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The Demon Ex-Wives Club

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Traci Cartwright

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University of California, Riverside
To Pat and to David, but Pat first.
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Enter the Dragon. Eight Years Ago…

Today was delivery day, the day all of Pop’s new purchases of old stuff arrived at our store, and I was unpacking. With a grunt of exertion, I pushed on the crow bar and popped open yet another crate. Expecting another gorgeous Qing Dynasty vase, hand painted hundreds of years ago with delicate pink cherry blossoms and lively red-winged birds, what I saw instead stopped me cold.

“Hey, Pop, what’s this?” I delicately pulled the rectangular form from the Styrofoam bubbles, inhaling deeply to catch the scent of old teak and older dust. It had all the markings of a traditional Chinese lantern: Tall rectangular design, the teakwood carved with an interweave of dragons, smoke pouring from their fiery nostrils, but the caricatures were a language I didn’t recognize. I read several dialects of Chinese, some Japanese, Korean and Tagalog, so this writing dated it even older than the Tang or Sui Dynasties. I’d never seen anything like it come through my dad’s Chinese antiques store before.

Goosebumps went up my arms; we were suddenly talking millennia old instead of just centuries.

“Are you the middle man for this piece?” I called out, but I doubt he could hear me in the office. He hid on inventory days so he didn’t have to unpack. “Have you already got a buyer?” It was totally out of our small import shop’s league. Our clients didn’t buy big ticket items like this.
The belly of the lantern wasn’t the traditional waxy rice paper windows, but rather amber glass—very unusual, a sign of a cultural interloper—and inside there already seemed to be a fire brewing. I watched as the misty light bobbed and swirled, giving off a preternaturally bright glow. My hands felt hot just touching the lantern, even though there was no conceivable way it could actually be lit, or giving off heat. The light twisted into a new form—from freeform clouds into what looked like a little dragon, its tiny face with its itsy bitsy eyes glaring at me. I knew this wasn’t possible, and that the mottled glass was just bending the light into looking like the world’s tiniest fire-breathing beastie, but the details were amazing—it had scales and claws and wings that were opening now, like it was going to bust out of its cage and go flying away—

“Be careful—you drop, whole world blow up,” my father said, appearing from the office, his aged hands waving at me.

“So dramatic,” I said, glancing at the authentication certificate and the ownership history the antique came with. “Documentation says it was part of a collection in Quebec, and look—the man purchased it while in China on his honeymoon. A wedding gift isn’t going to destroy the world.”

“You never know. Butterfly effect. Break lamp that supposed to belong one man, he buy other lamp, wife hates, marriage fails, husband presses button, world blows up.”

Despite the perpetual shake in his hands, he took the lantern away from me, holding it firmly to his chest. His grey corduroys hung loose around his thin legs and his woolen cardigan sagged from his shoulders, but he moved spryly to the stolid antique
armoire we used as a vault. As he undid the seven iron locks, one at a time, I snapped out of my reverie as he took it.

“You’re hiding something,” I said.

“Such smart girl. So glad I send you to college—you come back genius.” He kept his jovial tone, but I wasn’t fooled. He was trying to be sly.

That’s when I knew: He had purchased this exorbitant antique as a gift for me. So he was either upset the surprise was ruined, or he was embarrassed by his own generosity.

“Who’d want such an ugly thing?” I said, deciding to tease it out of him. “It’s not pretty like the vases. I can’t even tell what provenance it’s from, much less what era. Dragons are so passé. No one will want that.”

“You don’t fool me. Even you see how valuable.”

“If it’s so valuable, what are we doing with it?”

“Never you mind.”

“It’d make a great wedding present. Someone will pay big to honor their daughter’s wedding.”

“Too valuable for wedding gift,” he grumbled. “Man in Quebec idiot.” I knew better, I’d figured him out. He’d bought the lamp was a wedding gift for me, and would deny it until the day he gave it to me. It was just his way.

Too bad, however, his daughter had no marriage prospects; that lantern would be sitting on the shelf for a long time. It wasn’t my fault he’d waited until nearly fifty to start a family and now he was counting the days to grandchildren. What did he expect
now? I was busy trying to learn the store so I could take it over; too busy to look for a husband. He could buy all the expensive lanterns he wanted, it wasn’t going to magically make a spouse appear.

The seven locks back in place, he finished sealing the thick black cabinet doors with his usual, strange hand movements, like he was praying in a hurry, and put the key in his pants. I’d watched him make those same motions since I was little, and could repeat them identically, but I was convinced he had a secret phrase or hidden motion that empowered them in a way I couldn’t.

“Go back to work. Work off that expensive education you’re wasting.”

I started working off more crate lids. “Most of the other girls wanted fake boobs when they graduated from high school; you should be glad all I wanted was to study Asian Archeology for four years.”

“Fake boobs attract boys—what do old buried things attract? Like you a nun, but covered in dirt.”

“You should be glad no one’s marrying me or hiring me away—who else but a single, solitary, genius daughter would take care of such a grumpy old man?”

“Who say I not glad daughter is nun?”

“Rini, where can I put these for you?” Huan and his two friends had entered, pushing dollies loaded with several more crates into the showroom. I turned to look at him and he flushed. Loading in our truck wasn’t what turned this muscular kid of seventeen red; one look from me usually did the trick.

To cover his embarrassment, he used his toes to flip a lid from the ground into the
air, then caught it on his finger and spun it like a giant wooden plate.

“Don’t bother her, she doesn’t know,” Pop said, oblivious of Huan’s under-age longing for his daughter. “Put that down, what are you, trying out for Chinese circus? Line those crates against wall, and hurry up. I not paying you to gape at my accountant.”

Maybe he wasn’t so oblivious.

I shrugged at Huan and he went even brighter red. The lid crashed to the ground and he obediently led the jog to the far wall. He unloaded the crates in double-time, making his corded biceps pop. He glanced back at me to see if I was appreciating the tightness of his UCLA t-shirt.

Then I noticed Pop staring at me, a smirk working at his thin grey lips.

“Who needs fake boobs?” I said.

“He just like you because you exotic—white girl.”

“Funny, because all the white boys see is a Chinese girl.” I was both, actually, the Caucasian half coming from my mother.

“Guess you stuck in middle of nowhere. Now hush. You need job more than I need mouthy assistant.”

Huan and the boys retreated to the loading dock for another load and I returned to the crates for inventorying when the chimes over the front door rang, sending a tickling of vibration through the air along with its high-pitched notes.

Pop and I both looked to the door; it was nearly closing time, and already dark outside. We never got customers this late in the day. Two men stood there, surveying the place. They wore black suits and black overcoats, both made of heavy wool—strange
in LA, where most people had to be convinced to keep their shirt on.

“Can I help you?” I started to ask, but Pop put a hand on my arm. I looked over and saw the sharp look of suspicion cross his face.

“Go in back,” he said. Feeling the sudden rise in tension, I didn’t argue. I bowed to the men, to my father, and ducked into the back room.

“How can I help you gentlemen?” I heard my father say, slipping into Mandarin. The men weren’t Chinese—they looked Caucasian to me—but they responded in kind.

“We’re just looking, old man.” The accent was strange, like nothing I’d heard before. Either it was from an outlying region, or it was a very old dialect. But why were white men speaking it, and how did my father know to use it with them?

“Why would such esteemed customers dress like Russians in such fine weather,” said Pop. He was buying me time. We had established a routine in case of robbery, but we’d never had to use it before. Monterey Park wasn’t exactly a dangerous neighborhood.

The back room was separated from the selling floor with wooden screens carved into a menagerie of lotus flowers with spaces open between their leaves. These screens were employed back when it was considered taboo for single women to be seen by strangers; this way they could look on the proceedings without being seen.

I kept an eye on the floor while I put the money box into the floor safe, spun the dial and covered it with a heavy trunk. Then I turned on the cameras to capture the exchange. I couldn’t call the police until they actually did something, so the phone remained in its cradle, but I did lock the back door leading out to the loading docks. No
way was I going to get Huan and his high school buddies into this mess.

“It wasn’t such an interesting trip,” my father was saying, shrugging disdainfully.

“I’ve had better. Not much there of value. My daughter always makes me bring home too many Qing vases. But they are so pretty, don’t you think?”

He picked up the one of the hand-painted pieces of porcelain from a crate and held it up to them.

The man on the left swung his arm out and the vase went zooming across the room and smashed into the vault cabinet.

“Okay, no problem,” my father said, switching to English. “Just let me draw up sales slip for that.”

He turned toward me, his eyes wide and afraid, signaling me with his right hand. His fingers were in the shape of a gun.

We were in trouble. Big trouble if Pop wanted the gun.

I used my key to open the bottom drawer of the desk. In the back was a case, and in the case was a .45 Berretta Pop had bought off a retiring policeman twenty years ago. It had been out of its case maybe once before, during the LA riots. I was just four, and the shop was brand new, and my father was certain the end of the world was coming.

I picked up it up and suddenly had a mental picture of my father holding the gun then, just as I was now, both of us thinking about how best to protect our family and property.

Something crashed up front and I was surprised to see my hands popping the clip open to check for bullets and unlocking the safety. They seemed to know what they were
doing, so I followed my hands to the screen.

Hidden by teak camouflage, I poked the barrel of the gun through one hole and put my eye to another. My father was on the ground, an arm up in a defensive position as one of the thugs loomed over him. A chair had been smashed, and the other thug was at the vault, but not touching it, just examining it closely. The trigger must have pulled itself because I didn’t remember doing it. I flinched at the bang as it went off.

The bullet went nowhere near them, instead tearing through a shelf of pottery that shattered in explosive sequence. I’d just destroyed several thousand dollars of merchandise and erased pieces of history. For that, I wanted those men to run, to flee, to be done with their dirty business.

They didn’t budge. They looked at where I stood; the screen was no defense. The thug by the vault walked toward me. I involuntarily took a step back. The gun was trembling in my hands, and I couldn’t remember how to chamber the next round. Or was it an automatic? My sentient hands had suddenly gone dumb. My gun training had been years ago, and now I remembered nothing, my dad was in danger, and why hadn’t I paid better attention?

That’s when the screen was ripped away and tossed across the room like it was made of paper and not teak. There was nothing between the office and the showroom now, and nothing between me and the man in the black suit. His eyes were impossibly dark, blackness filling them up, but that must have just been the lighting. His hands, though; I saw his hands and they had curved into claws.

It wasn’t possible.
I flicked my eyes to my father, who had such a look of imploring sorrow, and in that instant the thug was on me. First he slapped the gun out of my hand; it discharged harmlessly. Then he slapped me, and my face lit on fire, burning with blood and in an instant, my tears. He grabbed my shoulder, his sharp nails digging into my skin, shredding the silk blouse I wore, and pulled me forward to where my father was laying on the floor.

The thug raised a hand, ready to strike me again. I cringed, bracing for more pain, but nothing happened.

“Guizhu, we’ve found what we’re looking for,” the other said to my father. “Get it for us or we’ll rip the skin off her face.”

I whimpered, coward that I was. There was something more to these thieves than what we saw—something so bad, we may never recover. My instinct said they were here for the dragon lamp, which I somehow suddenly knew was more than just expensive and old; it was impossibly invaluable. Just like Pop had said. I deeply didn’t want these men to have it. But what more could I do?

That’s when Huan came barnstorming in the front door, his friends behind him. Any desire to protect them disappeared when I saw them square off in fighter’s stance. Rescue! Huan had taken up jujitsu when I left for college; he thought a black belt would impress me. It didn’t until right this minute.

He took one look and knew we were being robbed. “Call the police!” he ordered one of his friends, who ducked out, already dialing his cell phone. I’d forgotten all about calling the cops. Thank goodness for level-headed, tightly-muscled Huan. The cops
would be here soon. I wondered if they’d be of any use.

Huan and his pal rushed the thugs. The one holding me let go, and the relief was so intense, I thought I’d cry. I dove for my father while Huan and his friend attacked our thieves. I pulled Pop into my arms and we watched in horror as their deadly martial art was rendered harmless. Not a single punch landed, not a single kick reached its destination. The air around the punches whooshed with velocity, then whooshed again as the men moved impossibly fast to get out of the way. It was like they were vaporizing and instantly reappearing inches beyond the strikes, but I knew that couldn’t be true.

The boys kept at it, and the third friend came in swinging, but it was almost comical. All that effort, and no contact. Not a single hit.

I helped Pop to his feet and turned to open the cabinet to grab the lantern. “No!” Pop said sharply, pulling on my arm toward the back office. He was right; better to escape with our lives than risk dying for the lantern. I helped him across the showroom, but it wasn’t the back door Pop wanted. “Rini, the desk,” Pop said.

He wanted to stay and fight. I let him go. He stagger-stepped to the box the gun had been in, and pulled at the inside casing. It came away, revealing a secret bottom. He pulled out a handful of stakes. Like, railroad stakes. They rattled heavily in his hand.

“Daddy, what are you doing? We gotta go—” I pleaded, but he looked to the fighting me with determination.

“Iron, Rini. Good stuff. You see.”

This was madness. An old man and a girl armed with railroad stakes couldn’t take on those fiends. I turned back to the door but the locks wouldn’t budge. It was as if
they’d been soldered in place. I yanked on the knob, banged on the thick metal in frustration, but there was no way out.

Pop was already heading back to the shop. Huan and his boys were still swinging, but slower now. They were tiring. The thugs magically remained right outside their strike zone.

Listening in vain for a police siren, I looked around the office for another weapon. Among the rolled up rugs and chipped vases and record books was a long spear, Yuan Dynasty. Worth over six thousand dollars. The thought of damaging it was distressing, but not enough to stop me from using it to save my crazy father.

I picked it up and tested the weight of it. I raised it to my shoulder, took a shuddering breath to firm what little courage I had left, and went charging into the shop.

Pop was about to throw one of his railroad ties like a dart at one thug, so I aimed at the other and together we launched our weapons into the air.

That’s when things really got weird.

Time seemed to stop, the air thickened into a jelly that smelled like rancid apples, and our weapons stalled in mid-air. They just hung there. I inhaled and was surprised to find I could breathe deeply enough to scream, and scream I did because the next thing that happened was terrible. The thugs were unimpeded by the strange jelly-like affect that was holding the rest of us firm, and then they simultaneously clapped, making a concussive racket that shook my ribcage. A big light rocketed out from their hands and the boys were suddenly propelled through the air.
Huan and his two friends smashed into the heavy carved benches on the west wall, and the crunch of broken bones combined with the breaking apart of the wood. They collapsed and didn’t move.

At the same time, the iron dart and the four thousand-year-old Yuan spear diverted and thudded into the ceiling of the shop.

The air loosened again and Pop dropped his spikes in awe. They fell in real time and made a discordant crash. The sound made my kidneys feel like they were boxing.

The men turned to us, their skin gone bright red with rage and exertion.

“Give us what we came for and we’ll let you live,” one said in his strange dialect.

Pop didn’t hesitate. He went right for the cabinet and began undoing the iron locks. I wanted to beg him not to do it, not to give them the dragon lantern, but a more sensible voice within said that I would rather we live. I kept my mouth shut. I lowered my head in shame as the locks were opened, one by one.

That’s when the chime over the front door tinkled again, a light, airy sound that was completely incongruous with current events. My kidneys returned to their proper places at the sound.

“Damn this GSP. I can never seem to get electronics to work right,” said a voice filled with good-natured mirth, oblivious to the crime scene he’d just walked in on. “You fellas ever have that problem?”

I looked up and involuntarily took a deep breath, like I hadn’t breathed in weeks. A man stood there, smelling impossibly of night-blooming jasmine and oak-barreled whiskey and wintry Russian woods. I’d never smelled wintry Russian woods, but
surely that was exactly what he smelled like. To be sure, I breathed in again, now getting
the scent of movie theater licorice, oiled Turkish pomade and the upholstery of the new
Mercedes Benz. Was I going crazy?

Now I noticed the man himself, dressed in an impeccably tailored light-weight
navy Armani suit that looked smooth like a dolphin’s skin. He had the thickest black hair
I’d ever seen, piled in waves on his head. His eyes were dark but sparkled with delight,
as if he’d just walked in on a surprise party. His grin was lopsided and toothy, ready for
fun. Whoever this man was, he was going to save us. Or he was going to die alongside
us. It was too early to tell.

The thugs turned their attention away from Pop and the vault, and to this
newcomer. One raised a lip and growled. The other cracked his knuckles.

“I don’t mean to interfere, but I’ve got an app that tells me when a really great
buy is in the area. I just had to stop.” He held his phone up, some European-looking
thing, as if to show us his great “app.” Was he crazy? “I’ll just make a quick purchase,
and let you all get on with your business.”

What was he saying? He wanted to go shopping?

Wasn’t it clear what was happening?

He slid his eyes toward me and winked. And damned if I didn’t feel relief. He
slipped a well-manicured hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a cigar and lighter,
holding them both in a single hand.

“So go ahead, shopkeep, pop that cabinet open and let’s see what you’ve got. I’ll
give you a fair price, which is quite a deal since these fellas weren’t going to pay you at
all, I don’t think. You know, guys, you’d find life a lot easier in these parts if you just flashed some cash. There’s really nothing in this world you can’t buy.”

The man put a stack of cash on the table next to him; it was easily twenty thousand dollars. Great, I thought. Now he was going to be robbed and killed, just because of some stupid app. Technology was going to be the death of him.

“We don’t buy what is already ours.”

“Last time I checked, possession is nine-tenths of the law. What do you say, Gramps? Do we have a deal?”

At that exact instant, Pop unlocked the last iron bolt and in a flash all three men rushed the cabinet—

The newcomer inexplicably got there first, despite being the furthest away. He stood in front of the cabinet and in front of Pop, taking a protective stance of them both.

“Whoa. There it is. Big magic, huh, boys?” He was trying not to stare it, greed making his handsome face wrinkle.

The thugs were creeping forward, getting ready to make a move while he was distracted by the big magic.

“Hello?” I said impatiently, breaking his trance. The newcomer looked up like he was satisfied all was right and well with the world.

“Well, Gramps? We got a deal?”

“Deal, deal,” my father said, looking frail like paper.

“Don’t make me, guys.” The man brandished his lighter, a shiny gold thing with a purple stone embedded in the front. He flipped the top up and poised a finger over the
slate wheel.

The thugs stopped where they were, one eyeing the gold lighter, the other fixated on the lantern in the cabinet, its light brighter than ever.

“You want a deal, you filthy grave robber? We’ll make you a deal. Take the girl, take everything you see, and leave us the Chein Long Guang.”

Our new customer glanced at me, checked me out and smiled. “Tempting.” I shivered and not in any kind of appropriate way for the circumstances. There was just something about that smile. “This place is worth a fortune,” he said, looking around. “Just all those Qing vases alone. But who are we kidding? Deal’s done. I wasn’t ever going to let you get your paws on the Hidden Dragon Light.”

He flicked the lighter and a luminescent purple light came out of the stone, growing into a glowing orb the size of the cabinet and smelling of Lemon Drops. The thugs turned to run, trying to use their bizarre powers to displace themselves like they had with Huan, but they only blinked out of and then back into existence, always whooshing back to the exact spot. There seemed to be a gravitational pull coming from the orb, and it pulled at the thieves, stretching their clothing, their hair, then their skin, and finally their limbs bent backwards until their whole bodies were smeared right into the orb of light, which then shimmered to black, then to white, then back to purple and retreated back into the lighter.

The handsome man flicked the lighter shut and the Lemon Drops went away. “You okay, Gramps?” he asked and helped my father into a chair.

I was frozen where I stood, bewildered and deeply, inexplicably moved by what
I’d just seen. My father sat down, looking a hundred years older than he was. “You should know better than to keep something like that around,” the man was chiding him. “What do you know,” said Gramps, waving the stranger away in a gesture I recognized.

