

Prologue



I was two, almost three years old when my brother was born. I remember watching my mother's stomach grow and slowly push me out of her lap. She never really explained what was happening and I remember being so confused when she'd groan and touch her middle, saying, "Your brother needs more room, Star Bright."

All I could think was, *'When did I get a brother and how did he get in there? Did you eat my brother?'*

Thankfully, Ouria was around to explain it for me. She encouraged me to guess what his name would be and what he would like to play. By the time my parents called my grandmother to come watch me and they rushed off to the hospital, I was fully excited to meet my new brother. It was after dinner, and I had already been through my bedtime routine. Ouria lay beside me in my tiny bed, making star patterns on the ceiling and telling me stories, when loud and hurried voices signaled the excitement.

Granny had just closed the door behind them when I padded into the living room to find out what was happening.

"Star! Get your hiney back in bed! Go on, shoo." Granny wasn't in the mood to talk.

Ouria was waiting for me when I walked back into my room. I never liked it when Granny or my parents were grumpy. It made me sad in ways I was ill equipped to process as a toddler.

Ouria scooped me up and wrapped her arms around me, nuzzling her nose into the top of my hair. "Your brother is being born tonight. When mom and dad get home, he'll be with them."

Sadness put up no protest when excited joy shoved it from the forefront of my mind. I beamed up at my angel, babbling all sorts of silly, little girl natterings, finally landing on a soft gasp. "Ora, I have an idea! My brother doesn't have any toys yet. Can I share mine?"

I don't remember her specific response, I wasn't quite three after all. I do recall gathering up all my stuffed animals and favorite soft things on my own cuddling baby blanket. I dragged them down the hall to his room. I crammed them all into the crib, cradle, and rocking chair. I even arranged a greeting contingent atop the changing table and the dresser.

A couple of mornings later, I sat at the kitchen table, slowly and precisely feeding one piece of cereal into each side of my mouth at a time, chewing pairs, when I saw my parents' car pull into the driveway. I was too excited to stay put. I ran to the door as Granny pulled it open. That was when it started. "Star! Get back to the table." She finished pulling the door open, me ducking under and around as she did so.

My dad had bags in one hand and draped over his shoulder. In his other hand, he carried a big, ugly plastic thing. Mom wasn't carrying anything at all, and I peered toward the car, wondering if my brother was waiting or just slow. Then the plastic thing began to cry, weak and soft. I turned and took one step toward it before Granny grabbed me. Her boney fingers dug sharply into my shoulder as she shoved me toward the kitchen. "I said, get back to the table, Star."

Rubbing my shoulder, I schlumped back to the table, but I scooted my bowl and cup down to another seat so I could still see everyone in the next room.

My mother sighed and loudly announced that she needed to go to the bathroom. No sooner had she stepped into the hall than my father turned to Granny and said, "You can go now."

"I can go when I'm ready." She stepped up to the crying plastic thing and began to cluck and make baby noises at it.

"No. You can go now. We're tired. We just got back. Now is not the time ..."

"Child. I've raised five of my own. I know how tired ..."

"Well, this one is mine! Now get out of my house."

Daddy was scary when he yelled.

Granny was scarier. "This is my daughter's house, and I'll stay as long as I want. You can't do anything about it." She bent and poked around in the top of the crying plastic thing. She straightened with a wiggly baby in her arms.

'My brother!'

Daddy made as if to step toward her and she pinned him in a glare. She made more baby noises as my brother fussed, and my mother came back into the room. After a few words between them, Granny hugged my mother, shot a look at my father, and left.

I hopped down from the table and scurried up to my mother's knees. "I wanna see."

Mother said, "He's hungry. I'm going to take him to the nursery."

Daddy nodded, and I skipped toward the hall. “I gave him presents!” Preceding them into the room, I beamed as I flung the door wide. “I didn’t want him to feel sad since he didn’t have any toys yet.”

