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# TO HELL AND BACK

**DANTE VALENTINE : BOOK 5**

BY *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**LILITH SAINTCROW**



# **TO HELL AND BACK**

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*For Nicholas Deangelo. Peace. Another charm's wound up.*

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*Tempt not a desperate man.*

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—*Shakespeare, Romeo & Juliet*

*I was a-trembling because I'd got to decide forever betwixt two things, and I knowed it.  
I studied for a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself, "All right,  
then, I'll go to hell."*

—*Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn*



# Prologue

---

*There is more than one way to break a human," he said, softly. "Especially a human woman."*

*I hung between sky and ground, the constellations of Hell overhead and sterile rock underneath the icy inhuman heat of a place far removed from my own world lapping at my skin. I had come looking for my own clean death in battle, and found this instead. This indignity.*

*The Devil doesn't believe in killing you, if you can be made to serve.*

*I will not scream. The world narrowed, became a single point of light as the writhing claws slipped below my flesh and the wet sounds of the thing that would break me to his will echoed against stone walls. I will not scream. I will not give in.*

*I did scream. I screamed until my voice broke itself again as the scar on my shoulder woke with frigid hot pain, my body healing even as he tore at me. I fought as hard as I could. I am no stranger to fighting, I have fought all my life.*

*None of it mattered.*

*Nothing mattered.*

*I died there. In Hell.*

*It was the only way to escape something worse.*



Darkness closed velvet over me, broken only by the flame of a scar burning, burning, against my shoulder. I do not know how I wrenched myself free, I only know that I *did*, before the last and worst could be done to me.

But not soon enough.

I heard myself scream, one last cry that shattered into pieces before I escaped to the only place left to me, welcome unconsciousness.

As I *fell*.

Cold. Wherever I was, it was *cold*. Hardness underneath me. I heard a low buzzing sound and passed out again, sliding away from consciousness like a marble on a reactive-greased slope. The buzzing followed, became a horde of angry bees inside my head, a deep and awful rattling whirr shaking my teeth loose, splitting my bones with hot lead.

I moaned.

The buzzing faded, receding bit by bit like waves sliding away from a rocky shore. I moaned again, rolled over. My cheek pressed chill hardness. Tears trickled hot out of my eyes. My shield shivered, rent and useless, a flooding tide of sensation and thought from the outside world roaring through my brain as I convulsed, instinct pulling my tissue-thin defenses together, drowning in the current. Where was I?

I had no prayers left.

Even if I'd had one, there would be no answer. The ultimate lesson of a life spent on the edge of Power and violence—*when the chips are down, sunshine, you're on your own*.

Slowly, so slowly, I regained my balance. A flood of human thought smashed rank and foul against my broken shields, roaring through my head, and I pushed it away with a supreme effort, trying to *think*. I made my eyes open. Dark shapes swirled, coalesced. I heard more, a low noise of crowds and hovertraffic, formless, splashing like the sea. Felt a tingle and trickle of Power against my skin.

*Oh, gods. Remind me not to do that again. Whatever it was.* The thought sounded like me, the tough, rational, practical me, over a deep screaming well of panic. *What happened to me?*

*Am I hungover?*

That made me laugh. It was unsteady, hitching, tired hilarity edged with broken glass, but I welcomed it. If I was laughing, I was okay.

Not really. I would never be *okay* again. My mind shuddered, flinching away from . . . something terrible. Something I could not think about if I wanted to keep the fragile barrier between myself and a screaming tide of insanity.

I pushed it away. Wrestled it into a dark corner and closed the door.

That made it possible to think a little more clearly.

I blinked. Shapes became recognizable, the stink of dying human cells filling my nose again. Warmth trickled down my cheeks, painted my upper lip. I tasted spoiled fruit and sweetness when

licked my lips.

~~Blood. I had a face covered in blood, and my clothes were no better than rags, if I retained them all. My bag clinked as I shifted, its broken strap reknotted and rasping between my breasts. I blinked more blood out of my eyes, stared up at a brick wall. It was night, and the wall loomed at a crazy angle because I lay twisted like a rag doll, pretty-much-naked against the floor of an alley.~~

*Alley. I'm in an alley. From the way it smells, it's not a nice one either. Trust me to end up like this.*

It was a sane thought, one I clung to even as I shivered and jolted, my entire body rebelling against the psychic assault of so many minds shoving against me, a surfroar of screaming voices. Not just my body but my *mind* mutinied, bucking like a runaway horse as the *something* returned, huge and furious, boiling up through layers of shock. Beating at the door I had locked against it.

