

THE CLOSER THE LIGHT,
THE GREATER THE SHADOW.

CITY OF SMOKE AND BRIMSTONE



A
HOUSE
OF DEVILS
NOVEL

KAYLA EDWARDS

BOOKS BY KAYLA EDWARDS:

Dreams of Ice and Iron

The *House of Devils* series

City of Gods and Monsters

City of Souls and Sinners

City of Lies and Legends

City of Smoke and Brimstone

CITY OF SMOKE AND BRIMSTONE

HOUSE OF DEVILS
BOOK FOUR

KAYLA EDWARDS

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A House of Devils Novel
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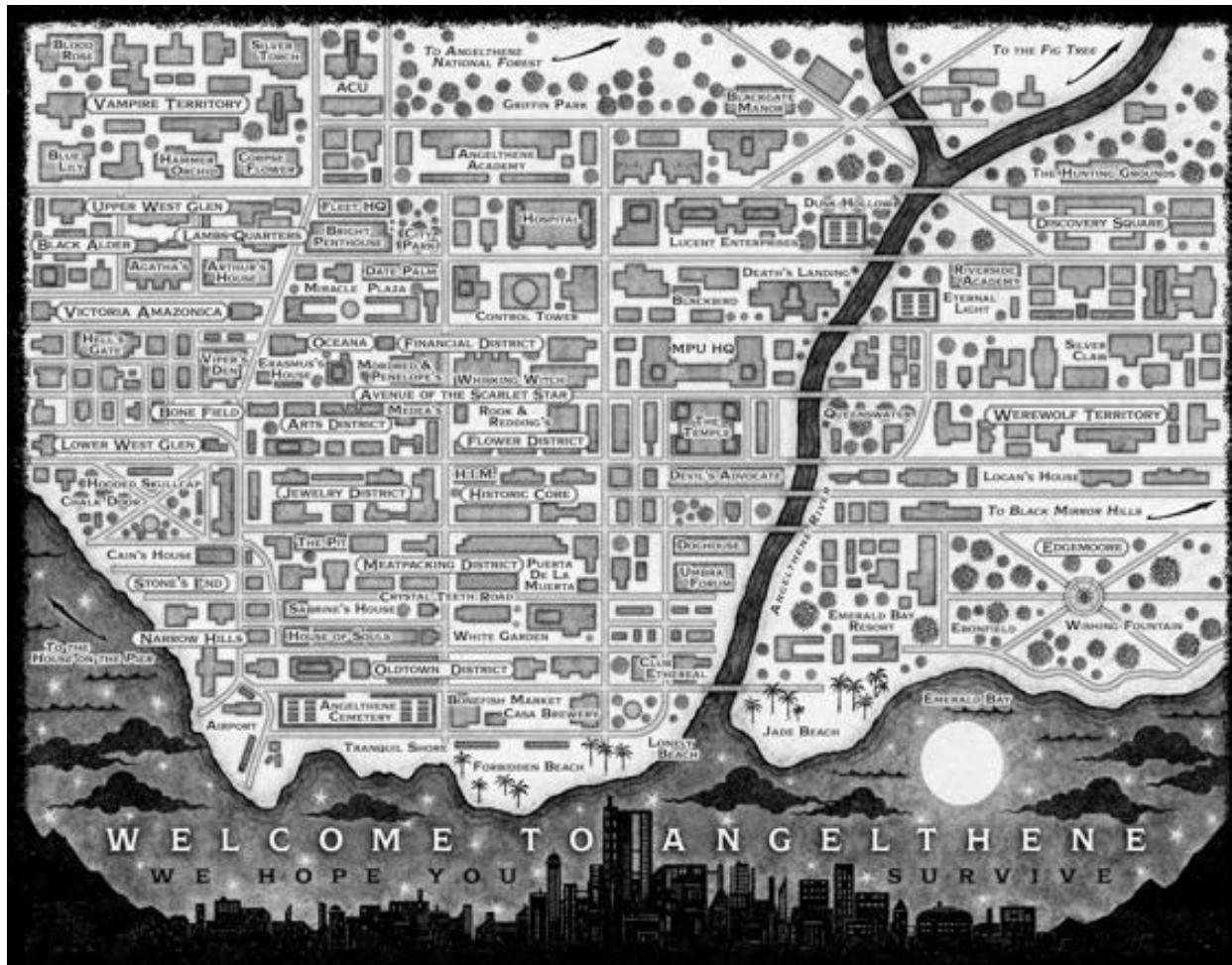
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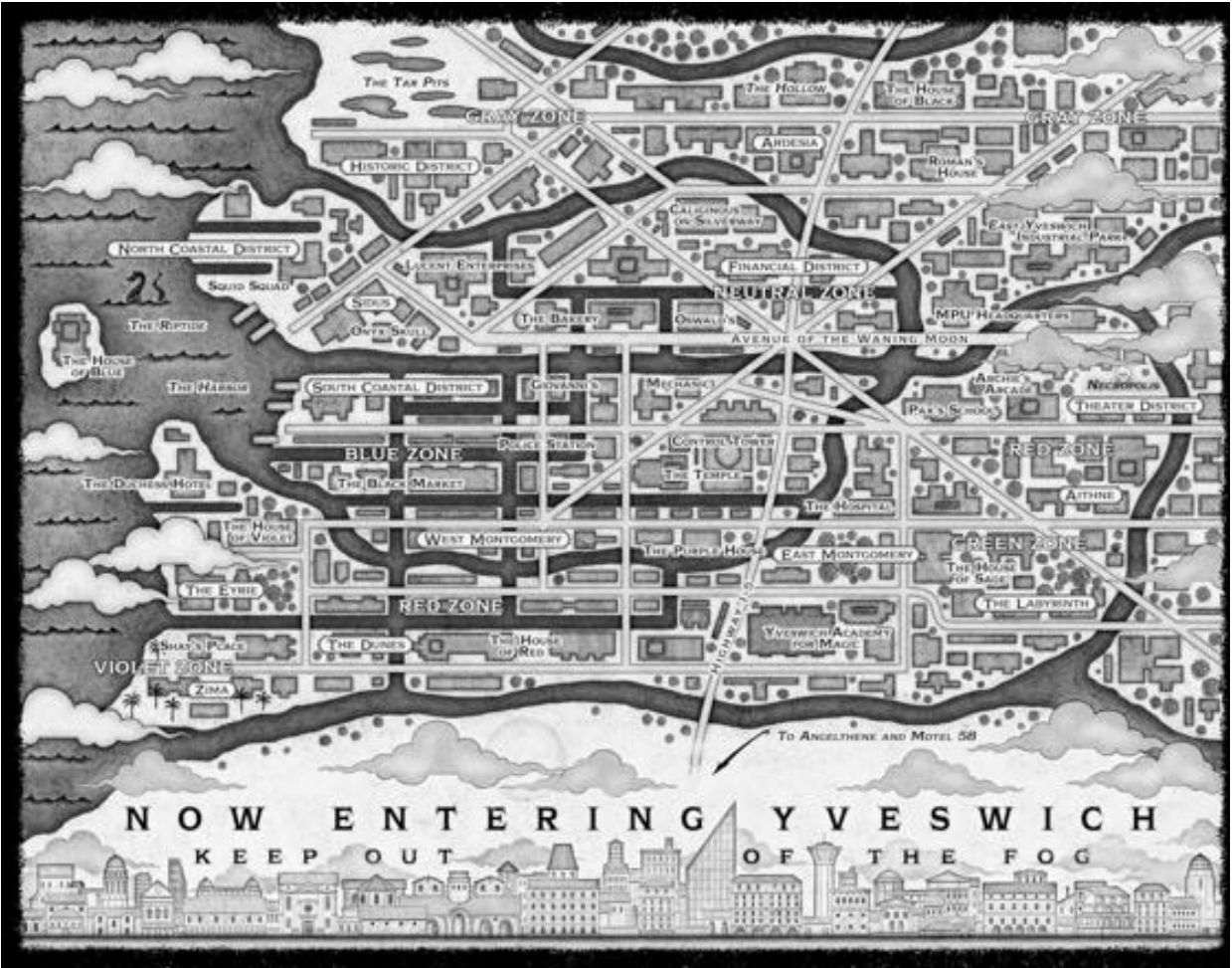
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, events, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

*For the Dariens and the Romans—those who shelter others when the rain
gets heavy.*

Remember to look after yourself, too.





