

Vampire in the Shadows:
An In-Between Guardian Witch Short Story

Andreas parted the branches and leaves so he could see the human cop and the blonde witch bending over something on the ground. He smelled blood, a metallic scent he could almost taste on his tongue, but his focus remained on Arianna Calin, the local Guardian. His eyes narrowed in the same frustration he had experienced for months. She looked good—but then, she always did.

The Riverdale officer, Lt. Ryan Foster, stepped away to speak with one of his technicians, giving Andreas an unobstructed view of the object claiming their interest. A dead body. A young dwarf with a deep slash across his throat.

She was investigating a new murder case.

As if the Guardian sensed his presence, she lifted her head and stared at the sparse March foliage. The expression on her face was wary.

Damn! Andreas backed away, careful to avoid the twigs littering the park grounds. It wasn't likely she would hear him over the noise of the crime scene personnel and other police activity, but she might recognize his Otherworld energy. He did not want to get caught watching like this. How would he explain it? Andreas scowled. The woman had turned him into a stalker.

He had been around, out of sight but providing his protection, since the night of the violent werewolf fight in the Vampire Caverns. Had he not been the one to dispatch the ghoul that was stalking her? Another night he had tossed the rock that warned her not to walk into a werehyena trap. She might be avoiding him—with good reason—but he could not put her out of his mind. Something about this witch drew him, called to him, like nothing he had felt before in his two hundred years as a vampire. He had told himself he was keeping her safe only until he figured out the unusual connection, but it was more than that. He could not stay away. For some reason, she mattered.

The memories made it worse—the times when his mind was inattentive. The warmth of her body, softness of her lips, and the sensual scent of her.

Baffled by his continuing interest, he wondered how the green-eyed witch had gotten under his skin. He had known other beautiful women, but somehow this one with the knowing look well-beyond her twenty-three years had stirred his interest. He brushed a black lock of hair off his forehead and faded into the trees, heading back to his supper club. Arianna seemed safe enough for the night, but a new case meant he needed to keep a closer watch. She had a habit of looking for trouble—and finding it.

When he arrived at Club Dintero, a torch singer was on stage, and the close to 300 guests in the elegant, candlelit dining room were engaged in quiet conversation and after-dinner cocktails. It was almost midnight. Even late diners had moved into the dessert stage. The kitchen would close soon as human and other food-consuming guests would depart to their beds. The vampires would remain for the wine and music until it was close to dawn.

Andreas noticed the stranger immediately. He sat alone in a rear alcove and was dressed too warmly for a spring night, a black fedora pulled low on his forehead, a long drab coat. It might conceal his reddish complexion and fire-red hair from a casual observer, but Andreas wasn't fooled. He knew a halfling demon when he saw one.

Andreas stepped into the main room, drawing the stranger's attention, and their gazes locked.

A hunter, Andreas thought, his body tensing as he recognized the message in that look. Although halfling demons were not necessarily evil—their mixed blood allowed them to exercise free will—this man represented danger. It flowed from him in slithering waves.

Andreas pictured the body in Goshen Park. Murder--and now a dangerous stranger. Were the two connected? Did this demon pose a risk to Arianna?

Andreas strolled to the bar and ordered a bottle of Chianti and two glasses. Snagging the glasses in one hand, the bottle in the other, he approached the stranger's table.

"May I join you?"

Coal black eyes looked him over, as if the stranger hadn't noticed him before, the black lashes flickering to hide his thoughts. "By all means. You must be Andreas."

"You have the advantage of me." Andreas set the glasses and bottle down before taking a seat across from the demon. He kept his face unreadable. "I do not believe we have met before."

"We haven't, but I *did* have an advantage. I heard the hint of an Italian accent, and I already knew this was your club."

When Andreas raised a brow at the obvious omission in the response, the demon grudgingly added, "Name's Drake. I'm new to town."

"Not many demons come to Riverdale, even halflings." Andreas filled both glasses and pushed one toward Drake. "Are you here on business?"

Drake dipped his head once. "You could say that. I'm looking for someone."

"An Otherworlder, I assume, or you would not be in my club. May I ask who?" Andreas sipped his Chianti and waited for the demon to pick up the conversation.

Drake hesitated, as if sorting through possible responses. "One of my kind. Perhaps you have seen him. His name is Harid. Typical halfling features, except his hair is pale as if it had been bleached. He stands out."

"I have not seen such a person." Andreas raised a hand, and Marcus, the young club host, arrived within moments. They conferred in an undertone, then Andreas shook his head at Drake as Marcus returned to the front entry. "He has not been here. Have you tried The Pit or Second Chance Saloon? I have seen halflings at both of those local bars."

"He won't be looking for others of his kind. I didn't expect him to be in here either, but I was hoping you might have heard something." Drake gulped down his drink, set it on the table, and Andreas poured him another.