The man stood straight, his broad shoulders filling out his suit, which he then tugged and straightened, brushing off a bit of lint. He looked at me, his eyes ablaze with a charm I’d never seen in a man.

Pop cursed the man in Mandarin, told him to go to Hell.

“I’m Jeffrey Cadge,” he said to me, ignoring my father. Now his elegant hand was held out. He wanted to take my hand. The thought of his touch caused a final welling of electricity down my spine, and it was too much. I fainted, right into his arms, and that was how my father lost his single, solitary genius daughter to marriage.
Incense and Immolation...Today.

I hesitated at the entry to the Buddhist Temple. The tall golden pillars and rouged red walls looked just the same as they did when I was a kid, and that gave me tremendous comfort. However, the sneaking suspicion that I might burst into flames or be struck by lightning was not so comforting, and deserved a moment of contemplation. After the way my dress smoldered at a Catholic wedding four years ago, I always gave pause before I stepped into any sacred space. Granted, I’d made love to Jeffrey just before that wedding, so I had his demon scent all over me. And the dress had been part polyester.

As of today, I hadn’t seen Jeffrey for three weeks, I was two thousand miles from our home in New Jersey, and he was on business at least three dimensions away. I had very little demon lingering on me, so lighting some incense in honor of my parents should not be a problem.

I braced and stuck the toe of my loafer onto the red carpeting, testing. That’s when a group of tiny Chinese women appeared behind me and charged the doorway, shoving me forward into the temple.

“Excuse us, dear.”

“Come along, honey.”

“Don’t be shy!”

“Whatever you have to ask favor for, better to get it over with.” They giggled at me and swept me along with them, standing so close we were bumping into each other.
Asians didn’t have much use for personal space, but I did, so I separated from them to take off my shoes.

We tucked our shoes into the shelving unit made of dozens of little cubby holes. The women, most of them older than me and all in office-wear, waved for me to hurry and join them. Figuring I’d be less likely to be looked at in a group than on my own, I joined them. En masse we surged toward the massive golden Buddha, growing silent and somber as we went. When I was five, I nicknamed him Buddy; he’d been a friend of mine since that day.

It felt nice to be a part of their pack, even for a few minutes. For that moment, despite being easily a foot taller than them, I felt like I had as a kid, like I belonged to this community. And just for today, their easy company helped hide just how much I no longer belonged.

“Haven’t been in a while?” asked one of the ladies, her hair in a perfect bob.

“How can you tell?”

“Anyone who spends that much time staring at Buddha is either new or out of practice.”

“Definitely out of practice.” I came to Los Angeles all the time for work, but it had been a year since I’d been to my father’s temple. This was an annual pilgrimage, one I both dreaded and longed for.

“There’s nothing to it. Just light the incense, bow your head and ask nicely for blessings.”

“I’m not here for blessings,” I said. “It’s the death of my father’s anniversary.”
“Oh, I’m sorry, dear. Who was your dad?”

And just like that, I’d almost gotten myself found out. Everyone knew my dad and his Chinese store, Guizhu Imports. It’d been six years since he passed, but that meant little in a community whose population never moved, never changed.

“Bruce Lee Kwan,” I said, making up a name.

She smiled despite not recognizing the name. “He’ll be glad to hear from his blessed daughter.” She patted my arm and headed off for her own place at the massive semi-circular shrine.

_Blessed._ Not even remotely.

The last time anyone in Monterey Park saw me, I was about to marry an outsider, and worse, a creature some of the elders adamantly believed was a demon. Generally, humans still didn’t know demons existed, but Asians had eons of belief systems built on the fact that they did. My whole community had fretted I’d been possessed, or gone dumb, or at the very least been magically enthralled. Some even begged my father to stop the wedding. Huan had personally offered to kick Jeffrey’s ass. Despite being put in traction by those dark-suited robbers the day Jeffrey arrived, he’d remained resolutely in love with me. In his eyes, Jeffrey was definitely a demon.

Regardless of the flack we took, and the nights I’d cried about moving to the East Coast, I married the man I’d fallen in love with. My father, whatever his reservations, had stood by my side when I did. I’d never forget that and I would always honor him for it, for all he did for me.

The massive temple still made me feel so very tiny, designed with the intention to
remind us of our insignificance in this mighty universe. The round inner sanction was
three stories tall and filled with gold columns and massive statue of Buddha, casting his
benevolent smile down on us. The walls were swathed in red and dotted with gold-plated
symbols, imparting words of wisdom in a number of Chinese dialects. The walls were
encircled the tall teakwood shrines glowing with thousands of candles and burning
incense.

I bowed at the dark wood shrine furthest in the corner and selected several sticks
of incense. I lit them off a large candle’s flame and waved them in the air seven times,
tracing the same patterns my father always made. Smoke curled off the ends, releasing a
scent that took me back to my childhood. When I was young, I thought all smoke
smelled like a sweet burnished perfume. I’ve learned since then.

It wouldn’t be wise to pray, but I could still talk to my parents. And I could still
leave a tribute. From my big travel saddlebag, I pulled seven shiny golden coins, two
balls of sweet rice wrapped in seaweed and two pork baos. I set them carefully on a
golden plate.

“No cookies for you today, Pop,” I whispered. “But I did bring you something
special.” I pulled out a small carved wooden flute, several centuries old. My boss,
Antonio Ruiz, had purchased it online, thinking it might be a nice addition to an exhibit
he was curating for a museum in Seattle, but it had a crack up the back. The sound was
ruined and rendered the piece too imperfect to Antonio’s discerning eye, but the carvings
of trees limbs bearing fat pears were too lovely for me to pass up. I knew my antiques
dealer father would have loved it, imperfections and all.
“It’s nearly my seventh anniversary. Can you believe that? That means you’ve been gone six years. That I can’t believe. I miss your teasing, Pop. I miss your voice.”

I pictured him in the shop, talking customers into buying our beautiful things.

“No home should be without this serving set. How have you lived without it? I cannot imagine what your relatives must think, eating off your Pottery Barn plates,” he’d say and they’d pull out their wallets. He’d wink at me and I’d shake my head, pretending to be disappointed in his methods, but inside I’d be giggling. So clever, so funny, so ready with the jab to the sensitive spot.

He’d had a heart attack while I was still on my honeymoon. I’d flown back from Italy, sitting rigid in the only seat on a nonstop available for days. I was his solitary just-married daughter and it was my duty to cremate him and send him into the bardo. “Take the portal, lamb,” Jeffrey had said, arms wrapped around me as sobbed. He wanted me to use his transdimensional travel portal, the one he’d rigged in his lighter, so I could get to Pop almost instantly. I was so over-wrought with grief, I nearly did. Letting my atoms dissolve into cosmic soup during the jump might have offered some relief. But the truth was, I needed the fifteen hour flight to process the fact that I was now an orphan.

Thank goodness I had Jeffrey, or I’d’ve been all alone in the world.

“I hope Mom is taking good care of you, and you’re taking good care of her,” I said to the wavering smoke of the incense, resisting the urge to draw patterns in it with a finger. He used to yell at me for doing that as a kid. He said it was disrespectful.

“Jeffrey and I are fine. Lot of parties to celebrate. Apparently year seven is a big deal in the Cadge clan—he’s even up for a big promotion. We’re doing so good, Pop—it’s
going to be an amazing year.”

I glanced around to see if anyone could overhear me. The group of women were gone, off to work, no doubt. A few grannies sat meditating here and there. Otherwise, I was alone. I glanced at my watch; I’d better get moving or I’d miss my plane.

“I’d ask for your blessing, but I know that would be pushing my luck. So I’ll just leave it to Buddha. I love you two,” I said, picturing my blond bombshell mother standing with her young husband, towering over him, his arm around her high waist and grinning like the Cheshire cat. It was an image I’d seen from a photograph, my favorite of them; I hardly remembered my mother.

I bowed my head and moved my hands in the pattern Pop had taught me, the one that sealed a prayer or a vow.

My hands felt hot. I looked at my palms. They were persimmon red. Whoops.

I guess that was too close to a prayer for the universe to turn a blind eye. I’d better get going or that threat of immolation might suddenly get real. I rose and turned from the shrine, hooking my bag on my elbow so I didn’t mar the leather.

There was an old woman standing behind me. And by old, I mean withered and so wrinkled her eyes had all but disappeared. Her lips had long parted ways with her mouth, as had most of her teeth. She hissed at me and jabbed at me with her crooked fingers.

“Sie chau tzyr ran,” she said, basically calling me evil and not natural.

This is what I’d been afraid of.

“That’s okay, grandmother, don’t get worked up over it,” I said soothingly in
Mandarin, reaching out to take her arm and sit her down. The other grannies were starting to notice.

“Muo!” she said and pulled out of my reach. With her other hand, she made the evil eye sign. “Muo!”

Now she was calling me a devil. Time to go.

Saffron-robed monks emerged from a veiled corner where they’d been praying so quietly, I hadn’t even seen them. They looked from the reanimated corpse shrieking about demons to me, the overly-tall, very guilty-looking girl. Surely they knew I wasn’t a devil.

I reached out again, determined to sit the elder down before she had a stroke, and wrapped a hand around her twiggy arm. She shrieked even louder, but this time from pain. My red-hot palm had burned through her thin top.

She was wavering, about to fall over, which would surely break her hips or snap her neck. I plunged my hands into my saddlebag and used the thick leather as a buffer. She toppled and I caught her with my bag and laid her on the vivid red carpet. Stuff was falling out of my bag and she was still screaming muo! muo! The monks scuttled across the temple with a purpose. I grabbed at my fallen things, stuffing them covered with ashen fingerprints back in, all the while dodging granny’s jabbing fingers. A monk grabbed a tall post, meant to hang incense burners from, but he lowered it like a pike. It didn’t matter that I’d grown up and worshipped in this temple, that I’d once been a part of this community; he intended to skewer the devil on the end of it.

I ran. Abandoning my shoes in the cubby hole, I bolted out the front filigreed
doors and sprinted for my rental car. One hand was still in my saddlebag, so I used it to dig out my keys. With a beep that started crisp and ended wobbly as the plastic melted, the key fob unlocked the door and I jumped in. The monks and remaining grannies lined up atop the stairs of the temple, looking like the strangest defensive line the universe had ever cobbled together on behalf of all that was Good and Pure.

The fob had been reduced to a black glob from the heat of my hands, but the keys were intact. I drove away as fast as the Ford Fiesta would go. I lifted my palms from the steering wheel – they were back to their regular beige color and the plastic of the wheel hadn’t been burned.

Driving past my old neighborhood felt like a trespass, like I had no right to be there, but it was the only way to the 605 freeway. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw where my father’s store had once stood with its faux pagoda awning and felt a terrible pang of loss.

The ultra-modern black and white sign said Containers & Lids. I knew it hadn’t been an antiques shop for a long time, but this new incarnation was devastating. How dare they replace heritage and ancient beauty for a store that sold plastic bins. I burned with anger inside, which quickly and inexplicably turned into hot tears.

“Have some respect!” I cried, but my heart wasn’t in. I didn’t even know who I was talking to.

The heart of the matter was this: I might never again be able to go into the temple where my father worshipped. Our store had been replaced and forgotten, and I was fairly certain my childhood home had been turned into condos. Monterey Park was no longer
any kind of home to me, and not just because I was now officially “too evil” to pass as completely human in the eyes of the old Chinese women and monks of the temple. Them and whatever gods still paid attention. I wondered which one of them had turned my hands into fry pans.

My vision was watery now, and so was my nose. I nearly missed the turn off for the Ontario Airport and had to cut off a lane of on-coming traffic to take it. Honks blared, but I didn’t care. I’d just assaulted a hundred-year-old woman to cover the fact that I’d desecrated a sacred place. I had no decency. I would run their great-grandmothers off the road, too.

Ahead was the tiny suburban airport that served San Bernadino County. I couldn’t wait to get away from this place and its terrible reminders of my old life, and my new failures. Through the mist of my tears, the clock told me I had an hour to make my flight. I was going to make it. Jeffrey would be home by the time I landed and we’d throw a party to celebrate our marriage and his promotion, and everything would be all right.

I hiccupped and took several deep breaths, calming myself down. The tears had dried up, but even so, the windshield looked like I was under water. Was it raining? I turned on the wipers, and again wiped at my eyes with my hand. Still blurry.

Thunk! Something splashed across the glass and I veered dangerously left. More blaring horns. I righted the car and watched in wonder as sloppy balls of slush dropped from the sky.
It was June in Southern California; the skies were crystalline not ten minutes ago, and now it was vomiting half-baked balls of ice down on the 605. *Chau tzyr ran,* indeed.

My windshield was quickly coated with chunky sheets of freezing water, dropping visibility to nearly zero. My self-pity was retrofitted with dread as I slowed way down. I hoped I wouldn’t have to pull over and wait this out; I was running to make my plane as it was. Long red smears of the brake lights led the way, and I followed them at ten miles per hour all the way to Departures.

I needn’t have worried about missing my flight. Everything was delayed; it was, after all, snowing in the desert.

“This freaky weather can’t possibly go on for much longer,” said the steward, winking big as he took our tickets and herded us onto the plane regardless of the delay.

Two hours later it was still going on. We still hadn’t gone anywhere, not even back to the gate so we could get a Cinnabon and use the WiFi. All I wanted was to get back to Jersey and my husband and forget this day ever happened.

For the first hour or so, I attempted to distract myself with work, clicking through the digital pictures of the ancient art and hunting tools I’d taken at Antonio’s studio in Santa Monica and making notes. He had assigned me the interpretive descriptions for nearly fifty pieces for the Phoenix Museum of Natural History’s exhibit of Inuit artifacts.

“You know I know nothing about the Inuit,” I said, watching as dozens of workers unpacked boxes filled with pieces hundreds of years old. Antonio wasn’t an
expert, either; he was just the best for-hire curator in the Southwest.

“Your background makes you the closest thing to an expert as we have,” he said, running a manicured hand over his green and pink tie. He always looked like he’d just come from some luncheon on a beach patio, tan and coifed with that vigor unique to rich Los Angeles men.

“You mean token Asian,” I said. The rest of his multi-cultural staff of interpretive writers represented the other six continents, so I was generally assigned anything remotely Asian. Which apparently now included the North Pole.

“Singular,” he corrected. “Besides, who else could make herself over into an Inuit expert in a month?”

The assignment was great; the timing couldn’t be worse. Jeffrey’s and my anniversary was to be celebrated Cadge demon style with seven parties, one for each year, all of them at our house, each of them bigger and better than the one before, and the one tonight setting the bar at three-ring circus. Orchestrating the parties was mostly my purview, and while I generally loved it, seven in a month was flat out ridiculous. And now this enormous assignment.

Scrunched down in my hard airplane seat, I squinted at the high tech camera’s tiny screen, trying to discern the details differentiating one bone bowl from another, one stonecutting from the next. The eye strain was giving me a headache, so I decided to try sleeping instead. Wiping off a streak of black ash from this morning’s burning hands incident, I put the camera into my bag and closed my eyes. Then I consciously stopped grinding my teeth and counted backwards from ten. Between four and three, I saw a
flash of the furious grannies and monks racing out of the temple with pikes, ready to pin me to my seat. My eyes flew open and my heart ricocheted around my chest.

I shouldn’t have come to California.

I had to come.

Antonio needed to walk me through the exhibit, yes, and then I’d made the decision to stretch the trip out to visit my father’s temple on the anniversary of his death. This I did despite the fact that his anniversary was the same day as our party. It was my own fault; I had no one to blame but myself.

I flashed on the grannies again, chasing me out of what was once my temple. It wasn’t just being late to the party that was my fault. Marrying a demon seven years ago had put me on the path to this day, when my past would be closed off to me. Another piece of my history was gone, never to return, never to be visited again. I supposed I knew this day would come, and now here it was, and Jeffrey wasn’t even here to comfort me.

My heart gave a heave that reminded me of a pipe organ, a minor-key dying drone. Letting go of the past was not my strong suit.

“I wuv you, my big strong manly man. I’m going to marry you to prove it!” This from the bottle blonde in Juicy sweatpants and a bejeweled T-shirt emblazoned with the words “100% Pure” sitting in the seat next to me. She’d been asleep until now, and when she woke up, she’d immediately started dialing her smart phone. She listened intensely as her Prince Charming said some sweet nothing back.

“But honey bunny wunny-man, my wuv is bigger than that. I wuv you so much I
don’t even see other men. I am blinded with your radicalness.”

A brief pause as the fiancé responded, and then she was on a giggling and blushing tear. She was making it impossible for me to keep wallowing; I gave in to annoyance instead. Too bad Jeffrey wasn’t here so he could superheat the phone and singe her hair extensions. Just in fun of course; my husband was fun that way.

Or I could use the tazer Jeffrey made me carry at all times, although I think it was more for demons who got wily, not insipid blondes making false claims of being “100% Pure.”

I tried to focus on something else.

I scanned the passengers again. From the rental car drop-off to my seat in 2L, I’d looked hard for the nefarious magik-worker who was supplying us with this delightful diversion. Demons had the power to make weather, but generally didn’t bother because then they’d be stuck in it, too, and they preferred sunshine.

The slushy storm was more aggravating than dangerous, so my theory was that it was just the irritated commentary on a business deal that had gone bad, or perhaps a reminder to an ice-demon somewhere in town to bring some raspberry popsicles to their home dimension.

It had nothing to do with me, or my assault on the old lady at the temple, or my marriage to Jeffrey. Or at least that’s what I’d decided to convince myself.

There was a demon on board, I’d spotted him in 4C right away, but he was in his human guise. He was easily passing, as most demons did, for a used car salesman or maybe real estate agent. No one was even aware a demon sat there except me.
Being married to one gave a girl wicked demon radar.

At first I thought maybe he was the source of the storm, but when I watched him plug his mouth with a rapid succession of two ounce whisky bottles and then pass out, it was obvious it wasn’t him. Magik of this magnitude is hard to sustain when you’re plowed or unconscious.

My umpteenth search for a Dark Worker came up empty. Again. I had to admit – again – that it was entirely possible this was just a bizarro act of nature and had nothing to do with demons. So why wasn’t my anxiety decreasing?

“I wuv you so much I became a born-again virgin for you…No man has ever touched this body.” This from Barbie the Phone Sex Operator in the next seat.

Deliriously silly. And yet, it made me feel a terrible pang for Jeffrey. I missed him. Not enough to become a born-again virgin for him, but then it had been three weeks since I’d seen him so maybe I didn’t have to.

If I was thinking about sex, I was feeling better.

“Honey-bunny, please, it’s like the first marriage never happened. I’m completely pure for you.”

I tried not to scoff.

My cell phone was ringing from my purse.

I clutched for it.

“Hi, yes, hello?”

“Babe,” came the purr on the other end. My heart swelled with that spicy heat only Jeffrey evoked in me.
“You’re back? You beat me home?”

“Just walked in, found you not here. So that makes you where?”

“Still in California.”

“How’s your dad?”

“He says happy anniversary,” I said. I’d keep the real story for when I saw him; I’d no doubt cry, maybe even hysterically, and that wasn’t exactly appropriate airplane behavior. “He says have fun at the party tonight.”

“How about Antonio? What’s he got to say?”

I smiled. Jeffrey was the jealous type—he was demon, after all—and he was certain that my fifty-something, deeply Catholic, married-with-seven-children boss had the hots for me. “He says it’s tradition for husbands to buy wives something ridiculously ornate and sparkly for their anniversary.”

“I’m sure he does. You can let him know it’s already done.”

“He’ll be so relieved.”

“You’re cutting it a little close, aren’t you, babe?”

“I know, I’m sorry,” I said, my anxiety flaring again. “We’ve been stuck on the tarmac for two hours. This weird weather pattern moved in.”

“Is it raining blood?”

“Just sleet.”

“Excellent!” he said, bursting into laughter. Sleet always made him laugh; so did solar eclipses and Daylight Saving Time. “Flavored?”