*Oh gods, please. Someone please. Anyone. Help me.*

I moaned, the sound bouncing off bricks, and the mark on my shoulder suddenly blazed with so much heat, welling out through my aching body. I hurt everywhere, as if I'd been torn apart and put back together wrong. The worst hurt was a deep drilling ache low in the bowl of my pelvis, like the world's worst menstrual cramp.

I could not think about that. My entire soul rose in rebellion. I could not *remember* what had been done to me.

The rips in my shields bound themselves together, tissue-thin, but still able to keep me sane. The scar pulsed, crying out like a beacon, a flaming black-diamond fountain tearing into the ambient Power of the cityscape. The first flare knocked me flat against the ground again, stunned and dazed. Successive pulses arrived, each working in a little deeper than the last, but not so jolting.

*Breathe. Just breathe.* I clung to the thought, shutting my eyes as the world reeled under me. I made it up to hands and knees, my palms against slick greasy concrete as I retched. I don't usually throw up unless poisoned, but I felt awful close.

Too bad there was nothing in my stomach. I curled over on myself, retched some more, and decided I felt better.

The mark kept pulsing, like a slow heartbeat. Japhrimel's pulse is slower than mine, one beat every three my own heart performs, like a strong silt-laden river through a broad channel. It felt uncomfortably like his heartbeat had settled in the scar on my shoulder, as if I was resting my head on his chest and hearing his old, slow, strong heart against my cheek and fingertips.

*Japhrimel.* I remembered him, at least. Even if I couldn't remember myself.

I cursed, in my head and aloud as I found the other brick wall confining this alley. Drove my claws into the wall, my arm quivering under the strain as I hauled myself to my feet. I couldn't afford to call on him. He was an enemy.

They were all my enemies. Everyone. Every single fucking thing that breathed, or walked, or even touched me. Even the air.

Even my own mind.

*Safe place. Got to find a safe place.* I could have laughed at the thought. I didn't even know where I was.

Not only that, but where on earth was safe for me now? I could barely even remember *who* I was.

*Valentine.*

A name returned to me. My name. My fingers crept up and touched a familiar wire of heat at my collarbone—the necklace, silver-dipped raccoon baculum and blood-marked bloodstones, its potential force spent and at low ebb. I knew who wore this jewelry.

*I am Valentine. Danny Valentine. I'm me. I am Dante Valentine.*

~~Relief scalded me all over, gushed in hot streams from my eyes. I knew who I was now: I could remember my name.~~

Everything else would follow.

I hauled myself up to my feet. My legs shook and I stumbled, and I was for once in no condition for a fight. I hoped I wasn't in a bad part of town.

*Whatever town this is. What happened?* I staggered, ripped my claws free of the brick wall, and leaned against its cold rough surface, for once blessing the stink of humanity. It meant I was safe.

*Safe from what?* I had no answer for that question, either. A hideous thing beat like a diseased heart behind the door I'd slammed to keep it away. I didn't want to know right now.

***Safe place, Danny girl.*** I flinched, but the words were familiar, whispered into my right ear. A man's voice, pitched low and tender with an undertone of urgency. Just the way he used to wake me up, back in the old days.

Back when I was human and Jace Monroe was alive, and Hell was only a place I read about in classic literature and required History of Magi classes.

*That thought sent a scree of panic through me. I almost buckled under the lash of fear, my knees softening.*

***Get up, clear your head, and move. There's a temple down the street, and nobody's around to see you. You've got to move now.*** Jace's voice whispered, cajoled.

I did not stop to question it. Whether my dead lover or my own small precognitive talent was speaking didn't matter.

The only thing that mattered was if it was right. I was naked and covered in blood, with only my bag. I had to find somewhere to hide.

I stumbled to the mouth of the alley, peering out on a dim-lit city street, the undersides of hovers glittering like fireflies above. The ambient Power tasted of synth-hash smoke, wet mold, and old spilled blood, with a spiked dash of Chill-laced bile over the top.