Liquid courage, Andreas thought, growing more concerned by the stranger's actions. Maybe he should have ordered a bottle of something stronger.

"Harid is a soul-stealer." Drake met Andreas's hardening gaze. "He's looking for innocents. It's how he feeds."

"What is your interest in this?"

The halfling flipped his jacket open, revealing a small arsenal of knives and two handguns before the jacket fell back in place. "I'm here to stop him."

Andreas rolled the stem of the wine glass in his long fingers. His earlier unease had not been unwarranted. Soul-stealers were among the most sinister Otherworld creatures. "Are you a cop or unofficial?"

"What do you think?" The demon's white teeth gleamed.

"I think you are unnecessarily evasive." Andreas shoved back his chair. "Under those circumstances, I cannot help you, but I will put you in touch with Arianna Calin, the local Guardian. You can explain the situation to her."

"Wait!" Drake put out a restraining hand but knew better than to touch Andreas. "This rogue is from my family. I will take care of him—but quietly. If his activities become known, my family will be dishonored."

"You are the family cleaner?" Andreas felt another flash of disquiet. Cleaners had a bad reputation. Ruthless. This hunter wouldn't care who he had to remove if someone got in his way.

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"Depends." Andreas moved his chair forward again and lowered his voice. "Does your rogue slash the throats of his victims?"

Drake straightened, his eyes flashing. "How did you know that?"

"Before I answer your question, tell me more about this rogue." Andreas suspected Drake wouldn't be offering anything once he had the information he wanted. "I know he does not need to prey on sentient beings, what set him off? Is this a random killing spree or does he have particular targets in mind?"

"If you know where he is, you must tell me. Now!" Drake's voice vibrated with barely suppressed anger. "I don't have time for curiosity. He will kill again, and soon."

"Then you should quit wasting time."

Drake gritted his teeth, finally drawing a long breath. "An exchange of information then. You leave me little choice." He rubbed his chin. "We knew Harid was a soul-stealer when he was six months old. He attacked a raccoon that had strayed into the yard. We found him latched onto the animal's mouth, sucking its life essence. As he became older, we realized his mind was not stable. For twenty years, the extended family has kept him confined and supplied with wild animals for his psychic feeding, mostly rats and mice. Bats when we could find them—due to their greater energy. We hoped he would never experience the *high* of stealing the soul of a truly sentient being." Drake shook his head. "A week ago, a tradesman came unbidden to our home when most of us were away and others busy. We don't know what prompted the attack, but after consuming the human's soul, Harid escaped. I've followed the trail of bodies."

"How many?"

Drake's voice was bleak. "Fourteen."

Andreas's lips tightened. "I believe he made it fifteen tonight. When I came through Goshen Park, the authorities had sealed an area with yellow tape. I saw the body of a dwarf ... with his throat cut."

The demon pushed to his feet. "Perhaps I can still pick up his trail. Where is this park?"

Andreas unfolded his body, suppressing a spurt of anger, and stood to confront the other man. "I will give you the direction, but you must not interfere with the official investigation. Or with the Guardian. If you place her at risk ..."

To Andreas's surprise, Drake didn't act offended. Instead, the corners of the demon's mouth curled. "I understand. A pity I have no intention of introducing myself to the local authorities. The Guardian must be very unusual to elicit such defense from a vampire."

Ignoring the implication, Andreas told him how to reach the crime scene. "I hope you have a short but productive stay in Riverdale," he added, as the halfling headed for the door. "Good hunting."

Drake lifted one hand before disappearing through the exit.

Andreas remained standing with his head cocked to one side. He wondered if he had made the right decision. He had sensed no deceit in Drake, only a dangerous determination, but he could not take any chances with Arianna involved.

Perhaps he would call and warn her. Or better yet, tell her in person.

A smile tugged at Andreas's lips at the thought of making contact again, but he finally shook his head. No, she had made it plain she did not want to see him. It was hard to misinterpret *stay away*, he thought dryly. It would better if she took the first step toward any renewal of their relationship. His instincts told him the time would come, but for now he must exercise what patience he had gained in two centuries. But he would not leave her safety to chance.

He spoke with Marcus again, leaving him in charge of the club for the next day or two, and slipped out the side door into a dark alley. Watching Arianna even more closely would be risky, but it wouldn't hurt to keep an eye on Drake, make sure the demon completed his task and left town.

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The crime scene hadn't change much since Andreas had been there two hours earlier. The body was gone, but crime scene tape, strung among the trees, barred the area, and officers still combed the grounds under the glow of spotlights. Lt. Foster's curly blond hair stood out immediately, and Andreas picked up Drake's scent coming from the trees on the far side of the clearing.