“Budweiser, I think. It’s the official beer of San Bernadino.” His good humor put
me at ease enough to joke.

“Any sign of the source?”

“No. Although there is a ...” I stopped myself from outing the demon — “guy in 4C, but he’s asleep, so no. Nothing to worry about.”

“Huh. Well, keep your eyes open.” He was paranoid, my husband, even more than me. There were dark works aplenty in our lives and that made us paranoid, but not today. Not at the Ontario Airport. I didn’t think.

There was a slurping sound on the other end and I pictured my handsome man leaning on the kitchen counter, biting into a dragon fruit, peeling the thick bumpy skin with his sharp incisors. “Take a video and YouTube it. I wanna see,” he said around his mouthful.

“I’m sure someone already has. Stay out of the fruit, please. That’s for tonight.”

“There’s no tonight if there’s no you.”

“I’ll be there. Don’t worry, everything’s all set. The liquor store should have already left six boxes on the porch, the caterers are coming at seven, and the wood for the bonfire was delivered before I left. All you need to do is light some coals in about an hour and get the pig ready for slaughtering.”

That’s when I noticed that the bedazzled woman-child in the seat next to me had gone suddenly silent.

“Are my knives sharpened?”

“I didn’t know what to sharpen -- the ritual sabers or the sacrificial daggers.”

“My what?”
Jeffrey didn’t have sacrificial daggers, but I’d just found a way to quiet down Blondie so I was going with it. She was now openly staring at me, but she wasn’t talking, and that was the important part. Turns out inappropriate plane chatter wasn’t such a bad thing.

“The ritual sabers are in the back room, right next to the Iron Maiden.”

“Are you funnin’ on someone?” he asked, guessing what I was up to.

“Yep.” Smart, that man of mine.

His rich, rolling laugh came across the line. “You’re evil,” he said.

“No, you’re evil,” I said, mimicking the dolly’s own delivery.

“No, you are. You really are.”

I leaned over Blondie’s lap, making her flinch, and looked out the window.

“Miracles of miracles – the sky’s clearing. I think we’re going to be taking off soon.”

“Come home, lamb – it’s a big night. I can’t wait to celebrate it with you.”

“I’m coming, fuego. I love you more than my hair color,” I said, meaning it.

“I love you more than the smell of gasoline,” he said, equally sincere.

I clicked off the call and settled into the seat, ready to go. *Who needed a childhood home when I had Jeffrey?* He was all the home I needed.
“How much time do we have?”

Jeffrey had been waiting for my cab at the front wrought iron gate, dressed in an unbuttoned shirt tucked into black suit pants. I couldn’t get out of the taxi fast enough, just throwing cash over my shoulder as I went while Jeffrey yanked the bags out of the trunk before the car had even stopped. We ran together through the tall gate, him punching the code to close it behind us, and me sprinting for the front door.

The moment we crossed the threshold, I activated the Otherworldly Alarm, and he dropped the bags so he could wrap me in his arms. The very feel of him sent earthquakes across every plain of skin, but concentrating on where his breath superheated my neck. The last dredges of anxiety still rattling my nervous system were replaced by something else entirely.

“How much time?” I repeated.

“Not nearly enough. I’d need a century,” he said, lips curling in a way that made me want to cancel the party outright. The open Egyptian cotton panels revealed red skin that looked like he’d fallen asleep on some Mexican beach and tattoos that ran roughshod across a chest carved with muscles. The ink seeped into a menagerie of edges and creases – scars – markings he’d never explained but which had drawn out in me a deep need to protect and soothe, and often other things. Like now.

Pressing my lips to his, I pulled his shirt out of his waistband and running fingers
across his scarred torso. He’d spun me around and pinned me up against the arched entryway to the living room, putting his own hands where they were most effective in inducing a swoon.

“They’re coming in like, a half hour.”

“I need to change. I need to shower—” I needed to do things with my husband. He was rubbing what bare skin he could find or make with his soft hands until he’d reached the backs of my knees. I did what I always did when he got there—fell right over, and into his arms.

“Come clean me up.”

“You smell delicious.”

“Only demons would find the scent of eight hours in a tin can appealing.”

“Leave it. My clients will lose their minds.”

“I want to make you lose your mind,” I said.

In an instant, he’d flipped me over his shoulder and was carrying me upstairs. I squirmed with delight, and wondered if either of us would make it back downstairs in time to greet our guests.

The answer was barely. It was just five minutes before the party was to start, but demons were always late. I was counting on that. I stood in the kitchen with still-wet hair in an up-do, wearing the green vintage Versace he’d brought back from one of his trips, skewering the bratwursts on long platinum spikes – the better to roast them in the bonfire – and listing off our to-do list.
“The coals are almost ready, and the appetizers are brined,” I said. “You just need to get your Scotch, and I’ll finish these, and we’re good to go.”

Jeffrey, now fully dressed in his perfectly tailored suit, was watching me closely.

“You okay?”

“Better now. I’ll tell you later.” The last thing I wanted to do was revisit being run out of my father’s temple by the local villagers, torches alight.

He kept his eyes on me for a long beat as I skewered and stewed, then decided to let it go. Instead, he gave the rubbery-skinned brats a critical raised eyebrow.

“Intestines shouldn’t be that small. Why aren’t there bigger animals on this plane to make a decent sausage of?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s a rhetorical question, so why don’t I tell you about the new assignment Antonio gave me,” I said, pausing for effect. “I’m lead on an Inuit exhibit.”

“I bet they had decent sausages—all those wooly mammoths. And whales.”

“Whale sausage—ew. Anyway, I know Antonio isn’t your favorite subject—”

“I have no problems with Antonio. I’m sure he’d make a great sausage, too.”

“That’s my boss you’re threatening to eviscerate. The point it, the job’s going to make this month tricky, trickier, with all the research I’ll need to do.”

“I think someone from my Clan killed off the last one.”


“Wooly mammoth. I know what I should have done—I should have dragged home some traggaa intestines. They’re the size of a pick-up truck tire. You should see them.”
I shuddered, picturing intestine skins so big I could walk through them like a tunnel of viscera. “How the Hell do you stuff an intestine that big? Never mind, I don’t want to know.”

“Sounds like a rough month, babe. Maybe you should just quit your job. Antonio’ll find someone else.”

“So I can make *tragga* sausage?”

“So I can spoil you like a proper demon’s wife.”

“Human wives work. Some of us even like it.” This was an old argument, one neither of us invested much energy into any more.

“Demon wives jump at the chance to not work.”

“You didn’t marry a demon. You married a human girl who wants to work.” He never wanted me to get a job, but I’d have gone stir crazy if I didn’t. He was gone a lot for business, sometimes for weeks at a time; there was no way I was going to just sit at home and wait for him. Lucky for me, I found something I loved doing.

“After the promotion, things are going to be different.”

His promotion, as far as I could tell, was tied in some way to our anniversary, and it was a big one. While I worked with cultural artifacts in the public human realm, Jeffrey worked for private collectors. He had a pristine reputation in the Nuevo demon world for being able to secure any item for any customer, no matter how dangerous the plane or unforthcoming the guardian Clan. His new job, however, would shift from him field work to management, overseeing other agents. This meant significantly less travel and more working from his home office; maybe he was worried he’d be the one sitting at
home waiting for his spouse to come home from work.

“Consultants get to set their own schedules; we’ll have plenty of time to be together. You’ll get sick of me,” I said, pulling a bowl of porcini mushrooms and a bundle of Thai basil from the fridge.

“Not possible. You and me—this is for eternity,” he said, nuzzling my neck as I tore at the basil. He loved the smell of the spice, and pulled my hand to his nose so he could inhale. The huff of his breath tickled. “Things are going to get seriously awesome after our anniversary. I don’t want you to miss any of it.”

He’d been saying that on a loop for the last three months: After our anniversary ceremony, I’d receive all the gifts and wonder being married to a Cadge demon brought. This morning at the Buddhist temple, however, I saw I had already received plenty of what being married to a demon brought. Any more and I wouldn’t be able to walk by a church without setting it on fire.

“Can you be more specific about what qualifies as ‘awesome?’”

“You know I’m forbidden to talk about it until after the anniversary’s passed.”

“Then we’ll talk about this then,” I said.

He released me so suddenly, I nearly tipped over. “Fine. I’ll guess I’ll just go get the Scotch.”

He was so cute when he got huffy.

Jeffery went to the basement door. That dank room was one of his prized possessions, besides me, because that’s where he kept his extremely old, extremely valuable Scotch.
“It’s not like there’s going to be lots of sitting in Barcaloungers and watching TV, so get that out of your head,” he said as he worked the alarm system’s glowing purple faceplate. This was another exotic device brought back from some other country or dimension, tuned to his handprint; only he could go in and out of the basement. Not that I wanted to; it’s also where he kept his transdimensional portal, which I found to be entirely too creepy to be around.

The door popped open, the alarm’s faceplate glowing purple. The earthy funk of the mushrooms was suddenly overpowered by the smell of Lemon Drops – that’s what portals smelled like, to me at least. Jeffrey said he never smelled anything but sulfur, so I can only be glad that’s not the scent I got accosted with every time that door opened.

“But we need to catch up on about a thousand reality shows whose awesomeness is quantifiable,” I teased as he tromped down the stairs.

“You know what else is awesome? Sweatpants,” his voice floated up to me.

“And seven’s the anniversary I’m safe to stop going to the gym, right?”

“You don’t scare me,” I said, thinking of him in sweatpants; I decided that was just fine. “You’re too vain to stop going to the gym. I’m just saying, a slightly less demon-y lifestyle wouldn’t be bad for either of us.”

He didn’t respond; I don’t think he could hear me. Or maybe he was ignoring me.

To challenge this worldly, sophisticated, and above all else, tasteful demon with being a boring old human in sweatpants was insulting. This was the guy, after all, who had charmed the Chien Long Guanga in addition to his daughter from my reluctant father.
After seven years, he ought to know I’d never ask him to change his nature—I loved him for exactly who he was. I just didn’t want to change any more of mine. To the human world, I was just another wife married to a workaholic—even Antonio had no idea about Jeffrey’s true identity. I had a good job and a safe, secure home I loved, and that was plenty for me. I didn’t want any more supernatural presents or special demon gifts or to go traveling through other dimensions, but try telling that to a Cadge demon on the verge of a big anniversary.

I sniffed and sneezed. The smell of Lemon Drops rolled in waves around me. The desire for a box of candy was overpowering, but everything in our kitchen was doused in vinegar and sea salt. *Maybe less demon-y was too much to ask,* I thought, remembering the source of the sweet stink. *But maybe I could at least wean him from vinegar to hoison sauce.*

I went across the expanse of the kitchen to toe the door closed when he was suddenly there, at the top of the stairs, arms filled with bottles.

I screeched.

“Jeez, scaredy cat.” He pushed through the door, easing me back, and closed the door with a shoulder. As he teetered toward the counter with his arms full of Scotch, I watched him, clutching my knife. “What do you think? Red tie tonight? It’s always so lucky for me.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I was still trying to process what I’d just seen. It had looked like a woman, tied to the wine rack.

“Who the hell was that?” I demanded, knife in hand.
“Who? Look out, baby—” He nudged past me to get the Scotch bottles onto the counter without dropping one.

“That woman. Downstairs. Tied to the wine rack.”
“That’s no woman. That’s the entertainment,” Jeffrey said, closing the basement door behind him. He took his armful of Scotch to the counter and began lining them up for consumption. “And she’s not tied to the rack, she’s chained to it. It’s part of her act. She’s just warming up.”

Which was worse, a woman being held captive in our basement, or a dominatrix “warming up” her equipment?

“A half-naked woman chaining people to things at an anniversary party—how is that entertaining?”

“Trust me; it is.” He plucked a pickled turnip from a plate of appetizers and popped it in his mouth.

I smacked his shoulder, hard. You could take the demon out of Hell, but you can’t take the Hell out of a demon.

“Babe, I’ve already put down the damned deposit. I’ll make you a deal. Just let her do her thing for fifteen, twenty minutes. I’ll have her cut the big finale.”

“No deals.” Now that I’d started this argument, I had to stay firm, not because I felt so strongly but because Jeffrey was wired to always try to get his way, regardless of the issue. It was his nature. “Tonight is supposed to be romantic. She is not romantic, fuego.”

Jeffrey studied me for a moment, gauging how serious I was. He could see that I
was, but that wasn’t enough to deter him. He came over, sniffed at my neck, nibbled at it. I stood strong, despite what my knees were doing.

“You’re right. She’s not what you’d call romantic.” He went over to the door and called down to the woman chained to the wine rack. “Sorry, Belina--it’s not going to work out for tonight.”

I peeked over his shoulder, saw Belina look up from amidst her thick chain links. Now I could see that she wasn’t human--she was just in a mostly human form. Her skin was greenish, and her small horns were translucent, as were her breasts, which were decidedly bare.

“You rat, I cancelled a Linixux gig for this. I take it the wife’s a prude?”

“The wife is cool with a great number of things,” I called down, “but your naked ass tied to my patio furniture at my anniversary party isn’t one of them.”

“But it’s your seventh,” she said, as if everyone should want an act like hers on their anniversary.

“We’re going to celebrate the traditional way—lots of gin, lots of food, and an office desk set. Thanks anyway.”

With a dark look and a single whipping motion, she released the chains from the rack and had them curling in circles around her forearm like obedient snakes.

“Gosh, that’s neat,” Jeffrey said. “If she put on a dress and stuck to rope tricks, could she stay?”

“I love it. I’m sold, come on in,” I said flatly. Belina knew it was time to clear out. Despite what must have been hundreds of pounds of metal filling her bag, she
picked it up effortlessly and turned to depart through Jeffrey’s transdimensional portal. This was the other precious thing Jeffrey kept in the basement besides his Glenfidditch—and the reason I stayed out. I hated that creepy Lemon Drop-smelling thing.

“You owe me, Jeffrey,” said the demon stripper.

“I’ll put a check in the mail,” he said.

“Hey, wifey—better watch out for this one. He’s a snake.”

Jeffrey’s eyes flared red—literally. This business deal was about to go straight to Hell.

“I think you’d better go now,” I said before Jeffrey could lose his temper. The green-skinned Hellspawn refrained from dispensing any more marital advice and stepped through the glassy sheen of the iridescent portal window. She disappeared from our basement, her chains clinking and the scent of burning autumn leaves weighting the air behind her. The noise sent ripples that went right to my elbows; it was like nails on a chalkboard, and the smell made me sneeze again.

I turned away, stretching out my arms to release the sensation, and went back to cooking.

“Bored yet, darling?” he asked.

“Never,” I answered. He smiled and came in for a kiss. “Just maybe a little less demonishness wouldn’t be such a bad thing, either.”

He froze, no kiss forthcoming. For an instant there was a look on his face I didn’t recognize. It was hard, and a little angry—not the flirty peevishness I still found so enchanting, but something else. Something darker.
“Tell you what,” he said, pouring two fingers of the amber Glenfidditch into a glass and raising it to toast me. “I’ll make you a deal: If you still want to be a boring old human after our anniversary, then your wish is my command.”

I didn’t know what to say to that or to his sudden dark mood, and was glad when the demon doorbell ground out its guttural foghorn blast. The first guests must have stepped through the portal where Belina the Chain Charmer had just departed. Jeffrey shifted his narrowed eyes away from me and unleashed the full force of his charisma as he let them into the kitchen. The demons, in their human forms, were happy to be glad-handed, but they all had eyes on their human hostess. Assuming the role as I had so many times before, I let go of the tension of that moment with Jeffrey, plastered a grin to my face and gave them a hearty welcome.

“Hello, boys!” I said and they surged toward me, hoping to start the night with a kiss and a grope. Jeffrey, more out of jealousy than chivalry, quickly circumvented their route away from me and to the expansive backyard. Still, a couple got through his defensive line.

“Rini, you are a lovely peach,” said a man I’d never seen before. His well-manicured hands were out and ready to grab a handful of something that wasn’t his when another demon intercepted.

“Rhinehold, it’s awfully early to be misbehaving, don’t you think?” said Franklin. He sometimes worked as Jeffrey’s partner and was an ever-present guest at our parties. Rhinehold joggled his split tongue at me; I shooed him away. Delighted to have gotten a reaction, he took the arm of his human date and followed the others outside.
“You look lovely, Rini,” Franklin said, giving me a kiss on both cheeks. Franklin Liontaine was as handsome a demon as I’d seen, with impossibly alabaster skin, a gentle smile and a mannerly way.

“Franklin, your timing is as good as ever,” I replied. “Thank you.”

“Meet Joslyn,” he said, introducing a very expensive looking girl about a foot taller than me. It wasn’t just the hair or the heels; this girl was an Amazon. Gold cuffs wrapped both arms, mostly covering the tattoos under them: She was marked for demon use. Franklin certainly didn’t need to purchase female company like most other demons. He was one of the few demons I thought would actually make a good husband for a human girl, but here he was with yet another rented date.

“Glad you both could make it,” I said. Franklin was as close as a friend as Jeffrey and I had. “I was just about to mix up some martinis.”

“Jeffrey really should hire you some help,” Franklin tsked. He said this at every party, and I usually brushed it off. Since so few humans knew demons even existed, they weren’t ideal hires, and the last thing I wanted were demons with free rein to move around my house. Even our guests weren’t welcome past the kitchen without escort. Tonight, however, I was thinking about all the work I had ahead of me this month.

“I’m starting to think you’re right,” I said.

“Damn right. You’re better than servitude.”

“It’s not servitude; it’s just being a hostess.”

“I can’t cook water,” Joslyn said. Her contribution brought the conversation to a dead halt; Franklin and I traded a look.
“And I would never ask you to,” Franklin assured her while I smothered a laugh.

“Come on, dear. We’ll wait for our martinis on the deck with our barbarian of a host.”

They left me to construct a massive pitcher of ice cold martinis, the kind that would make their demon tongues steam when drunk. As I poured bottle after bottle into the enormous vat, my mind went back to that strange, dark look Jeffrey gave me. He was so rarely cross with me; he was a genuinely good-natured guy. Maybe it was stress. All these parties on top of all the work travel, plus preparing for the promotion—it was a lot. But what did he mean that if I still wanted to be a boring old human after our anniversary, he’d grant my wish? Like I had a choice? And what was the alternative?

“Drinks, lamb!” came the command from the deck; on went the hostess smile and out went the martinis, just as it had a thousand times before.

“Infused with thyme and passion fruit,” I announced to the guests as Jeffrey took the gigantic pitcher from me and began pouring into out-stretched glasses.

“Four more and that ought to get them set,” he said quietly to me. “Bunch of drunks, aren’t they?”

“A trough and some straws would be easier,” I said.

“I’ll put it on our anniversary register. We can install it over by the Douglas fir.”

He gave me a genuine smile; his dark mood had passed. I smiled back.

I headed back for the kitchen before any of his guests could catch me up in conversation. Most demons were lousy conversationalists. They figured all humans knew each other, so it was always, “What’s Tom Cruise really like?” or “How about those Palestinians? You really should get them into the nuclear age.”
At the kitchen sink, I started another pitcher. Through the big window, I studied the party in motion into the backyard.

Jeffrey’s clients had come in their human forms of course, but that was temporary. For now, they all wore their expensively tailored khaki and cream suits and Italian shoes handmade to fit their enormous feet. Pomade, the oily Turkish kind demons seemed to favor, molded their thick hair to their heads, and many wore red-tinted sunglasses to shield their delicate eyes from the setting sun. As far as I was concerned, Jeffrey’s clients were generally going-to-seed goombas and slicksters, several steps below used car salesmen and not above raiding the estate sales of bankrupted families, but upon closer inspection I could see the guests this evening were of a higher caliber. They had tasteful titanium accessories, close-shaved profiles, and fresh manicures; not one smelled like sulfur. They held their martinis delicately and managed to keep their hands respectfully on their girls’ waists. Normally it was all ass-slapping and broken glasses within minutes, and I’d spend the night with a whisk pan and Neosporin to treat the abrasions.

