looked at him in amusement. "I would say that's obvious, beloved. He likes you."

"He's a Black Dog!" Chris said, confounded as the dog came up when Sable let him go, pushed against him to be pet again, rubbing against him, tongue hanging as he gave Chris another goofy grin. "You're supposed to guard your crossroads or what the hell ever."

Laughter made him look up to glare at Sable again. "What's so damned funny? You're in enough trouble for the rest of this decade, you damned demon—don't make your sentence longer."

"Black Dogs answer to the calls of ghosts, beautiful," Sable said, still snickering.

Chris scowled at them both. "I didn't call him, and I'm not in his territory anyway."

Sable reached out and stroked a hand over the dog's head, scratching it behind the ears. "Walkers can pick and choose their territories, bastards that they are," he said. "I would imagine he's utterly fascinated by such a strange ghost as you." He leaned over and kissed Chris' cheek. "Entranced at first sight."

"Shut up," Chris said, but not with all the heat he would have liked. "You don't even like Walkers, why are you suddenly being nice?"

"He has excellent taste in ghosts," Sable replied.

The dog woofed, and nudged Chris again, then sat back on his haunches and turned the puppy dog eyes up to maximum strength.

Chris threw up his hands. "Whatever. Dumb demon, dumb dog. I want a cup of coffee." He stared at the dog for a moment. "Do you have a name?"

In reply, the dog merely whined.

"Hmm," Chris said thoughtfully. Then he grinned. "Shuck."

"Shuck?" Sable asked.

Chris turned away, smirking. "Old nickname for my first boyfriend." He hated the bastard, but he'd always liked the name.

He went to go find a cup of coffee, leaving Sable glaring at Shuck, and Shuck barking playfully back.

Made for You

Made For You

"I did not believe it when my secretary told me who – perhaps I should say what – wanted to see me. What brings you here to my domain? Have you a name?"

"Charlie, and I came to say that I have not come to cause trouble." Charlie met the demon lord's gaze without flinching. He'd made certain to learn everything he could about Sable Brennus before venturing into his territory. He wanted no trouble, he really meant that.

Though he wasn't above causing it if that became necessary.

Sable Brennus was everything he'd heard and more. Handsome. Powerful. And from the looks he'd given the blonde standing by the glass wall, utterly enamored of his Consort.

"You're alone," Sable said idly.

Charlie nodded. "I am searching for my Master."

"He's missing? And yet you function?"

"Yes," Charlie said quietly. "I am meant to protect."

Sable lifted one brow, leaning back in his seat, the leather creaking faintly, soft fabric of his suit whispering. "You have failed, then?"

Shame washed through Charlie and he dropped his gaze to stare at the dark carpet. "They had two jinn. I killed one."

The blonde man, who through descriptions and the way Sable watched him was clearly the demon's consort, gave an inelegant snort. "Who the fuck attacked you that they had two jinn under control? Men can seldom control one, never mind two."

"I do not know," Charlie said, shaking his head, shoving back his hair when it fell forward across his cheek and into his face. His fingers ghosted over the turtleneck collar of his sweater, feeling the leather beneath it.

Sable regarded his consort. "What are you pondering, Christian?"

Christian did not reply, instead directing his attention to Charlie. "What was your Master involved in?"

"I cannot say," Charlie replied, feeling tired. "He had many enemies, and thus was I brought forth."

"I see," Christian said softly.

"Christian?" Sable asked, reaching out and tugging his consort close.

"Do you think he might be here?" Christian asked, resting his hand on Sable's shoulder as the demon wrapped an arm around his waist.

Looking at them hurt.

Charlie nodded. "My searching has led me here, and I am hoping to find him before they go elsewhere. However, I wanted to make my presence known, that you know my motives are pure and I truly seek to cause no disruption in your city."

"Oh, a little disruption is good for a kingdom," Sable said with a smile. "Your courtesy is appreciated, and I wish you happy hunting."

"Thank you," Charlie said, and sketched a deep bow before turning and walking toward the door. His hand was on the knob when Christian's voice stopped him.

"If you should desire help," Christian said, "you've only to let me know."

Charlie turned back briefly. "Thank you. I must do this on my own."

"Of course," Christian said. "Then as Sable said – happy hunting."

Charlie nodded, then left.

Outside, dusk had become full night, a hint of the full moon behind a thin bank of clouds. The smell of rain was thick in the air, but given that Sable Brennus was a demon of storms, that was to be expected.

People bustled to and fro on the streets, some in a hurry, others taking their time, a mass of friends and couples, strangers and enemies, a couple of drunkards and even a few small children being towed along by their mother.

Interspersed with the people were all manner of creatures – a goblin, an elf, a brownie...an imp...

Charlie slowed to a stop at the corner, eyes helplessly drawn to the imp. The pale swirl of glowing energies said he was employing magic – likely shapeshifting to blend in. Such spells were useless with him, however.

It was a fully mature imp, and no sign that he was bound...and the way he touched the vampire with him...

An old, familiar pain ripped through Charlie as the imp leaned down to kiss the vampire. A Poor Man's Genie, imps were often called. Though not one of the enslaved races, imps were often imprisoned all the same, and for the same reason – power. Yet imps could function without being slaves, as this one apparently did.

Not that he minded enslavement...

But...

Charlie shook his head, banishing the thoughts with an effort.

Nothing mattered right now except finding Jed. He turned away from the imp and vamp standing on the corner with a rough sound and focused his thoughts.

He wondered why Jed's kidnappers had dragged him all the way here. Why would bastards interested in summoning a great many demons choose to operate in the territory of a demon lord? And at the heart of the territory.

It made no sense...but every little clue and that faint tugging said Jed was here somewhere.

Hopefully all right. Charlie closed his eyes against the waves of pain and shame. He'd tried so hard...had done his best, exhausted his energy...but two old and powerful jinn were simply too much for him.

His boots splashed in a grimy puddle as he stepped off the curb and into the street, the buzz of the city fading as he reached quieter streets, filled with businesses closed down for the night, a few residential buildings.

At the farthest end he caught a glimpse of a goblin and pointedly turned away. Goblins were by and large unpleasant, and he had no wish to get tangled up with a group of them by disturbing one while it hunted.

Quickly turning his mind from that unhappy line of thought, Charlie picked up his pace and soon reached the bed and breakfast where he'd rented a room for a month – paid up front, and the brownie who owned it knew better than to ask questions.

Though she'd spent a good ten minutes admiring him, combing her fingers through his curly hair, admiring the 'white-gold' color. Charlie smiled briefly at the thought, but it was more sad than happy.

Climbing the stairs, he let himself into his room and stripped off his leather coat, hanging it on the hook on the back of the door. Next he stripped out of his sweater, a nice one of black cashmere. Not knowing what one wore to speak with a demon lord, he'd dressed as nicely as he could.

He was much happier to be left in a simple blue t-shirt and his jeans, though he was careful to take off his muddy boots before he moved further into the room. Padding across the thick, green carpet he sat down in the old, pseudo-antique armchair and considered his options.

Jed had always been wearily amused by the entire matter; as if on some level he thought it too ridiculous to be real – but on a deeper level knew the sheer absurdity confirmed it was real.

Slowly but surely they had been working to destroy the Key. Well, Jed had. He had not summoned Charlie until shortly before his cousin, and only other living member of their family, had died one night under bloody, terrible circumstances. Charlie had found the head only after several exhausting hours.

He would not be forced into that situation with Jed, he would not.

