BOOKS BY KRESLEY COLE

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The Sutherland Series
  The Captain of All Pleasures
  The Price of Pleasure
Those who oppose us will know their doom.

—Rune Darklight (a.k.a. Rune the Baneblood and Rune the Insatiable), assassin and secrets master of the Møriør

When in doubt, squeeze till something breaks.

—Josephine Doe (a.k.a. Lady Shady)
Jo woke to the taste of copper.

She smacked her lips, moving her tongue. *Something's in my mouth?*

Her eyes flashed open. She bolted upright, and spat two pieces of crumpled metal. *What the hell are those?*

Clutching her aching head, she gazed around, wrinkling her nose at the antiseptic smell. *Where am I?* Her vision was blurry, the light dim. She thought the room was tiled.

Shit, was she in a hospital? No good. That’d mean she and Thaddie were back in the foster system and off the streets. Which meant she’d be breaking him out yet again.

Where was he? Why couldn’t she remember what happened?

*Think, Jo. THINK! What’s the last thing you remember?*

Slowly images of the day began to surface. . . .

*It's getting too hot to stay here.*

Closing in on the library, Jo scanned the streets for the gang lord’s
Monte Carlo. She thought she heard its newly replaced engine rumbling a couple of blocks over.

The streets of this hood were a maze, the Monte Carlo a dragon. She was a plucky superhero, carrying her trusty sidekick on her back.

But last night hadn’t been a game.
She craned her head around to ask Thaddie, “What do you think?” His little body was secured in the Thadpack—the stolen backpack she’d modified, cutting out holes for his legs. “We lost ’em, didn’t we?”

“Loss ’em!” He waved his single toy, his Spider-Man doll, to celebrate.

She and Thaddie needed to get scarce, maybe head to Florida, making a new start in Key West.

She eyed their surroundings one last time, then slipped through the library’s back door, left open for her by Mrs. Brayden, part-time librarian/full-time busybody, a.k.a. MizB.

The woman was in the lounge, already setting up the high chair. Her picnic basket was full.

*Do I smell fried chicken?*

“Hope you two are hungry.” Her dark-brown shoulder-length hair had a touch of gray. Her eyes were light brown behind her boxy glasses. As usual, she wore some lame pantsuit.

*Don’t look too eager for chicken.* “Whatever.” Jo freed Thaddie from the pack, then took a seat, adjusting him in her lap. “Guess we could eat.” She propped her combat boots on the table.

MizB sighed at Jo’s outfit: ratty jeans, a stained T-shirt, and a black hoodie. The woman had offered to do laundry for them, as if Jo and Thaddie had a wardrobe of other stuff to change into while they waited.

“We need to talk, Jo.” She sat, but didn’t unload the basket.

“Uh-oh, Thaddie, it looks like we’re about to get a lecture.” Jo winked at him. “What do we say to MizB when she lectures us?”

He grinned at the woman, his adorable face dimpling, then yelled, “Fuggoff fuggoff fuggoff!”
Jo laughed, but MizB was unamused. “Excellent, Josephine. Now he has a potty mouth because of you.”

“He hasn’t reached his full potential of potty. Oh, but he will. Because my baby bro is brilliant!” Two and a half years old, and he was a boy genius.

At least, that’s how old she thought he was. Thirty months ago, she’d been found wandering the outskirts of Houston, wearing black robes and speaking “gibberish.” She’d clutched Thaddie in her arms, hissing at anyone who tried to take him from her. Before that day, she had no memories.

The docs had put him as a newborn and her age at eight. They’d figured head trauma had caused her memory loss.

No parents had come to claim them. *Fuckers.*

Sensing the drop in her mood, Thaddie made his Spidey doll kiss Jo’s cheek. “Mwah!” He smiled again. The kid loved showing off his new teeth.

Whereas Jo would just as soon sneer at someone, he babbled greetings to everyone, inviting them to play with his toy. If she’d ever owned a toy of her own, she never would’ve shared it with people who weren’t Thaddie.

“Be fwends?” he’d ask anyone, blinking his big hazel eyes at them, and “awws” would follow.

Folks fell in love with him as deeply as they fell in hate with Jo and her “sullen attitude,” “sickly looks,” and “pinched expression.”

“He needs a checkup,” MizB said. “And vaccinations. You both do.”

“If Thaddie didn’t like you so much, I would’ve popped you in the mouth by now. You realize that, don’t you?” She swiped her sleeve under his running nose. “He’s fine. We’re doing fine.” Jo had never meant to get so dependent on the woman.

A year ago, the tiny library had seemed like a good hideout for the day. She’d planned to steal some comics and wash herself and Thaddie in the bathroom like the rest of the homeless did.

MizB had set out food for Jo and Thaddie, then backed away, as if she were luring feral cats.
Fuck if it hadn’t worked. Woman made a mean tuna-fish sandwich.
They’d dropped by the next day, and the next, until Jo actually trusted
her enough to leave Thaddie for an hour now and then.
Whenever Jo had to do battle against villains.
Sometimes doing battle got dangerous. She glanced at the window.
Way too hot to stay here. She’d need bus fare. MizB would watch Thaddie,
and Jo could go roll some tourists. Doing her part to make their vacation
more eventful.
“So are we gonna get to lunch, or what?” A full meal for the road
wouldn’t be bad.
“In time.” MizB was holding out till she’d said her piece.
That chicken smelled like deep-fried crack. MizB was a sorceress! One
the heroine and plucky sidekick must resist!
As much as Jo liked the food, she hated the way Thaddie gulped it
down, like he knew he was only getting gas station chow until the next
basket. Made her feel like shit.
So what was Jo going to do when they ditched this town? Who’d baby-
sit Thaddie? Who’d feed them every day?
“You might be doing okay,” MizB said. “But you’d do better with me
and Mr. B.” Her husband was a ruddy-faced dude whose laugh sounded
like it came out of a barrel. He picked his wife up from the library and
dropped her off every day, walking her to the door as if she were precious
cargo. He clearly didn’t like her working in one of the worst hoods in Texas.
When the two of them thought no one was looking, they linked pin-
kies. ’Cause they were tools. MizB smelled like cinnamon and sun, Mr. B.
like motor oil and sun.
Jo had no urges to do lasting violence to them—her highest measure
of approval.
MizB continued, “But we can’t adopt you two unless you get back into
the system.”
With no sign of parents, Jo and Thaddie were adoptable. The Braydens
were okayed for adoption.
Jo didn’t trust the system. “And what happens if you and Mr. B. don’t
get us? Did I ever tell you about my first foster ‘father’? Night one, dick-wad shoved his hand down my pants—before the freaking *Late Show* came on.”

“Digwad!” Thad echoed.
MizB pursed her lips. “That man is the exception to the rule. And you should’ve reported him. Other children might get sent to him.”

“No. No chance of that.” Jo had set dickwad’s house on fire, using the silver Zippo she’d already stolen from him—before the freaking evening news had come on.

The look on his face as he watched his place burn still made her chuckle. From their spot in the bushes, Thaddie had clapped his little hands. Fires were free fun. *Just ask that gang lord* . . .

“Do I even want to know?” MizB asked.

“Nope.” There’d be no system for them. If the Braydens didn’t land the Doe siblings, Jo and Thaddie would be separated.

Docs had diagnosed her with scary-sounding disorders and disabilities; Thaddie was in the ninety-ninth percentile of everything good.

Her eyes and skin were jaundiced. Thaddie was pink-cheeked and bright-eyed. Every time she pulled down her hoodie, more of her hair would fall out. His was curling down.

Inside and out, she was as bad and defective as Thad was good and perfect. The only thing the siblings had in common was the color of their eyes—hazel irises with blue flecks.

“If you come to our house, it would be for good.” MizB looked fiercer than Jo had ever seen her. “We’d never let anyone take the two of you from us. We’d be a family.”

Jo’s opinion of the woman rose a notch. Still she said, “Are we done yet? For fuck’s sake, woman, feed us.”