Interesting. Maybe Jeffrey really was moving up in the underworld. I felt a surge of pride for him.

Our guests spilled off the wide cedar deck and dotted the lawn in threes and fives – always odd numbers – all the way to the adobe wall separating our estate from the dark line of trees beyond. There were iron pikes set at intervals along the wall, each with their own strange topper, some with stones or crystals charged with magical energy to act as wards. As the demons wandered near, the ornaments would light up in greeting and a
gentle reminder that they were to go no further than that wall, despite the enticing wild
woods beyond. The gold and silver lights splashed across the lawn, making the grass
look deep blue and the whole backyard like a disco.

The dates who came with the businessmen were typical of the human women who
consorted with demons: They all wore slinky summer dresses, were excessively
groomed, and handsomely paid for their company. Always groupies, never any wives.
In fact, I’d never met another demon wife. Jeffrey said it was because most demons were
commitment-phobic and didn’t do well in marriage. I figured it had a lot more to do with
human women being reluctant to marry a demon; I’d just been lucky to find a good one.
Well, not good so much as willing to behave.

On the deck, the hot tub was set to boiling and a number of clients had already
stripped down to climb in, their dates smartly keeping their distance. It would boil off
their skin in seconds. At the other end of the deck was a big roasting pit. Jeffrey was
forever cooking things out there, and tonight it was a pig the size of a small hybrid car.
His clients loved it, they’d get in a big circle and sing songs and spit whiskey into the
flames, making them jump high and turn colors. Boys.

I spent the next hour toting out martinis and platters of finger foods and dodging
roaming hands and invitations for threesomes later that night. As always, the girls
participated less and less as the demon antics escalated. They tended to cluster on the
deck, perched around the glass table, trading margarita recipes and Botox tips,
occasionally nipping inside to snort a little something in the guest bathroom. At some
point they’d be summoned; the clothes would come off and earnest, embarrassing games
of tag would commence. They’d be followed by some competitive spell-casting, the occasional prophecy reading, and finally loud copulating by the fire. Jeffrey assured me that occult protocols kept him from participating; sex magic had to be channeled by a non-participant, and as host, he was a channeler, not a practioner. I never asked exactly how someone channeled sex-magic, or even what the hell sex-magic was used for. So long as they kept it out of my pool, I didn’t care, but that did tend to be the time I’d call it a night. Maybe I was just a bit of a prude.

“There’s my beautiful wife,” said my husband brightly, the bonfire silhouetting him so that I couldn’t see his face. He pulled me in close, dipping me and ravishing my neck. I snuggled in close, breathing in the smoke already embedded in his clothes. “The prettiest lady here. Possibly the only lady here.”

“Hey, they’re your friends, not mine.”

“Professional associates, lamb,” he corrected. “Important ones. Hey, you know what I think I’m ready for?”

“Charades?”

“You know I’m a Jinga man. No, let’s break out that prickly pear ouzo I brought back from Greece.”

“The hundred proof stuff? In the dubious clay pot that looks like it was made in 5 B.C.?”

“It was made in 5 B.C. Which makes it long overdue for drinking,” he said grinning. He was a little tipsy and feeling good, happy to spread his good cheer. There was a reason Jeffrey Cadge’s parties were so well-attended, and it had everything to do
with their gregarious host.

Back in the kitchen, I saw that the guests had helped themselves to the sticky cheeses I’d been keeping for dessert. Paper wrappings were spread all over the counter, and crumbs of moldy blue gorgonzola lead to the guest bathroom, where I could hear giggling. Plus there were a suspicious number of empty wine bottles stacking up on the counter. We hadn’t put that many bottles out yet, had we? It was early still. On tiptoes I reached into the cabinet over the stove, hoping they hadn’t found the stash of eons-old ouzo.

I couldn’t reach. I pulled a chair over from the breakfast nook and climbed up; it felt rickety, but it was just me who was tipsy, not the chair. My fingers brushed against the aged clay.

“May I enter?” said a voice and I jolted in surprise. Off I fell from my perch, jar spilling from my hand.
Hidden Dragons

Gentle hands caught me in a flash, and then snatched the jar inches from crashing on the terra cotta tile. I, too, was inches from smashing on the floor. I turned my head to see who my rescuer was, hostess smile tremulous but in place despite the awkwardness of our pose.

He was a remarkable looking demon in his own form: Nearly black hide, a pointed head and lovely round eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. They were tawny-brown and held a gentle reserve, a sweetness even, that made me for just a moment forget about my husband’s toxic ancient moonshine. The sweet demeanor was odd, and so were the glasses, but what really surprised me was the rough-honed Franciscan monk habit he wore.

“Monks again,” I said to myself and he cocked his head quizzically.

As he set me upright, I bumbled an apology. “Sorry – yes, I mean, thank you. For catching me. Please, come in. Looking for the restroom? It’s occupied at the moment.”

As if on cue, a burst of rogue laughter came from behind the closed bathroom door. His ebony skin seemed to go even darker for a moment; he was embarrassed. How sweet! A demon who blushed. He set the ancient jar of moonshine delicately on the counter, careful not to touch its wide seal of red wax. His fingers were nearly twice as
long as a human’s.

“I’ll wait. Can I be of help to you?”

“You already have,” I said, nodding to the jar he’d saved.

“Pompeii, about six millenia old,” he said, and he was right. “This wax isn’t nearly that old though. Whatever it’s been used for more recently, I’d say the pot was made for the brothels. You can just see the paintings of the women with their clients.”

I squinted at the rough muddy curves of the jar; there were smudges of red and some blue was still present, but it looked like a messy swirl to me. I was an Asian artifact specialist, after all. “I’m not seeing it.”

“I’ve seen the originals, so I know what I’m looking for.”

I blinked at him. He blushed again. Was he that old? Or was it pictures he’d seen? Just then the bathroom door was flung open and six girls came pouring out, their eyes cocaine-fueled. Joslyn was among them, and she smiled at me, not nearly as high as the others. We watched as the girls tumbled out of the house, back into the party, howling and laughing, taking the energy of the party up another notch.

The demon kept his eyes on the tiles. When he saw me looking at him, he gave an awkward smile and created a more respectful distance between us. As he moved, there was a trace of new book smell and something that made me think of really old metal.

“I’ve seen a lot of otherworldly creatures pass through these rooms,” I said, “but a demon monk is a first.” I retrieved a knife and went to work at chipping away the hard red wax. “What’s a demon like you doing at a party like this?”
“I’m … an overseer. I suppose that would be the proper term. I’m here to oversee the ceremony. I could heat the wax, just slightly; then it could be easily peeled off.”

I pushed the pot at him; he put a hand across the seal. He closed his eyes behind his glasses and concentrated.

“Since when did orgies have monks supervising them?”

Now he went shiny ebony with embarrassment. He snatched his hand away; the wax was a little too soft now and was melting down the sides. Which meant it was melting into the liquor inside.

“Oops,” he said. I thought fast and grabbed the hose from the sink, and cranked the cold water. I sprayed the wax with a steady stream, freezing its melt. When water beaded on the surface, I peeled the wax off before it had a chance to get too hard again.

“Party foul averted,” I said. “Your Brotherhood never has to know.”

“I’m not a monk,” he blurted. “My clan are scholars and historians. I’m not here for the orgy.”

“Oh,” I said, setting down the misshapen wax lid. Now I was blushing. “I didn’t know there was such a thing as a historian demon.” That explained his expertise on the ouzo jar.

He was giving me a spot-on benevolent patient-monk look. Except for the demon action-hero thing, he totally could have been a monk. And he wasn’t brandishing a pike to skewer me, so added points.

“Perhaps that’s because your husband is from a merchant clan; they don’t
generally associate with the scholar clans. Augurs keep the records for the whole demon realm, all seven planes. We track unions and alliances, as well as regular demon business like curses, black magiks, spells, and so on. I, however, specialize in artifacts. I oversee the movement of artifacts from owner to owner.”

Now I understood the connection; Jeffrey’s whole business was moving artifacts from one owner to another, so he’d have to keep an Augur under employ. I myself didn’t often have anything in common with demons, but at the moment, I refrained from talking about my own association with artifacts. Better not to tell strange demons anything personal.

While I set about pouring the ouzo into shot glasses etched with charging bulls, I nudged the dessert plate piled with spicy chorizo pastries, sweetbread rolls and blood custards toward him. Curious, his nose sniffing, he took a step. He was like a rabbit, inching closer as if making sure it was all right. Finally he decided the pastries were harmless and took one.

“That’s wonderful,” he said, nibbling with dull teeth. “What is it?”

“Lemon curd infused with whiskey and cayenne pepper.”

“Delicious. You’re a fine cook, Mrs. Cadge,” he said, seeming to get lost in the tasty tartness.

“What do you do once an artifact’s changed hands?” Did demons have museums like humans did?

“Well, so long as it has gone through proper channels, we don’t do much. Just make a record of it. Unless of course the artifact is activated. Not to worry, most aren’t.
They tend to be considered more… show pieces these days. Decoration, as you yourself use them in your home. In Olden Times, we used artifacts as vessels for our magik. They were used to entrap and enthrall.”

Not surprising news, although it made me wonder if any of the artifacts in our house fell in that category. It was impossible, at least for me, to not notice the electrical charge carried by some of the pieces Jeffrey brought home. Some dinged when Jeffrey was arriving, some hummed with the moon’s cycles, and one or two even blared a siren when black magik was near-by and intended to harm us.

I knew the history of most of them from Jeffrey himself, but now he never mentioned they might even be magik traps.

Wait.

I had to check myself. Demons lied. And even when they weren’t lying, they had agendas, in all things. Even blushing demon monks with action hero moves and a penchant for lemon curd pastries. I didn’t know this guy, and couldn’t begin to guess what his game was. Regardless of his monk-guise or scholarly posturing, I had to assume he was bullshitting me until proven otherwise.

Hanging out with demons required keen political awareness at all times; it’s one of the reasons I didn’t drink much at our parties.

“Your husband owns some significant pieces, as a matter of fact,” he was saying, biting into a calf liver and mascarpone cheese tart. “That is really tasty. Really tasty.”

“That’s my husband’s favorite, too. He’s got great taste. What would you say was the most significant in the collection?” I asked casually, lining up small shot glasses
on a gold tray for the ouzo. *Two could play the bullshit game,* I thought. My curiosity was piqued; a bad habit I picked up from Jeffrey, or my pop.

“Of what I know he owns, the Chien Long Guanga, for sure.”

“I’m not surprised. I remember how determined he was to buy that from my father.”

“What was your father doing with it?” His voice was a little aggressive; he was tipping his hand in his interest in the lantern.

“He thought it’d make a nice wedding present.”

“Mr. Cadge purchased it as part of your marriage pact?”

“You make it sound like a dowry,” I said. He didn’t laugh. “It doesn’t matter who bought it. In marriage, what’s his is mine.”

“In human marriage. In demon marriage, what’s yours is his. May I see it?”

I looked at him hard for a moment; he didn’t look away. This demon definitely had an agenda. Jeffrey had rigged all our artifacts, and especially the Hidden Dragon Light, with alarms, so there was no need to be concerned for its safety. Not to mention, we were in the middle of a party of demons with allegiances to my husband; if he tried anything, he’d be eviscerated and burned to ash as a party favor.

“Sure,” I said and wiped my hands on a towel.

I led him into our living room, where most of our collection was on display, as well as a shrine for my parents’ ashes. The demon-monk ignored everything in the room except the lantern, and we had some remarkable pieces, both human and demon. Housed in a special alcove Jeffrey had had built for it, the recessed lighting above and below
made the wood shine. Behind the amber glass panels hovered the familiar glowing ball. Whenever I came close, it would unwind and turn into a dragon made of mist. I’d come to think of it as something of a pet—it even belched mist-fire at me when I talked to it. I purposefully stayed back and let the black-skinned demon take his turn.

“How do you know its origin?”

I’d traced the lantern back to the 2nd century AD, to the Western Han dynasty. No expert archeologists had ever studied it—the owners I could track seemed content on keeping it solely in their private collection, as we did—but other artifacts similar in style had been made during a particularly vital time of trade with outer regions of Asia. This exposure to other cultures resulted in the fusion of carving styles. The glass was still something of a mystery, but generalized research made me think it was the contribution of a trade and diplomacy mission by the Romans around that time. Their glass dated back easily that far, and was of the same fine, colored quality the lantern’s glass was.

However, I wanted to hear what this artifact scholar had to say. I kept my answer vague. “There are very few records; one can’t be sure.”

“The humans have decided the Romans provided the glass, but they’re wrong,” he said. “The glass was once indigenous to the northern shores of Shandong, and it predates any contact with the Romans.”

“By how long?”

“The Xia Dynasty.”

That made the lantern almost a thousand years older than the experts, including myself, thought. Impossible. There was no glass manufacturing that long ago.
The scholar demon seemed to read my mind. “Glass is what happens when sand
is super-heated; it was everywhere when they discovered him.”

“Discovered who?”

“The dragon that lived in the cove near what is today the village of Xiacun. He
made the glass.” His face was close to the lantern, pushing his glasses all the way up his
nose. He was enthralled; I was increasingly disturbed. I couldn’t help but think of my
first encounter with the lamp: eight years ago, in my father’s shop, fresh off the delivery
truck. I remembered my first impression, and how taken I was with it—just as the demon
monk was now. And I remembered the two black-suited goons who’d come to steal it,
and how Huan and his friends had fruitlessly tried to fight them off, and how Pop’s and
my weapons froze in mid-air. I understood now the thieves were demons; might have
even figured it out at the time. But I’d never forgotten the wrench in my gut that told me
that under no circumstances should they get their claws on the lantern. That the lantern
was beyond priceless. It had never occurred to me just why they wanted it so bad, and
now that same sense of dread was creeping up on me again.

“Is he in there?”

“Who?” I asked, not wanting him to answer.

“The dragon.”

“It’s a lighting trick lighting,” I said. “It casts the illusion of one.”

A long pause as he assessed my truthfulness. Then: “I’m sure you know the story
of Nian, Mrs. Cadge?”

“No,” I said, lying some more. “What’s a neon?” All Chinese knew Nian. My
own father had told me the story when I was five and I’d never forgotten it. My mother had been irate; being white and American, she thought putting monsters into little kids’ heads wasn’t such a great idea. My father, however, knew there really were monsters, and was just preparing me.

“Many thousands of years ago, a dragon terrorized the land,” he began. “This monster’s name was Nian, which is the same word for ‘year.’ Nian had a very big mouth and it would fly around, scooping people up and eating them, every night at the beginning of the new year.

“The village thought they were doomed, and that all the people in the world would be devoured by the dragon, but the people were saved. An old man, who was an immortal god, arrived. He told the monster that while it was very good at eating people, they were not a challenge for such a creature. Could he instead swallow the beasts of prey, who were the creature’s worthy opponents.”

This was the same story my father told me, only his version had much more fire and blood. Maybe that’s what my mother objected to.

“The old man rode the dragon, who was stupid and greedy,” he continued. “He rode it into the forests and the woods, and neither Nian nor the beasts bothered the humans any more.

“The old man told the people to hang red paper on their doors every New Year, because red was the color the monster feared most. He told the villagers to light off firecrackers to chase Nian away, if it should ever return.”

“So that’s how the Chinese came to make fireworks?” I asked, sticking to
ignorance.

“Yes, that’s right. That’s exactly right. But I’m sure you already knew that.”

The demon’s face was right up against the glass, but the golden sphere remained inert.

“What doesn’t he show himself?”

“I told you, it’s just a trick of the lighting. I wouldn’t get too close–Jeffrey’s got the whole display unit wired to electrocute anyone but him or me.” My hands were ice-cold; I rubbed them, thinking it was time to get back to the party and its nice big bonfire.

“I would really like to see him. Can you entice him out?”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I studied the Chien Long Guanga for years, Mrs. Cadge. My name is Asher Quamaller Augur, and it’s been a dream of mine to see the dragon. Please. I am asking you.” By giving me his name, he was giving me a measure of power over him; I could summon him, bind him with his full name. Knowing someone’s full name was no joke in demon culture; he was rolling over and showing his belly, letting me know he was no danger to me.

I could kick him out of our house right now, even without evoking any demon dealings, but my curiosity was over-riding the queasy feeling in my stomach. I wanted to know the truth about that lantern, and this scholar, demon or no, could be my key to learning the origin of the last artifact my father ever gave me—and why it was so valuable.

Taking a deep breath, I reached a hand toward the lantern. The familiar buzz of the alarm charm stirred the blood in my fingers, and then they touched the mottled glass.
I stroked it fondly. Almost immediately the cloudy light inside began to reform itself into a dragon shape. Its teeny eyes blinked open to see the two giant faces peering down at it and it gave a smoky bark. It opened its wings, rearing back as if to attack --

The demon monk’s mouth dropped open, revealing a forked green tongue amid the dull white teeth. He saw me staring, closed his mouth.

“Hello, Nian,” he breathed.

I coughed, covering a nervous choke of a laugh. It was impossible, the idea of the beast who ate half of China millennia ago, living in a lamp in my living room. He was wrong, he was lying, but I found myself laughing so I wouldn’t throw up.

“Mrs. Cadge, I must tell you something. Your husband may own the lantern,” said the demon scholar, never taking his eyes from the smoky apparition. “But it is you who are the keeper of Nian.”
“Prophecy says that Nian will ride again, to devour the land. You must guard him well.”

My skin rippled with gooseflesh at the words of the black-skinned demon, so fixated on the tiny smoke dragon in my lantern. *This demon was insane,* I thought. Mental illness wasn’t unusual in demons, but it was still sad, and in this case, chilling.

“Asher Augur, we’ve been looking for you!” Jeffrey’s booming voice came from behind us. Asher startled, snapping upright as if he’d been caught doing something illicit. I turned, feeling a wash of relief at the sight of my husband.

Asher bowed deeply to my husband, who stood with Franklin at his side. While Jeffrey still had his magnanimous host look on, Franklin was glaring at Asher.

“I --I was admiring your collection of artifacts,” Asher stammered.

“I’ll give you a tour later, buddy.”

Franklin swooped in and put an arm around Asher’s thin shoulders, escorting him out of the room. Asher went like a cowering whelp; it was obvious he was afraid of these demons.

Jeffrey held a hand out for me.

“Is that guy for real?” I asked, keeping my eyes averted but took it. My hand was trembling, and the warmth of his skin burned. It was too much, what Asher had told me. I knew it was a fallacy, created by him or by those who’d told him, but I couldn’t let it go; it sat on my conscience like a mossy film. Did my father know this lantern’s
mythology? Did Jeffrey?

“I know, right? Blame the Demon Council for making us invite a buzz kill bookworm. But he’s what makes this fealty ceremony official, so what do you do?”

With a last look at the puff of smoke that ate the world, I let Jeffrey guide me outside.

We stepped out onto the deck to the demon version of cheering, and all thoughts of Nian were sand-blasted from my brain. Our guests were doing something akin to ululating fused with Tibetan throat chanting. It was both war cry and celebratory banshee call, and sent birds racing from trees.

“Now we’re talking,” Jeffrey cheered, lapping it up. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders, gleefully sharing the moment.

The miasma of the bonfire was thicker than ever, and before it was a tall black-metal throne, complete with red velvet cushion. The men were all grinning big, their eyes alight in that way that usually came after the drinking and before the belching of brimstone. Jeffrey wore his most magnanimous smile, and he guided me to the chair, putting a shot of the ouzo in my hand. A dollop of red wax floated in it; I worked on picking it out as he waved at the demon monk, trying to get his attention.