Daddy roared and snatched me up by one arm. “Look at this mess!” He pointed me at the room, and I was thoroughly confused. He swatted my behind and legs and part of my lower back as he hustled me back to my own room. He kind of tossed me in and yelled. “If you have so many toys that you can’t keep them all in your room, maybe you have too many.”

With that, he slammed the door and left me to figure out for myself what had just happened. I could hear him yelling as he stomped up and down the hall a few times. Through my window, I watched as he dug a hole, right in front of me, so I got a good view. One by one, using the barbecue tongs, Daddy lit each and every one of my toys on fire before throwing them into the hole. I don’t know what I was feeling as I watched, my arms crossed on the windowsill and my chin resting atop them.

At last, he came to the baby blanket. It had my name written on it in brightly colored embroidery and had been given to me by my grandfather. I lifted my head and blinked as Daddy lifted it, doused it with lighter fluid, and lit it. That’s when I cried.

“Ora? Why is Daddy so mad?”

Ouria materialized beside me. She scooped me up and pulled me into her lap there on the floor. “He isn’t mad at you, Starling. He just doesn’t have anyone else he can show his anger to.”

“Why not?” I was hurt, but the man was still my Daddy, and I loved him. I didn’t want him to have bad feelings any more than I wanted to experience them myself.

“Because he’s a pathetic and weak little man who’s too big a coward to make the changes in his life that need to be made.” The scary shadow man stepped out of the dimness at the foot of my bed.

“That’s not fair, Crow.” Ouria rolled her eyes and made a face at me, letting me know she thought Crow was being silly.

All my toys were gone, and I was sad for Daddy, so I wiggled in Ouria’s lap until I could watch the shadow man. Ouria summoned a cup of milk for me and turned Crow, the shadow man, into Crow, the cartoon bird. The two traded quips; Crow hopping around on my bedroom floor, making me titter. I started to see through the mean little bird to a pattern of refracted light and sound waves that almost seemed solid against the backdrop of the wall.

Crow stopped hopping about, focusing on me, and twisted his little head side to side. Then he said to Ouria. “Maybe she *can* do it this time.”

Chapter 1. Estrangement



My name is Starling Nightcastle. I often wake from dreams about living someone else’s nightmare. For most of my life, I’ve been stuck in my own nightmare, looking for a way out. One day, I’d find one.

‘Is that day today?’

My whole body was numb. Crow was gone. I’d screamed and railed at him to get out, and he’d vanished. I’d sent him away, and he’d gone.

‘Am I ready?’

I’d called, and Ouria had come, but it wasn’t the same.

‘I’m not ready.’

She was the angel who’d abandoned me through all the pain and hateful experiences of my life. That was my main struggle as she sat there in front of me, as if there’d never been any distance between us, but I’d been just a child when my guardian angel left me. That had been Crow’s fault. Crow the constant, the foundation, the one thing I could always count on. The one source of self-identity in my existence, and he had always been responsible for fostering the pain.

Ouria had come and gone and left me with a cup of coffee, thinking about how much I missed Crow and how much I hated them both in turns. Sitting on my knees, I leaned over the arm of the couch and peered into my terrarium. The cyan shade of the triple warding cast a low-resolution sheen on the small pile of soul dust in the middle. It was what was left of Morris Wischell. He’d drowned and traded places, not with his wife’s lover, but with his wife. I hadn’t seen it coming. I suppose I should have, but I’d been a little distracted. Morris hadn’t received my best work. Still, all’s well... right?

I’d shown Ouria the terrarium and described the disappointment and frustration that led to the blow up. I thought about Ouria’s visit as I sat there atop my crossed ankles, my coffee cup still half full. When I’d called her, she’d taken one look at my resentment demon and asked, “What have you been feeding that thing?”

It was lounging, post-gorging, on my shoulder while I accused Crow of all the things I'd been blind to our whole relationship. "He's been setting me up, Ouria. He's been letting me think or believe whatever is convenient and leading me into things I didn't sign up for." I had related all the new insights I'd gained since being unveiled by Kione, the reaper. "And, Ouria, they take all their shit with them! Same zeitgeist!"