Fear compelled him to touch the leather at his throat, tracing the runes so carefully embossed, knowing them all by heart.

A form I give unto thee, to serve the will which made thee.

A name I give unto thee, to serve the will which made thee.

A purpose I give unto thee, to serve the will which made thee.

He let his fingers fall away and stared out the window, seeing nothing but the dirty brick of the building next door and a window covered with faded blue gingham curtains.

Where in the city would they be? He did not want to waste valuable time asking around on the chance someone might have seen something. No...he'd been chasing them for three months now. He had a grasp on how they thought, and he knew what they sought...

"The secret has been passed down for more years than we like to count. I intend to let it die with me; all my family has been killed for it, I will have the last laugh when the secret goes with me to the grave. Bastards."

They would require a place to work...and actually, now that he thought about it, most would read any sudden increase in demon power to be the work of Sable. So hiding right here in the heart of Sable's territory ensured no one would discover or bother them until too late.

Charlie bit his lip. He needed to find Jed soon. It was fast approaching the ideal time of the year for such things and while Jed would resist...the bastards had already killed what remained of Jed's family, and this had been going on for centuries and centuries.

So, a place to work, well within range of Sable to mask what they were doing but where Sable himself would not notice until too late – because all the cloaking and protection spells in the world would not mask such activity from a demon lord for long.

Going to this much trouble, they would also need bodies for the demons to inhabit, or at least objects – though the arrogance of these men...Charlie suspected they would go with bodies.

He closed his eyes, fighting the urge to go back to the demon lord and tell him everything. Sable, no doubt, would root out the troublemakers easily. The matter would resolve itself quickly.

But Jed had given him shape and name and purpose and Charlie had failed miserably. He would never forget the awful feeling of sinking into unconsciousness as Jed screamed his name, of waking up while the world was burned to ash around him, the agony of watching their little house burn, the taste of defeat bitter, the taste of failure foul.

He had failed, and so he would be the one to fix it. If he failed again...then he would return to nothing and hopefully Sable would deal with matters appropriately.

So...if he were intent upon black magic better left alone, and was bold enough to do it right beneath a demon lord's nose...Sable's 'palace' seemed too bold. Nearby, though...and tonight was the full moon, a poor time for casting black magic.

For tonight, at least, Jed was likely safe. No practitioner of black magic, especially of the level of the bastards who had taken his Master, would waste time and energy on a full moon night.

Charlie, by contrast, would fair much better. Tonight would be the perfect time to search, especially now that the hour was late, the streets quieting.

Moving to the bag he'd left on his bed, Charlie rifled briefly through it and pulled out a dark green wool sweater – a leather bound book tumbled to the floor. He'd forgotten he'd tucked it into the sweater before leaving his last hotel room. Kneeling, he gingerly picked it up and rifled through the contents.

They still smelled of smoke, a faint hint of magic. It clung to the few precious things he'd managed to save from the fire despite the three months which had passed. Protecting the bits, undoing what he could of the destructive Jinn magic, had cost him much – but these few things were precious to Jed, and so Charlie had made the effort.

The book itself was an heirloom, a journal passed down through the centuries, meticulously recopied when the previous draft simply grew too old – Jed had been in the process of a new copy when they'd been attacked that last, terrible time. But tucked between the pages were a few pictures, including an old drawing.

It was an image of a man in simple white robes which clung to his broad frame, flowing sleeves hiding his clasped hands, the ends heavily embroidered with runes and sigils, a simple belt of tooled leather slung low on his hips. His hair was a

mass of white-gold curls, neatly combed and ordered, save one stray curl which brushed against his right cheek. Though the picture was small, only a little larger than a postcard, the man's eyes positively blazed.

"My favorite part," Jed said in his quiet way, looking at the picture, not at Charlie.

He never seemed to look at Charlie very long.

"They're the color of the sun as it's rising, right when the deep red-orange turns to gold." He looked up, but immediately dropped his gaze again.

Charlie sighed and tucked the picture back into the pages of the journal, in front of one that was all that remained now of Jed's family as it had once been – mother, father, brother, sister, and Jed the youngest of all.

The picture, Charlie knew, had been drawn by a friend of Jed's, back before he'd been on the run. It was what Jed had used to give Charlie his form – right down to the sunrise-gold of his eyes.

He remembered the soft smile that had greeted him, upon completion of the spell.

The smell of incense, pungent and sharp, but also sweet. Sandalwood and rose, mingled with beeswax and fresh spring air, fluttering pale blue curtains, stirring the pink roses in a vase on a long coffee table. The magic circle had been drawn with chalk, adding its own dusty scent to the mix.

He blinked, unused to having shape and thoughts and feelings. The first thing to greet him, beyond those mingled scents, was a smile. Soft, more in the pale brown eyes than at the mouth, but utterly beautiful. He smiled back, or tried, but being real rather than an essence was new. Even as he knew things, he did not.

"My name is Jed," the man with the pretty smile said quietly. "Thank you for accepting my spell."

He bowed low, fingers tangling in the odd clothes he wore, a robe of white with runes and sigils embroidered at the edges. He sensed somehow he should be laughing, but could not say why and so did not. "You are the reason I exist, Master, of course I would answer to your spell."

"The words 'of course' do not belong anywhere near slavery, unless to say that of course it should not exist." Jed sighed and turned away, and he was sad to lose those pale brown eyes and the smile that had been in them. "I am, however, desperate. I need protection until I can escape them for good. I would be eternally grateful if you would watch over me until that goal is achieved."

"Of course, Master," he replied quietly.

Jed turned and smiled again. "Thank you. I apologize for doing this to you...as I said, I am at my wits' end." He sighed softly. "I suppose you need a name...hmm..." Jed wandered to the bookcases running the length of the far wall. "A fortuitous name would be best, yes..." He pulled down a book and flipped through it, then shook his head and replaced it. "Have a name of your own in mind?"

"No, Master."

Giving another soft sigh, Jed continued to rifle through books, shaking his head and muttering. He opened one – and suddenly smiled, turning back around. "How about the name of a great king?"

"Master?"

"Charlemagne," Jed said, closing the book with a satisfied snap and sliding it back into place without looking. "It's perfect."

"Charlemagne..." He tasted the name, saying it slowly. "Yes, Master."

Jed laughed. "Alright, so it's a little ostentatious, I suppose. I like it. We can call you Charlie for short, if you like."

"Yes, Master," Charlie said with a smile.

"Very well then, Charlie, let us get you out of those silly clothes, eh?" Jed pushed his glasses up his nose, the blue frame glinting in the candle light. "I'm afraid the robes came with the picture." He nodded to something beyond Charlie.

Turning, Charlie regarded the picture propped on what was clearly a summoning altar, meant to control what came from the circle in which he still stood. A picture...of a man in a robe that looked like his...with pale, curly hair and eyes that were clearly yellow. He moved closer, out of the circle, the spell tingling as he left its hold for good to be real once and for all.

Gingerly he picked it up, examining every bit of the drawing. He turned to Jed. "This...is what I look like? Is that good, Master?"

"Yes," Jed said softly. "An old friend drew it for me, said it was to protect me."

Charlie nodded. "Yes, Master."

"Again, I thank you."

"You are the reason I exist, Master. It is my reason for being to serve you, in whatever way you desire."

Jed choked, face turning red, and Charlie blinked in confusion. "Come on," Jed said, voice unsteady. "Let's find you some real clothes."

"Yes, Master."