I saw Asher standing by the fire, holding a book that had spikes on all four sides. He bowed fast, over and over, and opened his mouth wide to make a shiny exhale into the flames. The fire jumped higher and higher as he puked silver confetti into it. My stomach clenched tighter.

Returning his attention to Jeffrey, the demon Augur raised his glass and everyone
in the crowd raised their shot glasses and at once downed their high proof ouzo in a single swallow. Glad for some liquid obliteration, I joined them, the alcohol scorching all the way down, my vision blurring with involuntary tears. For an instant, I remembered the time my father served me his home-made plum wine; I’d dropped the glass in revulsion and where the liquor hit the wooden floor, it ate at the lacquer finish.

“Gentlemen, as you all know, my wife and I will be married for seven years at the next new moon,” Jeffrey was saying. “It’s a truly magikal event, one that I wanted to share with you all. You, my dear,” he said, turning to me, “are very near to being one of us, in more than just name or human law. Membership into a demon clan is uncommon and rarely offered to humans. But you’ve won my heart, and now, you’ll become a Cadge, according to clan law. As is our tradition, we will now shower you with gifts and pledges of fealty. Not a bad deal, huh?”

“Guess it depends on the gifts,” I said quite seriously, but he laughed.

One at a time, well-groomed demons in human guises handed me otherworldly gifts. First was a big book covered in thick grayish fur. The hairs pricked. I turned back to see who’d given it to me. The demon bowed and stepped away, making room for the next. This one put a pot sealed with thick grey goo on top of the book. The smell was ripe and brassy, and I quickly handed both items off to my husband, who was glowing with delight. With each gift came a deep bow, their heads dipping low to the ground. Over by the fire, Asher scribbled each gift into his book, never once meeting my eyes.

I’d seen a scene like this once, in a movie. Some gangster movie, a wedding scene when the wife marries her made man, and one at a time, the entire guest list came
up and handed her an envelope filled with money and gave her a kiss. It was the kiss that was important – the kiss was their sign that they were taking her into their closed community; she was one of them now.

For demons to be bowing before me was wrong in a way I couldn’t put my finger on. I kept thinking about the saffron-robed monks and their grandmothers, and how determined they were to cast me out of their temple. And now these demons were piling gifts on me – literally.

I looked to Jeffrey for affirmation. He was smiling benevolently, posturing like a king, but looking like a little boy to me. He’d worked hard for all this; far be it from me to take it away from him.

“I love you more than my hair color,” I said.

“I love you more than the smell of gasoline,” he said, eyes alight, and poured me another drink.

A writhing bag was handed to me. I quickly set it aside and instead fixated on a new gift: A metal box with markings that seemed to sigh when I touched them. They were nice and cool and I liked them. Other gifts came, but I kept my hands on the icy box. At some point, I held it to my head, which was suddenly burning and spinning, then stroked my cleavage with it. I was feverish.

The audience of men had shed their human disguises and now all looked like what they were: demons from the all over the Seven Realms. Humans can “see” one or two demons at a time and accept that as reality, but when a mess of the scaly things got together in their true form, our brains disconnected. Even drunk, all I saw were smears
where faces ought to be, with the occasional razor-edged tooth or hard black horn or boney piercings jutting out. Where the eyes should be, I saw miniscule burning bonfires that left tracers when the demon moved.

But one thing I could discern: They seemed to like what I was doing with the box, which was currently buried between my sweating breasts.

“What is this thing?” I asked Jeffrey, retrieving it and setting it aside.

“A boom box. It pumps out pheromones, baby. We’ll play with it later,” he promised. “What the Hell—” he said and was suddenly off to talk to Asher, who’d caught his attention by waving rods in frantic patterns in front of the fire. This was drawing other guests, and my fealty line dissipated.

The porno box was looking enticing to me again; in order to resist its lure, I pushed it into the mass of wiggling, writhing, furry, glowing gifts beside me. There was one remaining gift-giver before me. He was a demon of very small stature, mostly bones, with truncated legs that looked like birth defects. He was waggling that snake’s tongue at me. Rhinehold, revealed in all his true glory: a puny, misshapen little weasel. He was suddenly scaling my leg, making a bee-line for my lap. Repulsed, I gave him a hard shove, but demons are damn strong and he hung on, licking my hands with that nasty tongue.

“Rhinehold, get the fuck off—” I said, putting a hand around his bony neck to hold him back. I looked for Jeffrey, who was busy at the fire, which had gone a sickly bright green. The other demons had formed a circle around the pit, and Asher’s rods transformed into wavering, wobbling lines. Or maybe that was the ouzo. But when the
entertainment rose from the heart of the scorching flames, I knew what I saw: Belina.

The bitch was back. I stood suddenly, catching runt Rhinehold by surprise, and gave him a mighty toss by the neck. He flew through the air like a dog’s throw toy and landed with a graceless thud. He looked up at me with a burning fury. Sometimes I forgot they were demons: petty, rageful and mean.

Looking around for some support, I saw Franklin see me, but he was across the fire. I pointed to Rhinehold, who was about to charge, and Franklin started for us, but it was too late--

Rhinehold leapt to his feet, dug his taloned declaws into the grass, and sprinted at me.
Deal with a She-Devil

Rhinehold, the most unwelcome, most grotesquely lascivious guest at my anniversary party charged me, claws out and ready to rip my flesh. Eyes on Franklin, racing to intercept from the other side of the bonfire, my mouth opened to scream Jeffrey’s name when a chain whipped around Rhinehold’s neck and locked firm.

Behind him, Belina, twirling her snaky chains all around her, had lassoed the puny jerk and was dragging him into the fire. He coughed black ooze at me, clawing at the chain to release him. I flipped him off. That’s when he was whipped into the air and over the fire.

He wasn’t the only one caught in Belina’s bondage, but he was the one that made me momentarily glad she’d crashed my party. Demons and escorts alike were enthralled with the green-skinned chaintrix hooker; ululating war cries filled the heated air, Jeffrey’s among them. Franklin was still looking at me, checking to see if I needed help; I waved him off. Danger averted. Belina held Rhinehold and several other of my husband’s “professional associates” in the flames until their Hell-hardened hides caught fire and burst into sparklers.

It made me think of Chinese New Year. And then, finally, I did throw up.
Jeffrey carried me to bed. The party raged outside, and would until sun-up, but I was safe in our king-sized bed, the one bound by wards and a door enchanted with safety spells.

Dizzy, drunk and exhausted, I gazed up at my handsome husband’s face, gone red from anger and worry, and was inexplicably so very glad to be home, even in the midst of our unruly party guests, the chaintrix entertainment, the scholar demon who was convinced our lantern was a real world-devouring dragon, and who I wasn’t certain I didn’t believe.

“Thank you, fuego,” I said, already falling into slumber.

“Get some rest, lamb,” came Jeffrey’s voice to me. “I’ll take care of everything.”

#

“Please, no, baby,” I said as a still-wet-from-the-shower Jeffrey dashed about, getting dressed. The sun was scratching bright lines into the walls, making my skull pound. How could he be so awake and sprightly after that all-night rager? It wasn’t fair that demons didn’t need half the sleep humans did. “Don’t go. You just got home.”

“I got a new gig last night. Big money. Second honeymoon on the moon kind of money. I gotta go, lamb.”

“Can’t you give me more than sixteen hours?” I was whining and I meant every word. I was having a hard time remember what happened the night before; my mind repeatedly drifted toward thoughts of smoke, and then suddenly go dark. I flashed on Rhinehold, and the sneer on his creepy face as he charged at me, and my gut churned.

“I know you’ve have a rough couple days,” Jeffrey was saying, “but I’m still a
consultant, which means I’m on call. It’s not my choice. Not until the promotion goes through. I’m sorry.”

I rolled over, trying to find a comfortable position. My whole body hurt. He was leaving and I couldn’t stop him, and that hurt my heart. He was even packing his Kevlar armor, sneakily, as if I wouldn’t see, but I was the one who got the green blobby stuff off it last time, so I knew just where I’d put it.

“Who hired you?” I said.

“Rhinehold Reechy.”

“That little runt weasel.” No doubt he was doing it as an act of vengeance for shunning him last night. Demons would throw around tons of money if it assuaged their damaged egos.

“It’s a Hell of a lot of money, Rini.” He was pulling out all his best suits as well as a pair of hiking boots with ice gear. That made for an odd image in my head: My debonair husband climbing a glacier wall in a Tom Ford suit. Where in the Seven Realms was he going?

“He’s never coming to one of our parties again.”

“Damn right. But for the moment, he’s my boss. I gotta go, Rini. You can yell at me about everything you want to when I get back. I promise. In fact, I can’t wait; you know how I love it when you scream.” He gave me a kiss on the forehead and headed for the door, suitcase in hand, the one with the magical expanding pockets so he could pack for a year if he needed to. And based on all the equipment and clothes he’d taken, he needed to.
“Jeffrey.”

He stopped at the door. I was helpless in the face of my handsome man, anxious to go, anxious to get back.

Then he remembered himself and dropped the suitcase. He climbed back into bed with me, rolled on top of me and gave me a kiss that tasted of honey and very old ouzo. I inhaled deeply, wanting to capture his scent, memorize it. Night jasmine and the ice-touched juniper of wintery woods, a touch of fennel, the pomade in his hair, and the leather of expensive new cars.

I had a sense of foreboding, something terrible was in the air, coming this way. He seemed to sense this, and stroked my face, his fingers like velvet.

“Everything is going to be amazing, Rini. I promise. Let’s just get through this month.”

The look on his face was so earnest, it made my heart swell. Soon I’d have a husband who stayed. But for now he was gone. I let him go. “Be careful. Come home soon.”

“Oh! I forgot to mention,” he said, standing up and reaching for his suitcase.

“Belina needed to crash here last night. She’s downstairs.”

#

Cotton still fogged in my brain, so I walked lightly down the back stairs into the kitchen. I hesitated at the door to scope the area. The basement door was locked and glowing purple like it should. The counters were a maul of glasses and plates and leftovers, some chewed and some still whole. A glance out the window revealed that a
sizeable chunk of lawn had burned during the night, and the deck was hard to see under all the trash and pig parts.

A deep inhale helped gird my will and steady my stomach. Things were rotting already, or had arrived half-rotten. I’m not sure what Jeffrey was talking about last night when he said he’d take care of everything, but cleaning up obviously wasn’t it. But then, he always made the messes and I always cleaned them up.

The five billion year old ouzo jar was still on the counter, miraculously still intact. I picked it up; there was still a bit of the ancient gasoline in the bottom. I glanced around, looking for the red wax lid. It was probably under one of these piles I’d spend the day digging through. I held the open mouth of the pot to my nose and sniffed – Phew! Those poor whores, I thought, having to drink this stuff–

“Thatta girl! It’s five o’clock somewhere, right?”

I looked at Belina over the top of the jar. She stood in the doorway from the living room, wearing one of my old dresses. At least she wasn’t naked.

“None for me, though. I got a gig later, and after last night, I’m all about hydrating.”

“Belina,” I greeted her, keeping my voice neutral. She had saved me from a nasty incident with ol’ Rhinehold, after all.

“Don’t blame Jeffrey. I had to do the gig. Do you know how money-magik works? Once the cash exchanges hands, we’re bound to the deal.”

“I know what money-magik is.” The deposit had been paid, and that meant if Jeffrey didn’t break the deal, she was bound to do the job. They both knew she’d be
returning last night. That rapscallion had shined me on. I hated when he did that.

“So there you go,” she said, shrugging. She peeled Roquefort cheese off a plate with long translucent nails. The cheese must have been hard and nearly spoiled, but you’d never know, the way she was hoovering it up. “What Jeffrey wants, Jeffrey gets.”

That was entirely too much familiarity for me. Exactly how well did she know my husband? She wasn’t from his clan (his people were hornless and red). Must be a business relationship.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked, still aspiring to cordial. She was a demon and Jeffrey wasn’t here, so no matter my irritation, I needed to be somewhat delicate in the way I handled her. She could still set fire to my house with me in it. I began collecting the plates to be scraped of their piles of masticated bones.

“Who slept?” she snorted and I gripped my stack tight, making them clatter. “Relax, sister. I was the entertainment. I had thirty-five demons in Japanese chain bondage—a personal record for me, proud to say. Time got away from us, sun started coming up and suddenly everyone’s bolting for the portals, jumping through the fire. I was dog-tired and bleeding from—well, never mind about that. Jeffrey let me catch a few winks. That’s all.”

“I know,” I said, but what I was thinking was, *Demons lie.* They lie all the time. I had to assume she was lying now. Just like Asher Augur and his tale of the world-destroying dragon in my living room, or Jeffrey, assuring me he’d canceled Belina. They lied, and it wasn’t always to cover up wrong-doing, or to protect another, or even to manipulate their way to something they wanted. They did it because it was their nature.
If you really wanted to know the truth from a demon, the only way was to bind them with an enchantment, thus forcing them into it. But I didn’t do magik—I just wasn’t that kind of girl—and besides, I didn’t know her name to bind her with anyway.

So what to do?

“I suppose I owe you a thank you, actually.” Flattery generally went far, so that was my first line with the dominatrix. “You took care of a particularly ornery guest for me.”

“Did I?” she asked, studying her shiny sharp nails. I couldn’t tell if she was bullshitting. “Well, you’re welcome, I guess. Glad to be of help.” She sucked at her middle fingernail, getting the last bit of cheese out from under the tip.

No traction that direction. New tactic required.

“Look, I got a lot of stuff last night that I don’t really want or need. Did you see anything you liked?”

She tried to look like she didn’t care, but she was interested all right. Her strong jaws stopped gnashing the cheese and her eyes flickered yellow for an instant.

“You giving it away?”

“I’ll trade you for something.”

Money-magik wasn’t magik-magik; money worked the same way for demons as it did for humans: You pay for something, you get something. Bartering with her counted as a binding deal.

“What do you want?” she asked casually.

“What do you want?” I asked in return. She moved to the French doors so she
could better see the sprawl of booty I’d collected last night.

“I really like that chandelier with the fairylights.”

That piece had seven tiny lamps strung together with braided rope, and inside each lamp was a little glowing bulb shaped like a fairy. For a moment, I wondered if they were real, like the *Chien Long Guanga* was supposed to be.

“I’ll give you that if you’ll give me some information.”

Belina licked her lips. She wanted that chandelier. Probably already had a place in her house all picked out.

Demons were greedy. They never passed up an offering and they almost never passed up a deal.

“Tell me what you want to know, first.”

“First say we have a deal,” I said, feeling more in control of the situation.

She pretended to think it over, but I could tell it was a done deal. She nodded, now grazing on a massive pig knuckle I’d pickled and braised nearly a month ago.

“Okay then.” I only had one question, so it had to be phrased exactly right. I didn’t know what question I’d wanted ask until I heard the words blurt out of me. “Why is my seventh anniversary so important?”

It had been scratching at my subconscious for weeks, this whole scenario—the seven parties, the fealty gifts, the promotion, how moody Jeffrey was acting, how big of a deal it all was to him. Something big was happening, and I damn well wanted to know what it was.

“You’re just as dim as you look,” she said smiling. She had razor sharp bottom
teeth, across which she ran her tongue lightning fast. “I figured that would be the question you would ask. Looks like I get a free chandelier.”

“You have to answer—Where are you going?”

Her hand on the door to the deck, she gave me a searing look of contempt.

“Here’s the irony, human. I was bound previously by a deal with Jeffrey to not talk about your marriage— not to you, not to anyone. I can’t tell you what happens to you on your seventh. And here’s the best part—not my fault. I made the deal with you in good faith, so I still get the chandelier.”

I had walked right into this. I should have known Jeffery wouldn’t leave a house guest roaming around to give away his big surprises. They’d outsmarted me.

That was the other thing about demons. They weren’t stupid. It’s hard to trick them because they were already working all the angles.

But wait. She said “what happens to you on your seventh.” That wasn’t my question, my question was why was my seventh anniversary so important. She’d verified something was going to happen, which I knew, but now I knew it was going to happen to me.

My eyes narrowed.

Belina was out there pulling her loot from the pile, holding the lamps up to her face and shaking it. The lights lit up, bright and pale green. “Come to momma, my widdle babies,” she was saying to the lamps. Did she mean to slip, or was she just so giddy over her prize, she hadn’t put any thought into her words? The lights ricocheted around their glass orbs, and it occurred to me that fairies really were required for
I was liking this heinous creature less and less. There wasn’t any more information to be had from her. No need to keep her around.

I grabbed the sea salt off the counter and went to the door. Grabbing a handful, I poured out a solid, thick line on the floor, essentially barring her from reentry.

She saw me and hissed. “That’s rude!”

“Rude is wearing one of my dresses without asking. Rude is coming to my fealty ceremony and engaging in sex acts with my guests. Rude is making a deal with the wife of your business partner and then cheating her.”

“You are ferociously cute,” she said with the lasciviousness all demons seemed prone to. “All right, Renee Jia Tou Cadge.” Saying my proper name let me know she could bind me if she wanted. It worked both ways. But she’d never have the demon balls to try it; Jeffrey would eviscerate her, Japanese chain bondage expert or not. It was just her way of reminding me of her power, and my place in her world.

“I’ll give you a little something,” she said. “Rini.” So she didn’t know she’d slipped. And as with humans, a demon making a sloppy mistake usually meant a lot. I stood silently, as if I couldn’t care less when in fact my stomach was starting a slow climb up my esophagus.

Belina pulled the dress she’d borrowed over her head, and stood completely naked on my cedar deck, chandelier filled with poor innocent fairies in one hand and picking up her dominatrix bag of tricks and chains in her other hand. “There’s fine print in every deal made with a Cadge.”
“What are you talking about?” I said, trying to sound bored.

“Come on, human. Haven’t you ever signed something for Jeffrey?”

She couldn’t reference my marriage directly, but she could talk around it. I know what she was referencing: Written on soft lambskin, it was the “standard marriage contract for all Cadge demons,” he’d said. “It’s how we make it legit in the Otherworld.” Jeffrey had handed me a giant emu quill to sign with, and then he sealed the scroll with his own blood mixed in black wax. It was their version of the marriage license; that’s what he said.

Now my brain was thrumming. Where did that thing go? Had I seen it since the wedding?

And why was this lying, skeevy Hellwhore making me distrust my own husband?

Demons lie.

“Time to go,” I growled.

“Thanks for the parting gifts.”

And with that, she leapt easily twenty feet into the air, and as she returned to earth, the firepit burst into Hellfire. She disappeared into the blue flames, and with a pop, the entryway she’d used to crash our party closed behind her, and I was left to wonder just what it was I’d signed six years and eleven months ago.
The Fine Print

Our wedding day had a double ceremony and a double reception – the human one not well attended, and the demon one breaking fire codes. Jeffrey’s parents couldn’t attend; apparently they weren’t allowed to cross over to this realm, and I still wasn’t willing to travel transdimensionally to meet them. But there were representatives from Jeffrey’s clan who attended both events. His brothers Thierry and Kline had been as doting as a girl could hope from future demon brothers-in-law. They plied us with drinks and toasts and toasted drinks all night, and Thierry DJ’d, playing tracks from MuteMath and Cinnamon Chasers.

My dress kept getting trampled, on and off the dance floor. It was styled in the Chinese tradition with high Mandarin collar, but I’d modified it to have a long train, and all night, guests walked all over it, jerking me around. I learned to remain still or risk being choked by my own gown.

“This way, Mrs. Cadge,” an Augur demon had called to me. His scaled hands hid in the wide sleeves of his ceremonial robe made of sleek, swishing leather. A glance back showed me my dress was clear of obstruction. I followed him to a separate room from the reception with an ornately carved black wood pedestal and dozens of demons wearing official-looking badges that shimmered like mother of pearl in the candlelight.

“More speeches?” I asked Jeffrey, nodding to the pedestal.