DARKSLAYING CIRCLES OF ANGELTHENE

THE SEVEN DEVILS

Marked with a horned letter S in the gothic script of an ancient world, they answer to Darien Cassel, Head of Hell's Gate

THE REAPERS

Marked with the cloaked and masked god of death, they answer to Malakai Delaney, Head of the House of Souls and Right Hand of Darien Cassel

THE HUNTSMEN

Marked with a Hellhound, they answer to Lionel Savage, Head of the Hunting Grounds and former Right Hand of Randal Slade

THE ANGELS OF DEATH

Marked with overlapping wings in white ink, they answer to Dominic Valencia, Head of Death's Landing

THE WARGS

Marked with a crescent moon in luminescent ink, they answer to Channary Graves, Head of the House on the Pier

THE VIPERS

Marked with an animated striking serpent, they answer to Jude Monson, Head of the Den of Vipers

All Darkslaying circles in Angelthene answer to Darien Cassel, Head of all circles in the city. No one outside of these six circles may operate on Angelthene soil. To do so is punishable by death.

DARKSLAYING CIRCLES OF YVESWICH

THE SHADOWMASTERS

Marked with the bleeding black skull of Obitus, god of death and the dying,
they answer to Roman 'Shadows' Devlin, Head of the Hollow and the
House of Black

In some parts of Terra, they are better known as 'Wraiths'

THE SELKIES

Marked with the teardrop of Caligo, goddess of water, mercy, and rebirth,
they answer to Athene Cousens, Head of the Riptide and the House of Blue

THE WYVERNS

Marked with the flame of Ignis, goddess of fire and the Seven Circles, they
answer to Cerise Brinton, Head of the Dunes and the House of Red

In some parts of Terra, they are better known as 'Flameweavers'

THE JACKALS

Marked with the eye of Tempus the Liar, outcast of the Terran pantheon and
god of time, they answer to Griffin Brand, Head of the Labyrinth and the
House of Sage

THE SYLPHEN

Marked with the white feather of Vita, goddess of the sky and flight, they answer to Raina Cruso, Head of the Eyrie and the House of Violet

All Darkslaying circles in Yveswich answer to Donovan Slade, Head of all circles in the city. No one outside of these five circles may operate on Yveswich soil. To do so is punishable by death.

For a full list of characters, flip to the back of the book

This book contains subject matter that might be difficult for some readers, including intense violence, violence against children, brutal injuries, graphic language, discussion of domestic violence, substance use disorder, drug dependence and symptoms of withdrawal, death, gore, suicidal ideation, psychological torture, and sexual activities shown on the page. Please read with caution and prepare to return to the streets of Angelthene and Yveswich...

PROLOGUE

SIX MONTHS AGO

ANGELTHENE WAS ALWAYS QUIET AT NIGHT, BUT HERE IN THE sequestered district of Ebonfield, the thick silence felt especially eerie.

Fog curled around the car, making it difficult to see, and although the sprawling city was baking in the heat of a long, dry summer, the temperature in these parts took a sudden plunge, the shift a warning to all who wandered too close to the Crossroads. *Turn back, it seemed to advise, while you still have a chance.*

Cyra Sophronia held her breath, her wide eyes scanning her surroundings for any sign of movement as Erasmus steered the car through the fog.

It was the sky that drew her focus. Rather, what flew through it.

Firebirds. No bigger than the average crow, they lit up the starless expanse with shimmers of gold and ruby, their radiant plumage impossible to miss, even through dense fog. The birds' most active time was the end of the growing season, the period during which they gathered tinder to build their funeral pyres. Once built, they would brood their glasslike eggs in the nest of wood and spices for a fortnight, then set the nest ablaze with rapid flaps of their wings, cremating themselves in a show of flames and combustion. This sacrifice was necessary for the hatching of their chicks—a cycle of life and death that was tragic, yes, and yet strangely beautiful, in its own way.

Cyra's throat tightened to the point of pain, her heart pulling downward as if fastened to an anchor she dragged behind her.

The Firebirds were so like the phoenix. And the phoenix would always remind her of her many, *many* mistakes.

The tires thumped about as the car rolled down the dusty, uneven road. Peeking through the fog up ahead was a second road—one that intersected with this one to form an X. As that second road loomed, Cyra concentrated on steadying her breathing, her perspiring hands squeezing and twisting her seatbelt into a tube.