*Smells like Jersey.* I shook my head, blood dripping from my nose in a fresh trickle of heat, and staggered out into the night.





The street was indeed deserted, mostly warehouses and hoverfreight transport stations that don't see a lot of human traffic at night. There was a temple, and its doors creaked as I made it up the shallow steps. It could have been any temple in any city in the world, but I was rapidly becoming convinced it was North New York Jersey. It smelled like it.

Not that it mattered right at the moment.

The doors, heavy black-painted iron worked with the Hegemony sundisc, groaned as I leaned on one of them, shoving it open. My right leg dragged as I hauled myself inside, the shielding on the temple's walls snapping closed behind me like an airlock, pushing away the noise of the city outside. The damage to my leg was an old injury from the hunt for Kellerman Lourdes; I wondered if all the old scars were going to open up—the whip scars on my back and the brand along the crease of my lower left buttock.

If they did open up, would I bleed? Would the bleeding ever stop?

*Take out all the old wounds, see which one's deepest.* The voice of panic inside my head let out a terrified giggle; my chattering teeth chopped into bits. The door in my head stayed strong, stayed closed. It took most of my failing energy to keep that memory—whatever it was—wrestled down.

Every Hegemony temple is built on a node of intersecting ley lines, the shields humming, fed by the bulge of Power underneath. This temple, like most Hegemony places of worship, had two wings leading from the narrow central chamber—one for the gods of Old Graecia, and one for Egyptianic. There were other gods, but these were the two most common pantheons, and it was a stroke of luck.

If I still believed in luck.

Jace's voice in my ear had gone silent. I still could not remember what had been done to me.

*Whatever it was, it was bad. I'm in bad shape.*

I almost laughed at the absurdity of thinking so. As if it wasn't self-evident.

The main chamber was dedicated to a standard Hegemony sundisc, rocking a little on the altar. It was as tall as two of me, and I breathed out through my mouth because my nose was full of blood. I worried vaguely about that—usually the black blood rose and sealed away any wound, healing my perfect poreless golden skin without a trace. But here I was, bleeding. I could barely tell if the rest of me was bleeding too, especially the deep well of pain at the juncture of my legs, hot blood slicking the insides of my thighs.

I tried not to think about it. My right hand kept making little grasping motions, searching for a swordhilt.

*Where's my sword?* More panic drifted through me. I set my jaw and lowered my head, stubbornly. It didn't matter. I'd figure it out soon enough.

When I held my blade again, it would be time to kill.

I just couldn't think of who to kill first.

My bag shifted and clinked as I wove up the middle of the great hall, aiming for the left-hand wing, where the arch was decorated with dancing hieroglyphs carved into old wood. This entire place was dark, candles lit before the sundisc reflecting in its mellow depths. The flickering light made it even harder to walk.

My shoulder pulsed. Every throb was met with a fresh flood of Power along my battered shield sealing me away but also causing a hot new trickle of blood from my nose. My cheeks were wet and slick too, because my eyes were bleeding—either that, or I had some kind of scalp wound. Thin little fingers of blood patted the inside of my knees, tickled down to my ankles.

*I'm dripping like a public faucet. Gods.* I made it to the door and clung to one side, blinking away salt wetness.

There they sat in the dusk, the air alive with whispers and mutters. Power sparked, swirling in dust-laden air. The gods regarded me, each in their own way.

Isis stood behind Her throned son, Horus's hawk-head and cruel curved beak shifting under Her spread hand of blessing. Thoth stood to one side, His long ibis head held still but His hands—holding scroll and pen—looking startled, as if He had been writing and now froze, staring down at me. The statues were of polished basalt, carved in post-Awakening neoclassic; Nuit stretched above on the vault of the roof, painted instead of sculpted.

There, next to Ptah the Worker, was Anubis. The strength threatened to leave my legs again. I let out a sob that fractured against the temple's surfaces, its echoes coming back to eat me.

The god of Death regarded me, candles on the altar before Him blazing with sudden light. My eyes met His, and more flames bloomed on dark spent wicks, our gazes flint and steel sparking to light them.