“The official paperwork,” he said, helping load a thick stack of papers onto the surface. “This is what makes us legit in all Seven Realms.”
I went to step forward but got jerked back yet again – a young Augur demon carrying ink jars and giant quills in the curve of his arm was standing on it.

“Excuse me?” I asked, nodding to where he stood.

His dark scales went mildly bronze; he was blushing, but he still didn’t move.

“Axxk malvarssense,” barked the leather-robed Augur, or at least something that sounded like that. The intern-Augur bolted over to him, offering up the quills to his impatient boss.

I stepped forward, into the glow of my new husband’s loving eyes, and I was ready to sign anything at all. Jeffrey’s color was high, too, his human guise gone bright red with excitement. I had told him he could be himself during the demon reception, but he’d refused. He said he felt human that night, and wanted to look it.

Both Augurs busied themselves with recording our wedding presents, and another demon, this one in a slick shiny suit with red ram horns and a half dozen of those pearl badges, stood with us before that daunting stack of contracts.

“I’ll be signing on behalf of the Demon InterDimensional Council,” he told us. “We’re extremely pleased to give our approval of this union.” We were extremely pleased to have their approval, and not just because their wedding gift was an extremely impressive golden goblet that only a giant could drink from, or maybe a small giant could bathe in. It meant certain protections for Jeffrey; he was sanctioned to be in the human world.

“Marriage licenses and certificates are ridiculous in the Cadge realm,” Franklin was saying, helping Jeffrey to get the contracts in order.
“This is nothing compared to the Moiety clan,” said Jeffrey. “They dedicate an entire week of feasting and contract signing.” Everyone laughed in appreciation – those crazy Moiety demons. I gave a small smile, but wasn’t in on the joke. Franklin, Jeffrey’s best man, winked at me.

As we got to work penning our signatures, a pretty pink demon, part of the event planning team, delicately tugged at the difficult train. “Shall we do something with this?” he asked conspiratorially. “Yes, please,” I whispered back. As I distractedly signed whatever Jeffrey fed my quill, I also helped the pink demon pin up the train, sculpting it into a bustle. It was tattered and filthy, but I still very much wanted to save it.

“Sign, Rini,” Jeffrey would say every few seconds, and I’d turn and scribble, then turn back to the train. At some point, I noticed even the few humans who’d remained for this reception had left the room. Even Pop was gone, which I thought was odd. He was all about the paperwork.

“We’re going to have to sever it, missus,” said the pink demon and I sagged. He was right. The bustle wasn’t working; there just wasn’t enough of the silky fabric to work with. He pulled a massive pair of silver sheers from an attaché half their size and as he got to work slaying my train, I kept signing, trying not to be upset. Jeffrey put an arm around me for comfort.

And then it was done. All contracts executed, and the dress removed from its train.

#

“There’s fine print in every deal made with a Cadge.” That’s what Belina had
It was foolish to outright believe a demon, and ridiculous to commit to action based on what one said. So why was I letting that skanky she-devil sex worker into my head?

The dish washer had ran continuously all morning, and now I took a station at the sink, up to my elbows in the kind of industrial cleaner only found in Chinatown restaurants, the kind that would peel the skin off my hands if it weren’t for the industrial rubber gloves I wore. I scrubbed, I dumped, I cleaned and scoured and the whole time, I couldn’t stop thinking.

Something was going to happen to me on our seventh anniversary. That’s what Belina told me. What if I just asked Jeffrey? That was a dead-end; he was bound by Cadge rites not to talk about it until after the anniversary. Which irked me all the more: If it was a good thing, there wouldn’t be all this secrecy. I’d have been told before we said “I do” what was going to happen.

So what had I signed?

I switched to waste disposal, cleaning away the old and rotten. I jammed so many pastries and brined root vegetables into the garbage disposal it sent up smoke signals. Then I filled the trash can over and over. Plastic bags bulging with pig knuckles, massive rib bones and garlic-coated hard cheeses were arduously dragged to the trash bins in the garage. None of it could distract me.

What if this was just demon meddling? If Belina was trying to disrupt my happy home, there would be Hell to pay.
My kitchen was spit-shine clean and I was soaked with a sweat that smelled like rancid ouzo. I stood with ragged mop in hand, trying to focus my memory on those contracts. All I saw in my mind’s eye were official-looking seals and tons of tiny, squiggly writing.

Where would he keep that damned marriage scroll? It wasn’t in the bank deposit box, as I was the only one with access. Pacts and deals were one thing, but demons aren’t allowed to sign earthly contracts of any kind with humans. This was a law instated by the Demon InterDimensional Council, who oversaw demon business on the various planes. It was one of the benefits of having a human wife; it was someone to sign their name to human contracts on their behalf.

I knew this house inside and out and the scroll wasn’t in any of the rooms I had access to. Jeffrey kept two rooms for his business. One was the basement for his Scotch and the transdimensional portal; the other, his office upstairs, the one where he kept overflow inventory for his business. The basement I had access to; the office was locked up tight, even to me.

*Guess I’ll be starting in the basement,* I thought. I turned to the purple alien alarm plate by the door. It glowed passively back.

I waved off the Cadge family crest and it shined back a friendly pass-go green. At the bottom of the stairs was the wine rack Belina had chained herself to just last night. Beyond that was the portal, a swirling, mercury mass of mystic gases and light, purples and whites floating two feet above the cement floor. It was benign lavender today, the surface like a hot tub, light emitting from deep within. Kind of pretty, really, with its
frame of etched symbols.

From front-on, the portal was about two feet wide and five feet high, capable of expanding and adjusting to the size of whatever was passing through. From the side, it disappeared completely.

Off to the right, the room was stacked with crates of hundred-year-old Glenfidditch. I ignored them; those were definitely Jeffrey’s property. In a dark corner, we stored the furniture from Pop’s house. I’d inherited everything of his when he passed. I remembered driving it across-country myself, crying all the way. Pop would want me to find that scroll; I could practically hear his voice in my head, urging me on.

In another corner were cardboard boxes in piles four deep. The lids weren’t taped down, so they were easy to open and rustle through. Most just contained my childhood relics, books from college, and house wares we weren’t using; we kept a few boxes of Pop’s accounting records just in case the IRS ever decided to come poking, but no official papers that belonged to Jeffrey, and certainly no marriage scroll. I did find a file on the dragon lantern, and pulled that out. I’d look at that later, when I wasn’t busy being a snoopy wife.

“All right, Pop—help me out,” I said aloud, looking at the teak desk he had kept in the living room, dwarfing the couch, drowning in papers. “Where do I look, old man?”

And in my head I could hear him say, “How about the room he lock up? Stop wasting time – you avoiding.”

He was right. The contract, if it was that valuable, wouldn’t be where I, or anyone coming through the portal, could stumble on it. It would be in his office. I would
have to break in. The thought wasn’t a happy one. So far I hadn’t done anything invasive; I still had plausible deniability on my side, should he ask what I did with my Sunday. But cracking the door to his private stash—that I’d have to explain.

“Maybe he the one have to explain,” came Pop’s voice, and up the basement stairs I went. I waved my hand over the alarm to lock it and headed up another flight of stairs to Jeffrey’s massive, private, locked room. He’d knocked out the walls in two consecutive bedrooms to give himself plenty of space. He limed the walls with wards harmless to he and I but problematic in that magikal way for anyone else. Then he sealed one doorway with drywall, and installed seven iron deadbolts on the other.

Jeffrey had the only set of keys. This room was his private office, and I’d never had a problem respecting that privacy. Until now.

The only way I was going to get in there was to break the door down or call a locksmith. It was hard to picture myself with an axe hacking through the door, but somehow bringing an outsider into the house to open my husband’s office didn’t seem right, either.

And then I laughed. Here I was, trying to protect him, even now. Of course breaking into his office wasn’t the right thing to do, but neither was having me sign a marriage contract that had a gooey black surprise center. *There was fine print!*

I was projecting. *Calm down*, I told myself. Until I read the damned thing, I couldn’t know what it contained. I went to find the phone book.

#

Chuck the Locksmith was a compact man in a grey jumpsuit, his hair buzzed high
and tight, like ex-military. His tool box was very orderly, each screwdriver and wrench lined up by size and kind. It was somehow comforting to have someone who’d seen some stuff be the one to break into my husband’s office. He didn’t know it, but this was Black Ops.

He got to work on the seven deadbolts without a word and I paced the hallway chewing a nail. About three locks in, he said, “I’m not gonna ask what we’re doing here, but I need to know if I’m going to get a nasty phone call from an irate husband.”

“He’s out of town indefinitely.”

“So I should expect a call later?”

“I imagine he’ll just be angry at me. Are you married?”

“Can’t say I do this for fun,” he said. “I do it because it keeps her in QVC and me out of bankruptcy.”

“How long?”

“Seventeen years.”

“I think my husband has a big surprise planned for our seventh anniversary, and it could absolutely be something great, but it could also be…”

He looked at me funny. I deserved to be looked at funny.

“Bad. With a capital ‘bad’,” I finished.

“And you think the answer’s in here,” he said, meaning the office with the seven locks. I nodded.

“That’s what the voice in my head is saying.”

He nodded sagely. *Snick.* There went another lock.
“I’d listen to the voice. It’s one of those things God gave women to help defend themselves from men.”

“You want a drink?”

“I’d take a beer.”

Chuck and I drank beers in the hallway between lock five and six.

“Tenth year in, my wife got me something special,” he said. “She had me meet her at a hotel, a nice one, in the city. Didn’t tell me anything, just had me show up. So my mind goes to where men’s minds go, and I’m thinking this is all right, this will be fun. I got to the door and I heard voices inside. Now I’m thinking really wild thoughts. Between you and me and this door, I was thinking she’d figured out something extra for us. Someone she worked with maybe, or one of the waitresses at a club we liked.”

*Snick snick snick* went the tools as he got back to work and I felt dewy sweat break out on my forehead. Those locks weren’t for me, I tried to tell myself; they were for outsiders, anyone who got into our house intending to harm us. Jeffrey trusted me. He’ll be devastated when he finds out what I did.

I was tempted to stop Chuck, but didn’t. I stayed silent, trying to quell the storm in my skull. I was so wound-up, even my ponytail hurt.

“I was all kinds of excited now. My wife had finally gotten me something I wanted. Even if it was for just one night, to get to – well, you know. Fulfill a fantasy. That was going to buy her five more years of marriage. So I knocked and the door swung open and damned it if wasn’t her and her dermatologist.”

*Snick* and *click*. The lock scrapped back and the door was officially unlocked.
“She’d arranged for his and her Botox, and some massage thing with hot rocks.”

Chuck looked at me, removing his hand from the door, his job done.

“It was fine. But it wasn’t what I wanted. Between you and me and this door, I wish she’d have just told me. Because to this day, I still think about that door and wish something different had been on the other side.”

I paid Chuck and saw him to the door. I locked the Otherworldly Alarm system Jeffrey had installed himself, and watched him drive through the gates and away.

Why hadn’t his wife just gotten him a waitress? Or even just some fantastic lingerie and maybe something with batteries? Did she really think he’d be thrilled to get Botox for his tenth anniversary? A reminder that he was getting older?

She did it because she didn’t care about what he wanted. She only did what she wanted.

Hand on the office door knob, I was thinking Jeffrey could love me, vow to cherish me, and do all the things a human man did, but he was also a demon.

The room buzzed as I took a step in, the wards deciding whether to fry my flesh like chicken katsu. The magik recognized me and the hum deactivated. The room was packed with tumbling piles with artifacts from his travels, transdimensional souvenirs of missions he never talked about, never even acknowledged. His accumulation of strange tchotchkes and knick-knacks were stashed without arrangement or care, looking like a giant, jagged puzzle. He always was a Jinga man.

My eyes scanned: Iridescent metal cooking pots; portraits of exotic women painted from some creature’s purple blood; books that required magic words to open;
amulets and charms torn off the necks of holy men and women, used once for protection, but useless against the likes of him. There was no order, no system, just stacks and piles. A giant ruby sat in a circlet of brass. Staffs with feathers of impossibly huge birds. Books so old I wouldn’t dare touch them for fear of turning them to dust. Fossils of animals unknown to modern science. Crates and boxes sat unopened, half buried under the scalp of a giant porcupine, statues carved in the Mesopotamian fashion, amulets that changed color as I watched, and scrolls carved of some mellow green stone in a language I’d never seen, not even in a Museum of Ancient History.

It occurred to me how different how specialties were: There was nothing in this room I could date or identify beyond what Jeffrey had told me about them, no piece I could classify by culture or origin, or Realm for that matter. His business, his whole world, was truly alien to me. My mind strained to do what it was trained to do—to reverse-engineer purpose and value to its makers—but I ignored the calling. I was here with a mission.

I went to his desk and rifled through the drawers, finding things like buttons from TGIF, expired Bic lighters, an Oingo Boingo cassette tape—it was like the ‘80’s in that drawer. How sad that those were the only artifact I could relate to. He also had a hoarder’s stash of business cards, most of them made of stiff vinyl or leather, the kinds of materials demons liked; any earth-bound cards were generally dry-cleaning or jewelry store related. One was for Otherworldly Goods, a metaphysical store down on the Cape Tanner Promenade; that was weird but unhelpful. What would a demon need with Nag Champa incense and meditation books? Unless the proprietor was a demon, too. Some
of the Nuevo demons were big into yoga, so why not a metaphysical store?

I was getting distracted.

I moved on.

Every item that was openable, I opened. I thumbed through the books that wouldn’t evaporate upon touch, including the ones that sang in grumpy oboe voices when I picked them up.

It was hopeless. It would take me weeks to go through everything in this warehouse, and who knew if I’d even find it? Maybe it would be better to just go on the offensive when Jeffrey came home and found this place busted open, and demand answers. I’d tell him it was time for a talk. If we were going to have a quiet, peaceful home, there would be no more locked doors, no more secrets. I was his wife, and I had a right to know about his business, his world. It was time for full disclosure, I would say. What exactly was it I signed at our wedding? I’d ask, and then duck for cover when he got mad at my paranoia-induced bout of snooping.

I needn’t have worried about having that conversation, though. Because that’s when I found out what it was I’d signed.
Professional Grade Security Necessities

In the back corner of Jeffrey’s office was a massive silver-plated triceratops. I recognized it as similar to a torture device used by ancient Romans, only they fashioned theirs after hippopotamuses. A door was cut in the belly, and inside was a hollow cavern. An enemy would be packed inside, and a fire built under the animal, and their prisoners would be slowly roasted. A repulsive practice. Now the dinosaur seemed to be used as a storage unit: Inside were stacks of scrolls, all of them smelling faintly of burnt toast and cranberry sauce, or perhaps worse.

I pulled out one after another, some so old tiny bits crumbled off at my touch, others had wax seals that were still soft. Carefully, I lined them up on the floor until I found our marriage scroll. I could tell it was ours because it had a sprig of dried bluebells slipped into the opening.

The wax was marbled black and red; I’d never seen the seal before, not even when the Augur demon had sealed it that night. It was a fox’s head, and its jaws were wrapped around a lightning bolt.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I popped the seal open. It cracked with a mighty rumble, shaking the office like a low-Richter earthquake. Demons loved drama. But I was smart enough to know it wasn’t booby-trapped. I would have heard it hum if it was.

I cleared a space on the floor and carefully unrolled the scroll. The carefully inked letters seemed to swim and swing across the soft parchment; I waited until they took their
rightful places.

Belina said to look for the fine print. There it was, at the bottom, under our signatures, Jeffrey’s firm and tilting to the right, mine drifting and distracted. Damn that dress train. I had to hold the paper up to my face to read the tiny letters below.

“And hereto upon the seventh year of earthly marriage, so shall the exchange be made, one for the other and the other for one —”

One what? What would exchange? I read on --

“That upon signature, the contract binds that upon the full moon of the summer solstice, in the seventh year of union, the human-bound soul shall be transferred unto the Cadge, and the voeu of the demon shall take the human.

“So mote it be.”

My mother once accused my father of cheating on her. I was only five and didn’t remember the particulars, but I remembered the way my father glowed when he told me the story many times as I got older.


I remember two things for certain: one, my father was gone a lot before Mom died, and two, Mom had a lot of shoes. The yelling had gone on so long it made me miss my favorite TV show. I sat on the green velveteen couch and watched them pace and scream, scream and pace. My father said something rotten, bringing it to an escalation.
“I say, ‘You just go buy your shoes and shut up, woman,’ and that when all Hell break loose,” he’d tell me, crowing with laughter.

Mom, her bright blonde up-do starting to unravel, left the room and returned with armloads of shoes, most of them heels in satin and leather, and began throwing them at Pop. He dodged some, took others at full impact, all the while cursing her. “‘Claudia,’” he’d said. “‘I do nothing wrong!’”

“Had you?” I asked, probably around sixteen and having learned enough about the ways of the world to even understand the story.


My whole life, there were holes in the walls from her stiletto heels. Neither bothered to fix them. I think the busted drywall had been left as a reminder to not take their marriage for granted. After the shoe-throwing fight, my father stopped traveling so much. Two years later, my mother died. Those two years, between ages five and seven, after the fight and before her passing, were the happiest of my childhood.

I didn’t want to throw shoes.

I wanted to have never broken into his office, to have never heard Belina’s poisonous insinuations, to have never doubted my husband’s assurances of the great changes our anniversary was bringing. Why couldn’t I have just been good with the coming awesomeness?

But here I was, the scroll rolled out before me, the damning words unchanging. The need to talk to Jeffrey was overwhelming. But first I needed to think.
I rolled up the scroll and took it with me when I left the office. Closing the door behind me, I felt a buzz in my scalp as the wall wards reconnected and reenergized. The seven deadbolts were still open, but at least the wards offered some security. I found my way down the main stairs, moving by memory, my fingertips glazing over the smooth veneer of the railing. In the foyer, I stepped over the writhing bag given to me last night; it was wiggling aimlessly across the wooden planks, bumping into things. I’d dragged most of the gifts into the dining room sometime between acid-scrubbing the dishes and ammonia-mopping the floor.

In the warm hues of the living room, I knelt before the shrine holding my father’s yellow and gold urn, and tried not to pray. What would my father tell me to do? I listened, but he wasn’t talking. He’d probably tell me to go ahead and throw some shoes. He knew the curative powers of high heels flung by an angry woman.

I wasn’t angry yet. But I could feel it bubbling inside, in the same place I reserved for fear and regret. Maybe I was in shock.

Finally, I pulled my cell phone from my purse and I called the number that worked any time, any plane. It went to voice mail. Jeffrey’s jovial voice asked me to leave a message.

“Babe,” I said, my voice straining to sound normal. “You need to call me. As soon as you get this message. I think we’re going to have to cancel the party on Thursday.”

I hung up. Cancel the party on Thursday? That’s what I decided to say?

But he knew me, and he’d know from my voice that there was trouble. He’d call.
And then what?

Then he could tell me what a voeu was. And how exactly, in three weeks time, my soul would be transferred to him, and I’d get his voeu. That’s what the scroll said, and it had our signatures on it, so it was true and binding.

Who was I kidding? Talking to him wasn’t going to clarify anything. It would be all justifications and endearments; once he started talking, he was going to make it all the harder to understand.

What the Hell was a voeu?

And what would happen to me when I lost my soul? According to several modern religions, after death I’d be banished to an afterlife of torture and damnation. Which was bad enough for Jeffrey, but he had a thousand years of life before he had to face it. This weak human body would die in just decades. What would I be, where would I go, without my soul?

“Franklin?” I said into the phone. I had an emergency number for him, too, just in case Jeffrey couldn’t be reached. He was the only one Jeffrey or I trusted in emergencies.

“What’s wrong, Rini?” His voice came over the wire from who knows which Realm.

“Do you know where Jeffrey is?”

“Uh…sort of. I mean, I have coordinates. What’s going on?”

Coordinates? “I need to talk to him.”

