

France - 1666

Marie-Madeline lit the flame under the bowl. A draft through the empty fireplace blew it out. She adjusted the metal screen in front of the hearth, then moved the bowl and tried again. As the flame took hold, smoke swirled through the room, filling it with the acrid stink of burning hair and the sweet smell of rosemary.

“Entstehen, mein Nix,” she said, tongue tripping over the foreign words. She recited the rest of the incantation. The air rippled.

“You have failed . . . again,” a woman’s voice whispered.

Marie-Madeline’s fingers trembled around the bowl. A few red-hot cinders tumbled out, and scorched her hand. “It isn’t my fault. You aren’t giving me enough. This—it isn’t easy. I need more.”

“More?” the voice hissed, circling her head. “This is not one of your potions, witch. You cannot drink until you’ve had your fill. What I give you is the power of will, a finite quantity of that which you so sorely lack. Whether you choose to use it is your own decision.”

“But I want to use it. Gaudin must have his revenge, and I must have my freedom.”

The Nix’s voice sounded at her ear, words blasting on a stream of hot air. “You are a fool, Marquise. A mewling little worm of a woman who stumbled upon that spell to summon me,

then lied to me and wasted my time. You do not want resolve. You want deliverance. You want me to do this thing for you, to absolve you of the responsibility and guilt of patricide.”

“N—no. I’d never ask—”

“I will grant it.”

Marie-Madeline went still, certain she’d misheard. “You will . . . grant it?”

“You are not the only one to dabble in arcane magics, witch. I have a spell that I have been waiting to use, waiting for the right vessel—a worthy vessel. With it, you can allow me to possess your body, carry out this deed and have my reward. Then you may claim the credit to your lover.”

“What is the spell? Tell me now. Please. Gaudin grows impatient.”

The Nix’s chuckle wafted through the air. “As do I. Find a pen and some paper, my marquise, and we will be done this thing before daybreak.”

The Nix opened her eyes. She was lying on the floor, candles blazing all around her, their light so harsh it made her blink. The smoke filling her nostrils made her cough instinctively, and she jumped, startled by the sensation. She lifted her hands. Human hands, soft and bejeweled. The Marquise’s hands. She flexed, then clenched them. The long nails drove into her palms and she gasped. So that was pain. How . . . intriguing. She dug her nails in deeper, letting the pain course down her arms. Blood dripped onto her gown. She reached down and touched it, lifted her finger to her nose, inhaled the scent, then stuck out her tongue and tasted it.

The Nix pushed to her feet, wobbled, caught her balance. She'd taken on human form before, but never like this, never inhabiting a living being. It was very different. Awkward . . . and yet interesting.

She lifted her head and sniffed the air. Dawn was coming. Time to get to work.

She carried the soup to the Marquise's father, bearing it before her like an offering, luxuriating in the heat that radiated through the bowl. It was so cold here, the stone walls leaching drafts at every turn. She'd commanded the staff to light more fires, but they'd only mumbled something vaguely obeisant, then shuffled off and done nothing. Such insolence. If she was their master—but this was only a temporary inhabitation, to test the spell.

As she stepped into the room, she looked at the old man, seated with his back to her. Then she glanced down at the bowl of poisoned soup. The dose had better be right this time. Marie-Madeline had tested it on her maid, Francoise, but the girl hadn't died, so her lover, Gaudin Sainte-Croix had adjusted the dosage. But rather than try again on a fresh subject, they'd declared the mixture sufficient.

Lazy, imperfect humans, and their lazy, imperfect half-measures. Like the servants who didn't wish to venture outside the castle walls and chop more wood for the fire. What lessons she could teach them! Perhaps she would. As she crossed the floor, looking down at the bowl of soup, she realized, with a jolt of surprise, that the next move was hers. She could give the poison to Marie-Madeline's father or she could feed it to the lazy servants who had ignored her command. For once, she was the actor, not the spectator.

For three hundred years she'd had to sit by and hope humans used the resolve she gave them. Her reward was pain and suffering and chaos. But if they failed, she was left hungry—as helpless as a starving street urchin, begging for a crust of bread. That was what the humans had called the offspring of the Nixen—urchins—as if they knew, and laughed at the power they wielded over these mighty demi-demons. And yet, here she was, bearing in her hands the power of death, to deliver as she saw fit. She smiled. Perhaps she would stay a little longer than Marie-Madeline intended.