Arianna was not there. He stifled the small tug of disappointment. She must be notifying the dwarf's family. That would be her responsibility as the cop for the Magic Council, the Otherworld governing authority. The tension in his shoulders relaxed when he realized Drake and the dangers he represented were nowhere near her.

Andreas narrowed his eyes in thought. If he helped them find this rogue, perhaps he could prevent further killings and get both demons out of town. As long as Harid was on the loose, every sentient being was in danger, including Arianna.

He ducked under the yellow tape, stepped out of the trees, and walked toward Lt. Foster. The cop frowned, his body language stiff and not particularly welcoming.

"Andreas." Foster said the name warily. "Why are you inside my crime scene? This incident doesn't concern the vampire court, unless you're here to tell me a vampire did this." He suddenly frowned. "If you're looking for Ari, she already left."

"I am aware the Guardian is not here, as I checked before approaching you. I would rather you didn't mention you have seen me." He returned Foster's stare with determined calm. "I heard there was a brutal attack by an unknown person or creature. I am here to offer my assistance. If this was an Otherworlder, you might need someone who understands them." He looked at the dark blood stains on the ground. "The victim is dead?"

"Yes. A dwarf. He was nearly decapitated with a sharp blade. What are you not telling me, Andreas? Do you know what happened here?" Foster peered at him with suspicion. "If you do, I'd like to hear it."

"Nothing more than basic gossip that there had been trouble. Do you have a suspect or a weapon?"

Foster relaxed his stance a little, probably because Andreas had stuck to crime talk rather than showing any interest in the absent Guardian. "Don't I wish. Only real clue we've got are some unusual footprints. Big. I mean really big. Bigger than a size 18. Now we'll have our own Bigfoot legend," he added with dark humor. "Here, let me show you." He walked a few feet away and crouched next to a spot marked with a yellow flag. "These prints look like a bare human foot, except there are six toes. Not totally unheard of, but not common either, and

considering the large size and no shoes . . ." Ryan shrugged, standing again. "Ari suggested it was a mutant of some kind."

Yes, if only Foster realized how right Arianna was, Andreas mused. Soul-stealing could certainly be considered a serious mutation. In Harid's case it had also led to mental instability.

"Are there more prints like this? Perhaps I can track them."

Foster hooked his thumbs on his belt and gave Andreas a hard look. "Why are you being so helpful? I can't see what your stake is in this. You sure this wasn't a vampire?"

"I am sure, Lieutenant, but violence is bad for the Otherworld community, including my restaurant business." He needed to convince Foster that his offer of help was genuine and had nothing to do with Arianna Calin. He refused to discuss his concern for her safety with Foster. If the cop suspected the truth, he might tell her, and that would not be at all to Andreas's liking. "I have worked with your department before as a police consultant. Is my offer really so unusual?" When the Foster's blue eyes never wavered, Andreas showed his impatience. "Do you want my help or not?"

"Yeah, sure, I suppose it wouldn't hurt. The footprints go this way." Foster's stiff back said he wasn't convinced by Andreas's explanation, but he showed him the rest of the tracks.

"They lead to the woods over there." Foster pointed toward the densest part of the park.

Andreas's sense of smell told him Drake was already on the move, responding to Foster's directions. The demon cleaner would follow Harid's trail. Andreas slowed his steps, stopping to examine each flattened area. The longer he stalled, the more time Drake would have to get out of sight. If Foster caught a glimpse of the demon, he would ask uncomfortable questions Andreas wasn't prepared to answer.

They finally reached the woods and the noticeable broken twigs where something large had charged into the brush. "When was the victim found?" Andreas asked. "Do you have a time of death? This trail feels a few hours old."

"Blood was fresh when a wolf almost ran over the body, but that was close to four hours ago." Foster pulled his attention away from the mangled brush and slid his gaze toward Andreas. "The time delay is why Ari isn't around. She wanted to reach the family before they heard the bad news from the media or community gossip."

Andreas knew Foster had explained Arianna's absence as a way of saying 'thank you' for the help, but he didn't let his face show he had heard him. "The trail is getting faint. I should go if there is a chance of tracking this creature."

"Creature? So you think the killer is non-human?"

"It does not smell human." Andreas frowned. "Surely Arianna told you. A witch would know. Ah, I see." His features cleared, replaced by a dry look. "You were testing—to see if I would tell you the truth. Which I did, but why so suspicious?"

"Sorry. Just trying to figure out why you're really here," Foster grumbled.

Andreas turned away. "I will let you know if I am successful in trailing this thing."

He glided into the woods, determined to resolve this matter in the next twenty-four hours, before he was forced to keep his promise to report back to Foster. The human police were not equipped to handle a rampaging demon. They would turn the capture or kill over to the Guardian, and he wanted Drake to take the risks, not Arianna. In Andreas's mind, the issue was indisputable: Drake's problem—Drake's responsibility to clean it up.