MizB glared, but she did unpack the basket. “You need to be in school.”

“It didn’t take.” Jo couldn’t read. Kids caught on. Her awkward attempts to make friends had turned into scrapping, a pastime she preferred to do outside of a structured environment.
Jo had Thaddie; nothing else mattered.

In a kiddie bowl, MizB mixed pieces of chicken with mashed potatoes. Thaddie grew still, eyes locked on the grub. His stomach growled; Jo’s chin jutted. *Mental note: Steal more gas station chow between baskets.*

*Wait . . .* When they left for the Keys, there’d be no more baskets.

He was clambering for the high chair before the woman had even sprinkled cornbread crumbles on top of the chicken mash. She wouldn’t hand it over till he’d accepted a kiddie spoon from her.

“Like we taught you, Thaddeus.”

“We?” Jo snorted. “Two hands, ten fingers. What’s he need a spoon for?”

Once Thaddie was shoveling food into his piehole, MizB started back up again. “Mr. B. and I lie awake at night worrying about you two out here.” She and her hubby lived in the burbs. Ginormous yard. The woman had shown Jo on a map, then withheld barbecue until Jo could recite the address.

If MizB knew a fraction of what went on in these streets . . .

But Jo saw all.

The local gang lord was the worst. The street people called him the Wall because of his steroidal build, but also because he liked to screw his prostitutes from behind; in other words, your back was always up against him. Jo nicknamed him Wally.

He hung with a pair of brothers named TJ and JT. *Because cleverness.* The hookers named the older brother Knuckle behind his back since his dick was the length of a finger from knuckle to knuckle. The younger brother didn’t even merit a body-part nickname. The fourth crony was called Nobody. In other words: “Who did it?” “Nobody.”

Girls went into Wally’s crib one way, and after screams sounded, they stumbled out different. Whatever those four were doing in that house took the fight out of girls. Which was unforgivable.

Jo worshipped fighting. She dreamed about being a comic-book superheroine—just so she’d have an excuse to mess people up. With no
superpowers on the horizon, she’d launched a one-girl guerrilla war, kick-
ing the ant mound and running.

She’d started out small. Stick of butter underneath the door handle of Wally’s car. A little breaking and entering to slather his toilet seat with superglue. Then sand in the Monte Carlo’s gas tank.

She could stomach the risks, but she had a kid to think about. So why couldn’t she stop herself? It was as if some instinct was forcing her to target prey, stalk it, then hurt it.

She’d struck a much bigger blow last night, putting a stop to Wally’s revolving door of bad. She grinned.

When a car rumbled down a nearby side street, her grin faded. Waaaay too hot. She could feel the dragon’s breath.

“Come stay with us, Josephine. Just try it out,” MizB said. “There are only so many times I can watch you leave here before I do some-

thing.”

Jo went motionless. She gave the woman the same scary stare she’d given that dickwad foster dad, the look that got him to yank his hand away and back off. “You report us, and I’ll bust Thaddie out just like I always do, and I’ll take him so far away you’ll never see him again. We clear?”

You’re already gonna do that, Jo.

How would MizB react? It’d probably break her. Which Jo didn’t care about. At all. Jo’s job was looking out for number one.

“I have no doubt. That’s why I stop my fingers from dialing Child Protective Services every day.”

“I am his mom,” Jo said, even as Thaddie shoveled the woman’s grub into his mouth.

MizB softly said, “A mother would want better for her son.”

She sounded reasonable, but here was the thing: Jo was feral. There’d be no living under someone else’s roof and following someone else’s rules. Rules didn’t apply to Jo and never had.

There’d be no sharing Thaddie with a woman who desperately wanted to be his mother.
He’s mine, not hers. He was Jo’s number one.

But a tiny part of her said, Thaddie’s not feral. Not yet. Sometimes Jo had dreams about him with the Braydens. The three of them as a family.

Those dreams weirded her out, because she wasn’t in them.

Done with this, Jo snagged a chicken leg and stood. “I gotta blaze. Be back in an hour or so.” She swooped in to kiss Thaddie. “Mwah!” Then she whispered to him, “Bitch tries anything, you tit-punch her.”

He nodded happily. Smacking cornbread, he said, “Bye-bye, JoJo.” MizB walked her to the door. “Out to pick pockets again?”

“Yeah, you want me to grab you anything while I’m out?”

But the woman grew really serious. “How can you touch a child so innocent and good when your hands aren’t clean?”

Jo shoved the chicken leg in her mouth, raising both hands. Around the drumstick, she said, “Clean as they’ll ever be.”

“That’s not true, Josephine. I think you’ve forgotten you’re just a little girl.”

“Little girl? I’ve been a lot of things, but that ain’t one of them. . . .”

Out on the street, Jo mimicked, “How can you touch him? Meh meh MEH meh meh.” She snatched a bite of chicken, hating how good it was.

She turned the corner. Stopped in her tracks and swallowed hard. The chicken fell from her limp fingers.

A gun barrel was pointed at her face.

Wally.

Behind him stood his trio of asshole friends. They all looked spaced-out, eyes crazy bloodshot.

Wally’s long, stringy hair had been singed, and sweat poured down his blistered face. “People been saying the creepy pale girl’s always fucking with me.” His words were slurred, and the gun shook in his bandaged hand. “People been saying she was sneaking around my place last night. So I’m gonna ask the creepy pale girl once: why’d my goddamned house catch on fire last night—with us in it?”

Oh. Shit. “You left your teakettle on again?”
“Wrong answer, bitch.” He squeezed the trigger, and all the world went dark.

Wally had shot Jo in the face! So how had she lived? And where was she? Damn, her scalp was itching like crazy. She scratched—

A crumpled piece of metal was sprouting... sprouting from her forehead! She stifled a cry as she scraped it out. Immediately her vision cleared.

She pinched the thing between her fingers. Recognition. A spent bullet had just come out of her skull!

She found others caught in her hair. Shed from her head too? She collected them with the two that had been in her mouth. In her cupped palms she held six slugs.

But I’m alive. I’m... bulletproof?

I AM a superhero. (Secretly she’d always known it!)

She pocketed the slugs, narrowing her eyes. It was payback time. She hopped down from the table, or tried to. She floated to her feet—feet that weren’t touching the ground.

She gaped down at her body. She was wearing her same clothes, but her faint outline flickered. She glanced at the table. Atop it, a zipped-up body bag lay flat. This was a morgue? Other bodies in bags were lined up on tables, waiting for whatever happened in fucking morgues.

Realization sank in.

I was in that empty bag.
Because I died.
I’m a... ghost.

Her gaze darted. How the hell was she going to care for Thaddie? Surely MizB had taken him home after the shooting.

Jo’s shooting.

Wally and his crew killed me! Those pricks! She squeezed her fists and screamed. The lights above shattered, glass raining down.
She’d haunt Wally until he went insane, would drive them all crazy! She needed to hurt them—NOW!

Suddenly she felt herself moving, as if she were being sucked into the air. She blinked; her surroundings had disappeared, replaced with the hood. She was standing in front of Wally’s still smoking house.

She’d . . . teleported here? Of course! Because she was supposed to get revenge. That’s what ghosts did. Once she’d finished with that, she’d go snag Thaddie; they’d find a spooky deserted mansion somewhere. Live happily ever after and all that shit.

First step: get a bead on Wally. She started walking/ floating over cracks in the sidewalk. Why did this movement seem so familiar? Why was her ghostness not freaking her out?

There was something so right about her new form, as if she should’ve been freaking out about her existence all the years before.

Homeless kids and runaways, other street rats like her, peeked out from lean-tos and abandoned cars. Gasps sounded as she made her way along the street.

So ghosts were visible to people. Would she meet other ghosts?

She heard the kids’ whispers. They all knew Wally had killed her. Some had watched her body get bagged.

A prostitute on the corner didn’t see her coming and backed right into—or through—Jo. Their bodies got tangled, and suddenly Jo was inside her, sharing her movements as the woman shuddered.