"He's a demon, Star Bright." She wiped away a tear from my cheek and tucked my hair behind my ear. "That's the definition of their operations model. As long as you don't dig for more, he won't offer it voluntarily. That's okay. I'm here, now. We can work on that together from now on." She was clearly of the opinion that I was better off, but just because your guardian angel says so doesn't make it true.

A chime sounded in the air. I glanced up, frowning at the green warding covering the inside of my apartment. A knock at the door brought my study of the ward down to the front door. With a little shuffling, I got to my feet and took a sip of my coffee as I ambled forward. It was cold, but I was committed already and proceeded to choke down the swallow with a grimace. The cold and bitter dregs left a sour taste on my tongue. "Blech. Who's there?"

"Hey Star. It's me. Can I come in?" A small smile fought its way to my face at the sound of Paul's voice.

As I reached for the door, another voice settled a furrow on my brow. "Me too, Liaison. I want permission to enter."

Kione the reaper was with him. I paused in place, heaved a sigh, and pulled the door open. "Come on in. Both of you." I reached through the ward stuff and took Kione by the hand. Pulling them through, I paused and said, "Let this stand as a permanent invitation to pass the ward at need." With that, I puppeteered a fist bump with the reaper, depositing a stamp of my magical signet ring, onto their hand.

I lifted the signet to scan the image of a caged Crow for any sign of change now that I'd used it to give two angels and a reaper passage through the ward. The ring face still glowed green, filled with ward stuff by Crow, and not at all diminished, that I could tell, since the day I'd demanded it. Still, I had now given every celestial with interest a pass. The signet's purpose had been fulfilled. Then, I remembered, Crow wasn't going to be around to help me make the ward. I hoped the signet's endowment wasn't being used up. It was my only way to patch the ward.

With a small shake to clear my head, I pushed the door closed and took my cup to the kitchen. Kione had flitted off in that introspective moment, moving through the apartment and sticking their head into every room, nook, and cranny. I shared a raised eyebrow with Paul. He shrugged back and followed me to the kitchen. I almost laughed. Almost.

I handed Paul a clean cup and poured half of the coffee remaining in the pot for him. “I guess Ouria told you I banished Crow?” I glanced up before emptying the rest of the pot into my own cup. It reheated the old stuff perfectly, and I hummed to myself as I sipped.

Paul moved to the small bistro table that served to separate the kitchen from the living room. “She did! I think it’s fair to say we were all a little surprised.”

I grunted through a wry twist of my lips and brought my own cup over. “So why isn’t Damien with you?” I took another sip and sat my cup on the table, turning back to brew a fresh pot. “Didn’t he want to see the damage in person?”

Kione joined Paul at the table, sitting on an invisible tuffet of air. “I believe it is part of the professional courtesy of angels. Now that Ouria has direct contact once more, Damien expects to step back and be less involved.”

Paul turned a stormy expression on Kione and opened his mouth to protest.

Kione cut him off with one upraised hand. “Of course, that’s simplistic and unrealistic, but that’s an angel for you.”

I grunted and started toward them. “Kione, can I get you anything?”

Kione tapped the table and a pottery mug appeared with some dark liquid. “No thank you.” They grinned and took a sip.

With a sigh, I climbed into the vacant chair and wrapped my fingers around my coffee. “I thought Damien kind of liked me.” I made a pouty face but didn’t have the heart to point it at anyone.

“He does.” Paul clucked and chuckled. “He’ll still be around. You just have to make sure he knows you want him to be.”

I eyed him for a minute. “Yeah. Okay.”

Paul gave me a soft smile and leaned forward. “So how are you doing with the banishment?”

“I don’t know yet. Honestly, my mind has been on a replay loop since Ouria left. I’m still so mad at Crow.” I slumped over the comforting steam wafting up from between my hands.

“Do you mind explaining what happened?”

I leaned my head back and groaned. “I got some news from the FBI. They’re still watching me, by the way.”