“Are you okay?”
“I’m fine.”

“I’m coming over.”

The knock at the basement door came within seconds. I guess he could hear the freak out in my voice.

I waved off the crest and opened the door to Franklin, handsome, alabaster-skinned Franklin. He looked so worried, I didn’t stop him from hugging me when he entered the kitchen.

“Wow, hey. Place looks great. How’d you manage that in one morning?” he said helplessly. “You are Wonder Woman.”

Flattery doesn’t work on scorned wives. I scowled and said, “I need to talk to my husband.”

He kept a steadying hand on my arm and led me to the stools at the counter. “He can’t talk to you right now. Rhinehold’s got him doing some fool thing up in the Arctic. Don’t ask.”

“He’s got his travel portal. Will you go get him?”

“Only he can activate it from his end, you know that. Besides, our tech goes wonky up there. Something about the drifting magnetic polarity and charge reversals.”

Only half-listening, I scratched at a streak of dried egg yolk on the counter. I had somehow missed it in my cleaning frenzy. “Without a static ley line to tap, I wouldn’t recommend any demon try using a portal—Rini, are you pregnant?”

I stopped scratching. “Definitely not.”

His relief was almost comical. Humans couldn’t have children with demons; the
babies tended to kill their mothers long before gestation.

“Okay, then. Everything’s all right.”

I studied his familiar face as he said this lie, tracing the sharpness of his nose to the tiny shadow it cast over his pencil-thin lips. He had sharp teeth, like Jeffrey, and shared my husband’s taste for Scotch and vacations at the equator; we’d even vacationed with him before. His clan was in allegiance with the Cadges, had been for centuries; he and Jeffrey had worked together for over a hundred years. There was no doubt in my mind that he knew what was going on.

“What do you know about Cadge marriage contracts?”

No response. Not even a blink of the eye. Then, carefully, “Well, they aren’t nearly as extensive as the Moeity clan’s contracts—”

“Tell me what I signed.”

“You got into his office, didn’t you.”

“Damn right I did.”

He flashed a grin, pleased, then got back to the business of calming down his best friend’s wife.

“Someone’s messing with your head, and I don’t blame you for doing what you gotta do. So who was it?”

Nicely played; he wasn’t making me feel crazy or guilty, even giving me the option to blame someone else entirely, but the oh-so-casual request for who narced off Jeffrey was a misstep. If he was asking, it was important; if someone said something they weren’t supposed to, it meant my worry was real and valid. That made their identity
a valuable negotiating piece, and he was trying to make a deal with me.

I might despise Belina, but I wasn’t going to rat her out or use her that way. Besides, I’d known something already or I wouldn’t have asked her, so really, it was Jeffrey and his twitchy behavior and endless assurances that clued me in. Even natural born liars had tells.

When I remained silent, the deal died on the vine. Franklin took to looking around, as if for a stiff drink, or maybe debating a mad dash back through the portal and out of the way of the oncoming domestic disturbance.

“Here’s the thing, Rini—those locks on his office are no joke. They’re professional grade security necessities—”

“The wards still work, no one’s going to get into the office.”

“It’s not about keeping people out. It’s about keeping what’s in there in. Nothing got out while you were digging around, did it?”

How should I know? The place was a hoarder’s dream. A thousand things could have flown, crawled or oozed out, and the inventory wouldn’t have looked at all depleted. But I did try to remember whether I’d left the door open while I searched. I think I might have. Which meant the wards weren’t activated because the link was broken.

“Maybe I should take a look around,” he said.

Shoot. Now I did need something from him, but it wasn’t what I wanted from him. And if I asked him to do this, he’d ask for something in return, and I’d have to give it to him to keep us even. Everything was a negotiation with demons.

Why had I called him again? Oh, that’s right. Because I had no one else to call.
I said nothing but he set off to search the house anyway. The egg yolk wouldn’t budge from the countertop and hacking at it was butchering my nail. I got the wire scrubby from the sink and furiously went at it with that, trying to push back the roily emotions churning inside.

I had to find out what a voeu was. Before Jeffrey got back. And just maybe none of this was as bad as it seemed; maybe it was a symbolic transfer of my soul, like how wedding vows were a symbol of two lives becoming one. They didn’t really, and maybe a “voeu taking the human” was just a symbol, too, and the whole damn thing was something awesome, like Jeffrey said, just unicorns and rainbows.

If it was, Franklin would have said so.

His silence spoke volumes. I knew I was making some pretty radical assumptions, but my instincts told me I was right.

Damn that egg yolk. It’s like the yellow goo had bonded its DNA with the porcelain. I’d have to pry out the entire tile. I was digging in a drawer for a leveraging tool when I heard Franklin’s voice behind me.

“I think we’re okay.”

I spun, smashing my fingers in the drawer. “Ow, dammit—Shit.” I put my fingers to my mouth, blowing on them. “Really?” I said facetiously. “You think we’re okay?”

Franklin looked away, looking as guilty as a demon could. Clutching the screwdriver I’d pulled out, I took a deep breath and told myself to calm down.

“Thank you for looking around,” I said in measured tones, “but I am not paying
you. You offered and did it of your own accord. There is no deal to be made here, so
don’t even ask, I’m not playing. But Franklin, I need answers, I think I deserve them,
and I really don’t want to bind you to get some God damned information—”

“Hey, there’s no need for that kind of language.”

“If you are my friend, and I always thought you were, just answer my question.”

This was nothing short of desperate, but I needed to think our friendship counted for
something to him. “If you have any love for me at all, tell me what happens on our
seventh anniversary.”
“I was married once, too,” Franklin said, leaning against the kitchen’s entryway, arms folded across his suit.

I sagged. He wasn’t going to answer my question.

“It was…hard. Marriage is hard.”

“Please. Tell me what I signed.”

“I can’t.”

What did that mean? That his allegiance with Jeffrey wouldn’t let him, or was he bound, enchanted to not speak about our marriage, like Belina was?

“Tell me what a voeu is.”

“I can’t.”

“Do you have one?”

“It’s complicated.”

“How did your marriage end?”

Franklin gave the most rueful smile I’d ever seen on a demon. “With a bang. You don’t want that. Believe me.”

I hadn’t locked the crest; he easily opened the basement door and the portal’s smell of Lemon Drops rolled into the kitchen like a storm cloud. “You don’t owe me anything, Rini. I am your friend. But you signed a contract. That deal’s done. He loves you, okay? It won’t be so bad. I promise.” His lies fell flat; I knew him well enough not to believe anything he was saying. He’d given me that much.
Franklin left. I turned back to the counter and jammed the flat-tip screwdriver into the caulking of the offending tile. I hacked and smashed away at it until the whole tile shattered, taking the egg yolk with it.

#

The internet was no help, either. It never was, when it came to real demon lore; this hidden subculture had somehow remained secret even to the world wide web. I keyword searched for voeu, but all that come up was the French translation, which said it was a “wish” or “want.” When I Googled voeu and demon and Cadge demon and marriage contract and all variations thereof, all I got was some cheesy fanfic and the suggestion that perhaps what I meant was “caged demon” and offered up some passages from the Book of Revelations. It was a stonewall, like all the demons on this plane and every human who had any inkling they were real had made a collective agreement not to blog or Wiki or post about them.

Or maybe it was Dark Works. That would be some big magik, binding us all to stay quiet.

I picked up the cell phone and dialed Antonio’s number.

“Boss,” I said when he answered.

“Rini, you’re calling already. That can’t be a good thing.”

No doubt he was parked in his very expensive ergonomic chair in his glass-and-chrome office, the one on the second story with a peak of the ocean between buildings. He went to work before 7am most mornings, but I pictured him sun-stoned and tanned, like he’d just dragged himself in from catching some waves in Malibu. He might have
been over fifty, had an international multi-million dollar business to run and seven kids to juggle, but in my mind, he had always just walked in from the beach.

“No, it’s fine, the project’s fine. Well, truth is, I haven’t even had a chance to look at it yet.” Truth was, it hadn’t even crossed my mind. I wasn’t even sure where the camera was with all the pictures I’d taken at his studio.

“How was your party?”

“Still a little fogged over, actually.”

“I admire the energy of you young people. How many more did you say, ten? Twelve?”

“Just six, but please don’t worry—they won’t interfere with getting our project done.” It wasn’t our anniversary parties that were going to interfere.

“That’s what I wanted to hear. Now, what can I do for you?”

“Uh, this may sound strange, but I’d like to ask you a few questions, completely without context, and if they jog anything, great, and if they don’t, we’ll forget the whole thing.”

“A mystery!” There was a pause and I could hear plates clicking together.

“Okay, proceed, I’ve had my espresso.”

“Have you ever heard the word ‘voeu’?” I walked into the living room and sat in one of the several deep, butter-rich leather couches. The Dragon Lantern sat idly on its shelf, lit up from above and below, but no action going on inside.

“Not a Spanish word. French, perhaps? Voeu. It makes me think of ‘cow’, but I don’t think that’s right.”
“Have you ever heard of the Seven Realms?”

“That’s the new casino in Vegas, yes?”

“Have you ever done business with anyone named Cadge? Besides me.”

“I’d have to check my records, but I think I’d remember if I had—Rini, come on, a clue. What is all this?”

“Just a lead I’m chasing for an artifact. Speaking of,” I said, eyes on the lantern, “can I use your account to have it dated? This isn’t one of the Inuit pieces, it’s something private.”

“Oh course. I’ll let the lab know you’re sending something in. Anything of interest?”

In other words, anything he’d want to buy and put into a museum somewhere. Antonio wasn’t some burnished surfer god; he was a single-minded businessman who loved the chase of acquisition.

“A wedding gift, actually. I thought I knew where it’s history, but there’s a new theory I want to check out.”

“I’ll try to reign in my curiosity,” he said, which was my cue to end the conversation. I didn’t want to give him enough information to get his mind working. “But do you want me to ask around?”

I was too late. He knew me well enough to know when I was lying, so I wasn’t even going to try to convince him it was nothing.

“You’ve been a big help, Antonio, thanks.”

“Okay, Nancy Drew. Good luck. And don’t forget, I need a prospectus by the
end of next week.”

I hung up, sunk deeper into the couch. His prospectus was going to have to wait.

Where else could I fish for demon lore? There were dozens of books in Jeffrey’s office; surely some of them were demon history or mythology books that talked about Cadge marriage contracts.

Upstairs, I felt the hum of the wards, safely keeping what was inside in. When I went into the office this time, I closed the door behind me. The wards hummed back into harmony. It was just me and the creepy crawlies.

Jeffrey’s book shelf wasn’t densely packed; he wasn’t much of a reader, and apparently neither were his clients. Maybe Asher was right about merchant classes not being particularly scholarly because most of the books—the ones that wouldn’t fall apart to the touch—were aged copies of simple spell books (“How to make a fungus grow;” “How to change skin color”) and illustrated creature summaries. I glanced through that one, looking for Nian, but either these creatures were from the other Realms or they were pure fantasy because I didn’t recognize any of them.

I put that book back on the shelf and kept looking. That’s when I noticed a number of open spaces on the shelf, gaping holes I didn’t remember being there my first time through.

I took a step back and counted: there were easily six books missing.

Franklin. When he went looking for escapees, was he was really just in here, stealing books that might have told me something about my marriage?
Heat flushed my throat and cheeks. Demons always have their own agendas. Franklin was Jeffrey’s friend before he was mine; he was only protecting his own.

But wait. The door was unlocked, but how did he get through the wards? They were keyed to just Jeffrey and me. Unless Jeffrey had included his business partner in the spellwork. That would make sense. Yet another secret I’d never known, so I’d unwittingly let him walk right in here, unescorted, and take anything that could have helped me.

That son of a bitch.

I stood and fumed for a few minutes, thinking. I could bind him and make him give them to me. But that was a really aggressive move and until I knew the real meaning of the contract, I shouldn’t go burning demons. There might be other documents in that room that could tell me something, but again, the inventory was so compacted, it could be weeks before I found anything.

I sat at the desk, defeated and frustrated, wondering how it was I’d gone seven years as Jeffrey’s wife knowing so little about his world, and how much more didn’t I know, and how in Hell was I going to find out—and that’s when I remembered the business card stash. And one in particular: Otherworldly Goods.

Anyone who owned a store with that name had to know about demons.

#

The metaphysical store was just a mile or so down the road, in the center of our township called the Promenade. My muscles were cramped with stress and anger, so walking there sounded good to me. Maybe I’d be able to think more clearly in the fresh
air, and not in my husband’s demon den.

A twelve-foot wall surrounded my home with a wrought iron gate in the front courtyard. A code box unlocked it, and the code was the date of our wedding, 0621, the summer solstice seven years ago. All roads led back to my wedding; all roads ended at my wedding.

I punched the buttons unnecessarily hard and pushed past the heavy gate as they rotated open. Beyond my enclosed estate was a narrow poplar tree-lined road, a picturesque lane barely wide enough for two cars. I walked into it, disrupting the gravel with my heavy footfall, clutching my purse tight to my body. I turned west and got moving.

The house was long behind me by the time I could see the Promenade down the road. My feet were chaffing in their loafers. I didn’t wear heels like my mother did. She’d been better armed than her daughter. The sky above had gone dark and bubbled; rain was moving in fast. The landscape had changed around me, leaving behind the country roads of my neighborhood, and now I was closing in on the Cape Tanner Promenade, a quaintly designed New England-styled shopping area. It was squarely aimed at the tourist dollar, and therefore I’d always avoided it. Apparently Jeffrey hadn’t.

It was after lunch and the sidewalks leading to the Promenade were empty; had everyone else in the world figured out that Hellfire was about to pour down? Of course not; they’d been smart enough not to marry a demon. Their souls were fine, perfectly intact.
That damnable son of a bitch. It felt easier to curse him out here than it was in our home.

I felt the first drop from the sky. Then another. It was icy cool and felt good against my hot skin. Maybe I’d just stand right here, in the downpour, and let it wash me away. Or maybe I’d be reasonable and get the umbrella from my purse.

I stopped and set my bag on the low stone fence cupping the far end of the Promenade. I reached in, knocking aside my wallet, the scroll, something that felt like my gloves and – ouch!

Something sharp had pricked my finger.

I pulled my hand out. My finger was bleeding. A lot. Whatever it had been had dug in deep. And left a barb behind. It looked like an insect leg. Or a fish hook, straightened out.

What the --

That’s when the world started to tilt.

I sagged against the stone wall, which did an immediate tilt-a-whirl, projecting me staggering into the street. I clutched my bag and my somersaulting gut. I looked around, trying to get my bearings; I saw twelve of everything. I was completely alone.

What was happening?

Someone stood on the empty street, under the green smear of maple leaves.

The air had grown thick with smudges of rain, but there, around that man in the street, it was as bright as a sun. I squinted, and started to walk backwards – but that wasn’t the direction I was going. I was going forwards, one step after another, toward the
black-robed creature, it’s head covered by a hood. Shadows seemed to pour out of its sleeves, forming something like a hand, beckoning me. My pricked finger sang.

I’d been poisoned, and now I was being summoned, dragged with dark magik, to the demon in the road.
Disrupting the Spatial Array

My head lurched until it was facing downward; I could just make out my calf leather shoes, the ones Jeffrey had brought me back from some business trip or another, and sure enough, they were still heading in the shadow-demon’s direction. I was being attacked, right here in the middle of the road, in the middle of the day, in the middle of my marriage crisis.

I lurched my head sideways, trying to make myself fall from the dizziness, but my body refused to go down. It remained stubbornly half-upright, like a zombie with a serious inner ear problem.

Son of a Hellhound—

Anger salted with panic countermanded my somersaulting stomach; for an instant I felt perfectly fine. Then I chugged forward again, two sloppy steps, both against my will. The shadows were congealing to form a creamy beige shell whose breath emerged from under the hood in black shadows. Now that I was closer, I could see that his robe was made of cheap, unraveling rough cloth, or at least that’s what my mind was trying to turn it into. It might have just been dense shadows and not cloth at all. Whatever that thing was, it had poisoned me, and was here to do some nasty demon magic.

I bit my lip hard, trying to bring that clarity back to my head. All that did was hurt. Then I remembered the tazer Jeffrey always made me carry. He had given the Disbander to me for our third anniversary. He’d explained that it was for anytime he wasn’t here to protect me from any of Darkness being married to a demon sometimes
entailed. I’d thought he was ridiculous, and I’d never had to use it, but now I was hell-bent to use it now.

I used the caroming lurch of my body to knock my purse off my shoulder. It tumbled to the ground, spilling contents. A hairbrush scuttled down the stones in front of me; in a stroke of luck, my drugged foot didn’t lift to avoid it and I tripped right over it, smashing into the ground. Even as my zombified body strained to get up from this awkward face plant, I took inventory with my eyes: compact, smart phone, three different lipsticks, none my favorite color, wallet – there. The hard casing of a plastic gun-shaped weapon. The Disbander. As I rolled over, my hip rammed the big red “on” button. It hummed as it charged up and my hip throbbed.

Printed in big bold letters on the gun was “DO NOT USE IN, UNDER OR NEAR WATER;” this was too unfortunate, as it was resting in a sheen of rainwater, and more was falling from the sky all the time.

I was being pulled to an upright position now. Just feet away from me now, the demon’s hand was bidding me to rise to come to him, and I knew I’d be forced to continue my enthralled march toward my attacker. The rain blurred like a veil of grey gauze between me and him. I could feel the rain; that was a good thing. It meant my body hadn’t entire left me. It meant I might have a chance.

Rallying the muscles in my shoulder, I flung my limp hand for the gun, which was pointing in his general direction. It wouldn’t be a direct hit, and it would be decidedly in, under and near water.

As my legs pushed up from the ground, taking me away from my weapon, my
tingling thumb did what I begged it to and squeezed that trigger.

An electric buzz went straight up my arm and shocked my brain. For an instant, I could see every detail in a mile radius. Each raindrop, the contour of each cloud, the several thousand leaves dotting the trees, every bump in the asphalt, a pair of headlights cutting through the storm nearly a half mile away, and right in front of me, the creamy bag of shadows, reaching for me—

A charmeuse lightning bolt shot from the nozzle of the Disbander, across the few feet between us and skipped across the demon’s shield. The bubble, a light bulb before, suddenly blazed even brighter. We glowed together for a moment as his hand shot back and that big black maw slammed shut with an audible crunch. The demon shook like a kitten in a bath, then exploded like an atom bomb, disbanding into smoke which was contained by the magic bubble. Then the bubble went dark and collapsed, then burst outward in a shimmering green wave. The shockwave sent us both flying, the smoke that was a demon blowing in one direction and me in the direction of the Promenade.

That’s when something really odd happened.

For just an instant, I could have sworn I wasn’t in Cape Tanner – I was somewhere…else. It only lasted an instant, but in that flash, I saw a sky of amethyst above and a yellowish ground below me, made of something that looked like sponge cake and was possibly alive because it was rising up toward me—

And then I was back, slamming into black pavement, one shoe tearing off my foot as I slid several yards. My elbows were only saved by my thick, rain-splattered leather jacket. Nothing could help my head. It smacked off the street like a rubber ball. Blazing
streaks of blood red light burned my eyes. When I finally stopped moving, I was
instantly climbing to my feet, even before my vision cleared, and staggering toward the
Promenade, toward where people would be and the demon wouldn’t dare pursue me,
even in smoke form.

I rounded the corner onto the Cape Tanner Promenade and nearly cried with relief
to see other humans, scurrying in the rain between awnings and into stores.

That’s when my legs gave out and I crashed out of consciousness.

Gentle fairy bells tinkled. I could hear them, but they were distorted. Maybe
coming from underwater. Or the moon.

For an instant, the creamy bag of shadows was reaching for me again --

My eyes sprang open and I went upright only to be overcome with nausea. Back
down I went, groaning.