It was as if Jo was a hermit crab in a hooker-shaped shell. She couldn’t feel anything through the woman’s skin, but she could make her move. Awesome!

When Jo backed out of the shell, disentangling herself, the woman turned around with a terrified look on her face.

A moment passed before she registered what she was seeing. “Oh God!” She stumbled back, making the sign of the cross. “You died! The Wall shot you.”

“It didn’t take.” Jo’s voice sounded ghostly and hollow. “Where’s Wally staying now?”
The woman sputtered, “F-few houses down from his old crib.”

Jo float-walked back in that direction. Others followed her at a distance, wide-eyed, as if they couldn’t help themselves.

She found the digs—with the dragon guarding the lair. Voices sounded from inside, Wally’s among them.

Her nails lengthened and sharpened. They were black, and they ached. *Ghosts have claws?*

She tried to teleport into the house, but her body didn’t move, so she float-walked up to the porch, stopping at the front door. Could she knock? They probably wouldn’t open for her. Maybe she could “ghost” into the house, as she had the hooker shell.

With a shrug, Jo floated forward—and passed right through the door. *Score! Breaking and entering would now simply be entering.*

In the den, packets of smack and guns topped the coffee table. They’d already replaced all the weapons and drugs. Bags of new clothes were strewn around the house.

These dickwads had set up a few doors down. Burning down his pad had done jack.

Jo clenched her fists. She’d only come here to scare the gang, to moan *woo-woo* and send them running. But rage took hold of her.

Her claws ached to slash someone.

When the lights flickered, Knuckle and the two others glanced up. Saw Jo. Their mouths moved wordlessly—

They lunged for the guns.

With a shriek, she flew at Knuckle. “You gonna shoot me?” She slashed out with her claws. She half-expected her fingers to pass through his torso—yet four deep gashes appeared on his belly.

She gasped. Her claws dripped with his blood. She could become solid when she wanted to?

He clutched his bloody stomach, but guts slithered out between his fingers like eels. His knees met the blood-wetted carpet, and then he collapsed.

*I just dropped a dude!* Superheroes didn’t kill people. Not even bad people.
She should be screaming, yet all this felt natural. *This is me. I ghost. I hurt bad guys.*

*No, I hunt them.*

Realization struck her. She’d always been *hunting.*

*Been waiting for this. All. My. Life.*

JT and Nobody scrambled toward the door, barely got it open. She flew after them, catching them on the porch. She easily dragged both men back inside. She winked at the kids gathering across the street, then kicked the door shut.

The pair screamed as she attacked. Red covered her vision, some kind of animal instinct taking over. As she slashed, blood splattered; her head spun.

Then she realized neither of them was moving. *I've dropped three dudes.*

Her ears twitched, and she heard a low moan from a back room. Wally. *Let's make it an even four.* He must’ve peeked out and seen Jo offing his posse.

She ghosted through the door into another room. “Oh, Wall-ee . . .” Muffled breaths sounded from under the bed.

She floated downward until she was directly in line with him. “Psst!”

He jerked his head around and yelled with horror. Like a rat, he scurried out on the other side of the bed.

She floated upright, taking her time. He pointed another huge gun at her and fired away, unloading bullets. When they passed through her into the wall, he pissed himself.

She wanted to meet his eyes, to make him understand what he’d done. She felt herself moving, disappearing and reappearing right in front of him. *Handy.* She floated higher to catch his gaze. “You shouldn't have shot me.”

“N-never do it again,” he said, blubbering.

“Wrong answer, dick. I'll see you in hell.” She would. No one could enjoy hunting as much as she did and not wind up there—

He swung a bat he’d concealed behind his back; her hand shot out in reflex, striking.
Blood spurted from his throat. The bat fell as he clamped his neck. Gushes of crimson escaped to spray over her.

Her feet touched the ground, her body solidifying, as if to catch the shower. Her appetite leapt. Her teeth ached. She could swear they were sharper. As he watched in glassy-eyed shock, she raised her face with curiosity and parted her lips.

The first drop hit her tongue. Delicious! Her eyes rolled as blood filled her mouth.

She swallowed with a gulp. *I'm drinking Wally's blood.* Part of her was grossed out, but as warmth slid down her throat, power flooded her.

Her senses came to life, her eyes picking up new colors, as if she had comic-book infrared vision. The hum of distant streetlights buzzed in her ears. She could smell baitsfish down by the bay.

As Wally collapsed, she heard his last heartbeat.

She gave a cry when her hoodie began stretching across her chest, her zipper ripping open. The waist of her jeans cut into her sides. *What's happening to me?* She rushed into the bathroom, clawing away her strangling clothes. She was burning up. From the blood?

She reached into the shower and twisted the tap on, as cold as she could get it. When she scrubbed away the gang’s remains, her palms glided over her skin. It’d grown soft as silk, the jaundiced color fading.

She gaped down at her body. She’d filled out, no longer sickly thin! No bones jutted. Even better, she had tons of energy! She exited the shower and crossed to the basin with a spring in her step.

She stared at her reflection. An eerily pretty girl with gleaming black eyes and a blacker heart stared back.

Dark smudges highlighted her gaze like heavy eyeliner and hollowed her cheeks. Her full lips were blood red.

For kicks, she tried to return to her “ghost” form. She went completely invisible, then dialed it back a notch to *faint-ish*. Worked! The circles around her eyes deepened and her lips turned pale, yet even that appearance was pretty.

To look and feel like this, all she had to do was steal others’ lifeblood?
She’d awakened a ghost; now she was a blood-drinker too. A vampire.
No, she wasn’t a superhero.
Jo flashed a fang at the mirror. *I’m a fucking villain.*

Her heart soared. This was her origin story. She was going to be a leg-
end (Secretly she’d known that too)!

Then her heart sank. Thaddie. *Gotta get to him.* Shit, she needed clothes.
She scrounged through those bags until she found JT’s smaller threads.
She slipped on a pair of sweats, rolling them up and tying them tight,
then snagged a jersey.

With her revenge done, the urgency to find her brother overwhelmed
her. Could she teleport to him as well?

She pictured him with MizB in some burbs house. Nothing, Jo strained
to teleport. Didn’t move an inch. *Do this the old-fashioned way.* She tore out
of the house, running toward the neighborhood MizB had shown her on a
library map. Past the interstate, past the tower, past the pond . . .

Right when Jo thought she’d maxed her speed, she increased it. Trees
and houses zoomed by. She was like a rocket!

In minutes, she’d reached the outskirts of the neighborhood. She
raised her face to scent the wind.

Thaddie. Close. She followed his trail to a fancy house. Outside, she
leapt into a tree, peering in windows. Spotted him! He was asleep in what
looked like a guest bedroom. She imagined sitting beside him on that bed;
suddenly, she was.

Adult voices murmured just beyond the door. The Braydens.

God, Thaddie looked so small and vulnerable under the covers, his
Spidey doll clutched in his tiny hand. What if he’d been in the Thadpack
when Wally had struck? What if he’d . . . died?

The more emotional Jo got, the more she wavered between ghost and
body. She had to get Thaddie out of here before the Braydens saw her.
“Wake up, baby bro,” she whispered.

He blinked open his eyes, sitting up in bed.
“We gotta go, Thaddie.”
His brows drew together. She heard his heartbeat race. “You’re not JoJo.”

She couldn’t look *that* different. “It’s me, kid.”

“No JoJo, not JoJo,” he repeated as he scrambled back from her.

“It’s me. Spidey knows me.” She reached for the doll, to get a kiss on her cheek.

Thad yanked it from her, yelling, “You’re not JoJo! Not JoJo! NOT JOJO!”

She shot back in confusion, her palms raised; the door burst open. The Braydens.

MizB gasped at Jo, then lunged for Thaddie on the bed. Mr. B. shoved them behind him, his strong arm protecting them.

*From me?*

“Oh, dear God,” MizB murmured, as Thaddie squeezed her like a life-line. “You d-died.”

Jo nodded.

“You need to pass on.” Mr. B. swallowed. “Or s-something.”