I let out another painful sob, agony twisting fresh inside my heart. Blood spattered, steaming against chill stone. This might be a new building, but they had scoured the floor down to rock, and it showed. My ribs ached as if I'd just taken a hard shot with a *jo* staff. Everywhere on me ached especially—

I shut that thought away. Let go of the edge of the doorway and tacked out like a ship, zigzagging because my right leg wouldn't work quite properly. I veered away into the gloom, bypassing Anubis though every cell in my body cried out for me to sink to the floor before His altar and let Him take me, if He would.

I had given my life to Him, and been glad to do it—but He had betrayed me twice, once in taking Jason Monroe from me and again in asking me to spare the killer of my best and only friend.

I could not lay down before Him now. Not like this.

There was something I had to do first.

I kept going, each step a scream. Past Ptah, and Thoth, and Isis and Horus, to where no candles danced on the altars. The dark pressed close, still whispering. It took forever, but I finally reached them, and looked up. My right hand had clamped itself against my other arm, just under the scar on my left shoulder, each beat of Power thudding against my palm as my arm dangled.

Nephtys's eyes were sad, arms crossed over Her midriff. Beside Her Set glowered, the jackal head twitching in quick little jerks as candlelight failed to reach it completely. The powers of Destruction at the left hand of Creation. Propitiated, because there is no creation without the clearing-away of the old. Propitiated as well in the hope that they will avoid your life, pass you by.

What had been done to me? I barely even remembered my own name. *Something* had happened.

Someone had done this to me.

Someone I had to kill.

**Burn it all down,** a new voice whispered in my head. **Come to Me, and let it burn away. Make something new, if you like—but first, there is the burning.**

**There is vengeance.**

Between Isis and Nephtys, the other goddess lingered. Her altar was swept bare, which meant

was probably the end of the month wherever I'd landed. Offerings to Her and to Set were cleared away at the dark of the moon.

Unless they were *taken*. Which happens more often than you'd think.

I folded down to my knees, each fresh jab of agony in my belly echoed by my dragging right leg and a thousand other weals of smoking pain. My fingers were slippery with blood, and I kept swiping at my face. I tipped my chin up.

My eyes rested on Her carved breasts, the stone knot between them. The shadows whispered and chuckled again, soft little feathery touches against my skin and ruined, flapping blood-crusting clothes.

Her face was a male lion's, serene in its awfulness, the disc above Her head most likely bronze but still lit with a random reflection of candlelight, turning to gold. My eyes met Hers.

"Sekhmet." My aching lips shaped the word.

The prayer rose out of my Magi-trained memory, from a page of text read long ago in Comparative Religions class at the Academy. Psions are trained to almost-perfect memory, a blessing when you want to remember an incantation or a rune; deadly misery when you want to forget the she-maddening injustice of being among the living.

Or when you *have* to forget, to stay sane. When you must push away something so monstrous your mind shivers like a slicboard over water as violation strains to replay itself in the corridors of your brain, the place that should be the most private of all.

I did not whisper. My ruined voice crept along the walls, flooding the air with husky seduction. "*Sekhmet sa'es*. Sekhmet, lady of the sun, destructive eye of Ra. Sekhmet, Power of Battle, You who made the gods drunk; o my Lady, *n't be'at*. I evoke You. I *invoke* You. I *summon* You, and I will not be denied."

No answer. Silence ate the end of the prayer. The ultimate silence.

I tipped my head back.

A scream welled out of me, out of some deep numb place that was still fully human. However wrecked and shattered that place was, it was still mine, the only territory I had left. Everything had been taken from me—but by every god that ever lived, I would take it *back*.

Just as soon as I could figure out who to kill first.

The prayer beat inside my head, an invocation as old as rage itself. *I invoke You. I summon You, I demand You, I call You forth and into me.*

Sound careened and bounced against stone, echoes like brass guns tearing the air itself, the walls of the temple creaking and groaning as I howled. My lips were numb and my body finally failed me; I slumped over to the side, my head striking the floor with a dim note of pain, my fingers clutching empty air. Blood smeared between my cheek and the stone, and as my vision wavered Her lips pulled back, teeth gleaming ivory-white as the rushing of flame surrounded me. I spiraled again into oblivion. This time it wasn't dark, and there was no blue glow of Death's far country.

No. This time I descended into blood-red, the sound of an old slow heartbeat and the running liquid crackle of flame. I fell, again, and this time I felt no pain.