Kione nodded and made a dismissive wave of one hand. “I accounted for them. They can’t see me anyway.”

Paul made a slight ‘oh.’ “That’s why you made me walk from around the corner?”

“Yes, good job. Now, hush.” Kione turned back to me. “You were saying?”

I sighed deeply and shook my head. “Yeah, anyway, the Buchanon boy’s body was found, and I got, ... I don’t know. Affected? Anyway, I started fiddling with the dust, just curious and experimenting, you know? The ward makes my hand tingle uncomfortably when I just reach in, so I got a wooden spoon and tried to fish some out.”

“Tried? It didn’t work?” Paul watched me with rapt attention.

“Nope. The ward brushed it all off the spoon, clean as a whistle. I was a little upset and called Crow.” I stopped there, looking from one face to the other, and decided to skip the part about me throwing the spoon at the demon. “It all comes down to Pete, what he did, and who could have stopped him. I was so angry.”

Paul’s expression tensed with concern. “Are you getting close to needing a purge?”

I took a second to think about it and shrugged. “I’m not sure. Everything about this purge and the delay before it has been out of the ordinary. The regular common emotions are still at minimal levels. Even anger unless it has something to do with Pete. I have all this guilt over those kids. Every time I think about it, first it’s the guilt, then I start getting angry. But it’s wrong.”

Kione cocked their head to one side at me. I nodded and glanced at Paul, still watching me closely. “It’s just wrong. All my thoughts twist up and go in circles. It’s a litany, not logical or even accurate, but persistent. I remember anger from before Crow. That felt energetic and clear. This feels wrong.”

“I see.” Kione leaned back with their cup and a faraway expression. With a glance at the terrarium, they pointed. “Did you at least get access to the dust before you banished him?”

I groaned softly. “No. But can’t one of you,” I looked at Kione, “you or Ouria, help me break through? I mean, between me and Damien, that’s two-thirds of the warding authority.”

Kione exchanged a look with Paul. Paul nodded and turned to me. “Star, no. Crow was clever agreeing to this ward. You can get through it, but you can’t pull the soul dust out.”

“Not without Crow.” Kione saluted the thought with their cup.

I growled, low and soft in my throat. “No, I refuse.”

“You can’t purge without him.” Kione didn’t look up. The statement coming out like a polite reminder.

“No! If I can’t purge, then I won’t. Not if it requires calling him back.”

Kione raised their eyebrows, letting them settle back over squinty-eyed skepticism. “Brave words, little human.”

Paul chuckled. “I kind of agree. You don’t need to purge.” He shrugged and nodded to Kione. “Not yet anyway. But that’s going to be harder as you go.”

Kione looked smug and turned to me, unblinking. “It isn’t just the dust. You need to call him back because you need to defeat your demons. All of them.”

I considered popping them one but reconsidered. I still wasn’t sure what they might do or how far I could push them. “I’m not calling him back. And you can’t make me.”

Chapter 2. Shelter Plans



Kione finished off their beverage and evaporated from the room with a small wave. Paul waited a count of five before meeting my eyes and rolling his. With a chuckle, he retrieved the coffee pot and refilled both our cups. “I guess, given the time right now, you aren’t going to work tonight?”

“Given the time and the events of the evening, no. I called in sick. Mwahaha.” I gave my best sinister laugh.

Paul saw right through me. “You feel like a rotten lay-about, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Wanna come help me at the shelter for a while?”

With a brief stop upstairs at the diner, taking the long way around for the sake of the police officers still surveilling me and my home, we walked with our take-out bags swinging from our hands. As we walked, Paul gave me the update on the renovation project.

“The Popadopouloses donated some machines for the laundry. Abbey’s running it. She’s really good at it, and I think it’s good for her, too.” That soft, sappy look crept back into his eyes, and I grinned.

Abbey was a homeless woman with two small imp demons attached to her zeitgeist. When I’d first met her, she’d given me the impression she could somehow sense my and Paul’s gifts. All in my imagination of course, but, according to Paul, she’d remembered me and asked about me. Also, according to Paul, she wasn’t as in need of medication as she thought she was. I hadn’t had a chance to prod for an explanation to that yet.