All at once, the fog cleared, and the field on the other side of the barbed wire fence spread before them, the gold of the waist-high grass reduced to a gray blur under the velvet cover of night.

Erasmus stopped the car just shy of the intersection.

They sat awhile in the quiet. Minutes passed, and during this time neither of them dared to even move.

Cyra was about to risk breaking the silence when a brittle voice beat her to it with a whisper of her name—her old one.

“Helia.”

Her head snapped toward Erasmus, the rasp of that ancient and terrible voice slashing deep into her bones, like a knife freshly sharpened on a whetstone. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” He glanced about, the round lenses of his glasses reflecting the cool glow of the dashboard.

Cyra’s mouth dried out. “It must’ve been the wind.”

As if her words were a summoning, a supernatural draft crept through the vents, the clammy tongues of otherworldly spirits pebbling the skin on Cyra’s nape.

Once upon a time, she had been a part of the spirit realm, roaming the mist-veiled land of the dead as goddess of neither here nor there, her every step jingling with the ring of keys that could open any door, any latch. But centuries had passed since then, and those long centuries had changed her, molding her into something new. Ground that was once familiar was now foreign; beings she once considered friends were now strangers. She no longer belonged, nor was she welcome, on the other side of the curtain.

We’re here to talk, she reminded herself, *not trade*. Surely no harm would come from talking.

Right?

Erasmus must have sensed her distress, because he said softly, “All we’ll do is talk.” He shut off the car, the sudden absence of the engine’s

purr causing the silence to swell like a too-full balloon. “There’s n-nothing to be afraid of, my love.” Despite the reassurance, the smile he gave her wobbled. “Ready?”

Cyra drew a breath, the scent of magic—warm sugar and smoke—coating her tongue, and said on the exhale, “Ready.”

Erasmus cracked open his door. Cyra followed suit, her fingers trembling on the handle.

The moment she was out, the wind picked up, blowing her hair upward like a flame. Tree branches creaked and cracked like frail bones, and fallen leaves and palm fronds swooshed by in gusts of unseasonably cool air. The sounds were oddly amplified, as if boxed in by walls no one could see.

They walked, side by side, across the field—to the old, crumbling fountain squatting in the center of it. Thousands of fountains just like this one were scattered throughout Terra, but only one was home to the granter of wishes the world called *The Widow*.

A rusted pail sat on the fountain’s edge, a hungry mouth begging for a meal.

The sight of the pail brought Erasmus to a sudden stop, his throat jouncing with a swallow.

He hated this part. Cyra didn’t particularly enjoy it either, but it had to be done.

So she retrieved the switchblade from her pocket. “It’ll be over quickly,” she promised, the reassurance blown away by another gale that howled through her ears. She couldn’t promise that he’d feel no pain, but she could promise that the pain wouldn’t last.

She dragged the sharp edge of the knife across her palm, a hiss of discomfort catching in her throat as her skin split open. After wiping the blade clean on her pants, she cupped the back of Erasmus’s hand and carefully cut an identical line across his palm. Where his skin was weathered and wrinkled, hers was smooth and ageless, its only imperfection the single scar that ran from the heel of her hand to the base of her pinky. Human and hellseher blood welled in the moonlight, the smell drawing the attention of the predators skulking in the dark gaps between the trees.

They held their fists above the pail and squeezed, blood dripping, then tossed in the coins they brought as payment. The pieces of silver clanged when they struck the bottom, but the pail itself made no sound when dropped into the fountain. Not even a splash.

“Ready?” Erasmus asked again, taking her good hand into his.

She nodded, the wound already clotting. “Ready.”

They stepped up onto the stone rim...and waited, as if ringing a doorbell.

Two heartbeats passed before a fresh blanket of fog folded over them like a sheet. For a moment, nothing existed except the sound of their breathing and an endless canvas of white.

And then they arrived, the fog dropping to the floor like spilled milk, leaving them standing in a dark room, the walls of which were curved.

Crossing made them feel nauseous, so they took a moment to compose themselves before stepping off the edge of the fountain. Muck splashed beneath their shoes.

The spider had wedged herself into an alcove on the other side of the room, her gargantuan body supported by a hammock of webs that sagged under her weight. Wispy shadows clung to her like affectionate pets to their master, briefly tricking Cyra’s eyes into seeing more than eight legs.