Charlie returned the journal to his bag, then stowed the bag under the bed. That done, he strode from the room and back out into the streets. The silence here was heavier than ever, and as he returned to the nightlife districts it seemed to linger. Many abnormals were still out, but they were quiet, content each to mind his own business.

The beat of leathery wings and a dark shadow brought Charlie's head up, and he blinked in surprise to see an imp – the very same one he'd seen before with the vampire.

"So it's true," the imp said, landing neatly on the pavement in front of him. If the others in the area were startled to see a fully mature imp, they gave no sign of it. His mismatched eyes glowed in the dark, long horns gleaming where they jutted from his forehead. The leathery wings were drawn in and neatly folded. "There really is an angel in town. I've only met one other angel in my life, and that was way back when I was under the thumb of my first master. You don't look anything like her – but she wasn't a Guardian Angel either."

Charlie could not help the pride that thrummed through him, that Jed had been able to create him, and he was so well created that even with his collar hidden it was obvious what he was. "My Master is most skilled," he replied.

Of all the abnormal races in the world, the most powerful were what was generally called the enslaved races. There were four of them.

Dragons. Jinn. Demons. Angels.

Dragons were living weapons, created for that sole purpose, traditionally answering only to the blood of kings. Even in the present day, when not drugged and forced, they obeyed only those who possessed indomitable strength of spirit. Incredibly powerful, nearly unbeatable, the price for their power was the need for a Liege – an Owner. Swords were useless without someone to wield them.

Jinn. Wild beings made of fire and dark emotion. Fierce, deadly, but they could not use their own power with any sort of control – it took a Master to control the untamable fires and emotion. Jinn were incredibly rare, perhaps only a few hundred in all the world – and they came at a high price.

Demons. Creatures of hell who were bound from the moment of their summoning, trapped in an object or bound to a body. Even when free of their enslaver, they were restricted by their own power, forced eventually to settle into a territory and take a Consort.

Angels. Nothing but sheer force of will, a lingering presence created by the emotions and wants and will of humans. The more a human believed that an angel was watching him, the stronger that presence grew. Giving true form to an angel was hard, though, a spell that few could manage with real success. It was hard to give form to a concept, to something that existed only in the back of the mind.

There were books, spells, records...all manner of texts detailing the history of, the various types, all the different uses to which they could be put.

Charlie was a Guardian Angel, summoned for the express purpose – written directly into his spell, for angels were created by will and desire and so must be given purpose along with form – of protecting his creator or whosoever his creator commanded be kept safe.

Except Charlie had failed, yet somehow still existed, likely because Jed was still alive and so perhaps he had not failed completely. He still wore his collar, the spell which had brought him forth and given him form, life. It bore his master's name, written in sigils, that no other could ever control Charlie.

"Does that collar upset you, Charlie?"

"Why should it, Master? It is not too tight, and quite light."

Jed smiled, but it was not a happy one, and he returned to his work without further comment.

Charlie reached up to touch the collar cinched around his throat, tracing the runes and sigils, puzzled by the question, wishing he knew what to say or ask – but being created by Jed was apparently not enough to understand him. He turned back to stare out the window, into the dark, moonless night, feeling there was something else he should be doing but uncertain as to what.

"Did you need something, imp?" Charlie asked quietly.

The imp shook his head. "Nope. Just wanted to see the angel for myself. Chris said you were looking for your Master."

Charlie blinked. "You know the demon's consort?"

"Yeah, he's sort of my boss," the imp said with a grin. "Name's Doug."

"Charlie."

"A pleasure. Need any help?"

That was twice now he'd been offered help, when it had never been offered to him before. First by a consort, now by one who apparently was close to the consort. "No, but I thank you. The courtesy is appreciated. It is my duty to save my Master."

"I'd say be careful of the crazies, but you look like you could teach me a thing or two," Doug said with a laugh. "Take care, angel." With a graceful launch and snap of his wings, the imp vanished back into the sky.

Charlie frowned, horribly confused by the kind reception he'd so far received. Passing through the territories of vampires and wolves, he had scarcely been given a second glance. Shrugging, he continued on his way, wandering the streets while looking carefully for any sign of where his Master might be.

In a city this large, simply wandering was not the most effective method of searching – but he did not want to waste time asking around, and he already knew that they would be close to Sable's palace without being in it.

He opened his jacket enough to pull down the collar, stroking his fingers over the leather collar. It was warm against his skin, surprisingly soft, and he knew the embossing had taken Jed hours to accomplish.

A tingle raced up and back down his spine and Charlie slowed, taking a closer look at his surroundings. He'd left the bars and restaurants well behind; here there was nothing but offices, warehouses, a couple of empty lots.

Then he felt it – the pulsing warmth that said his Master was near. He'd not felt it in months, and though now he felt it only faintly, the point was he could feel it. Jed was close. Charlie closed his eyes and let himself simply feel.

Master...

His feet moved as if of their own volition, following the faint trace of Jed's presence, instinct seeing what his senses could not.

When he stopped moving, Charlie slowly opened his eyes.

An old warehouse building. He looked up – the Tantalus was but a block away; in the daylight, it would cast a shadow over this space. The pulsing warmth in his chest was stronger than ever. Charlie examined the warehouse, weighing his options. In the end, simply going in through the front seemed the most effective course.

If he had not already known Jed was inside the abandoned place, the pristine padlock on the dingy door would have been a clue. Charlie hefted the lock thoughtfully, feeling the curses laid into it, goosebumps prickling his skin as the magic tried to hurt him and was instead broken down.

As the magic ceased, Charlie pulled hard, tearing the lock casing from the shackle and tossing both pieces to the ground. He slid the door open, ignoring the rattles and creaks. There was little point in trying to stay too quiet – likely someone had felt it when he'd deactivated the curses in the locks.

Inside the warehouse was empty, save for a few rusted bits of old machinery he could not identify. The floor was covered in grime, wet and thick, clearly from the holes in the roof where frequent rain had come right in.

Here and there were a few animal skeletons, birds mostly, who had gotten in but never out. Charlie bypassed all of it, more interested in the single bit of light he could see in the upstairs office, a flicker of shadow that spoke of movement.

Then the door abruptly swung open, and more goosebumps popped up on his skin as he felt the hot wash of magic. The man at the top of the stairs blinked in confusion, mouth gaping as he stared at Charlie. "You! Why aren't you dead?"

Charlie did not reply, merely bolted for the stairs, racing up them, movement too fast for a human – even one capable of magic – to completely follow. He grabbed the man by the throat and dangled him over the edge. "Where is my Master?" he asked softly, squeezing hard enough to bruise.

"Here," the man managed, his eyes glinting as he silently called up a spell.

Charlie let him. The magic washed over him, making his skin prickle, causing a brief chill, but dying nearly as fast as it had been cast. Charlie contemplated the dangling man, then reached out with his free hand and tore away the earring in his right ear.

The man screamed in pain and thrashed in his hold, mindless of his precarious position.

"You should not have kidnapped my Master," Charlie said, and let him go.

He heard the man crash to the ground, but it wasn't so far the man would die – probably would bear no injuries save those Charlie had given him. Charlie contemplated the earring lying in his palm in a small pool of blood.

Horn. The earring had been carved from imp horn. That would explain why a mere human had such magic, and could cast it so easily. Charlie dropped the earring to the ground and stamped hard, grinding the heel of his boot into it, then smearing the dust into the thick grime on the floor.

That done, he shoved open the door to the office; it gave a long, groaning creak, and rattled as it hit the wall. Charlie barely noticed, the warmth in his chest flaring to a white heat.