The three of them looked like . . . a family.

Jo’s voice cracked as she said, “Thaddie?”

He wouldn’t look at her, burying his face against MizB’s neck. Jo reached for him, but her fingers passed right through him. Grasping, grasping for her little boy.

The Braydens shielded him, MizB screaming, “Get away from him, you, you ghost or . . . or demon! Go back to hell where you came from!”

*No, Thaddie’s mine!* When he wailed as if in pain, Jo’s eyes watered. She told the Braydens, “I’m gonna get this figured out. But I will be coming back for him.”

MizB whispered, “*Don’t.*”

Jo floated forward, yearning for one last stroke of Thaddie’s curls . . . but she felt nothing. She couldn’t touch him, couldn’t hug him. Her Thaddie. A sob burst from her lips. *I did die after all.*

*And this is hell.*
TWO

Ten months later

It was finally time to collect her boy.

Jo ghosted to the Brayden house and stood outside a window, scanning for him among the people crowding the rooms. They were all dressed in black, talking in hushed voices.

She was busting Thaddie out tonight, couldn’t stand the separation anymore without tearing her hair out. . . .

For the first couple of months, she’d ghosted around the household, hovering over him as the Braydens spoiled him with tons of toys and a puppy and all the things Jo had wanted to give him. His washed Spidey doll sat on his toy shelf, buried among all the others.

If Thaddie called out for her, Jo had been there in an instant, never quite showing herself. Yet at the same time, her presence had seemed to upset him.

She’d found the Thadpack in a closet and had stolen it back—would hug it like an idiot.

For the next couple of months, she’d tried to back off, watching over him from a distance. Other kids came over to play, and he was always so psyched, finally having the “fwends” he’d longed for. They ran around in the Braydens’ perfect backyard with the puppy on their heels.
Her baby brother called out for her less.

While Thaddie grew like a weed and laughed more and more, Jo had been doing her worst, no closer to figuring herself out or controlling her on-again, off-again ghosting. Sure, she could float right into his bedroom, but how could she nab him when she was just air?

Determined to get to the bottom of her transformation, she’d returned to town. The hospital’s blood bank had drawn her. After gorging on bags, she’d gotten her body back, growing solid.

She guessed that was what vampires did. Though she did wonder why she could still go out in the sun.

Stronger from drinking, she’d practiced switching from ghost-mode to body and back. In time, she could ghost things. Anything she carried turned to air like her, but returned to solid as soon as she let go: purses from cars, clothes from stores, a wigged-out cat.

She’d worked hard at it until she felt confident she could steal Thaddie. But deep down, she knew he was better off with two parents and his treasured puppy. So she’d strung together the filed bullet slugs from her “death” to make a necklace. If tempted to return, she touched the bullets, reminding herself she wasn’t right.

MizB had banished Jo for a reason. And the woman didn’t even know Jo was a killer ghost/vampire.

So she’d hung out at the morgue, hoping for someone like her to float out of a body bag, but it’d never happened.

She’d tried so hard to stay away . . .

Then last week, she’d seen the coroner working on a corpse.

It was Mr. B.

Killed in a work accident. He never rose, just stayed dead.

It was a sign for Jo to return. Surely?

No longer were the Braydens better than Jo just ’cause there were two of them, and MizB would be in no shape to raise a kid on her own. Jo was sorry the woman would lose her husband and Thaddie all at the same time, but she couldn’t take this any longer.
She’d decided to let Thaddie attend Mr. B’s wake today, but then she was done. Once MizB put him to bed, Jo would go to him. She had the Thadpack with her and everything.

She could be just as good a mom as MizB. She could protect Thaddie, was strong enough to lift a freaking car. Rolling folks for money had never been easier, so she could buy him toys. And she hadn’t killed a single person since that first night. In self-defense, she sometimes squashed guys’ balls like grapes—but zero murders!

She craned her head. Where was he? The sun would soon set. There! He was scampering into the room, dressed in a little black suit with tufts of dog fur on the pants.

Looking from the pack to Thaddie, she realized he’d never fit. Maybe she could stuff the dog in there.

She’d take Thaddie’s hand, and the three of them would all ghost away together.

He crawled up to sit in an older woman’s lap. Jo had seen the lady visit before. She was MizB’s mom, Thaddie’s . . . “Gram.” The old chick was explaining to him that she would live there from now on and help out around the house.

Isn’t that swell? Jo squeezed the pack. He’s mine! Her necklace felt cold and heavy around her throat.

Storm clouds gathered, thunder rumbling. Jo glared at the sky. Unlike her, Thaddie shouldn’t be out in the rain.

MizB came into the room, her eyes all puffy. She must feel like crap rolled over, but she wasn’t crying, and her dress and hair were neat.

Thaddie crawled from the old woman’s lap to MizB’s. Gazing up at her with those big hazel eyes, he asked, “Mama, where did Daddy go?”

Jo swayed, her breath knocked from her lungs. Mama? Tears welled and spilled. He hadn’t even called Jo that.

If she took him today, Thaddie would lose a father and a mother. Would that mess him up beyond hope?

The clouds opened up, rain falling as fast as her tears. Drops streamed through her; she must’ve gone into ghost-mode without noticing.
MizB wrapped her arms around him. Jealousy clawed at Jo when he curled up against the woman with so much trust. Jo found herself clutching the Thadpack to her chest.

Keeping a stiff upper lip, MizB answered, “Oh, sweetheart, remember? Daddy’s gone to heaven to be with JoJo.”

Knife in gut. Knife in gut. Knife in gut.

Jo stood in the worsening storm, heart shriveling—because she’d reached a conclusion about Thaddie’s future.

_I won’t be in it._

She pressed her palm to the window. Though no imprint showed, she willed him to turn in her direction, to _see_ her.

But he didn’t.

Tears pouring, she hugged the Thadpack tighter. Between sobs, she whispered, “Bye-bye, Thaddie.” She turned away, with no idea where to go.

As night fell, she ghosted down the lonely highway with only the storm as her companion. . . .
THREE

The dimension of Tenebrous,
Perdishian Castle, capital of the Elserealms

Beings of power stirred in the echoing stronghold as Rune Darklight made his way through the immense black castle.

He was the sole Morior who’d stayed awake for the last five centuries and was tasked with rousing the others when Tenebrous had ground through time and space to near its destination: Gaia.

Also known as Earth. Rune had sounded the telepathic call moments ago.

Boots clicking across the ancient stone floor, he entered the war room—a chamber with a massive star-shaped table and a wall made of blast-proof glass.

Outside the glass, against a slate of black nothingness, images of worlds flashed by, as if from a film projector.

He took one of the twelve empty seats at the table, propping his boots up on the gold surface as he awaited his allies. Or at least, he awaited five of them. Two seats remained vacant, and four Morior would slumber on; considering their natures, waiting to unleash them on Gaia was for the best.

Abyssian Infernas, prince of Pandemonia, was the first to join Rune. Sian, as his compatriots called him, was over seven feet tall and muscled,
with long black hair. He wore leather bands over his broad chest and dark trews.

Rune could admit the prince of hells was as wickedly handsome as the devil who’d sired him.

Sian turned his green eyes toward the glass wall. “Good, we’re still a few days out. Gives us time to prepare.” He took his seat at the table. “I haven’t been to Earth in ages.”

“Much has changed. As you’ll soon see.” Rune had been the others’ eyes and ears over the last five centuries, documenting every realm he’d visited. Once his allies had convened, they would delve into his memories, updating their speech and learning about these new times in which they would war.

They were in for some graphic scenes; Rune had spent most of his years plowing slick nymph flesh.

Out of habit, he slid an arrow from the quiver strapped to his calf. He tapped his forefinger on the arrowhead, collecting some of his black blood to draw symbols on the shaft. With those demonic runes, he could focus his fey magicks, amplifying a regular arrow into one of power.