“Well, isn’t this a delightful surprise?” the Widow remarked, her curious voice bubbling through the room. “I cannot say I expected to see the Sophronias anytime soon. How very delightful, indeed.”

“We come for advice,” Cyra began, tripping over her words. She was out of practice. Nineteen years—that was how long had passed since she had last sought out a creature of the Crossroads. Nineteen years since her last bargain.

Nineteen years since her greatest creation...and her biggest mistake.

The spider made a hungry, smacking sound. “And what have you brought me in exchange?” The webs of her resting place were studded with cocooned insects, their dead bodies sparkling like berries crusted with frost.

Cyra shared a glance with Erasmus. “Well, we—” She cleared her throat, the sound carrying. “We don’t...”

Foolish—they were foolish for coming here. The Nameless were chronically bored, chronically starving creatures with endless time at their disposal. Time to feast—to torture the poor souls they deemed unworthy.

Quite plainly, this was suicide.

But the Widow did the unexpected. The exhale she let out was one of... of understanding, Cyra thought. “You do not have anything left to trade.”

“We realize this isn’t customary,” Erasmus said tightly.

The spider chuckled. “Not at all. But I suppose I can spare you a listen.”

“Our daughter is being hunted,” Cyra confessed, the words turning her stomach. The running, the hiding, the many sacrifices they’d made—were all their efforts for nothing? “We come to you seeking advice on how to help her.”

“Liliana Sophronia.” The Widow spoke their daughter’s name as if it were a bird she’d held captive for quite some time, and was desperate to set it free. The name given to a mortal baby with a rainbow aura, who’d watched quietly—no tears, no fussing—as she was lifted from a pool of impossibly deep water, her skin scented with the delicate fragrance of violets.

Cyra swallowed the lump in her throat. “Yes,” she whispered.

It was the reason they had come back to Angelthene. The minute they’d received word of the bounty on their daughter’s head, they had vowed to find a way to make her safe again. No matter how steep the price.

The Widow added, “She goes by ‘Loren Calla’ now.”

Cyra turned the name over in her mind, committing it to memory.

Loren Calla—the name her new parents had given her.

The name her new, *better* parents had given her. Had they raised her properly? Given her a full and happy life?

Did they love her?

“Will you show her to us?” Cyra blurted, regret piercing a hole in her heart. Not just regret, but guilt too—so much guilt, she knew it would hold her prisoner forever, even after death.

As the creature considered the request, she kept her gaze fastened on Cyra, reading her like a book. Cyra dropped her own under the scrutiny, studying the muddy water at her feet as the spider judged her for her sins, seeing far beyond what lay on the surface. The monster wearing a hellseher’s skin. That was all she was now: a monster.

“Your heart is heavy,” the spider observed.

Cyra lifted her head; it, too, was heavy. “It is.”

“You’ve made many mistakes.”

“I have.” A sob cracked the confession apart.

A peculiar silence. Then the Widow whispered, “But you’re sorry.”

Tears slipped down Cyra’s cold face. “I’ve never been more sorry in all my life.” But being sorry, she’d learned, did not fix anything.

Erasmus came closer, taking her hand in comfort.

“You’ve been alive for a very long time,” the spider said. “Everyone makes mistakes, even those who have lived a fraction of your years.”

Cyra knew the Widow was right. And maybe this was a truth she desperately needed to hear, after spending many years beating herself up for her missteps and oversights. But she would never forgive herself for her many blunders—that, she refused.

The Widow seemed to already know this, because she said then, her words coasting on a saddened sigh, “Look into the fountain.”

Cyra’s heart swelled with hope as she and Erasmus stepped up to the fountain’s gaping mouth. The water inside was no longer murky, but sprinkled with stars and motes of light. A miniature galaxy.

As they stood there, the churning water stilled, turning glass-smooth. The stars winked out, and fat drops of liquid dribbled from the ceiling, casting new ripples across the surface. Slowly, the face of a young woman took shape in the water, and Cyra had to concentrate on breathing as she beheld her adult daughter for the very first time.

Her hair was honey-blond, her skin fair, her eyes a vivid blue. A smattering of freckles dotted her nose, her smile bright and carefree. Cyra watched, enraptured, her shaking hands moving to grip the fountain’s rough edge, as the girl tipped her head back and laughed. She was lounging on the dock of a sunlit beach with two friends—two witches, one a redhead, the other a brunette.