Andreas lost the trail after forty-five minutes. He had followed both scents through the park and into the Vampire Strip Club district in Olde Town. The two halfings—rogue and hunter—had stayed to the dark alleys. Suddenly, even Drake's trail vanished. Andreas searched

the immediate area, hoping to pick it up again, then returned to stand at the end of the alley where he had felt the last trace. He peered into the shadows.

What the hell? No scent, no life force. How had he lost both of them? He searched his memories for something similar, a possible answer, and finally nodded. It had to be portal travel, a method consistent with the pattern he had found: the brief gaps in the trail, the abrupt end. The ability to create and travel through dimension rifts was a rare demon trait, but these two were from the same family. It could be hereditary.

His nostrils flared as he tried one last time to pick up their scent, then he shrugged. If he could not locate the enemy, he must stay close to Arianna and be very careful to avoid exposure. Sooner or later, the rogue demon and the witch would find each other. He could guarantee it.

He sprinted through the tree-lined streets of Olde Town, his feet skimming the pavement, and he stopped next to the ivy-covered wall of her brick apartment building. He looked up at the dark windows on the second floor, but he could sense she wasn't there. It was 3:00 a.m. Did the witch never sleep?

He lifted his head, checked the building again to be sure he hadn't missed something, recording and in turn discarding the various sensations. Most of the inhabitants were human. One elf, a lone werewolf. He could smell each being's blood, and if he listened carefully, he could identify the regular breathing of deep sleep. None of them were Arianna.

Rather than go running all over town without a known destination, he settled in to wait, leaning against the wall in the shadows underneath her window. His lashes hooded his black eyes, as he pondered what he was doing there. This vigil did not seem to be the rational action of a highly regarded member of the vampire court. Reaching no conclusion he was comfortable with, he shrugged, stilled his body, and simply waited.

Less than ten minutes later, he sensed a familiar presence and her apartment lights flicked on. The window in her kitchen was cranked open an inch to let in the spring breeze, and he heard dim sounds of movement for a while. The shower came on, and he indulged himself in imagining the scene for a brief instant. Finally the lights went out.

Andreas glanced at the sky. It was beginning to gray from the approach of dawn. He waited until he heard her regular breathing that indicated she was settled for the next few hours. Perhaps Drake would eliminate the threat from Harid before she woke.

Hurrying to beat the dawn, he arrived at his Victorian mansion in time to speak with his head of security and arrange for one of the weretiger staff to watch Arianna's apartment building while she slept.

"Why are you so worried?" Samuel asked, once he had his instructions. His family had been in Andreas's employment for several generations, and they had a personal relationship with their boss. "It's been a long time since I've seen you so concerned about someone."

"I am always worried when evil is prowling our community."

"Seems to me this is more about the witch." Samuel gave him a cheeky grin, in spite of Andreas's deepening frown. "I've heard she's pretty. Long blonde hair, big green eyes."

"She is hard-headed and impossible," Andreas muttered before catching himself and lapsing into silence. "Just send someone over there," he finally said.

He left abruptly, pretending he hadn't heard the security chief's chuckle. Knowing he had taken all the precautions he could, Andreas retired to his darkened chambers, but he didn't immediately yield to the sun's leaden call. He prowled his room, favoring the over-sized bed and his black silk sheets with a frustrated glare. He had never been so impatient with the mandatory

down time before. He stopped, cracked a window shutter with one finger, and stared into the approaching day.

His unease wasn't just about her. Andreas's vampiric senses felt a deranged mind, confused, yet exhilarated by the rush of new sensations. Harid was projecting, his insanity leaking into the atmosphere, warping the energy fields. Wherever he had been, the killer was back in this dimension, and at the moment, Andreas was helpless to do anything about it.

As the sun's pull on his body and his mind grew insistent, overpowering everything else, Andreas dropped onto the bed. Within less than a second, he was out for the day.

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Hours later his first conscious thought was *something is wrong!* He blinked his eyes and rolled to his feet in a smooth move, instantly alert. His eyes roved the room, but it was quickly apparent the threat was not here. He grabbed his clothes, pulled on jeans and shirt and bolted into the hallway.

"Samuel!" he shouted into the hall cameras. "What is going on?"

"Nothing new," answered a disembodied voice. "There are no alarms, and I just spoke to the tiger watching the Guardian. She's inside the police station."

Talking with Foster, Andreas thought, suppressing his over-reaction. She should be safe enough for the present, but he could still sense Harid's violent, chaotic thoughts. The rogue demon's hunger was increasing.

"All right. Stay alert. I have this . . . bad feeling. I am going to shower now and leave. Don't expect me to return until dawn."

"I'll let you know if anything changes."

"Do that."

Andreas ducked into the shower and within minutes had shrugged into a fresh set of Armani casuals, black t-shirt and jeans. He had a particular fondness for everything that originated in his native Italy and had worn the clothing of the Milan-based company since the mid-seventies. When they added the jeans' line in 1981, he made them part of his daily wardrobe.