Allixta, the Overlady of Witches and the newest Møriør, entered, sauntering toward the table. How she walked in such a skintight dress baffled Rune. A question for the ages. “Are we finally here?” Curses, her familiar, trailed her. The creature was an Elserealm breed of panther, so large its whiskers brushed her shoulders.

“Close enough to wake,” Rune answered.

Adjusting the brim of her oversize witch’s hat, she sank into her chair. Curses hopped atop the table, reclined its gigantic frame, then hissed at Rune.

Rune hissed back, baring his demon fangs.

“This is what I wake to, baneblood?” Allixta glared at his arrow. “Why spill your disgusting poison in the presence of others? Do you intend to cause offense?”

Rune paused his drawing. As a dark fey, he had poisonous black blood,
fatal even to immortals. “My dearest Allixta, if I’ve caused offense, it was unwittingly done—but a welcome development.”

Blace, the oldest vampire, suddenly appeared in his seat at the table, goblet of blood mead in hand. His dark-brown hair was tied back into a neat queue, and he wore an impeccable suit, though the shirt, cravat, doublet, and breeches were centuries outdated.

“Good awakening, friend,” Rune said. He liked the vampire. Blace provided welcome counsel. He was sparing with it, and usually dead-on.

Blace swigged his libation. “I wonder what sights your mind will show us this time.”

Darach Lyka, the first werewolf, entered the chamber, still transforming from his wolven form. The primordial wolf wore only trews and carried a wadded-up tunic in one fist. Rune had little in common with the quietly intense Darach—other than a mutual loathing of Allixta—but Rune respected him.

The best tracker in the worlds, Darach had proven invaluable in locating magickal objects. And on the few occasions when he’d mastered his beast and was able to communicate more easily, he’d shared keen insights, demonstrating a surprising cynicism for a man who’d risen from the dead.

Now Darach struggled to reclaim his human body, compacting his nine-foot-tall werewolf frame. Fangs grinding, he clenched his fists tighter, his bones cracking into place.

Each transition grew more difficult. One day Darach would transform into a beast and never return. Unless he found a way to keep his human form. Perhaps in the Gaia realm?

In addition to the Møriør’s overarching aims, each of them coveted something from Earth and its connected planes, had traveled across the universe to collect.

Most thought Rune wanted the throne of his home world. No, his desires ran much darker than that. As dark as his unnatural black blood. . . .

Their liege, Orion—the Undoing—was the last to convene. He was a
being of unknown descent, but Rune believed he was at least a demigod. Perhaps a full deity, or even an overdeity.

Orion’s appearance and scent had changed; he altered them regularly. Today he was a tall blond demon. At their last meeting, he’d been a black-haired giant.

He moved to the glass wall without saying a word. He could remain silent for a decade. Before him, that line of ever-changing planets floated by as the stronghold passed one after another.

Now that all the awakened Møriør had assembled, the others began digging into Rune’s mind. Their mental link was so strong, they could even speak to each other telepathically.

He opened his memories wide for them, offering access to almost everything, at least after the first millennium of his life. He worked to conceal that earlier time of betrayals and violation.

Within a few moments, Blace raised an approving brow. “A dozen nymphs in one night?”

Rune grinned. He’d bedded thousands of them, was a favorite of Nymphae coveys far and wide. They were excellent sources of information. “That was merely the first round. The real debauchery started a day later.”

Blace shook his head ruefully. “Ah, the vigor of the young.” Rune was seven millennia old—young compared to Blace. “You come by your trailing name honestly.”

Rune the Insatiable. He buffed his black claws. “Wringing orgasms and breaking hearts for eons.”

Sian said, “Gods pity any female who loses her heart to you. I could almost feel sorry for your bedmates.”

“If one of my tarts is stupid enough to want more, then she deserves all the heartache in the worlds.” He made no secret of his detachment during sex. He felt physical pleasure but no connection, no immediacy—no emotions. Outside of bedsport, he did. He knew amusement; he grew excited about upcoming battles. He experienced kinship with the Møriør. But during sex . . . nothing.
Which was unsettling, since he spent a good deal of his life tupping.

“Tarts?” Allixta sneered. “You are such a whore.”

A former slave, he’d known his share of insults; most didn’t bother him. Now his claws sharpened as he remembered his queen’s words from so long ago: *You possess the smoldering sensuality of the fey and the sexual intensity of a demon. . . . I have a use for you after all.*

Old frustrations made his tone sharp: “On the subject of whores, did I ever get around to swiving you, witch? For the life of me I just can’t remember.”

Darach bit back a roughened laugh as he pulled on his tunic.

Allixta leveled her green gaze on the wolf. “Something to say, mongrel?” Then she turned to Rune. “Trust me, baneblood, if I could stomach your befouled body long enough to bed you, you’d never forget it.”

_Befouled._ Rune loathed his blood. Worse, she _knew_ how deeply he did. Some things in his mind were too prominent to disguise from prying eyes.

He reached into his pocket, seeking the talisman he always kept near. Carved from a demon ancestor’s horn and inscribed with runes even he couldn’t decipher, it always helped him focus, reminding him to look toward the future—

Suddenly Sian’s head jerked up. “My brother is dead?” Sian’s twin, the Father of Terrors, had been as hideous as Sian was physically flawless.

Rune nodded. “Killed in a blood sport contest. Murdered in front of cheering crowds.”

Blace shook his head. “Impossible. A primordial like the Father of Terrors can’t be killed.”

“He was slain—by a mere immortal,” Rune said. “These days in the Gaia realms, they no longer fight one species against another; they’ve _allied_ into armies. And more, these immortals don’t just take down primordials. They assassinate gods.”

Allixta smirked. “Perhaps your dirty blood has finally rotted your brain. Deities can’t be assassinated by immortals.”

He turned from her and addressed the others: “Several gods have perished, all in the last year. Including one of the witch divinities.” While
Allixta sputtered, Rune reeled off names of old deities, extinguished forever. He studied the set of Orion’s shoulders for signs of tension.

How would a god feel about the deaths of his kind?

Orion just stared at the worlds flickering past.

“How would a god feel about the deaths of his kind?” Allixta demanded of Rune.

“Because I pay them well in their favorite currency: stiff fuckings with a stout cock. It just so happens I’m rich beyond measure.”

Before she could launch into a scathing response, Blace said, “These assassinations have occurred. Read his thoughts, Allixta. The information is there.”

“They seem connected,” Sian said. “It’s as if someone is trying to attract our notice. Our very presence. Who would dare?”

“A Valkyrie named Nïx the Ever-Knowing,” Rune answered. “The primordial of her species.” According to the nymphs, Nïx had orchestrated these killings. “She’s a soothsayer and a wish giver. Close to goddesshood.”

Orion often made allies of enemies—he had with Blace, Allixta, and two of the sleeping Møriør. Would the god enlist the primordial Valkyrie?

Orion raised his flattened palm. The projections slowed, then stopped on an image of a crimson planet. He tilted his head, perceiving things no one else could.

Weaknesses.

He could see vulnerabilities in a man, a castle, an army. An entire world.

The Undoing slowly curled his fingers to make a fist. The planet began to lose shape, crumbling, as if he wadded up parchment.

Was Orion mimicking the destruction? Or causing it?

The world dwindled and dwindled, until it . . . disappeared. A whole realm—gone. The inhabitants dead.

Orion turned to face the others. His expression was contemplative, but his eyes . . . dark and chilling, like the abyss Sian hailed from. His fathomless gaze fell on Rune. “Bring me the head of the Valkyrie, archer.”

No enlistment. Just death. Why not attempt to sway Nïx? Two seats
remained at the table, and a soothsayer was always an asset. Lore held that she was one of the most powerful oracles ever to live.

Too bad she couldn’t see her own future.

Rune shrugged off his curiosity. He had no love for Valkyries anyway. They were staunch allies to the fey, a colonizing species of slavers and rapists.

Judged by the company you keep, Níx.

Rune knew she prowled the streets of a specific mortal city—a place of ready sin—from sundown to sunup. There was a large covey of water nymphs nearby. Tree nymphs as well.