Tied up and tucked into the corner of the dank office was Jed, looking much the worse for wear but otherwise alright. His strawberry blonde hair was matted and filthy, clothes torn beyond repair. He'd been wearing old jeans and a faded rugby t-shirt when they'd taken him, and he still wore them.

Charlie strode over to him and quickly did away with the rope, then bundled Jed close. "Master, I'm sorry."

"Charlie," Jed gasped out, and his arms wrapped around Charlie's neck with startling strength, burying his face in Charlie's throat. "I kept waiting for you, I knew you weren't dead."

"No, Master," Charlie said softly, and slowly stood up, settling his arms around Jed's waist, closing his eyes at the relief that washed through him, rinsing away the tension of the past three months. He hated to move, perfectly content to stand there holding his Master, heedless of the smell and unpleasant setting, but Jed's safety came first. "Come, Master, we must go before the others return."

Jed shifted in his arms, head moving in what was likely a nod.

Charlie delicately brushed tangles of hair from Jed's face. "Your glasses, Master?"

"They were broken a while ago," Jed replied. "I've had a nasty headache for the past two months thanks to them."

Adding that to the list of wrongs to be redressed, Charlie took Jed's hand and led him out of the office and down the stairs, back out into the street. He saw Jed shiver and shrugged out of his coat, slipping it over Jed's shoulders. "My room is not far, Master."

"Thank you for finding me, Charlie," Jed said softly, offering a tired but genuine smile. "They said you were dead, and I saw you fall – but I knew you'd find me."

Charlie nodded. "I am sorry it took me so long, Master."

"Nonsense, Charlie," Jed said with another tired smile. "Those Jinn nearly killed you, and we've been moving quickly. All things considered, you found me with impressive speed." Jed squeezed his hand, and leaned into him. "I'm glad you're alive, Charlie. Truly. It made me sick, to think you were dead or badly hurt because of me. I never should have summoned

you."

The words were like a slap, and Charlie faltered briefly, stumbling. "Y-yes, Master," he said miserably, happiness at being with Jed again going out like a candle. "You are, of course, welcome to dismiss me at any time."

"No, Charlie – that's not –" Jed sighed, and grimaced, looking at his filthy hand. "Let me get cleaned up first, I cannot stand the smell or look of me, and I will not have this discussion while I so closely resemble a garbage heap."

Charlie laughed softly despite himself. "It is not so bad as that, Master. Mr. Hoskins was always much, much worse even after he took a shower."

Jed blinked at him, then threw his head back and laughed. "I swear that man showered in sewage water. I hope we never have to pass through that city again!" He rubbed at his scraggly, unkempt beard. "I must look as though I'm related to him, ugh. Are we nearly to your room, Charlie?"

"Right here, Master," Charlie said, and quickly led the way up, locking the door behind them. "I will set clothes out for you, Master."

"Thank you, Charlie. Burn these things, would you? Oh, my glasses, wait a moment." Jed fumbled through his pockets and came out with mangled frames and a handful of glass that was all that remained of his lenses. Setting the mess on the nightstand, he vanished into the bathroom and tossed out his old clothes. They formed a filthy heap on the pristine carpet and Charlie smiled briefly to think of the way the brownie would screech to see such a mess. He knelt and fanned his hand out over the heap. Fire was not his strength, but in small portions... His eyes flashed and the clothes burst into flames, the fire dying when nothing of them remained, leaving not even ashes.

Turning, he pulled his bag from beneath the bed and then rose. Rifling through it, he brought out clothes he'd bought for when he found Jed, knowing he would need them. He set them out, then after casting a protective seal around the room, went in search of food.

When he returned, overburdened with what seemed like at least half the kitchen, he found Jed sitting cross-legged on the floor, bent over a small magic circle, meticulously writing in the necessary runes and sigils.

His hair was still wet, Jed always too impatient to properly dry it, the strawberry blonde strands clinging to his neck, soaking his shirt, one strand stuck to a pale cheek. He wore the jeans, blue t-shirt, and black and blue flannel, left unbuttoned, that Charlie had set out for him.

He murmured a greeting to Charlie, but did not look up from his work. In the middle of the circle were the remains of his glasses. The tip of Jed's tongue stuck out between his lips as he worked, an odd habit that Charlie had always found cute.

Jed muttered softly to himself, bracing his hands over the circle, and then a brief flash of blue light filled the room.

Smiling in satisfaction, Jed picked up his newly-restored glasses from the middle of the circle.

Charlie smiled as Jed turned to face him. "I see you found the chalk in my bag."

"You are nothing if not always prepared, Charlie," Jed said, sliding his glasses onto his face. Though his thirty-first birthday had recently passed, Jed could easily pass for much younger. "Did you empty the kitchen?" he asked, mouth twitching as he took in the tray of food Charlie held.

"The owner is a brownie," Charlie said. "She thinks I'm very pretty and too skinny."

Jed laughed, a rare sound, and any unhappiness Charlie still felt faded beneath it.

"Well, it's all true," Jed said at last, "so I can hardly fault her. Set it on the table and we'll do our best to fatten you up."

Charlie blinked, and obeyed. He tried to bite back the question – but he wanted to know. Needed to know. "Master – did you mean it when you said you should not have summoned me?"

Jed's fingers fumbled with the teacup he'd picked up, and he swore softly as hot tea splashed on the back of his hand. He shook his head slowly back and forth, but did not look up as he spoke, mopping up the spilled tea with stiff motions. "No, Charlie...but I am not proud I was so concerned for my safety that I enslaved you."

"Master..."

"I always let it go, ignored it, told myself it was alright...but then I saw those Jinn throw you through the wall, heard your

head crack against the banister. You were lying so still on the floor..." Jed's hand trembled and he dropped the tea-soaked napkins to fist them tightly, still not looking up. "I was finally forced to admit how selfish and cruel I've been. I summoned you to protect me, and that almost got you killed. I had no right to play so cruelly with your life like that...you never had any choice but to protect me, and nearly died."

Finally he looked up, and Charlie found it hard to breathe in the face of the agony soaking those pale brown eyes. "Though it would pain me, break me even, I would rather free you than ever again see you endure such pain on my behalf. It isn't fair, it isn't right." He reached out slowly to touch the collar at Charlie's throat. "You never had any choice, and that makes it so much worse. I'm sorry, Charlie."

Charlie caught his hand before Jed could pull it away, disliking that it was cool to the touch, holding it firmly in his own to warm it. Heart beating fiercely, he gave in to an urge long held back and pressed a butterfly-soft kiss to the palm. "You say I am a slave, Master, but you never once asked how I felt about it. Not once have I ever felt that way. If technically I am enslaved, I have ever willingly been so."

The hand in his twitched, and when it did not pull away Charlie pressed a firmer kiss to the soft palm, pleased that it was warm now. The bathroom had been stocked with mint-scented soap, and the sharp smell clung to Jed's skin, mingling with the sweet, vaguely almond-like scent that was only Jed. "Master, please, if I could ever have one boon it is that you never banish me."

Jed made a low, rough, indistinct sound and moved suddenly close, free arm sliding around Charlie's waist, burying his head against Charlie's chest. "A thousand times I told myself it would be the right thing to do, and that I would when you rescued me...but I can't Charlie, I just can't. You—You're—"

Charlie released the hand he still held to wrap his arms around Jed, holding his Master close, the deep knot that had always resided in his chest slowly working itself loose. The scent of mint and warm skin filled his nostrils, but Charlie could only smell sandalwood and rose, beeswax and chalk and spring air.