“It sounds like you’ve made a lot of progress.” I watched eddies swirl in our path. They reached for us with grasping tendrils that seemed to lose cohesion as they touched us. Falling away like a water bubble suddenly feeling the effects of gravity, they lay in puddles for a moment before flowing away, back to the larger mass. Every few steps, another cohort stretched out for us. I watched impassively, detached.

“I can’t wait for you to see it. I’m really proud of the guys and all the work they’ve done.” Paul chattered about the rough-in of the upstairs dormitories. “We separated the space into four parts. The three dorms and the showers.”

“Three dorms?”

Paul nodded. “Yeah. The men’s, the ladies’ and the family dorms.”

I grunted at the thought of homeless families. Homeless children.

A troupe of knee-high Unseen critters stepped through the sparse traffic and onto the sidewalk in front of us. I’m not sure how many there were. The way they moved, from moment to moment, the small group might appear to be three, or five, or eight identical garden gnomes, specifically for Halloween. With a hooked nose and what looked like two more positioned to replace a mustache, their spikey-haired heads reminded me of a sweetgum ball.

“Paul!” My hand shot out to touch his arm.

“Huh! What?” He stopped on a dime and his eyes went wide, darting around before settling on me.

“Sorry.” I continued to watch the meandering troupe with one eye. “I see something new and ...”

Dawning understanding relaxed the tension in his whole body. “Oh, sure. You want me to read the resonance?”

“Do you mind?” At his gesture, I pointed out the area the troupe traveled, finally joining the end of their line and pacing them.

Paul mimicked me, showing me how ridiculous I looked, and chuckled.

“Really?” I frowned.

“Sorry.” He set aside his amusement and focused. “There is a convolution there.” He continued to trace their path even as I resumed my place at his side.

“Like, something keeping you from picking it up?”

“No, like the cause of misunderstandings. It’s translating as a convolution.” He glanced at me and shrugged.

I turned back to watch the cluster slowly phase through a wall. The last met my eyes just before it too went through the wall and out of sight. I shuddered.

Paul asked, “What is it?”

I shuddered again, with feeling this time. “The whole thing ignored me until the last second. That was a creepy little whatever.”

“Is your vision still growing? I mean, is it a pretty steady supply of new stuff?” Paul traded his dinner into his other hand, sticking his now-free hand in his pocket, and slowly scanned the street for signs of more critters in our path.

I thought about it as I looked up at the couriers flying through space. “There has been a change in my distance vision, or maybe my depth perception. I can see details on the farthest speck.”

“What? Like, you have telescopic vision?”

“No, not like that. It’s like everything is still where it’s supposed to be and I have perspective, making things look tiny and all that. But instead of, like ...” I cast about for an example. “The moon, for instance. I can see all the individual rocks and ... rocks, I guess... with as much clarity as if I was standing on the surface.”

Paul pressed his lips together for a moment, then turned to me. “Wow. That’s intense.”

I nodded. “It’s like that all the way as far as I think anyone can see. I don’t see an end.” I mused on the vastness, got a little dizzy, and lowered my gaze to the skyline. “I think I’m beginning to see more of the light spectrum, too. Or maybe night vision? Either way, I can see in the dark like there’s a candle glowing somewhere.”

“Whoa, like infrared? Like night vision goggles?”

I laughed. “Not quite. I mean, I’ve never used night vision goggles, but everything is all green when they’re showing night vision on tv. Nothing changes colors, it’s just dim.”

“Can you see through walls?” Paul leaned close. “Or anything?”

I tagged him playfully with my elbow. “No, I can’t see through things. Although, sometimes, I think I can tell where people are on the other side of a wall. I could just be imagining it.” Paul and I exchanged shrugs. “The menagerie of Unseen critters has grown some. Including the whatever from a minute ago, I’ve discovered six new ones since getting back from the island.”