After a stop in the kitchen to down a bottle of blood, Andreas grabbed a black leather jacket from the hall closet. Once out the front door, he headed straight to Goshen Park. Even before dark, Otherworlders gravitated in that direction. Magical creatures had free run of the park at night when it was closed to humans, but even during daylight the dense trees offered the concealment so prized by those who had survived through many centuries by hiding. The new treaties didn't always change long-standing habits. Andreas was betting that Harid would follow his instincts and seek safety in the woods.

When the vampire reached the park, the areas around the gates and fountains were still populated by humans taking advantage of the first spring days. He moved deeper into less visited areas, selecting the most remote trails. The third path he chose tingled with demon energy, and Drake rose to meet him from a old tree stump where he'd been seated.

"Where is he?" Andreas demanded. "I have felt his hunger."

"Dimension hopping." Drake sighed. "He knows I'm after him, considers it a game. He's like a terrible child, swinging between playfulness and murderous tantrums. This appears to be his favorite portal. If you stay here and watch it, I'll go in after him again."

"A demon portal? Where is it?" Andreas spun around, looking in every direction. Even with Drake pointing at the exact location, Andreas had a hard time seeing the slight distortion in the air. He closed his eyes, realizing he had senses better than sight. He marked the location in his mind before looking at Drake and nodding.

The demon cleaner walked toward the wavy area but stopped before stepping through. "If he comes through take him down by any means you can. He's fast, and he's armed with a demon sword."

Andreas understood the warning. Demon swords were not only large machete-like weapons, but their blades were often tainted with a poison that even affected vampires. While Andreas would survive the poisoning, it would slow him down and might give Harid a chance to rip off his head. A very permanent death for anyone.

Andreas nodded a second time, and Drake appeared to slip sideways into nothing. He was just gone.

When the crickets chirped and the other night sounds started, Andreas realized how quiet it had been in the presence of the cleaner. Even the insects and birds recognized that kind of danger. He found the renewed sounds oddly reassuring.

While he waited, Andreas walked over to examine the portal. He stuck his arm into the shimmering area, but nothing unusual happened. His hand simply passed through. He saw nothing; his hand looked normal. He stepped where he had watched Drake step but again—nothing. He could still make out the slight distortion, feel the demon energy, and his marking confirmed the spot, but the portal didn't recognize his body as having any substance. Interesting phenomenon, but useless to him if he could not enter.

He turned away, preparing to wait, when he heard a small sound behind him. Spinning around, he caught the flash of a red face, surrounded by swirling white-blond hair. Andreas dove forward grabbing for the halfling, but he landed hard on the pine-needle surface, his arms holding nothing. Harid had leaped back into the void of the portal.

"Damn!" Andreas swore under his breath, flipped to his feet, and brushed the dirt off his jeans. Well, that had been embarrassing. Drake's warning that Harid was fast had been a gross understatement. The halfling had been no more than a glimmer, an impression. Containing him while he was on the move would be like trying to grab the wind.

Andreas glared at the shimmering spot, hoping the halfling had jumped straight into Drake's line of fire. He grabbed the cell out of his jacket pocket.

"Samuel," he barked, as soon as his security chief answered, "get one of our vampires over here with a shotgun loaded with silver. I need someone to watch a portal for me. We have a killer demon hopping between dimensions."

"Can do. Hang on." The phone was quiet for a moment, then Samuel's voice was back. "Marlena's on her way. She's the most sensitive to portal energy."

"Good choice."

Within three minutes Marlena burst into the scene. "Samuel said to hurry," she explained. "Something about a killer demon." The red-headed vampiress grinned, showing her fangs. "I could use a little action. Things have been dull lately."

Andreas's mouth twitched at her eagerness. When he pointed out the demon portal entrance, she nodded and walked over to poke her finger in it. "They don't look like much, do they? What do you suppose they find on the other side?"

He knew she didn't expect an answer, so he got to the point. "The halfling we're hunting is fast. He got away from me."

Marlena's eyes widened in astonishment. "You're joking? Sorry, of course you're not joking, but he must be super fast if you missed him."

"He blinked in and out. If you see a disturbance again, I'd fire as soon as you identify his bleached blond hair. There is a second halfling, a cleaner with dark hair. Try not to kill him by mistake."

"If you insist." Marlena's eyes twinkled. "Go do whatever you need to do. I'll keep a eye out for our bad boy. I'm going to be disappointed if he doesn't show."

Andreas warned her about the demon sword, then hurried toward the park entrance, anxious to find Arianna. With Harid on the loose he wanted to be close by her side. He wasn't sure her witch blood would protect her from the demon's poison.