They had eyes and ears in every pond, oak, and puddle.

In the name of duty, I’ll pump them for information. As Rune had answered so many times over the millennia: “It is done, my liege.”
Oh, gods, Rune, so close! Pleasepleasepleaseohgods, yes, yes, YESSSSSS!”

When Jo’s super-hearing picked up a third woman screaming her way to ecstasy—from the same location—her curiosity got piqued.

Time to finish up with the guy she was strangling.

She’d pinned him up against a brick wall, unmoved as he squirmed. He’d come into her territory, carrying a pimp cane?

In Jo’s mind, pimp cane signaled open season. Then the fucker had used it on a prostitute, a girl younger than Jo. The chick huddled on the curb, cheek swelling as she watched Jo delivering punishment.

“You gonna come back here?” Jo asked, though he couldn’t answer. She squeezed till things broke; this guy’s windpipe was crushed. “Huh?”

Staring at her eyes, he tried to shake his head.

“You do. You die. Get me?” He attempted a nod. “And if you ever hit a woman again, I’ll come for you. You’ll wake up with me hovering over you in your bed, your very own nightmare.” She flashed her fangs and hissed.

He started to urinate—occupational hazard—so she tossed him across the adjoining parking lot.

The girl gazed up at Jo. “Thanks, Lady Shady.”
My moniker. Somehow Jo’s alter ego had morphed into some weird-ass villain protector of prostitutes. Could be worse. “Yeah. S’cool.”

As Jo dusted off her hands, she heard another scream. “Rune! Rune! YES!”

All three ecstatic women had called out that Rune guy’s name. This I gotta see.

Though the girl was watching her, Jo went into ghost-mode. Invisible and intangible, she headed down Bourbon Street toward the screams, her feet never touching the ground.

Since she’d arrived in the city a few months ago, she’d been doing a lot of spying. The uncanny things—and beings—she’d witnessed here had lit a hope in her she hadn’t felt in years.

No longer did she gaze at the stars, losing herself in dreams of having her brother back with her. No longer did she pass endless days and nights, zoning out with comics or TV.

Jo was zoning in.

A wasted pedestrian stumbled through her, and shuddered. So did she. Tourists were rank. They sweated like crazy, gorged on mudbugs and garlic bread, and boozed to kingdom come, like pre-detonated puke grenades.

Would she puke if she drank from them?

She’d never bitten anybody. The smell—of whatever the guy had eaten for dinner, or the starch from his collar, or the slobbery pets he’d cuddled—warded her off. Or worse, he’d reek of cologne.

Axe cologne.

How could she put her tongue on skin saturated with that crap? Until someone invented a fang condom, she’d continue stealing from the blood bank.

A few blocks off Bourbon, she came upon a high-walled courtyard. A water fountain splashed within. The woman was screaming even louder; the sound of slapping skin quickened.

Hmm. Maybe Jo could possess one of the participants, live vicariously through her. Aside from an initial shudder, the “shells” never knew she was inside.
Or Jo could pick their pockets. Her rent-by-the-week motel room was filled with loot. She pretended each stolen prize was a gift to her—a bridge to get to know someone better—just as she pretended each possession was a visit.

A connection.

Having never made a friend before, how could she know the difference? Her compulsions to steal and to possess others had grown worse lately. Maybe she needed a real connection. She’d had so little real interaction she wondered if she’d been resurrected at all.

Sometimes, she had nightmares about floating away. Who would even notice her absence?

As Jo eased toward the entry of the courtyard, a fourth woman’s voice sounded: “It’s so good, Rune! My gods in heavens! YES! Never stop, never stop! Never, NEVER!”

Jo floated to the cracked-open wooden gate, peeking around to see a wicked scene.

A half-dressed blonde was pressed against the ivy-covered courtyard wall by a tall dark-haired man with his pants at his thighs. The woman’s lithe legs wrapped around his waist as he bounced her.

Must be Rune. What kind of name was that?

Three other stunning women were sprawled naked on a lounge sofa, heavy-lidded as they watched him pounding the fourth.

This guy had just screwed them all? Line ’em up and knock ’em down? Ugh. Forget possessing any of them.

Jo floated to the side to see him better. He looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties, and apparently he had serious stamina. He was attractive, she supposed. His eyes were nice, the color of dark plums, and she liked his thick black hair. It was carelessly cut and longish, with random small braids. But he had rough-hewn features—a fighter’s crooked nose and a too-wide jaw.

His long, lean body, however, was smoking hot. He must be nearing seven feet tall, would tower over her five and a half feet, and every inch of him was ripped. A thin shirt highlighted his broad chest and chiseled
arms. His bared ass was rock-hard. His powerful thighs would nicely fill out those black leather pants bunched above his knees.

He had a bow slung over his back and a quiver strapped to his calf. A knife holster was clipped to his wide-open belt.

She shrugged; she'd witnessed weirder things on Bourbon Street. If he pulled out a little more, she'd be able to see his dick—

Whoa. Brow-raising. The brow-raising-est she'd ever seen.

How could he last this long? He wasn't even out of breath. Maybe she'd have more sex if other guys had his staying power. Her handful of quick-draw hookups hadn't been worth the admission price of a condom.

As she watched this tall stranger working his body—sometimes stirring his lean hips, other times withdrawing to the tip to slam back in—she wondered what his tanned, smooth skin would feel like. Smell like. When Jo was in ghost-mode, her super-keen sense of smell was weakened.

She'd bet Rune didn't wear Axe.

Her gaze locked on the pulse point in his neck. The slow, steady rhythm was hypnotic.

Beat . . . beat . . . beat . . .

Amazingly, the tempo wasn't speeding up.

How would he react if she pierced that pulse point with a fang? What would he taste like?

And still he was going. His stamina had to be supernatural. Plus, the women were almost too pretty. Jo suspected these people were otherworldly.

What she called freaks.

From her hidden vantages along New Orleans streets, she'd spied paranormal people doing inhuman deeds. Which made her wonder—what if she wasn't some kind of abomination who'd been resurrected from hell? She might be one among many.

She reached for her necklace, fingering the string of misshapen bullets. She never took it off, still kept it as a token of the night she'd risen from the dead.

But her discovery of other freaks had made her start rethinking herself, her world.
Her decision to remain away from Thad.
She’d approached some of these strange beings with questions on her lips: *What am I? How did I come to be? Are there others like me?* Yet they’d fled her.

She had a feeling this male wouldn’t. She could talk to him once he got finished! She’d be on guard, of course, ready to bare her claws and fangs if things went sideways. . . . Jo supposed she *still* was like a feral cat.

Appearing lost, the blonde leaned up to kiss him, but he averted his face. Interesting.

The other three whispered to each other:

“I forget myself sometimes too.”
“Can you imagine what he could do with that mouth? If only . . . .”
“Why’d he have to be a bane?”

The man must be able to hear their soft voices. He narrowed his eyes, his lips thinning with irritation, even midthrust. Jo felt sorry for him.

“Have you ever seen his black blood?”
“His cock isn’t poisonous, and that’s all that really matters.”
Poisonous? Black blood? He was definitely a freak!

The bouncing blonde cupped his craggy face. “MORE! I’m so close! Don’t stop, Rune, *don’t stop*!”

He stopped.
“Noooo!” the woman wailed.
“You want more? I won’t disappoint you, dove.” His deep voice had an unusual accent Jo couldn’t place. “But you can’t disappoint me. Promise me you’ll do as I’ve asked.”

He was using sex to manipulate the chick? What an asshole. Strike feeling sorry for him.

The woman’s expression grew frantic. “I will! I swear, SWEAR! Just *pleasepleaseplease* keep going!”

Rune chucked her under the chin and grinned at her; she seemed to dissolve. “Good girls get rewards, don’t they?”

Jo would laugh in his face if he talked to her like that. The blonde nodded helplessly.
He resumed with a harsh shove. The woman convulsed on his big dick, babbling between cries.

“This is what you want, dove?” he demanded. “My cock’s all that really matters, is it not? You can’t live without it, can you?” So arrogant!