Cyra swallowed. “When?” she asked the Widow.

“Two weeks ago.”

Her throat tightened with emotion, but she managed to say, the words strangled, “And where is she now?”

“Sleeping. Safe.”

Cyra couldn’t tear her eyes off her daughter as Lily and her friends jumped to their feet. They raced each other to the end of the dock and jumped, laughing and shrieking, into the ocean.

“She’s beautiful,” Cyra whispered. Erasmus came closer, wrapping an arm around her. Tears sparkled on his cheeks. “Erasmus, isn’t she beautiful?” She extended a hand toward the water—reaching for Lily, who’d resurfaced in the ocean, laughing as she pushed her wet hair back.

A flood of black engulfed the image, and Cyra’s stomach sank with disappointment as Lily disappeared, leaving Cyra’s own reflection—the

face that hadn't changed in a hideously long time—staring back at her in the gloom.

“Your daughter is being hunted,” the Widow said, reiterating Cyra's confession in a metallic tone. “Many a person looks for her.”

“Bounty hunters?” Cyra asked. They had no idea *who*, exactly, was hunting Lily—only that many people were.

“Some.”

“We have to stop them.” Cyra stepped around the fountain, pressing her hands together in supplication. “How do we stop them? Please. *Please*, if you can help us, just tell us what to do. I'll give anything—”

“My dear, you must hire someone stronger,” the spider said.

Cyra blinked. *Hire someone stronger...* It wasn't a stupid suggestion; in fact, it was...clever. What better way to deal with an opponent than to hire someone who could beat them at their own job? Someone who could find Lily and...well, Cyra wasn't certain what would happen after.

“Are you saying,” Cyra began, her brows knitting together, “we should hire someone to act as her...*bodyguard*?”

“Precisely.”

Her shoulders sank. A moment ago, she'd considered the Widow a genius. But now...now, she wasn't so sure.

Still, she wet her chapped lips and asked the spider, “Who do you recommend?”

“Only the best,” she said plainly. “Only the strongest, most capable person in all of Angelthene would be fit to protect your daughter.”

Cyra mulled it over. The strongest people were Darkslayers. But that couldn't be the answer here, because Darkslayers didn't protect—they hunted and they killed. In what world would a slayer be willingly saddled with a human girl—

“Darien Cassel,” the Widow said. But—

“*No.*” Erasmus's rebuke—shaky with fear—clapped against the walls. “Ab-absolutely not!”

The Widow stirred, rock clacking. Mist coiled around her legs like agitated snakes. “Do you take issue with my advice, Erasmus?”

Cyra's lungs tightened with terror. She looked toward the fountain—their only way out. Gauged how many steps it'd take them to get there—how long they'd have to wait for the magic to spirit them away.

When Erasmus spoke again, he did so carefully. “I beg your p-pardon, Araneae, but yes, I do take great issue. I mean, let’s be reasonable here—” A nervous chuckle. “This man you speak of is *Darien Cassel*. The m-most ruthless Darkslayer in the entire city!”

“In the state.”

Erasmus glared, throwing caution to the wind. “Pardon me?”

“I was simply correcting you.” The Widow blinked her many shining eyes. “He is the most ruthless Darkslayer in the city, yes, as well as the state.”

Erasmus threw his hands in the air. “Unbelievable! We’re wasting our time—”

“Darling,” Cyra tried.

But Erasmus wasn’t listening. “This must b-be a joke. Allow me to make sure I understand what you’re saying. You expect us to hire the most d-dangerous Darkslayer in the city—a man who’s killed hundreds, maybe even thousands of people, someone who kills because he *enjoys* it—and trust that he will—*poof*—” He flourished his hands. “—miraculously choose to *protect* our daughter?”

The Widow blinked. “Yes.”

Erasmus pushed, “*Randal Slade’s son?*”

“Yes.”

“What are the odds?” he demanded. “A thousand to one?”

“Perhaps.”

Erasmus shook his head in disbelief and started to pace, water sloshing around his shoes.

“You came to me seeking advice, Erasmus, and I have given you exactly that. You don’t have to do as I say, but I am not in the habit of changing my answers simply because someone does not agree with me.”