He had just passed the park's swan fountain when he heard the shotgun blast. He whirled and raced toward Marlena and the portal.

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"Son of a bitch!" Marlena was stomping around the clearing, gesticulating at the portal with the barrel of the shotgun. "Just dumb luck, is what it was. I almost had him."

Relieved to find her uninjured, Andreas grabbed the barrel of the wildly swinging gun. "Calm down and tell me what happened."

She gave him a murderous look and yanked the gun away, lowering it to her side. "I had him. Filled him full of buckshot. But the lucky SOB staggered and fell back into the other dimension. If I could have gone after him, well, hell . . ." She sputtered to a halt. "I don't suppose he'll try again, but I'll be here. Waiting."

"You have successfully blocked one access, and you have weakened him. Perhaps the cleaner will be able to finish the job."

"I'd rather finish it myself," she said. "I doubt if even silver buckshot can slow him for long, but I guess it'd have to be OK if somebody else got him."

"That was good work, Marlena. Stay on it, and I will return later. Cheer up," he said with a chuckle. "You may get another chance."

He left her staring at the nearly invisible demon portal, but this time he got out of the park without incident. He checked his Parmigiani watch and noted the time on the red dial. 7:57 p.m. It was early for Otherworlders, and Arianna might be anywhere. He swung by her apartment, but as he expected, the place was dark. So was her office at the Cultural Center. Her best friend Claris was at home, but only the boyfriend was visiting. When Andreas stopped on the street near the Riverdale Police Building, his senses told him neither Arianna nor Lt. Foster was inside. He felt an unwelcome twinge of jealousy that they might be together.

Enough! he ordered himself. This fascination with the Guardian had to end as soon as the threat from the halfling was removed. Perhaps he should find another woman to take her off his mind. Celibacy was only good for one thing—frustration.

Andreas rubbed his chin between thumb and finger. A date might not be a bad idea. Someone like Glorius, the stunning and well-endowed recent addition to the vampire court. She had given him more than one inviting smile. A night with her might make a man forget anyone—especially an annoying witch who had no desire to see him again. Let the witch keep her distance. It was probably better for both of them.

From now on, she was on her own. As soon as he took care of the demon.

He searched the bar district, where he knew Arianna began her patrol every night. Except for the usual loud voices, deafening music and an occasional fight, he found nothing that would indicate the presence of the halfling or the Guardian. He had almost decided to wait for her at Goshen Park, her last stop every evening, when he spotted her and several uniformed police officers outside the Sin & Skin strip lounge.

He kept to the edge of the crowd surrounding them, hoping she wouldn't pick up on his presence with so much Otherworld energy around. She and Lt. Foster were talking with the uniformed officers and a couple of burly werebears in human form. He moved closer to listen in on the conversation, and the scent of blood made his fangs stir. He should have grabbed that second bottle of blood.

One of the bears cradled an injured arm, wrapped in a bloody jacket, but the other one was doing the talking. "I tell you we'd never seen the guy before. But he could really move. One second he was screeching at us for spilling his beer. The next, he hauled out this huge cleaver and swung it at my buddy. Then he looked toward the door, there was a flash of movement, and he was gone." The werebear held up both empty hands for emphasis. "I've never see anyone move like that."

"What kind of being are we talking about?" Arianna asked. "This wasn't another were?"

Both bears shook their heads vigorously, but the victim answered her. "Naw, something else. He smelled of sulfur. A Hell-born brat, but this one had white hair."

"An albino halfling?" she said, as if talking to herself. "I've never seen one, but I suppose anything's possible. Halflings are fast, but that fast?" She looked thoughtful. "You said he had a knife. Something that would make a very large slit on the throat," she said, looking at Ryan.

"God, yes!" the victim said. "It's a wonder he didn't cut my head off."

Andreas smiled to himself, while keeping his head down in the center of the crowd. She was figuring it out. Whatever failings the witch had—and he could name a few, like her hasty temper—she was clever.

His attention returned to the conversation when he heard Foster ask her, "Can you track this thing?"

Arianna shrugged. "Maybe." She looked at the two bears. "Show me where you last saw him."

As they walked toward the strip club door, Andreas remained in the crowd outside. If she found a trail it would only lead to another demon portal, which definitely was not inside the strip club. Besides, he didn't dare venture inside. She would see him the moment they were in the same room.

Yet, he was tempted. A strong invisible force tugged on him to follow her, as if his magic refused to be parted from hers. He had felt that same magnetism the first night they met, but it still baffled him. The attraction went beyond lust or any romantic notion—not that he hadn't noticed how well her jeans fit or the deep V in her casually buttoned top, but the connection was more, like something forged in the distant past. He sucked in a frustrated breath. His relief was almost palpable when his thoughts were interrupted by Arianna and Foster emerging from the building.

"I don't understand why he wasn't seen when he came out the front door. Are you sure this is the way he went?"