I don't know how long I was out. It seemed a very long time. I would surface, hazily, and something would push me back down. Two things never varied—the feel of softness under me, and a low rasping voice, even and quiet. And the third thing: fever, sinking through my flesh like venom. Each time I rose, the cool cloth on my forehead and the voice would drive it back.

The voice was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Male, a low whispering tone, produced by a human throat. Or was it only that the ragged pleading in it sounded so human?

“Don’t you dare give up on me, Valentine.” Hoarse and harsh, a throat-cut voice, suffering through the syllables. “Don’t you *dare*.”

My eyelids fluttered, shutterclicks of light pouring into my head, scouring. The light was from a candle on a bare, sticky wooden table, glimmering in a ceramic holder. The candleflame cast a perfect golden sphere of light, and my naked skin shrank under the weight of a sheet. The room was warm.

“Hey.” Lucas Villalobos’s lank hair was mussed and dirty; flecks of dried blood marked his sallo face. The river of scarring down his left cheek twitched as an odd expression filled his yellow eyes and exposed his strong, square white teeth.

He was grinning. With *relief*.

*Now I’ve officially seen everything.*

I let out a sharp breath, my right hand feeling around slick sheets. The thin mattress was getting harder by the second. I felt every individual slat of the low cot.

I flinched and blinked. Stared up at Lucas. Managed a single, pertinent question.

“What the *fuck*?”

“That’s more like it. You’re one slippery bitch, Valentine.”

Another question surfaced. “How . . .” I coughed. My throat was a dust-slick river of stone. I hurt all over, heavy and slow. But everything on me was working. My belly ached, way down low, as if I carried a hot stone.

Another hot rill of bile worked up my throat.

“I got ways of trailin’ my clients.” He shrugged, picking something up from the nightstand. He slid one wiry-strong arm under my shoulders and tipped tepid chlorinated water down my throat.

It was the sweetest taste I’d had in ages. He took the cup away despite my sound of protest, stopping me from getting sick on it. I didn’t think I’d retch, but I wouldn’t put it past me.

“You disappeared six months ago.” He shook his lank hair back, rolling his shoulders in the sockets as if they hurt. He wore a threadbare Trade Bargains microfiber shirt, but his bandoliers were freshly oiled, resting on reinforced patches. “I been knockin’ around tryin’ to find you, keep one step ahead o’ everyone else. Two nights ago I found you in Jersey, of all fuckin’ places.” He paused, as if he wanted to say more. “Care to tell me how the fuck you managed to vanish like that?”

I sank back onto the thin mattress. Shut my eyes. Darkness returned, wrapped me in a blanket. “Six months?” My voice was just as ruined as his, but where Lucas’s harsh croak was a raven’s, mine was cracked velvet honey, strained and soft. “I . . . I don’t know.”

“You was in pretty bad shape. I didn’t think you’d make it.”

Relief rose up, fighting with pure terror as I strained to remember what I could, tiptoeing around the huge black hole in my head . . .

*My sword chimed as I dropped it, my boots ground in shattered dishes and broken glass, and I had her by the throat, lifted up so her feet dangled, my fingers iron in her soft, fragile human flesh. The candle pulsed coldly; green light painted the inside of the kitchen in a flash of aqueous light. She choked, a large dark stain spreading at the crotch of her jeans. Pissed herself with fear.*

*My lips pulled back. Rage, boiling in every single blood vessel. Heat poured from me, the air groaning and steaming, glass fogging, the wood cabinet-facings popping and pinging as the*

~~expanded with the sudden temperature shift, the floor shaking and juddering. The entire house trembled on its foundations, more tinkling crashes as whatever Pontside and Mercy and their merry crew of dirty fucking Saint City cops hadn't broken as they searched the house shattered.~~

It is your choice. It is always your choice. *Death's voice was kind, the infinite kindness of the god had sworn my life to. If I denied Him, He would still accept me, still love me.*

*But He should not have asked this of me.*

*She was helpless and unarmed, incapable of fighting back. But she was guilty, and she had lied and murdered as surely as any bounty I'd ever chased.*

Anubis et'her ka . . . Kill. Kill her kill her KILL HER!