Cyra and Erasmus had been gone for a long time, it was true, but there wasn’t a soul alive who hadn’t heard of *Darien Cassel*. Son of *Randal Slade*... Fearless leader of the Seven Devils... A spawn of evil—spat out of the deepest pits of hell. He’d broken Darkslayer records, having slaughtered more people and monsters at the age of twenty-three than most of his kind killed in a hundred. No mercy, no regret—just coldblooded killing. Merely the thought of him was enough to tempt Cyra to find Lily herself and take her far away from here. Surely there had to be *someplace* where no one would find her—

But she knew that was foolish. After all, she herself had spent decades in hiding; if anyone understood how difficult it was to remain hidden, it was Cyra. Only a near-impossible trade had allowed her and Erasmus to start over with new lives, new identities, new auras... If a Darkslayer as gifted as Darien Cassel wanted to locate someone badly enough, there was no place in the world where a person could hide—no land, sea, or sky where he couldn't find you.

"A word of caution," said the spider, her echoing words stilling Erasmus's restless feet. "Place your daughter's life in the hands of anyone other than Darien Cassel, and she will be butchered."

Cyra's skin prickled with chills. "How could you say that?"

"I merely speak the truth," the Widow said. "I see a thousand different futures for your daughter; trust me when I say they are all ugly. Shall I list the outcomes? Tortured. Beaten. Raped—"

"Stop," Cyra whispered, her voice weak with fright.

"All ugly...except for one." The future that involved Darien Cassel.

But how could that be? When Cyra had gazed upon her daughter in the fountain, she had seen a ray of sunshine. A beauty. A bright and bubbly personality who simply didn't fit, didn't *belong* in the underworld. Was it possible that the man she'd heard such vile things about could fall for Lily? Protect her? *Love* her, even?... Cyra could not imagine it.

"Let's go." Erasmus stepped forward, winding an arm around Cyra's shoulders. "We're d-done here."

Cyra shrugged him off and approached the spider.

"Cyra," he hissed, his heart pounding through the Crossroads.

She ignored him, turning her focus to the infernal being squatting in the bluish light. "Tortured, beaten, raped...", Cyra croaked. "Darien Cassel will do none of these things?" She was asking too many questions, her time nearly spent, but she *had* to know.

"Nothing is set in stone, my dear—they call it *free will* for a reason. But believe me when I say he is your best option. With Darien Cassel's protection, your daughter may stand a chance. May yet survive...in a world of people who will soon want her dead." Her words brought a fresh wave of goosebumps to Cyra's skin.

Erasmus hurried forward, taking Cyra by the arm. "Let's g-go."

"Thank you, Araneae, for your time," Cyra said as Erasmus pulled her toward the fountain. Their time was up; they couldn't linger—not without

payment.

'Helia.' The Widow's voice floated through Cyra's mind—audible only to her now.

She turned.

'To forgive is to set yourself free. Tormenting yourself over your past mistakes will not fix them. What you choose to do with your future is far more important. If you truly love your daughter, I implore you to heed my advice—heed my warning, and find Darien Cassel.'

The pit in Cyra's stomach widened. *'But he's a monster.'*

'I don't deny that. But he may be one of the only monsters capable of changing. Should he choose to protect your daughter, there will be nothing he wouldn't do for her. You must find him. He is her best and only chance.'

The fog thickened before Cyra could reply. It carried them away—back to Angelthene. When it finally cleared, they stood in the grass of Ebonfield, the faint sounds of cars and sparse nightlife trickling through distant streets.

Cyra crossed her arms, her skin tingling with chills. “What should we do?”

Erasmus lifted his hands in defeat. “It's y-your decision. Say the words, and we'll do it.”

Butchered, the Widow had said.

Tortured.

Beaten.

Raped.

Could Cyra live with herself if she chose to ignore the creature's warnings? If Lily ended up dying because Cyra was too afraid to trust the one man the Widow claimed would protect her? The Nameless were incapable of lying, their knowledge of the world and its occupants deeper than the deepest ocean. Vaster than outer space. If the Widow said they could trust Darien Cassel, not only did she mean it, but it was also the gods' honest truth.

Erasmus awaited her answer.

Place their trust in the leader of the Seven Devils...or sentence their daughter to death.

Take a chance...or risk losing everything.

“We trust the Widow,” Cyra decided, the winds of change gusting around her. “And we hire Darien Cassel.”