The blonde whimpered, shaking her head. The other women gazed at him as if he were a god.

Jo’s plan to ask him stuff grew less appetizing by the second. Would he make her beg for information, or toy with her? But she stayed. She wanted to see him get off. To watch as he lost his iron control.

To see him vulnerable.

Her gaze returned to that pulse point. Would his blood truly be black? She fantasized about it coursing through his veins, all over that gorgeous body.

Her fangs sharpened. Her heart began to thud, her spectral breaths shallowing. She struggled for control. As ever, heightened emotions affected her ghosting, making it harder to stay intangible. If she materialized even a little, these freaks might be able to sense her presence.

Her body started to float downward like a weighted balloon. No, not yet. He probably wouldn’t be keen to talk if he discovered she’d spied on his orgy. She’d have to leave before she materialized, then “run into” him later.

The blonde began screaming in ecstasy. Though Rune was pummeling her, and she was orgasming all over him, he smiled and calmly purred, “I’m coming.”

The woman gazed up at him in moaning awe.

He briefly froze. Then his hips pistoned. Thrust, thrust, thrust, THRUST, THRUST.

With a smirk, he stillled. He was done? He’d just come! Jo had risked staying for that? If she’d blinked, she might’ve missed it.

When her gaze dipped to his ass and her breaths shallowed even more, she made for the exit. Over her shoulder, she took one last glance at his pulse point.

Its beat had never sped up.
Meadowberries mixed with warm rain.

Another female was nearby—and, gods almighty, her sweet scent was mouthwatering.

Rune had just finished securing his last informant and was already envisioning the search for his Valkyrie target. Yet when he detected the new female’s scent, he found himself stiffening once more inside the nymph.

She believed his reaction was for her and cast him a smug smile.

Unacceptable. A male should never lose control of his body during sex. He pulled out abruptly, making her gasp, then set her down. While he dressed, she stumbled over to join her friends. They would likely carry on without him.

*And there they go.* What male could leave a tangle of wanton nymphs?

He could. This was a nightly occurrence for him.

Besides, the faceless meadowberry female awaited investigation. He could tell she’d been *in* the courtyard—a voyeur?—but she’d put distance between them.

If she looked half as good as she smelled . . .

He fastened his heavy belt. Without glancing back, he told the nymphs,
“I’m off, doves. Contact me as soon as Nïx goes to ground. And keep an eye out for a lock of hair.”

Between moans, one nymph asked, “Why are you wanting past the wraiths?”

Those ghastly beings defended Val Hall, the Valkyries’ lair, with a guard that was impenetrable, even for a Møriør like him. But tonight he’d learned—through swiving—that there was a key of sorts; if one tendered Valkyrie hair to the wraiths, those creatures would allow entry.

The nymphs would be on the lookout for a lock. In the meantime, they would conceal themselves in Val Hall’s oaks to spy, alerting Rune when Nïx returned.

Until then, he would search the streets for the soothsayer. After he tracked this scent.

Another nymph asked him, “You wouldn’t hurt Nïxie, right?”

She’ll never feel a thing. He turned to smile at his bevy. His grin, he well knew, was as crooked as his morals, and held a hint of snide; females creamed when they saw it.

Another question for the ages.

“Hurt Nïx?” he scoffed. “I merely want to make a conquest. What male doesn’t want to lay a Valkyrie?”

He already had, of course. Huge disappointment. She’d clung afterward, and the pointed ears—such a feylike feature—had been a turnoff. He despised the fey, hating that his own ears were pointed as well. The nymphs had them too, but at least they were up for a good time with no strings attached.

Conquest was something the nymphs understood. The first one he’d pleased tonight said, “Nïx might be out in the Quarter even now. At least until sunrise. Good luck!”

He left them sighing at his grin as he stormed from the courtyard. He needed to be scouring this city for his target. So why was he hurrying after the voyeur?

Out on the street, drunken pedestrians milled around him. Bleary-eyed females regarded him with desire.

Though half fey/half demon, he could pass for a—very large—
human. His hair concealed his ears, and he’d etched runes into the bow and quiver he wore to camouflage them from mortal eyes.

Among the humans were other immortals. Most mistook him for a rough-around-the-edges fey—as long as he didn’t bare the fangs he’d inherited from his demon mother.

Though his sense of smell wasn’t nearly as keen as Darach’s, Rune was able to lock on the voyeur some distance ahead. His gaze zoomed in on a short black miniskirt and an impossibly hot ass.

Her thighs were shapely but taut. Made to close around a male’s waist.

Or his pointed ears.

Not that a poisonous male like Rune could pleasure her in such a manner.

A long mane of dark brown curls swayed down her back, looking as silky as mink. Her cropped black tank top revealed a tiny waist. She wore combat boots, and she knew how to walk in them.

If her tits were as gravity-defying as that pert ass . . . As though on command, she turned back in his direction, giving him a view of the front.

First thought: *I wish I could eat her up.*

Her skin was the palest alabaster, her wide eyes hazel and heavily shaded with kohl. She had high cheekbones and a haunting airiness about her face. But her red lips were full and carnal.

She wore a strange necklace made of uneven hunks of metal. Appearing lost in thought, she rubbed one chunk across her chin.

His gaze dipped, and he nearly groaned. *Those tits.* They were generous; she was braless. *Good girl.* He watched those mounds rise and fall with her confident steps—a glorious sight.

Even better, her nipples were straining against her shirt. He’d bet his performance had caused that response.

He inhaled more deeply. Oh yes, he’d affected her. When he scented her arousal, his muscles tensed, his body strung tight as his bow.

Her navel was pierced, with a dainty chain dangling from a ring. He would nuzzle that. Without going farther south. If he tongued her, she’d know pleasure for an instant, then convulse with agony.
His bodily fluids were as toxic as his black blood. His fangs and claws as well.

The only thing he hated worse than the fey was his poison. If he killed another, it should be by his choice—not because of some anomaly of nature.

He leaned against a lamppost, studying the female. Ghostly makeup, black clothes, combat boots. What did mortals term this style? Ah, she was a *Goth.* Why anyone would harken to that human age perplexed him.

But with ethereal looks like hers, she had to be an immortal. Perhaps another nymph? No, too edgy.

Maybe a succubus? If so, she would crave semen, which he couldn’t give, even if he weren’t poisonous. Still, not a deal killer. Rune had seduced his share of seed feeders, promising them a teeth-clattering ride. He’d always delivered.

Even those tarts had wanted more of him. After just one bedding, non-nymph females uniformly grew attached to him, becoming jealous and possessive.

Over his lifetime, thousands had sought monogamy from him. He shuddered. The concept was incomprehensible to him.

The voyeur possessed no secrets he wanted, and he risked her attachment. So why was he inhaling for more of her scent?

What is she? He had a healthy measure of fey curiosity in him, and it demanded an answer.

Only twenty feet separated them.

If she was a halfling like him, then had he never in all his years and travels scented her combination? That didn’t make sense.

Ten feet away. He moved to block her.

She raised her face, blinking in surprise.

"Hello, dove. Were you wanting to join the party in the courtyard, then?" He backed her to a wall, and, naturally, she let him. "The nymphs would’ve been happy to share me. And there’s plenty to go around."

Her surprise faded. She craned her head up to cast him a measured look.
“You were watching, no?” The thought of those spellbinding eyes taking in his action hardened his cock even more. Would she deny it?

“I did watch.” His voyeur’s voice was sultry, with not an ounce of shame.

Phenomenal looks. Sexy voice. Would she have curved or pointed ears? He prayed for the former. “I know you enjoyed the show.”

“You know, huh?” She tilted her head, sending glossy curls cascading over one shoulder. “You were passable.”

The scent of her hair struck him like a blow. Meadowberries. They’d grown in the highlands of his home world, far above the sweltering fens he’d worked as a half-starved young slave. Their scent had tantalized him to distraction.