“Do you know what they all are?” We turned the last corner.

“No, and I still haven’t asked ... anyone, what the thing I keep seeing on Gail is.” I swallowed a lump in my throat as I almost said Crow’s name. “I should start a sketchbook and just draw them for identification.”

Paul reached out and pulled the door open, holding it for me. “I didn’t know you could draw.”

I stepped through and held the inner door for him in turn. “I can’t, but I can sketch a little. At least enough to get the point across, I think.” I followed Paul in and was immediately distracted by the changes that had occurred since my last visit.

The wall dividing the front common areas from the back was fully painted and adorned with signs and a clock. The concrete floor under the dining area had been given a clear surface and polished. The entertainment areas were demarcated with area rugs over a thin all-purpose carpet, and seating areas were arranged in each to resemble living rooms.

“Wow. You’ve really gotten a lot done! It looks great.” I followed Paul through one of the doors into the back.

“Thanks. It’s been hard work, but it’s turning out pretty nice.” He led me to a table in the staff breakroom and I sat while he prepped the coffee. “After we eat, I’ll show you the upstairs. I want to give a few jobs to some of the volunteers. Like Abbey and the laundry. I’m hoping to eventually be able to offer job placement services when they’re needed.”

“It sounds like a big plan.”

“Yeah.” He sat across from me and sighed. “I wish I knew more about running a nonprofit.”

“Can’t you take a class for it?” I slumped back in my chair and took in the custom cabinetry job.

“Yeah, and I’m attending a tutorial, sort of. But the big takeaway from that seems to be that I need a degree in it to really be on the safe side. Or hire someone.”

I grunted. “Well, don’t look at me.”

He hummed and we sat quietly until the coffee pot burbled. He stood and set two coffee cups on the counter. “It’s just all the taxes and permits and stuff. I’m afraid I’m going to mess up and let everyone down.”

“Why don’t you get the degree?” I pulled my takeout box from the bag and did the same for Paul’s.

He brought our coffee and got settled, taking a sip and humming before he spoke. “I never used my G.I. bill. Maybe I should look into it?” I hadn’t seen that timid look of uncertainty on him in months.

“Of course, you should.” I swatted the air between us. “Don’t be a dope.”

“I’m trying. It’s a process.”

“It’s all a process. You’ll probably have to worry the financial aid office to death and go back and forth with the VA, but everyone does. Half the education is learning to jump through hoops and follow up.”

Paul grunted. “Can you help me with that?”

“Absolutely!”

Chapter 3. Wardings



I spent a few hours helping Paul fill out paperwork for two different types of permits from the city and a stack of redundant insurance forms. When he called it quits for the night, we shared a ride back to the diner where he dropped me off before heading home. It was barely 11:00, so I tossed a wave at the officers parked on the street, watching, and strode in.

Adrya came out of the back, tying on her apron, as I approached the counter. She smiled and pulled her pen and pad from her pocket. “Hey, you’re in a little late for you, aren’t you?”

I smiled and nodded. “Yeah, some things came up, so I’m off for the night. Did you just get here?”

“Yep.” She shot a coy grin at a young man sitting a little further down the counter. “Max gave me a ride tonight.” She wiggled her fingers at him.

I turned to include Max, figuratively, in the conversation. “Aw, that was sweet. Have you known each other long?”

“Not very.” Adrya beckoned to the young man, a coffee drinker I saw, and he slid his cup over a couple of seats to join us. “Max, this is Star. She’s less a regular and more like family.”

I lifted a hand to shake his, exchanging those muttered, under the breath, “Nice to meet you. You too. How’s it going?” niceties. This part of introductions always reminded me of feral cats hissing when they meet for the first time.

“Star, this is Max. We met a couple of weeks ago, while you were on vacation.” Adrya had tucked her order pad back under her arm and showed no sign of pulling it back out. “He works at my bank, and he’s always been so nice.” She paused, giving Max the gushy, melty-eyed gaze I always thought was just cheesy B-movie acting. I glanced at Max. The melty eyes were apparently contagious.