"It's what my senses say." Arianna turned toward the side alley. "He came along here. Probably someone did see him, but it was just a blur in the corner of their eye. Not something they were sure of, not sure enough to mention."

When the two cops entered the alley, Andreas swung around the block to watch from the other end. The Guardian tracked the creature the four blocks to the Mississippi River cliffs and raised Andreas's immediate alarm when they stopped directly over the Vampire Caverns that spread under the city. The last thing he wanted was strangers, including cops, swarming into restricted vampire territory. He let out a pent-up breath when she started walking again, turning north, following a faint footpath away from the cliffs. The trees and brush grew thick along the sides of the path which ended after fifty yards or less at an arched stone entrance.

Lone Oak Cemetery. He had been past here several times, but he had not been aware of any demon activity. It was an early settlement graveyard of leaning and broken stones. An elderly caretaker kept the weeds down, but hardly anyone else visited. He watched Arianna and Foster walking among the ancient graves. She came to a sudden halt, and from her puzzled behavior, Andreas assumed she had lost the trail. Harid must have created a portal here among the residual energy of the dead. Another access point Drake must close before he left town. Once the current menace was over, Andreas did not want other demonic creatures using the abandoned portals, but only a demon or black magic could seal them.

He called Marlina on her cell phone. "Any action on your end?"

"That depends on your definition, I guess."

Andreas was momentarily taken aback by the odd tone in her voice, until she added, "Your friend Drake is here. He seems to have lost the trail of our bad guy."

"Tell him Harid was at a strip club about an hour ago, but he fled into another portal. Also tell Drake to stay put. We need to discuss the portals, and I should be there soon." As they talked, he continued to watch Arianna and Foster search the cemetery.

The Guardian finally looked at Foster and threw up her hands. He shrugged.

"I should not be here much longer," Andreas said, as he realized their search had come to an end." Even as he spoke, Arianna turned and walked straight toward him. "Got to go," he whispered.

Concerned he had been seen or she had felt him watching her, Andreas slipped through the trees and didn't look back until he had entered the first block of residential homes. He circled around to confirm the cops were returning to town before he headed for Goshen Park and his meeting with the demon. He should have just enough time to update him on Harid's activities and discuss the closing of the portals before Arianna reached Goshen Park and her patrol of the property. If something happened tonight, he wanted to be there, to make sure she was safe.

* * *

Marlena and Drake seemed locked in an uneasy silence when Andreas arrived at the forest clearing with the first portal.

"Well, I'm glad to see you have become such good friends," he said with barely concealed amusement. "Have I missed something?"

"He's a freakin' demon!"

"She's a bloodsucker," Drake offered.

"Now that we have established the obvious, will somebody explain why you have gotten off to such a bad start?"

"Nothing really happened," Drake said. "But you told her—"

"The killer demon is related to him," Marlina interrupted. "You didn't tell me that. How do you know we can trust him? What if the whole family is evil?"

Andreas raised an astonished brow at her outburst and the barely-leashed tension. Drake shuffled his feet. "OK, so I might have struck a demon blow when she came toward me. I expected to see you and thought she was an attacker."

"He sucker punched me," Marlena spat. "You told me not to hurt him, and he sucker-punched me."

"I apologized," Drake protested.

Andreas sighed, seeing more in this spirited exchange than either of the others seemed to recognize. He did not have time or the inclination to deal with a blossoming demon/vampire romance. He mentally shuddered at the thought.

"Let us stick to business. Harid has struck again but no one died this time. The victim was a werebear and will self-heal. But your kin is attacking in public now, growing more bold. We must dispense with him tonight."

"While I whole-heartedly agree, I can't do much if I can't get my hands on him."

Suddenly irritated at the halfling's offhand attitude, Andreas snapped. "You are not likely to find him by sitting on a stump."

Drake glowered at him and slowly rose. He stared at the vampire a moment before answering. "I suppose you have a point, but you asked that I wait here."

Andreas's stiff shoulders slumped. "So I did. Sorry, I seem to be distracted."

If he had an opinion about Andreas's distraction, Drake chose to focus the conversation on Harid. "Where was this latest attack?"

"A strip club in the bar district. He got angry when someone knocked over his beer, but before he did much damage, he suddenly stopped fighting and left. We tracked him to a cemetery, not far from the cliffs."

"Damnation! Then I just missed him. I was there about an hour ago. He must have picked up my scent."

"Why would he go running after you?" Marlena asked. "I thought he was avoiding you. Doesn't he know you'll kill him?"

"He knows." Drake's voice softened, almost sad. "Perhaps he hoped to kill me first, but it was more likely the affinity for our family ties. Harid was playing games with me before, but this time he was angry, confused. He's in trouble, and we share the same blood. He would be drawn to return to me."