He started to speak, but felt the pulse of dark, burning magic a second before they were surrounded by blazing heat.

Snarling in rage, pent up anger finally spilling free, Charlie raised one hand aloft and then dragged it back down, closing it into a fist as he did so – the heat vanished and Charlie scooped Jed up, bolting from the room, the house, and out into the street.

He held Jed close as he stared angrily at the men waiting for them – three humans, one of them the man he'd earlier hurt, and a Jinn. At least they'd not acquired more Jinn in the past three months.

Carefully he set Jed down and shoved him back. "You will pay for hurting my Master," he told the assembled men. "How many times must he tell you that he will not do as you desire?"

"He will," the leader said nastily. "If he doesn't, we'll just keep taking away what he loves – including you, angel."

"No," Charlie said softly. "None will ever take me from the arms of my Lord and Master, especially one such as you." He wasted no more time with words, but burst forward, launching himself at the jinn.

It roared with a hungry lust for battle, for blood. Though it looked human, dusky skin and dark, curly hair, its eyes resembled hot coals and all who touched it were guaranteed to come away badly burned – assuming they lived. Of the enslaved races, only the Jinn were unconditionally wrong, one of the few races created out of nothing good. Even demons, greatest in power and born in the depths of hell, were not inherently evil as were jinn.

Charlie's skin hissed as the jinn latched onto him, but it healed nearly as fast as it was seared. With a roar he threw the jinn off, gasping for a breath that did not taste like burning flesh.

The jinn laughed as it regained its feet. "You killed my brother, angel. Show me your wings so I can tear them off and hear your screams."

Charlie nearly rolled his eyes. He bared his teeth. "Come closer so I can bottle you up, Genie. Ah, but if you do the bidding of these humans – you're already bottled, aren't you?"

Snaring, the jinn attacked, washing the street in blistering heat, hands aflame as he attacked Charlie, burning through his clothes and flesh. Charlie screamed but did not struggle out of the grip. Instead he clung tightly, hands sliding over the jinn's shoulders, shredding its clothes, fingers seeking out that which he needed.

Yes.

His skin prickled, despite the heat, as his fingers found the marks of binding inked into the jinn's skin. He screamed in pain as the Jinn continued to sear his flesh, feeling blood pouring all over, as brutal this time as it had been all those months ago...but then he felt the cool tingle as the binding spell dissolved beneath his touch.

The jinn shuddered in surprise, and Charlie felt it the moment the jinn realized just how precisely Charlie had killed his brothers. He used the momentary pause to twist free, vision blurry, body in so much pain – he fell to his knees and used his own blood to cast the circle, movements choppy and quick, but accurate. Too fast, too much, for the humans to follow.

Before it could wreak mindless destruction, he bound it anew – then drew one more sigil in the circle.

With a last angry snarl the jinn vanished, leaving only wreckage and the acrid smell of smoke as evidence he'd ever existed.

Releasing a pent up breath, Charlie struggled to his feet. Nearby, Jed stood helplessly within the protective circle Charlie had cast.

"You killed the jinn, angel," the leader of the three men said. "Two of them, now. Do you know how expensive they are?" He eyed Charlie speculatively. "Though I suppose if I had you in recompense..."

Charlie shook his head. "You are not my Master. Leave now, leave us alone, or I will kill you."

"No way," the man said. "I want the ring."

Jed laughed sadly from within his protective circle, and the look he gave the men was far too old for his years. "You've killed my entire family, several friends, all for such a stupid reason. You obviously don't need it, if you're able to control two jinn..." Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Why is it worth it?"

"I want to control a hundred jinn," the man said, greed giving his eyes a hard shine. "That sort of power is worth any price."

"Do you know the saddest part of all?" Jed asked. "Solomon was given that ring because he asked for help. He wasn't the nicest person to ever live, but he wasn't like you. He needed help, and so my ancient ancestor made the ring, and not once did Solomon ever abuse it. You have already proven unworthy of such power, and if I must endure the deaths of hundred more I will because one such as you should never have such power."

Charlie smiled with pride and affection. "Gladly will I die to protect my Master," he told the men. "I've killed two jinn, humans – you are as nothing to me."

"Oh, I don't know," a low, husky voice said from the shadows across the street. "That big one looks rather tasty."

As one the three men spun half around to watch the figure that slunk from the shadows, and Charlie could hear them draw audible breaths as they fell beneath the spell of the beautiful vampire.

With a ripple of shock he realized he recognized it – it was the one who'd been with the imp.

"Come and speak with me, handsome," the vampire said to the leader.

Charlie gawked as the man obeyed, shaking his head in wonder as the man was quickly turned into a meal.

The beat of leathery wings brought his head back around, and he blinked as Doug landed neatly beside him, mismatched eyes gleaming in the dark. "He's been bitten before," he said, eyes on the feeding vampire. "Probably when he was young, before he got to be so powerful – one bite makes you vulnerable to others, no matter how strong your magic. That and he didn't properly have his guard up. The idiot." He finally turned to look at Charlie, and grinned. "Sorry to butt in, but they're tearing up our turf."

A startled cry from the remaining two men diverted Charlie's attention yet again, right as he sensed a wash of magic far greater than anything he'd ever sensed before.

Sable Brennus stood over their bodies, expression dispassionate. Christian was nearby, and Charlie watched as the demon's consort approached Jed.

"I am sorry," Charlie said slowly. "I truly did not mean to cause trouble."

Sable laughed. "This looks like jinn work, not angel work." His eyes dropped to the blood-made spell circle. "You're quite adept."

"My Master bears the blood of great sorcerers," Charlie said. "When he made me, that talent wove into my being."

A soft thump broke the relative silence in the street, as the vampire dropped his meal. He grimaced. "Not very tasty, but I suppose it was the least wasteful way to dispose of such a vile creature." His eyes flashed with the cold light of a predator for a single moment, but as Doug approached him, the vampire's eyes warmed to something far more pleasant.

"I could have just killed him," Sable said idly.

"Too easy," the vampire said. "This way, he died angry and afraid, which if he's the one we think he was, it's the least he deserved." The vampire smirked. "Not that you couldn't have made him suffer, demon lord, but this way the blood didn't go to waste."

Sable shrugged and let the matter drop, turning to his consort, who was entrenched in conversation with Jed.

"There's more of his cult out there," Christian was saying as Charlie drew close, breaking the protective circle with a thought as he reached them. "I was hired a couple of months ago to root them out, but they move far too quickly for me to pin down. It's sheer dumb luck they came right into our territory."

Jed grimaced. "Cult? I didn't know they were that organized. They only want me for my magic adeptness."

"Blood of the great mages," Sable said softly. "Humans these days do not use magic well. Few are those who can, and I've not encountered one of your power and ability in three hundred years."

"I wish I did not have my power and ability," Jed said with a tired smile. "Then again, it brought me Charlie, so I cannot truly begrudge it. I want no part of making magic rings and such. I am sorry my troubles bled into your world."

Christian shrugged. "As I said, we've been looking for them for awhile. We've had spells out to catch their magic signature – and their powerful jinn." He flicked his gaze to Charlie. "You must be powerful indeed to have killed two of them."

Charlie shook his head. "I failed the first time."

"No, Charlie," Jed said softly. "Not once have you ever failed."

"Yes, Master," Charlie replied, smiling.

Christian shook his head, looking between them. "So what are you planning to do now?"

Jed's smile faded, and he shrugged. "Find a place to hide, until either the world forgets about me or magic rings go out of fashion."