I took the opportunity while both were distractedly swimming in melty eye puddles to study his zeitgeist and demons. In a pleasantly surprising turn, Max’s zeitgeist was similar in shape to what Paul’s Zeke had been when I’d first seen it. Masklike pale grey, extending over his eyes and halfway up his forehead, it wrapped all the way around his head and supported an alarming four personal demon imps. Thankfully, they were all the size of softballs and under. None stood out as particularly well-fed, so I felt no compunction to give any warnings.

“Always? I thought you said you just met.” I drummed my fingernails absently on the counter, in the place my coffee should have been.

Adrya bobbed her head slowly as she turned toward the coffee station along the wall behind her. “Technically, we’ve waved and said hi for months. Officially, we met a couple of weeks ago when he came to my rescue.”

She managed a passable pour as she spoke, and I eagerly received the steaming mug of liquid joy. Max spoke up as I sipped.

“It was just a little rain. I was glad for it, though. I’d been trying to figure out how to get more time with you for a while.”

I looked between them as they locked gazes and stared, unblinking so long it made my eyes itch. “So, was there an umbrella involved in this miracle rain?”

Adrya chuckled and the pheromone levels in the room went back to nominal. “Yes. He held an umbrella over me all the way to my car and managed to ask me out before we both drowned.”

I chuckled. It was cute. If I’d been an observer of the event, I probably wouldn’t have described it as magical, but if it razzed their berries, good for them. “That’s sweet. Good for you two.” It was my standard response to gooey social news. It wasn’t that I didn’t care, so much as I didn’t *care*. I responded like I thought people of average and customary sensibilities would; the way I thought I would with a full repertoire of emotions. It seemed to satisfy them both.

Max yawned and finished his coffee. “I’m going to go, Hun. See you in the morning?”

They shared a sweet kiss and Adrya sighed as she watched him go. “I really like him.” She rumbled her nose. “I always really like them at this point in the game.”

I perked up over my cup and raised my eyebrows. “Are you borrowing trouble?”

Adrya snapped her focus back to me and looked startled for a split-second. Then she giggled and waved one hand to clear the air. “Oh, no. Just thinking and daydreaming.” She cranked up a bright smile and lifted the order pad, pen poised at the ready. “What can I get you?”

I made the order to-go, thinking I might be able to get a little reading in before the night was over. When it was ready, I tacked four extra coffees onto the order and Adrya helped me pack it all up for easier toting. It wasn’t the first time I’d spontaneously brought my minders coffee. I had even gotten each car a fruit bowl and a cinnamon pull-apart once. Only once, and this was only the fifth coffee order. I didn’t want them getting used to it.

Still, the officers had all become much more friendly along the way. Less likely to scowl and more likely to wave when they saw me now, even I noticed a reduction in the tension of being surveilled. The odd couple that typically took point in my yard in the evenings saw me coming and stepped out of their car.

“Good evening, Dr. Nightcastle.” The taller of the two said with a sparkling grin.

“Heya. Any creeps been creepin’?” I passed out the coffees.

The shorter of the two said, “Just us.” Her gruff voice reminded me of a pitchier version of Paul’s gravel.

“Oh, well, I think that’s okay then.” It didn’t matter what I said, as long as it was generally positive. Inane chatter, social niceties, small talk; how much more efficient would it be to just skip all the words that didn’t mean anything and move on? But that’s not how people work.

I thought of these kinds of social interactions like a choice between a sticky button and a soft gel button and their consequences. For instance, I really enjoyed the feel of a gel button, but pushing it would get me a nail gun to the face. Touching the sticky button makes me gag, but pushing it would get me a month's salary. I could pick whatever I wanted, but the outcome was linked to the button, not my wishes.

I generally avoided the choice or ended up touching the sticky button. Somehow, the rest of the world always seemed to get more out of this wasted conversation than I ever would, but I knew that. That made the choice pretty simple.