*I could not tell if the reply was Anubis, or some deep voice from the heart of me. But she can't fight back. This is murder, Dante.*

*I didn't care. And yet . . .*

"I didn't kill her," I whispered. "The healer. I didn't . . . I walked away. I went to a phone booth, and called Polyamour."

"She told me so. She was the last person to talk to you, near as I could figure. Nobody else knows. I had a hard enough time gettin' her to give *me* anything."

I could see why. Lucas Villalobos was every psion's worst nightmare. We knew what he charged for his help. Only the desperate bargained with him, and I hadn't had time to tell Poly he was on my side.

"Valentine?" Lucas restrained himself from shaking me, thank the gods. "Care to tell me where you was?"

I thought about it. Where *had* I gone?

My heart thudded, a sharp strike of pain inside my chest. Clawed fingers, digging in—

Lucas grabbed my wrist, locked it, and half-tore me out of the bed as he backpedaled to avoid my punch. We went down in a tangle of arms and legs, my claws springing free and slashing at empty air as he evaded the strike. "*Stop it!*" he yelled, producing an amazing amount of noise through the gravel in his throat. "*Calm the fuck down!*"

The sheet tangled around my hips. One of Lucas's skinny, strong arms locked across my throat, his knee in my back. "Calm down," he repeated, in my ear. "I ain't your enemy, Valentine! Quit it!"

I froze. My heart thundered in my ears. I felt my pulse in my wrists, my ankles, my throat, in the back of my head. Even my hair throbbed frantically.

It was true. He wasn't my enemy.

Who was? What had *happened*? "I don't know," I whispered. "I don't know what happened. The last thing I remember is being in that phone booth."

It wasn't strictly true. I knew I'd left the phone booth and gone . . . somewhere.

*Pretty damn far*, a sneering little voice spoke up inside my head. *You went right over the moon. Right over the goddamn moon and into the black, sunshine.*

Lucas was out of breath. "You calm?"

*I'm not anywhere near calm, Lucas. But it'll have to do.* I stared at the floor—filthy boards, dirt squirming in cracks, my narrow golden hand spread in front of my face to keep me from being mashed into the ground. I still had my rings, but each stone was dull and empty, no spells sunk into the depths. I had used them all.

When?

I coughed, racking. Wanted to spit. Didn't. "Let me up."

He complied. I made it up to sitting, my back braced against the cot, the sheet wrapped around me. Lucas squatted, easily, his yellow eyes on my face. Just like a cat will stare at a mousehole, patient and silent.

I shut my eyes. Breathed in. My shields were in bad shape, ragged patches bleeding energy into the air, heat simmering over my skin as my demon metabolism ran high. The surfroar of human minds outside this small room was just as loud as ever, but it wasn't crashing through my head. The discipline of almost forty years as a psion stood me in good stead, trained reflex patching together holes in the shimmering cloak of energy over me, little threads spinning out to protect me from the psychic whirlpool of a city.

*Almost forty years, last time I checked.* I didn't even know what year it was.

The absurdity of the situation walloped me right between the eyes. Danny Valentine, part-demon bounty hunter and tough-ass Necromance, and I didn't even know what goddamn decade I was in.

I bent over, wheezing. Lucas rose to his feet and shuffled away. I laughed until black spots crowded my vision from lack of oxygen, fit to choke as the candleflame trembled and the bare white painted walls ran with shadows.

Lucas came back. He settled down cross-legged, and when I could look at him again, swabbing his salt water from my cheeks, he offered me the bottle. It was rice wine, fuming colorlessly in my mouth. I took a healthy draft and passed the green plasglass bottle back to him. He took a swig, didn't grimace, and tossed it far back. His throat worked as he swallowed.

I wondered who the blood on his face was from. Discovered I didn't want to know. There was only one thing I needed to know from him.

"What the fuck's going on?"

He shrugged, took another hit off the bottle. "You disappeared and all hell broke loose. Your green-eyed boyfriend's tearin' up whole cities looking for you, and he's not too choosy where he looks or how hard. Your blue-eyed girl was scrambling to keep away from him at first, but she pulled a vanishing trick too, about a month ago. Everyone wants a piece of Danny Valentine, and I nearly got my head taken off a few times lookin' for you myself. I never been so happy to see a datband trace go live in my *life*."