"Stay here," Christian said abruptly. "Maybe more of them will come looking for you, and you'd be safer here than anywhere else."

Jed blinked, then laughed softly. "You want me to be bait?"

"Well protected bait," Doug inserted with a grin, mismatched eyes glowing. "Not that you need it with your guardian angel, but you know – the more the merrier."

"Why?" Charlie asked. "No one has ever treated us as you do."

Sable chuckled. "Christian is good at collecting strays, and he badly wants to finally finish this case." He looked at Charlie, then at Jed, eyes like moon-lit clouds. "One should always treat angels with respect, especially an angel so well and lovingly made, and the Master who made him. So if you want to stay, you are most welcome."

Doug yawned. "Though next time a jinn comes looking to barbeque you, tell him to wait until morning."

Charlie's lips twitched. "I will try."

"Good," Doug replied. "Then we're going back to bed." So saying, he held the vampire close and launched into the air.

Sable laughed softly and reached out to snag Christian close. "Bed sounds good." He look up briefly, eyes flashing as he gazed around the street, the damage done by the jinn gone as quickly as it had been done, leaving the street and buildings as good as new. Sable yawned. "Good night."

They vanished, leaving Charlie and Jed alone in the street.

"I'm glad no one else was killed this time," Jed said, not protesting as Charlie gently tugged him close, resting his head

against Charlie's broad chest.

"I am glad you are still here, Master," Charlie replied. Problems for the time being resolved, even the matter of where to go, his thoughts focused immediately on where they'd left off upstairs, on the demon's words. An angel so well and lovingly made.

Of course he was, but it made him happy to hear it all the same. "Master..." he said softly, barely more than a whisper.

"Are you certain you're happy, Charlie? Though you've never had a choice in anything..."

Charlie pulled just far enough away to tilt Jed's face up, fingers tingling as he touched that soft, warm skin. "What of you, Master? You never had any choice but to be human. Does that upset you?"

Jed laughed, body shaking with it, and he once more burrowed his head against Charlie's chest. "Have you ever noticed, Charlie, that you're a bit of a snob? You do not like humans, with precious few exceptions. I know that wasn't me, I like humans just fine. Well, most of them. Some of them."

"They're almost all idiots," Charlie muttered, but smiled. He tilted Jed's face back up, and dared to brush his thumb across those pale lips. Jed's tongue darted out, just barely touching his thumb, making Charlie's breath hitch. "You had no choice but to be human, Master, but like it just fine. Why, then, cannot I not be quite content to be your angel?"

"I..." Jed stared up at him, light from the street lamps reflected in his glasses. "When you put it that way...I guess..."

Charlie smiled and tugged Jed close, and leaned down to kiss his master softly, happiness flooding him when arms wrapped around his neck and Jed returned the kiss, finally feeling as though he were doing everything for which he had been made.

First Date

Chris scowled as he ventured inside the hotel, and the expression only deepened as a man in the hotel uniform promptly came up to him, sweeping an old fashioned bow before murmuring that Mr. White should follow him.

He followed all the same, because he had agreed to dinner.

Though how he would have gotten out of that room without agreeing, he didn't really know.

He pointedly ignored the fact that he hadn't really tried.

Tugging at the sleeves of his blue sweater, entertaining thoughts of what precisely he was going to do to interfering imps, he nodded an absent thanks to the man who'd guided him and entered the room as the attendant pulled the door open.

The lights in the room were dimmed; too dark for him to get a strong sense of the exact colors of it, but he sensed even absolute dark would not hide the demon who stood to greet him, unless Sable felt like hiding.

Something flashed in those storm cloud eyes as Sable drew close, something hot and possessive that Chris stubbornly ignored. He was not going to be pushed around and overwhelmed by a damned demon lord and that was that.

"You look as stunning as ever, beautiful," Sable murmured, lightly stroking Chris' cheek.

Chris jerked away. "Stop calling me that. I agreed to dinner, not your ridiculous pet names."

"Pet names?" Sable smirked. "No, not pet names. Endearments."

"Shut up," Chris retorted.

Sable laughed and motioned to the table. "I neglected to ask what you liked to eat, so I had to improvise."

Chris quirked a brow, wondering what on earth he meant by 'improvise' because he seriously doubted it was as simple as merely choosing a meal he thought might work.

He was motioned once more to sit down, and reluctantly Chris gave in. Sable sat down across from him, and Chris wished he could say he was unaffected by the demon – but more stolen kisses than he liked to think about said otherwise, and that he could not completely tear his eyes away only emphasized the fact that he found Sable Brennus far too attractive.

The dark curls had been more or less tamed, and the black slacks and gray sweater fit too well to be anything but tailored. Chris felt outclassed in more ways than one – beyond his being something that should not exist, he was about as much a peasant as Sable was the wealthy Lord of the city.

In a different time and place, he would have been worth less than the dirt on Sable's shoes. Such distinctions didn't matter as much to normals, but in the paranormal world it still carried a bit of weight.

Or maybe it was all in his head, because his world had nothing in common whatsoever with the neon towers that were in essence Sable's palace.

"So how is it you are part ghost, lovely?" Sable asked, eyes locked upon him.

Chris frowned, because he hated dealing with the matter of his birth, but he respected being asked straight out rather than slyly prodded. "My father is a ghost," he finally said. "My mother used to be a white witch."

"Fascinating," Sable said. "She used the spell of temporary life. That must have been exhausting. Any person capable of that must be strong indeed.

"Yes," Chris said quietly, and it was warming to finally talk to someone who truly appreciated the depth and complexity of the spell his mother had so long ago cast. A spell that had cost a not insignificant amount of her own life to give three days of life to his father. Such a spell was usually too much for anyone to fully comprehend, let alone appreciate the difficulty.

Sable's eyes gleamed. "That would explain your curious mix of energies. I've never seen the like."

"Energies?" Chris asked. He'd heard vaguely of such things, but demons were not something he knew much about – they were powerful, but overall did not play a very large role in the day to day.

"Yes," Sable said, leaning slightly forward, and Chris swore his eyes were almost glowing...no...they looked more like lightning behind thick clouds. "Black and gold; a strange mix of purities. All it lacks is silver."

Chris scowled. "Silver?" he asked, though he suspected he knew exactly what Sable meant.

The smirk he got in reply was answer enough, but Sable elaborated anyway. "My energies."

"I'm not yours," Chris snapped. He was prevented from further comment as the door suddenly opened and waiters appeared bearing large trays. Swiftly but neatly they set out glasses, a bottle of wine, and a large plate piled with what seemed to be at least half a dozen different things.

He glared at the vast array of appetizers, then up at Sable. "What exactly," he asked slowly, "did you mean by improvise?"

Sable shrugged, the expression on his face one of extreme innocence. "I didn't get to ask you what you liked, so I just asked others."

Chris groaned and reached for his wine glass – somehow not surprised to find it was one of his favorites as well. "I do not know who you asked, but I swear if I get asked a million damned questions, you confounding demon—"

"Temper, temper," Sable said, but with a grin. "I bet that feistiness gets you far in your business." The grin turned into a smirk – one which held no small amount of heat. "I wonder where else that feistiness does well."

Bastard.

"None of your business," he snapped.

Sable merely smiled and helped himself to the tray of appetizers, and Chris stubbornly jerked his gaze away from watching that little display.

Not certain what else to do, he took a few bites of his own.

His last date had consisted of a movie theatre and his punching the jerk in the face. Before that...none of them had been quite like this.

Less glamour. Less smirking. Much less smartass, know it all, far too smug demon lord.