Wait . . . “Did you say passable? I assure you that word has never been applied to my performance.” He watched in fascination as her lips curled. The bottom one had a little dip in the center he wanted to tongue. But never could.

“‘Performance.’” Her vivid eyes flashed. “Exactly how I’d describe it.”

Damn it, what was she? Then his brows drew together at her comment. Over the last several millennia, he might have consolidated his sexual . . . repertoire. His poison limited his options. But performance? “I get zero complaints.”

She shrugged, and her breasts bobbed in her tank. He’d licked his lips before he caught himself.

“You want my honest opinion?”

As if he cared what she thought! Yet his mouth was saying, “Tell me.”

“You showed hints of game at times, but nothing I’d strip for.”

Game? “Then you didn’t watch the scene I partook in.”

She gave him an exaggerated frown. “My honesty hurt your feelings. It wasn’t all bad. How about this: there’s a live-sex club right around the corner—I bet you could place in their amateur-night competition.”

He leaned in. “Ah, dove, if you’re the expert to my novice, I’d appreciate any hands-on instruction.”
“Here’s a tip. Maybe settle in enough to take off your boots. Or, hey, how ’bout removing your bow and arrows?”

“Sound advice, but I never know when I might need my weapons. Even when I fuck, I still listen for enemies.”

“You must have a lot of them. What kind?”

“All kinds. Untold numbers of them. In any case, I’m leery of removing my bow; it was a priceless gift.” Ages ago, Orion had loosed Darach into a foreign realm with scant guidance: Find the Darklight bow with a black moon and white sun etched above the hand grip. A week later, Darach had returned, wild-eyed, bow in hand. Orion had given it to Rune, saying, “Your new weapon, archer. . . .”

“Priceless?” The voyeur’s gaze flickered over his bow with a touch too much interest. “Sure would hate for it to get stolen.”

“Never.” Why had he bragged to her about his weapon? Information flowed to him, not from him.

He could talk for hours and never say a meaningful thing.

Yet something about her had made him boast? He’d taken prettier women. He’d had demigoddesses beneath him. Why did he find her so captivating?

Maybe her disdain toward you, Rune?

“Are you a good archer?” she asked.

“I’m the best in all the worlds.” Crowing again? Though it was true.

Initial, Rune had resisted taking up a weapon favored by the fey. Orion’s answer: Even when you’ll be more lethal with it than all of them combined?

“Worlds, is it? Where are you from?”

“Very, very far away.” He wondered what she’d think if he told her his primary home was in a dimension that moved. That he lived in a mystical castle filled with primordials and monsters.

“Who taught you to shoot?”

“I taught myself.” Determined to be worthy of Orion’s notice, Rune had practiced till his bowstring was stained black from his bleeding fingers.

“If your performance is gonna be predictable, at least you’re good at
archery.” She nibbled that dip in her bottom lip, and his cock twitched in his pants.

She needed that mouth kissed until her vision went blurry. And he couldn’t be the male to do it! His hands fisted, and he grated, “You can talk all you like about my performance, but it got you wet. I can scent it.”

“You got a woodie; I got a wettie. Doesn’t mean mine was for yours.”

She was terse, borderline aggressive. I want her. “Are we going to do this or not? The courtyard awaits, and I’m on a clock.” He didn’t have time for this! His target might be roaming these very streets. “Or we can meet later.”

“No dice,” she told him. “I like a guy with passion. When you finished back there, I couldn’t tell if you’d gotten your nut or muffled a sneeze.”

His eyes narrowed. “I have to keep a rein on myself. I’m half demon/half fey, a dark fey through and through”—he pulled his hair back to reveal his pointed ear—“and if I lose control, I might harm partners.”

Though true, he was in no danger of losing control. There’s nothing within me to bridle. No fire to contain.

In any case, he’d learned to restrain himself for other reasons as well. He’d realized at an early age that the power dynamic shifted between bedmates when one surrendered to the throes.

Power was everything during fucking.

“You really can’t kiss?” she asked. “I heard them say you’re poisonous.”

He shrugged, as if this limitation were trifling. “To all but my own kind.” His first kill had been with a lethal kiss.

Reminded of his past, he gritted his fangs and shoved this female’s hand to his dick. “Anything you think you might miss? I’d make up for it with size.”

She gave him a light squeeze, then withdrew her hand—as if she’d deigned to acknowledge his cock, and only because he’d been gauche enough to put it out there. Her disdain could put the old fey queen’s to shame.

“Some cavemen carry big sticks. Doesn’t mean I want to get clubbed with one.”

Inner shake. “I have other tricks in my bag.” He was good with his hands. Once he retracted his poisonous claws, he could use his fingers to get
a purr out of her. “Meet me back in the courtyard at midnight, and I’ll make you see stars.” He cast her his grin, awaiting the reaction he always garnered.

The wench covered a yawn.

His grin faded.

“I might meet you,” she said, “if you agreed to talk with me over coffee.”

As a prelude to sex? What the hells could he discuss with her, a woman he planned to bed? He got tunnel-visioned at that point.

She added, “I’m not a big coffee drinker myself, but isn’t that what people do?”

Her desire to talk must be a ploy of some kind. Otherwise, this would mean a female wanted something of him . . . other than sex? No, that made zero sense. “What would we discuss?” He laid his palm against the wall over her head. “You’ll tell me your truth, and I’ll tell you a lie?”

A shadow crossed her face. “All my truths are lies.”

Curiosity flooded him. Bloody fascinating female. He reached forward to brush her hair over her shoulder. Her little ear was blessedly rounded on top. Two small rings decorated the helix, highlighting the perfect curve.

He bit back a groan. To a male like him, that couldn’t be sexier. He wanted to kiss her ears, nuzzle and nip them. “Look at those piercings. Any hidden ones on your body?”

“Yes.” A single word. Succinct. No additional explanation.

Just enough to send his imagination into overdrive. His claws dug into the brick wall. “If I meet you, I’ll seduce you to do more than talk.”

She exhaled as if she’d reached the end of her patience with him. Which, again, made zero sense. Rune elicited many responses from females: lust, possessiveness, obsession. Never exasperation.

“You’ve gotta be satisfied after four babes.”

“Those nymphs were a warm-up. I’m called Rune the Insatiable for a reason. I’m never satisfied,” he told her honestly, as if this were a good thing. He jested with his compatriots, but in reality, his existence could get exhausting. Always seeking the next conquest, the next secret . . .

He’d considered hibernating after this Accession.
Then he’d remembered he would need at least five hundred years to savor his victories.

He leaned down to rasp at her lovely ear, “Maybe you’ll be the one to sate me at last.” If it hadn’t happened in millennia, he didn’t expect it to now, but tarts ate that line up. He dangled the prospect because Lore females liked challenges.

This one pressed her hot palms to his chest, digging in her black nails. “You wanna know a truth?” She held his gaze. Her eyes were mesmerizing, her hazel irises flecked with brilliant blue and amber.

Finally they were getting somewhere! “I do.”

In a breathy whisper, she said, “Maybe I wouldn’t give a good goddamn if you were sated or not.”

Sexiest voice. Bitchy words. “What are you?”

“You really don’t know?”

He shook his head, but she was already looking past him, her interest turned off in an instant.

“I’m done here.” She patted his chest, then sidled under his arm. “Later, Rune.”

“Wait, I didn’t catch your name.”

She walked backward, flashing him a dazzling smile. “Because I didn’t toss it, sport. Only good boys get rewards.” She pivoted to saunter away from him.

His lips parted in disbelief as she strutted down the street. She turned every head, leaving mortal males agog. Rune’s muscles tensed to pursue her, but he ruthlessly quelled the urge.

He’d become the master of his impulses. For the first hellish centuries of his life, his body and his mind had been commanded by another.

No longer.

But the damage had been done. He’d grown so detached during his early abuse that he’d felt like two separate beings. And one was dead.

Rune had stifled the fire within himself for so long, he’d extinguished it. And yet his heart thundered in his ears as he watched his voyeur melt into the crowd.
I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from SWEET RUIN!

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