So that's how he'd tracked me, with a datband trace. I was glad nobody else had been close enough to me to slip that code in. "Six months." I stared down at my hands. The battered black molecule-drip polish on my fingernails was almost gone, the fingernails themselves translucent gold.

Claw-tips. I could extend them, if I had to, and rip the sheet to shreds.

*A year in Hell is not the same as a year in your world.* Eve's voice floated through my head.

Why would I think of that now? I'd been out of action for six months, six months I couldn't remember. Six months I would probably, if I was lucky, never get back. I didn't *want* to remember them.

*What do you do now, Danny? Japhrimel's looking for me, and Eve . . . Has he done something to her? Where have I been?*

It didn't matter.

"What do you think we should do?" I whispered. I was fresh out of ideas.

Lucas took another mouthful, handed the bottle to me. "I think we should contact your boyfriend. There's other shit goin' down too, Valentine. Magi casting circles and invoking, and things comin' through."

“Isn’t having something come through the *point* of Magi casting circles?” I took a hit of rice wine and let it burn all the way down into my chest. It wouldn’t do a damn thing for me—my part-demon metabolism mostly shunted alcohol aside now.

But the idea of getting drunk was so fucking tempting I wondered if I should find a vat of beer or something stronger.

“Not when Magi keep getting torn apart, even when they’re just casting regular sorceries. The Hegemony’s issued a joint directive with the Putchkin Alliance. No Magi are allowed to practice for the foreseeable future.”

I stared at him, my jaw suspiciously loose. “*Sekhmet sa’es*,” I breathed, a thrill of fear running along my skin. “A joint directive?”

No Magi practicing meant the corporate shields of gods-alone-knew how many companies weren’t being worked on. The glut of work could be ameliorated by some Shamans, but the finer industries and thieves were probably having the time of their lives. All sorts of other effects would ripple out through the economy—the potential loss in tax revenue was enormous. The setback in research labs would cost a hefty chunk, too.

“I ain’t no coward.” Lucas gave me a straight yellow-eyed glare. “But I can’t see keepin’ you alive much past sundown if we break cover. There’s just too much fuckin’ flak up there. Your green-eyed boy will keep you alive, and I confess I’d like a little backup m’self.”

Now I have *officially heard everything*. For the man they called “the Deathless” to admit wanting backup was thought-provoking, to say the least.

Thought-provoking *isn’t the word you want here, Danny. The word you want is* terrifying. I sighed and swallowed another slug of clear fiery liquor. Even if I couldn’t get drunk it was a calming ritual. My stomach rumbled a bit, subsided. I should have felt ravenous.

I only felt slightly unsteady. Nauseous. And *heavy*, my limbs filled with sand. “I need clothes. Arms and weapons.” *Where is my sword?* I badly wanted to close my hand on a hilt, hear the deadly whistle as the keen blade clove air. I wanted *my* sword, the sword my teacher had gifted to me.

I came back to myself as the bottle groaned sharply in my clenched hand, thick green plasiliid singing with stress. Lucas eyed me.

I had to force my fingers to relax. I breathed deeply, in through the nose, out through the mouth. Just like the first and last meditation instruction every psion has hammered into her head—*breath and the mind grows still*.

*I wish that was true*. My datband gleamed on my wrist, which looked suddenly naked without the thick cuff of silvery metal.

The Gauntlet, the demon artifact that marked me as Lucifer’s little errand girl. Where was it? That was another thought I didn’t want. I pushed it away.

“You got it.” Lucas levered himself to his feet. “You got any idea how we’re gonna find your boyfriend?”

My fingers tingled, and the scar on my shoulder burned, shifting. I could *feel* the ropes of scarring writhing against the surface of my skin. “We won’t have to.” My voice sounded very far away. “Sooner or later he always finds me. One way or another.”

When he did, I would at least be safe for a little while. Everything else was just noise.

“Good thing, too. You get in *more* fuckin’ trouble.” He shuffled away, past the table with the dancing candleflame. Halted, his shoulders coming up and tensing. “Valentine? You okay?”

*Do I look okay to you?* “Yeah.” I set the bottle down and scrubbed my hands together, as if they were dirty. I *felt* dirty. Filthy, in fact. Maybe it was the room. I dearly wanted a shower. “Is there



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