He finally dragged his gaze up as the silence stretched, because try as he might he didn't want the silence to stretch. Damn it, this was stupid. He had no business dallying with a demon lord – especially since at some point said demon lord would

need to take a consort.

Which would leave Chris painfully short one lover.

Except he had no intention of becoming lovers with Sable, so the point was moot.

He took another swallow of wine.

"So how did you come to be a paranormal detective, beautiful? It is an interesting occupation."

Chris shrugged. "An old friend of my mother's always wanted to be one; he used to talk about it a lot. It interested me enough to pursue it." He motioned vaguely. "I have never heard of a demon who lorded it up in casinos."

Sable grinned, and Chris could not help but stare. He looked almost boyish, like a kid told to do as he wanted in a toy store. "I like the way the noise and the flash make people act. They're bewitched without any magic involved. It amuses me."

He didn't doubt it also gave Sable an extremely easy way of keeping certain normals and even paranormals under his thumb. A demon, after all, was a demon. It was almost amusing, really.

A soft laugh drew him from his thoughts, and he glowered as he realized he'd been caught in his light amusement.

The opening of the door once more prevented his responding, and he wondered suddenly if Sable was doing that on purpose. He didn't bother to ask, knowing he'd just get a taunting reply, and anyway the smell of steak was far more interesting at the moment.

He really was supremely annoyed with Sable.

Not so much he was going to refuse such wonderful food. They ate for several minutes in silence, Chris periodically glaring at the looks Sable gave him from time to time. Looks that spelled nothing but trouble he fully intended to avoid.

When their plates were at last emptied, he sat back with his wine in hand and regarded Sable, glare still firmly in place.

"That blue sweater really does divine things to your eyes, beloved. I shall have to thank your imp."

Chris set his wine glass down hard and leaned forward. "Do. Not. Call. Me. That," he hissed. "I am no such thing. Your being a demon lord does not mean you get your way with everything. I'm no plaything for you to toy with."

Those eyes blazed, like lightning or moonlight, the sort of light that loved the darkness. "No," Sable said, "you're not. You're mine."

Before he could protest that, Chris found himself yanked roughly, awkwardly, across the table. He swore at the bruises he would have in strange places the next morning, but they were quickly smothered beneath a hot mouth that somehow knew all too well how to make him groan.

He reached up to shove Sable back, something, but instead his hands only fisted in the soft cashmere of the gray sweater and he refused to acknowledge that he was straddling Sable or that it felt more than a little nice.

With an effort he tore away from that far too appealing mouth. "You're out of line."

"No, I'm not," Sable replied, that infuriating smirk on his face that Chris wanted to smack off or kiss off or whatever would work. "You're mine, beloved."

Chris let go of the grip he still had on Sable's sweater to smack him hard on one shoulder, then struggled to get free – but Sable wasn't letting him go, and he already learned the hard way that even with his ghost form he didn't go anywhere once Sable had hold. "Let me go," he snapped.

"No," Sable repeated, then dragged him down for another kiss.

Damn it he was not giving in. He'd agreed to dinner, and that most certainly did not include this manner of dessert, he didn't care that Sable tasted like magic and that those hands were equally wicked.

When he was finally allowed to breathe again, he could only try and fail to keep scowling and protesting and escaping.

"Come upstairs with me, beautiful."

Chris wondered what the hell was wrong with him, and just how much he would someday regret this, but neither concern

kept him from replying, "Only if you stop calling me those stupid names."

Sable merely smiled, and it was startling that there was nothing smug or mocking in it, enough that Chris forgot to protest as he was pressed down upon Sable's bed.

"Beloved..." the words were like a caress against his skin, and Chris shivered despite himself, thoroughly annoyed by that fact.

He glared at the demon who had returned to being smug, and tugged Sable back down to initiate a kiss himself, if only to shut the damnable demon up.

The Devil & Halloween

Sable frowned in discontent.

Everything was nearly perfect, the tolling of the bells as they announced the tenth hour a crowning touch.

Candles and paper lanterns, hundreds of paranormals packed together – some in costume, some perfectly themselves, and if any normals had slipped into the crowd they either saw what they wanted or would be paranormal before the night was out.

It was a perfect night – he'd even cleared enough of the sky to let the moon shine down through the skylight. His Halloween Masque was so very close to perfect.

The only thing lacking was his consort, but Christian loathed parties and Sable only pushed when it came to his birthday. Still, it was disappointing. He snagged a flute of champagne from a passing tray and skimmed the crowd again.

Perhaps the most amusing – and endearing – sight was Doug and Zach out on the balcony, speaking with a handful of other vampires. This being a Halloween masque, Doug had no need to shift into his human form.

Sable shifted his attention elsewhere, nodding and smiling absently at those who met his eyes. He loved parties, and was most pleased with this one...but he wished Christian had come.

He sipped his champagne and idly pondered what to do with the remainder of the night. The masque had only been in full swing perhaps an hour and it would go on until the gray of morning finally forced a retreat. He would slip out long before that, hopefully to find his consort relaxing in their bedroom.

With a sigh he set his empty flute down on another passing tray – and stilled as he felt a familiar presence. It couldn't be... something must be wrong, if Christian had come downstairs...

He frowned as he turned and turned, sensing but not seeing his lover.

In fact, it was rather startling how strongly he could feel Christian. His consort was not banking his power in the slightest. He could not make it more obvious he belonged to a demon lord if he tried. Yet Sable couldn't find him – Christian was purposely avoiding being spotted. Sable frowned, confused.

He turned and turned, seeing only people, paranormals, candles and the orchestra but never the one he—

Sable stopped, eyes widening, and for only the third time in his long life he found it hard to breathe.

For his own costume he had chosen to go with the period of dress that had always amused him the most – breeches and waistcoat, cravat and knee high boots polished to a mirror shine. Black from head to toe, the lace at his neck and throat threaded with palest silver.

Across the ballroom floor, waiting, Christian was his perfect match and exact opposite – the same outfit but white, the lace threaded with finest gold. More gold, and the tiniest of diamonds, glittered on the half mask he wore.

Sable crossed the dance floor, barely noticing the way people moved swiftly from his path, immediately reaching out to touch – the soft skin of one fine cheek where it wasn't covered by the mask, smoothing over the velvet jacket, combing gently through the bright hair. "Christian," he breathed, barely able to contain himself. "You look ravishing."

Christian snorted. "No one says ravishing. They haven't used that word in a few hundred years, Sable." His blue eyes were bright with pleasure all the same, and he did not put up his usual fuss when Sable bent to nibble at his jaw and kiss him

lightly.

Even if his lover had protested, Sable wasn't certain he could stop. So beautiful. Enthralling the way the elaborate clothes hid nearly every bit of his lover from him, yet hinted at so much. Even the hands were covered in satin gloves, sliding smoothly across the leather covering his own hands.

"You are intoxicating, beloved," he murmured, lapping at Christian's lips, needing to taste and touch this beauty who was his forever.

Christian's tone was typically sharp as he replied, but there was an unmistakable huskiness underscoring it. "Sable, after all the trouble I went to I had better stay dressed more than—"

Sable chuckled and cut him off with a brief kiss, then backed far enough away to tug his lover out onto the dance floor. "Would you like anything to drink?" he asked softly, even as he pulled Christian into his arms.

"No," was the equally soft reply, nearly lost as the first strains of music filled the air, brilliant blue eyes locked with his as they began to move.