Either way, the officers assured me that nothing and no one had been anywhere near my apartment. I thanked them, wished them a good evening, and ambled across the yard to my door. I studied the ward as I fiddled with my keys. It was still solid all the way around, for now. I stepped inside and let my eyes roam over the ceiling, walls, and floor. I wasn't great with patching the ward by myself. That I could at all was a whole other level of amazing, but as incredible as it was, it was still unreliable.

I decided to make it a nightly practice and took my place at the central-most space in my apartment. From there, I could see everywhere in my space and intend wardings in every direction. I watched my signet as I took my place and began to do the Intention Shuffle, rocking in a boxlike pattern as I flicked my intentions every which way. At first, the signet simply glowed steadily with its imbuelement. I almost gave up when I caught a weak flash from it. I don't know when my attention wandered.

I gazed, unseeing at the terrarium on the end table beside my couch. Its normally soft white, almost bluish, glow from the top rim met the cyan-ward hue protecting the soul dust piled in the center of the soil and gravel bottom. I considered how unpleasant it was to reach into that ward and wondered if it would fade away like the green warding on my apartment. More importantly, would it fade away before I got desperate for a purge? How could I get through it in case it didn't fade or in case it lasted longer than me?

Eventually, I realized I was staring at the terrarium, letting thoughts of the dust and how it worked rattle around in my head, unchecked. I was still shuffling; I just wasn't thinking about it specifically. I checked the signet and found it pulsing in time to my rocking motion. No sooner had I realized the fact, than it stopped, dimmed and refused to admit it had done any such thing.

I looked around the warding. I couldn't see any difference and hoped that indicated the desired effect. There wasn't much I could do about it anyway. With a check of the time on my phone, I called it late enough and took my dinner to the couch, nibbling a sandwich and studying the cyan ward.

It was unpleasant but not painful when I touched it before. I had removed my hand and assumed I shouldn't touch it. What if that was what it was supposed to feel like, and I'd be fine? I chomped a bite from my sandwich, very good but also very large, and set it aside. Wiggling closer to the terrarium, I reached out and stuck the tip of one finger deliberately into the warding from the top. The tingles began immediately.

I resisted the increasingly powerful urge to snatch my hand back as the tingle intensified and crept up my finger. I thought I was imagining it until it got to my third knuckle. My finger began to twitch as the muscles worked to override my determination not to move. I tried to estimate how long that had taken and realized I couldn't reach my phone without jostling my experiment. I sighed and glanced at my discarded sandwich. I couldn't reach that either. I sighed again and removed my finger from the warding.

A few minutes later, I had fetched the pillows from my bed and stacked them on the arm of the couch. I settled myself with a fresh cup of coffee, the remainder of my sandwich, and my phone's timer ready to start. The arrangement meant I'd be sticking my other hand into the ward this time, and I was okay with that. The tingles had taken several minutes to fade away from my other hand and I wasn't keen to reawaken them. Besides, it could futz my experiment if I used an already primed finger.

I sat, wiggled, and took a fortifying breath. Then, I reached into the ward, propping my arm on the pillow stack and allowing one fingertip to dip into the cyan ward, simultaneously tapping the start button on the phone. This time, also on my phone, I recorded the time it took to get all the way up my finger and gave the intensity level a scale, calling the feeling at the start a 1 and the increase by the time it reached my third knuckle a 2.

I patiently waited for the tingle to move further, nibbling my sandwich and feeling sweat bead over my brow and upper lip until the tingle reached a third of the way up my hand. On my palm as well as the back, a line of tingles rode the advancing edge and quickly escalated to a burning itch like stinging nettles on the tip of my finger. I called that intensity level 3 and worried my scale was too small. I ended the experiment for the night, filling out my notes and examining

the timing. From 1 to 2 had taken about four minutes. From 2 to 3 had taken another five minutes. In under ten minutes, the repellant tingles had become burning itching pain, but only up to my hand.

I cleaned up my dinner mess and pondered through a shower. As I rolled into bed, I designed a new experiment and resolved, again, not to ever need to call Crow back.

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