Marlena grimaced. "Seems rather suicidal. If that's really what you think he'd do, why not sit tight until he finds you?"

"There would be too many dead bodies in the meantime," Andreas said. "He is losing control and will soon begin to feed in public."

His prediction seemed to spur Drake into action. "Yes, I should go." He opened his long coat, searched a couple of pockets and pulled out a weapon that looked similar to a stun gun. "An energy disrupter," he said when he saw Marlena watching. "It will disable him, so I can return him home before his final sentence. I won't stop this time until I've completed my mission. He's become too dangerous."

The primeval roar of a predator rent the air—and sent everyone scrambling. "Stay here," Andreas ordered Marlena, as he and Drake crashed into the woods. "Be ready with the shotgun in case he flees into the portals." No one questioned the savage howl had come from Harid.

Andreas's heart pounded as the brambles tugged at his leather jacket. He brushed them aside and rushed headlong across the park. Harid had located an intended victim, and Andreas

knew who it was—every instinct screamed the answer. The Guardian and trouble had found each other.

Neither the vampire nor the demon cleaner bothered with paths. They crashed through brush, leaped over downed logs or other obstacles, taking the shortest and most direct route toward the source of that single howl. The woods had fallen ominously quiet.

Andreas slid to a halt, quickly taking in the scene before him. Arianna and a blond halfling demon were circling each other in an area to one open side of the path ahead. Moonlight gleamed from the demon sword Harid was waving, his reddish complexion now flushed tomato red with fury. His lip was split as if he had been struck a hard blow. Arianna crouched in a defensive posture, displaying no weapons, but Andreas knew her better than that.

"What are you waiting for?" Drake whispered. "He'll make mincemeat of her! She has no means of defense."

"You are mistaken. Just watch." Andreas slid his eyes toward the other man. "She must never know that I was here. I will not reveal myself unless it becomes necessary to save her life."

"OK, your call." Drake lifted a shoulder. "But I'm not going to stand here while he kills her." He started forward, stopping when Andreas threw out a restraining hand.

Breath hissed through the vampire's teeth, and his fangs extended. "That will not happen." He returned his attention to the battle scene as Harid lunged toward the witch. Arianna backed away, raising her hands. A brilliant blue flame arced from her fingertips, catching the gleaming sword and knocking it from the demon's hands. She immediately moved forward, engaging him with a side kick to the head and following with double chops to the neck. She spun away before he could recover and repeated the attack from a second direction. Harid flailed at her with his huge arms, acting more like a mindless zombie gone wild than a clever, conniving son of the hellborn. His fists were massive, however, and when he struck a heavy blow to her back, she tumbled face first into the dirt, rolled, stumbling as she regained her feet.

Andreas tensed to spring forward.

Arianna moved in again, pelting the giant with strategic blows and dancing away. Harid swung his head back and forth in confusion as she leaped with both feet, striking him in the chest, and knocking him over. He quickly righted himself but seemed more intent now on defending rather than furthering the attack. Arianna was relentless. Over and over, landing blows that began to sap the demon's strength.

Andreas heard Drake chuckle next to him. "I see what you mean. In spite of what he's done, I almost feel sorry for Harid. I don't think your witch needs any help."

While Andreas watched her with admiration for her skill and spirit, he felt the bite of Drake's comment. That was the crux of the problem—Arianna needed no one. Least of all, him.

Andreas flinched when she landed a hard kick to the giant's groin, following through with a second kick to the head that resulted in a loud crack. The blond demon staggered. Harid sank to his knees, his arms covering his head, and the killer turned into a bawling child.

Drake and Andreas looked at each other.

"Definitely didn't need help," the cleaner amended.

Andreas watched as Arianna stared down at Harid in astonishment. For a moment she appeared to be paralyzed by the tears. Dropping to one knee, she bound him with magical twine.

"I think that's my entrance cue," Drake said, starting forward again. This time Andreas made no attempt to stop him.

"And my exit line." Andreas paused long enough to drink in one more look at her and turned away. It was over—in more ways than one. Anxious to put distance between him and the

witch, his footsteps barely touched the ground as he sped toward the club. Upon arrival, he slipped in the alley door, changed into a black Armani suit, and strolled into the main lounge.

The music was soft, the lights dim. He began to relax and shed the tension of the last two days. This was his world, a very satisfying one.

He turned as he felt someone watching him from behind. A sensual perfume reached him first, as the newest member of the vampire court swayed toward him. Slender, slinky, long-legged and voluptuous, Glorius pursed her lips at him with a provocative arch of her brows. Her voice was soft and sultry. "Darling, Andreas. I thought it was time to visit your club I've heard so much about." She held out both hands.

A smile curling his lips, Andreas glided toward her. If a momentary flash of witchy green eyes crossed his mind, he chose to ignore it.

The End

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Amazon US: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0099ZDHO8>

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