They moved easily, perfectly. For all that Christian had once claimed ignorance when it came to dancing he had proven to be a natural. Sable could dance with him forever. "You look magnificent, Christian, truly." They parted briefly for a step, and only the fact he enjoyed dancing too much kept him from stopping to kiss his consort senseless. "I didn't think you were coming."

Christian flashed a smile that was no small part smug. "If you had known, it would not have been a surprise."

"Mmm," Sable said, closing a bit of space between them. "A finer surprise I've rarely had."

Chris glared. "Rarely?"

Sable grinned and stole a quick kiss before they were again parted briefly. He chuckled as they came together. "Realizing I was truly free, for one. I did not believe it until it happened, and was quite surprised my escape worked." He stole another soft kiss. "Seeing my beloved standing before me, rain-soaked and lovely, as though my wistful thoughts had summoned him, for two."

"Hmph," Chris said in reply, but a soft smile briefly stole across his mouth.

He smiled in return, then fell silent, content simply to dance with his consort. It felt to him the most intimate of acts, calling to mind silver fire and a promise of eternity. The rest of the masque, the rest of the world, faded entirely away. Nothing existed but the man in his arms, the sway and glide and turn of their dance.

One dance blended into another, until he lost count, and the distant sound of the music was entirely superfluous. They needed only each other to dance.

Absently he kept note of the swirling energies around him, but they were all flat and dull, unable to compete with the overwhelming silver that was his, infused in his consort, overlaying the rich black and vibrant gold that were Christian's combination alone.

"Beloved..."

Christian accepted his kiss without protest, hands moving to lightly grasp his shoulders as they slowed to a stop. "Sable."

As the last strains of music faded away, Sable moved them off the dance floor and out of the ballroom altogether, into a small hallway. Usually every last increment of the Tantalus was busy, but tonight everyone was either in the ballroom or out on the streets.

That left him alone with his devastatingly beautiful consort, and Sable took full advantage, pressing Christian against the wall and tearing their masks away before taking a kiss deeper and more thorough than those he had stolen in the ballroom.

Christian moaned, fingers digging into his shoulders, but the slick satin of his gloves against the smooth velvet of Sable's jacket did not allow for a firm grip. "Sable."

The raw need as Christian said his name sparked his blood, and Sable kissed him again, bracing his hands on the wall, caging his lover completely, drawing out sound after sound until Christian could do nothing but shiver and stutter his name.

Yes.

Sable thrust a leg between Christian's thighs, pressing against his heat, gaining another choked moan, satin-covered fingers gripping his hair, pulling not quite hard enough to hurt. He broke the kiss but lingered a moment more on Christian's mouth, nibbling at the full, wet lips, then finally moved to explore elsewhere – a finely-sculpted cheekbone, the line of his jaw, nipping one earlobe, close to the diamond that had long ago been his first gift to Christian.

Christian who was utterly pliant in his arms, moving and shifting, offering up all that Sable could want or ask for. "Mmm, you are almost sweet tonight, beloved."

"Shut up, demon," Christian retorted, then ensured Sable's silence by kissing him again.

Sable was more than willing to be silenced in such a manner, since usually Christian preferred to smack him. Oh, he did like it when his consort was in the mood to spoil him.

His magic flared as he moved them from the hallway to their bedroom. In every way it was theirs and theirs alone – no one else was allowed here; until Christian it had been only he. Sable finally broke the kiss to step back just far enough to admire his consort again, loving all the white and silver against his skin and hair, the way it teased and hinted at the body beneath.

That Christian had worn it just for him.

He yanked his consort back into his arms, sinking one hand into Christian's hair, kissing him until he knew those fine lips were bruised and swollen, and Christian was incapable of forming thoughts.

"Sable..."

Oh, yes. When Christian said his name that way, he was definitely going to get his way – without a fight.

Making a sound remarkably close to a growl, Sable began to work on the myriad fastenings of Christian's clothes. It would be easy enough to tear everything away and lay the fine body bare, but he liked the slow stripping, seeing what he wanted a portion at a time, teasing every bit of skin as it was revealed, relishing the shivers and needy jerks of Christian's body.

He put his mouth to Christian's throat, lapping at the point where the pulse beat, then bit down hard enough to leave a mark, chuckling at the soft swearing it elicited.

"You look divine, beautiful," he murmured, stripping away the shirt to at last reveal Christian's chest and arms, the golden skin warm and smooth, moving beneath his knowing touch.

"Idiot," Chris retorted, but the words were spoken fondly.

Hands sank into his hair and Sable realized Christian was still wearing his satin gloves. Well, that wouldn't do, though they were not unpleasant in the least. He lifted one hand and undid the buttons, then put his teeth to the first finger, tugging gently. When it was loose, he moved to the next, slowly working his way to each of Christian's fingers before finally stripping the glove away. He bit lightly at the flesh between thumb and first finger, then pressed a soft kiss to the palm before releasing that hand and capturing the next to repeat the process.

By the time he'd finished, Christian was flushed and breathing heavily, eyes jewel-bright. He smoothed his own hands, still encased in supple leather, over the skin bared to him, finally ending at the still fastened pants.

"Christian..." he breathed the name against his consort's lips, then closed the space between them to kiss him long and slow as he worked at the fastenings of the form-fitting breeches, finally shoving a hand inside. The groan that poured into his mouth was sweet, as fine as the way Christian's hips jerked, begging for more.

He slipped his free hand down the back of the breeches, caressing and squeezing, until Christian was writhing in his arms, reduced to incoherency.

Oh, yes. That was a beautiful sight.

Finer still was the way Christian looked as he came, shuddering hard, eyes going distant and hazy, the mixed energies flaring bright as heat spilled over Sable's gloved hand.

"Mmm, you are perfection, beloved."

Christian made a noise that ordinarily would have been a scathing retort, but came out only a weak, garbled protest. Sable smiled faintly and lifted his hand to stroke Christian's lips, painting them with his release.

A soft moan and Christian licked his lips, then tugged Sable close enough to kiss deeply.

Sable growled into it, moving until Christian was pressed down upon their bed, skin all but glowing against the blue coverlet that was only a few shades darker than his eyes. He made short work of their remaining clothes, moving to cover that beautiful body with his own, taking another hungry kiss.

Hands gripped his shoulders, nails digging in just enough to sting a bit, Christian's legs spreading wide to make a place for him between them. He wasted no time pushing one finger inside, hissing to discover Christian had prepared for this night in every way.

Ravenously he attacked Christian's mouth, breaking away only to line himself up and push into the tight heat of his lover's body, growling deep in satisfaction once he was fully seated. Bracing his hands on the bed, digging his fingers into the coverlet, he again took Christian's mouth as he began to move, pulling out and slamming back in, thrusting hard over and over, drawing out gasps and cries and curses every single time.

Nothing existed but the man beneath him, the energies around them, and it was only vaguely that he heard the rumbling thunder that announced the return of the storm clouds attracted by his presence, his power.

He did not bother to muffle his shout as he came, rivaling the crashing thunder, spilling inside his lover, Christian's joining him, echoing him, making the night complete.

With a low groan he pulled out, and moved them so they lay properly on the bed, lying against the pillows and pulling Christian to lie mostly on top of him. "Thank you, beloved," he said, kissing Christian softly. "Truly, you take my breath away."

"You're welcome," Christian said, trying to sound his usual sharp self, but the underlying affection ruining the tone completely.

Sable kissed him again and then settled down to simply laze about with his lover, listening to the rain patter against the glass, the rumbling thunder, watching the occasional flicker of lightning.

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