Hands were immediately on me, checking for a pulse, checking for damage. I
tried my eyes again. There was a field of hairy static above me, a beautiful auburn color.
With some effort, I focused, staring at a pretty face within the red nest, first in triple, then
double, then singular. It was a young woman, about my age. She wore little make-up
and a paisley-printed dress that flowed in as many directions as her hair. I took a deep
breath and smelled sage. A lot of it. Like, all of it. I coughed, which made my head
pound; I reached up to brace it but felt something wet. I was bleeding.

The woman took my hand, which sent a searing shock up to my elbow, and
sniffed.
“You’ve been poisoned. And you fell pretty hard.”

How’d she know?

I was just now noticing that she had customers. I was on the floor of some kind of shop, and now that I was awake and doing some moaning, they were leaving.

“Did you see who did it?”

“Dint recognize.” My words were coming out blurry, like my head. “Ishe gone?”

“You sound like you have a sock in your mouth.”

Getting electrocuted will do that, I thought, but couldn’t articulate.

“Don’t talk. You’re all kinds of jacked up. Give your brain a minute to descramble.”

I didn’t argue; I couldn’t.

“Is this okay? It’s herbal,” she said, holding up a tube of something that looked like toothpaste. I continued to say nothing, only watched dumbly as she administered some herbal mash to my head and my pricked finger. She said a few words and made a couple of signs with her right hand and the throb left my finger, and then the ache left my head and I was asleep.

When I woke up again, I was slumped in a puffy armchair in a back office stacked with inventory. Meditation books, candles in a rainbow of colors, long, thin boxes of incense. My brain was struggling to make a connection, but I was distracted by the fact that I was entirely shoeless now. My feet were really cold.

Then I noticed the woman with the huge head of red frizzy hair was perched on the desk, eating Chinese food with wooden chopsticks. She had so much hair, she had to
push it aside to get a mouthful of food in. I noticed a bright orange gem with golden sparkles that zoomed about inside hanging from a braid, tapping gently against her neck’s pulse-point. That wasn’t typical. Definitely not a gem that even existed on this plane.

“There she is!” she said brightly. “Hungry?” She shoved a mushroom at me. I blanched.

My head was a squishy bulb of pain, but at least I didn’t have permanent brain fry. I reached up to rub it – and felt a wad of coarseness, like the wire scrubber I was using this morning to clean the egg yolk. I glanced at the desk; there was a mirror next to the phone. My reflection showed a scorched and brittle head of hair, even blacker than its natural color. My cheek was starting to scab where I’d face-planted into the asphalt. One eye, already on the small side, was nearly swollen closed. I’d have one Hell of a black eye; the white had been popped red with broken blood vessels.

“Too soon,” Ambergine said, taking away the mirror.

“It gets worse?”

“Only if you are your left shoe.” She held it up. It was shredded, as if the charge from the demon tazer had gone straight to its fine leather upper and hand-carved wooden sole and released a shrapnel burst.

This girl had walked right into my mess, and she’d dragged it back to her shop. Either she was some kind of over-achieving do-gooder, or she was not right in the head.

“What time is it?” I asked. “Where am I?” At least my words were coming out clearly again.

“You’re safe. This place has some pretty serious shielding. Nothing’s following
you here.”

 Shielding. Another sign she wasn’t just a hippie chick. I glanced at the computer clock: 6:37. I’d been unconscious the entire afternoon. Oddly, I felt better than I had since the day I came back from California.

“You’re in my shop. Otherworldly Goods. On the Cape Tanner Promenade. New Jersey?” She waited for me to give an indication that I knew what she was talking about, but I was busy shivering from the coincidence.

“I was actually just coming here.”

“No kidding.” Her easy-going continence shifted into something that looked like nervousness. “What for? Looking for a birthday gift for a friend?”

“My husband had your business card.”

“No kidding,” she said again, slower. Now she was leaning away from me, sliding a glance at the door.

“Do you know my husband? Jeffrey Cadge?” No reason not to dive right in; either she knew him or she didn’t.

“No, huh uh. I mean, I know the Cadges, if that’s what you’re asking. But I don’t know a Jeffrey Cadge.”

She knew of the Cadge clan, which meant she knew about demons, and there were few human who copped to knowing demons walked among us. Just maybe I had picked the right place to come. And her finding me first must be a good sign.

“He’s the only Cadge in this area. You’d probably know him if you saw him—”

“Look, I don’t know your husband, okay? Lots of husbands come to my store.
He was probably here to buy you a gift, for goddess’s sake. Could have been years ago, for all I know.”

“Oh,” I said, something clicking in my head. “You think—” Then I started laughing, my head swelling with blood and air, making me dizzy. My pricked finger throbbed in unison. “You think I think you had an affair with him.”

She glared; it looked strange on her pixie sweet features.

“I don’t think that,” she said unconvincingly.

“If only that was the problem,” I said. “Not even remotely.”

“Because I don’t sleep with married men. Or demons.”

Did that mean she did sleep with demons, so long as they’re single? Not that it was any of my business. Rather than go any further down that road, I changed the subject.

“I should be thanking you, first off, for…whatever it was you did.”

“I brought you here and drew out the poison in your system.”

“So death, then. Wait, how did you know I was poisoned? Did you see something? What did you see?”

“Bright lights, mostly,” she said, resuming eating her Chinese food. “I was coming back from picking up my lunch and it was like an electrical storm over 7th. I could feel it in all seven chakras. Then it was like you came hurling out of it, and just—whump! Flat on your back.”

“You didn’t call an ambulance?”

“No time. You were going blue around the gills. And your fingernails. That’s
how I knew you were poisoned. By the time you got to a hospital, the brain fry would have been permanent.”

“Then you really did save me. Thank you,” I said. “My name’s Rini Cadge.” I wanted to offer a hand to shake, but it was pudding at the end of my arm.

“I’m Ambergine Telluride. The proprietor. I’m also a Class 4 Pagan, so I knew what to do.”

“What’s a Class 4 Pagan?”

Ambergine snapped her chop sticks at me twice. “I’m a witch, sweetie. My specialty is healing. No judgments. We don’t care who you’re married to, or what kind of Dark Works you’re into—”

“I don’t do Dark Works,” I said.

“You do something dark, sister. That light show wasn’t normal, and it wasn’t white magic. Not to mention, you’re married to a Cadge demon.”

“He’s not dark. I mean, for a demon. He’s like a three on the evil scale—”

“If you say so.” She used her chopsticks to pluck up a small plastic bag from her desk. Inside was a quarter-sized beetle amulet, its wings iridescent. One leg was missing. That would be the one that had lodged itself in my finger. “This ugly little bugger, however, is a twenty on the evil scale.”

She held it up to her face and the beetle rattled to life and tried to climb through the plastic onto her nose.

Not an amulet.

I felt woozy again.
Ambergine opened a small lock box, dropping the beetle-in-a-bag into it, and locking it in. She went to open the floor safe for further safe-keeping.

“That must have been a demon, and a seriously powerful one, who attacked you. Nothing else could disrupt the spatial array like that. And who else uses scarabs to poison their victims? So old school.” She closed the safe door and spun the dial.

“So why you were coming to my store? ‘Cuz I’m really hoping it’s all a big coincidence.”

I didn’t have the faintest idea why I’d been attacked, but I seriously doubted it had anything to do with this girl or her store. Still, it had happened on the day I discovered I was in a potentially evil marriage; if there was any connection to anything in my life, it was that.

“I was hoping you could tell me what a voeu is,” I blurted. My eyes went to where my purse lay gaping like a grouper on her desk. The marriage contract scroll was tucked just inside, slightly unfurled.

Her eyes followed mine to the scroll, then she averted her eyes.

“You read that,” I said.

“Yeah. I did. I’m nosy that way.” And with that, all the ugly secrets of my life were splayed open. Strangely, all I felt was relief.

“I just found out myself what it says. I didn’t exactly read it when I signed it. Stupid. Because apparently I gave him rights to my soul.”

“Goddess, demons can be such assholes.”

“Yes, they can.”
“And you married one!”

“Some are bigger assholes than others.”

“Well, you sure got yourself a winner. Do you think he sent that demon after you?

“I don’t think so. He doesn’t know yet that I know.”

“You sure about that?”

I wasn’t. All I had was Franklin’s word that he was unreachable; arctic polarity reversal interference or whatever. This from Franklin, who quite possibly stole books from Jeffrey’s office so I couldn’t find any easy answers to my questions.

“So do you know? What a voeu is?” I asked.

“It’s new on me. Not that I know a lot about this stuff. But I might know someone who does.”

“Thank you,” I said, once more feeling that sweet relief. My stomach flared, but not with nausea this time. This time with hunger. I remembered I hadn’t eaten breakfast before breaking into my husband’s office, discovering I’d been betrayed, threatening his best friend with a binding spell, and then electrocuting myself to escape a demon attack. I eyed the Chinese food on the desk; Ambergine saw and pushed a pair of chopsticks at me. I removed them from their paper casing and dove into a to-go container. “Is this from Lao’s?”

“Best in town.”

“Orange chicken is my favorite,” I said, savoring the crunchy goodness.

“Me too,” she said. “The Kung Pao’s pretty outrageous, though.”
“Definitely.” I handed her the orange chicken and she passed me the Kung Pao.

“So… What happens if the voeu transfer thing is as bad as it sounds? What are you going to do?”

I stopped chewing. “Well, at the least, my husband and I need to have a conversation.”

“That’s good thinking. Give him a chance to bind you until that contract expires.”

“He wouldn’t bind me.”

“Fine. Enthrall you.”

“He wouldn’t. You don’t know him—”

“That is some kind of denial you’ve got working for you. You think he’s just gonna let you go?” she said. “He’s a demon—”

“He’s my husband. And this really isn’t any of your business.”

“You love him.” She sounded surprised. “And you’re sure you not enthralled?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. Do you love him enough to hand over your soul?”

“No way,” I said without hesitation.

“Then this woman can definitely help you.”

And with that, Ambergine the nosy, life-saving neighborhood Class 4 Pagan handed me the business card for a divorce attorney.
All is Fair in Love and Demon Divorce

“You’re not my first demon divorce, Mrs. Cadge,” the Euro-diva lawyer said.

Ms. Lena Margolis Esquire was ageless in that European kind of way, the kind that meant the right skin care at the right age, wine and Silk Cuts habit be damned. She was the kind of woman my father would have loved. “In fact, there’s a growing club of demon ex-wives.”

A club? I thought. Why in the world would the ex-wives of demons hang out together?

“I’m just fact finding at the moment, Ms. Margolis. There is still a lot of information I need before I’d even consider divorce.” I said this despite the fact that I’d traveled by train all the way to New York City to meet with her.

I sat in one of two silky-soft burnt umber chairs, nervously eyeing the fiery reds and oranges of the paintings on her walls. Hers was a den of power and unflinching focus; perfect for a woman in her line of work. While the majority of her cases were human, she was the East Coast demon-divorce specialist, and the only person I’d found so far who would actually answer my questions. I didn’t, however, want her to make any assumptions.

“I understand that my marriage contract dictates a transfer of soul and voeu, which is still a mystery to me, but what I’d like to know, first and foremost is, has anyone ever renegotiated? Is it even remotely possible for us to remain married, but I keep my soul?”
She gave me an unfathomable Euro-stare from within her black three-quarter sleeved jacket and pencil skirt encasement. Her black patent leather stilettos and waves and waves of thick black hair gleamed at me. I noticed she also had a sheen of the stuff on her forearms. Her secret ingredient as a shyster was obviously not an overdose of estrogen. I shifted in my seat.

“Resetting the terms is not a legal option, Mrs. Cadge. If you want to keep your soul, the only remedy is termination of the contract.”

Ms. Margolis was a divorce attorney, and wasn’t going to deviate from her mission statement easily. She scanned me from under those thick, well-tended eyebrows, saw I wasn’t moved from my own stand. “Let’s start at the beginning, shall we? Do you know the nature of the enchantment?”

She was asking what he did to get me to marry him. “I wasn’t enchanted. I fell in love. I loved my husband then, and I do now.”

Her pen was platinum and encrusted with rubies. It dashed across her legal pad, making a note. “When was the wedding?”


“Yes, of course.” She glanced at her desk calendar, a chic chrome piece. “Only twenty-five days until the next.”

I tugged nervously at the fringe of my purse, the one Jeffrey had brought me from a trip several years ago.

“On June twenty-first, 2007, you and he signed a contract.”

“I thought it was a marriage license,” I said. I opened the purse to retrieve the
scroll and pushed it across the desk to her.

Before she touched it, she pulled out a long rod of rose quartz and waved it over the contract. I was reluctant to call it something as trite as a wand, but that’s what it looked like. “Most demon contracts are enchanted, so even if you weren’t, it probably was. It might have projected different words than were actually on the page, or it might have had an evasion spell, one that made it difficult for you to concentrate.” I thought about my distraction with my dress during the reception. Maybe I wasn’t just being an obsessive bride. “Like that purse, for example,” she continued, not looking up.

My purse? I looked at it now: Hand-woven of the softest leather I’d ever felt, streaked with blue so faded it was embedded into the material; it reminded me of the ouzo jar from 5 B.C. Jeffrey said it was made from some exotic African deer, one that had been around when Adam and Eve first walked the earth. Then he had burst into laughter.

After Ms. Margolis’ comment, I looked at the supple skin with its barely-there blue markings, squinting to see past the enchantment she said it carried. They were inkmarks, and they were becoming more evident to me; they weren’t a language, but pictographs. Now I wondered if it hadn’t been made of an ancient African deer at all, but out of something I’d find revolting and despicable, and that was why he was laughing.

“Before we go any further, will you please tell me what a voeu is,” I said, setting the purse on the floor and pushing it away with my foot. “I don’t think I can do any decision making until I understand what that is.”

“Certainly you need to understand the terminology,” she said, looking up from the
contract. “It translates to ‘vow,’ or ‘want.’ It’s a Dark Work demons have in place of a soul, and once transferred to you, the voeu would effectively replace your humanity with demonity. It’s boilerplate in demon marriage contracts, hence the enchantment—the grooms don’t want their brides reading that bit. Tends to spoil the honeymoon.”

“So after my seventh anniversary, I’m no longer human. He becomes human, because he gets my soul, and I become—”

“A demon.”

“Essentially.”

A cool breeze seemed to blast across the planes of my face, freezing the sweat that had been beading at my temples. I was hot and cold at once. A demon. I would be a demon. And he would be a human, because he would have taken my humanity. How was this possible? Jeffrey knew how upset I was at already being “too evil” to go into churches and temples; how did he think I was going to go for this?

Ms. Margolis watched me closely as I tried to process what she was saying. “I don’t want you to worry,” she said, breaking into my brain-lock. “I can stop him. I’ve stopped dozens of demons from taking their human wives’ souls.”

I didn’t know whether to be reassured. I did know I didn’t want demonity.

She stood and turned to study a room-length mahogany cabinet of ancient leather-bound books locked behind thick glass. Tugging at a silver chain around her neck, she retrieved whatever ornament was snuggled safely between her breasts. She used a jagged-edged key at the end of her silver chain to open the lock. The smell of caramelized sulfur wafted toward me, sweet and sickening and familiar.
“You say he sent an attacker after you?” Ms. Margolis said. I flinched, turning my thoughts to the swirling shadow creature and the Disbander blast that had fried us both. My hair had gone so crispy, I’d had to trim it down to a pixie cut, and I still had a black scorch mark on my right foot.

“I didn’t say it was him. Jeffrey’s still in the Arctic; he doesn’t even know I’ve found the contract yet.”

“It would smarter to assume that’s not true. Unless you can think of anyone else who would attack you, then it stands to reason the attack was designed to send you running back to him for protection,” she said, perusing her books with the sort of manicured fingernail that could crack open walnuts. “Bold. And a mistake. It’s a flagrant transgression. We’ll rake him across the coals.”

“If by coals you mean, we’ll gladly take the deal where I get to keep my soul, and I’m not otherwise flayed, boiled, branded, tortured or mutilated?” I ought to be thrilled to have found someone so obviously up to this challenge, but I was so nauseas I could barely move in the butter-umber chair. “Tell me I’m not the only woman who’s been in this position.”

“No, not at all. Most demon wives divorce within the first year; they don’t find the demon lifestyle to their liking. Almost none get as far as you do. But we’ve gotten those women out of their marriages before all was lost.”

“So what should I expect? If I decide to divorce?”

“Don’t worry. Demon divorces are getting more common, and more human. The days of being indentured for eternity or burning alive for a fortnight or going insane after
the papers are signed are over. All hail women’s lib.” She gave a brief bark of a laugh. It was no doubt lawyers like her who made it possible for women like me to become the ex-wives of demons.

So defilement and dismemberment were off the retribution table, but there were a lot of other ways I could be made to pay for dissolving my union.

“However, that old saw that ‘he’s a demon and therefore in the wrong’ doesn’t work anymore,” Ms. Margolis was saying. “Hasn’t since the Church pulled out of mediating these things. Demon divorces fall under human law in this Realm, which is mandated in conjunction with the Demon InterDimensional Council. This is a no-fault state, which stipulates fifty-fifty. You’re going to have to give up something, we’re just going to make sure it’s not going to be out of your hide.”

“I don’t care about our material possessions,” I said, then remembered the Chein Long Guanga. “Except for a couple items, he can have everything.”

“Unfortunately, where he’s going, he won’t need or want any earth-bound material items, so they won’t constitute a strong negotiating stance,” Ms. Margolis said, finally finding the book she was looking for and returning with it to her desk. It was a petite volume covered in markings I knew didn’t come from a pen or any other earthly implement. Nor was it written in any earthly language. I’d seen enough of Jeffrey’s blackbooks and contracts to recognize it as a dialect older than Original Sin, possibly by someone who had had a hand in that first failed demon-human romance. The hooks and tails on the markings seemed to swim between my lawyer’s fingers; one circular imprint seemed to glow when she opened the book. It’s also where the smell came from, like it’d
just been forged in the fires of Hell. She began making more notes on her legal pad.

“He’s probably going to want the house,” I said. “He’s got a portal in the basement.”

“A portal, hmmm. That does make it a bit trickier.” Even her scribbling sounded expensive; rich and fluid and assured. “We’ll file a restraining order with the Demon InterDimensional Council, which will put you in summary possession of the house; that will create a stronger stand for later negotiations. For now, Mrs. Cadge, the house is absolutely the safest place you can be, given the nefarious environment he’s exposed you to.”

“I see,” I said, thinking of the boney assailant. “I guess you’re right. The house is rigged with wards and alarms. They’ll protect me from…other dangers. But with the portal, Jeffrey can come and go any time he wants.”

“You said it’s in the basement? I’m assuming there’s a magikal lock on the door?” I nodded. “I’ll send someone over tomorrow to reset it.”

“We can do that? Lock him out of the house?”

“Absolutely.”

I didn’t mention the obvious, but locking him and everything else out would also summarily lock me in. For the moment, that didn’t seem so terrible. Finding a cave to crawl into was a primordial impulse in times of crisis, and it’s all I wanted to do at the moment.

“Won’t he appeal?” I asked, trying to stay in the moment and get more questions answered. Mightn’t he burn the house down? I wanted to ask.
“I’m sure he will. But we’ll make sure we file first and request the order be made permanent.”

“Can we ask to have the portal closed, or moved?”

“That’s not how portals work, Mrs. Cadge. But don’t worry about that for now. Let’s just focus on getting you and your assets secured.”

She sounded so confident. Things were moving so fast. Her expensive silver stylus was dashing out a lightning shorthand across her pad, her thick brows lowered with intensity. She might have forgotten I was there.

“What -- ” I started, stalled and tried again. “What do you think he’ll want?”

What could possibly replace a human soul?

“Hard to say, Mrs. Cadge,” she said, putting down the pen. She took up the blackbook again, thumbed through the pages. “But I have to warn you -- it may draw a little blood.”