Hearing her footsteps, Marie-Madeline's father turned. "You didn't need to bring that yourself."

She curtseyed. "It is a daughter's duty, and privilege, to serve her father."

He beamed. "And it is a father's joy to have such a dutiful daughter. You see now that I was right about Gaudin Sainte-Croix. You belong with your husband, and with your father."

She bowed her head. "It was a passing fancy, one that shames me all the more for the shame it brought on my family."

"We will speak no more of it," he said, patting her arm. "Let us enjoy our holiday together."

"First, you should enjoy your soup, Father. Before it grows cold."

For the next four days, d'Aubrey suffered the agonies of a slow death. She stayed at his side, genuinely doing all she could for him, knowing it wouldn't save him, using the excuse to linger and drink in his suffering. At last, he lay in her arms, a hairsbreadth from death, and he used his last words to thank her for everything she'd done.

"It was my pleasure," she said, smiling as she closed his eyes.

It took six years for the Nix to grow bored of Marie-Madeline, and exhaust the possibilities of her silly little life. Time to move on, to find fresh opportunities . . . but not before she had wrung the last bit of merriment from this one.

First, she'd killed Sainte-Croix. Nothing personal in that. He'd been a fine lover and a useful partner, but she had no more need of him, except to play his part in the last act of the drama. He'd died in his laboratory, an apparent victim of his own poison, his glass mask having slipped off at an inopportune moment.

After anonymously alerting the police about Saint-Croix's death, she'd rushed to the commissary and demanded the return of a box from the sealed laboratory. The box was hers, and must be returned to her unopened. Naturally, that only guaranteed that the police would open it. Inside, they found the bond she'd given Sainte-Croix for the poison used to kill the Marquise's father, plus Sainte-Croix's legacy to her—an assortment of poisons the likes of which the French authorities had never seen. She'd fled Paris, and taken refuge in a convent. The trial came and Marie-Madeline, having not appeared to defend herself, was sentenced to death.

And so it was done.

The Nix returned to Paris, where she knew Marie-Madeline would be swiftly apprehended. Taking a quiet room in an inn, she lay down on the bed, closed her eyes and recited the incantation for ending the possession. After a few minutes, she opened her eyes and lifted her hand. Still human.

With a grunt, she closed her eyes and repeated the spell. Nothing happened. With a snarl, she gathered her spirit form into a ball and flung herself upward and, saying the words again, voice rising, filling with fury as her soul stayed lashed to this human form. For two hours, she battered herself against the flesh walls of her prison.

Then she began to scream.

Nicolette peered out across the crowd amassed in the courtyard, praying she'd see no one she recognized. If her mother found out she was here— She shuddered, feeling the sting of her mother's tongue. Death is not a spectacle, she'd say. Nicolette should know that better than anyone. Yet she wasn't here to see the Marquise de Brinvilliers die . . . not really. It was the spectacle surrounding the spectacle that drew her, the chance to be part of something that would be the talk of Paris for years.

A young man pushed through the crowd, hawking pamphlets describing the torture of the Marquise. When he saw Nicolette, he grinned as his eyes traveled over her.

"A pamphlet, my lady," he said, thrusting one at her. "With my compliments."

Nicolette glanced down at the paper he held out. Across the front was a crudely drawn sketch of a naked woman, her body arching as if to a lover, limbs bound to the table, a funnel stuffed into her mouth, face contorted with agony. Nicolette shuddered and looked away. To her left, an old woman cackled. The pamphleteer pressed closer to her, mouth opening, but a man cut him short, and sent him off with a few gruff words.

"You should not be out here, my lady," the man rumbled near her ear when the pamphleteer was gone. "This is no place for you."

No, her place was up in the balconies, where she could watch with an unobstructed view, dining on cakes and wine. Nicolette had tried to disguise herself, to blend in with the common folk, but they always knew.

She was about to move on when the prison doors opened. A small entourage emerged. At its center was a tiny woman, no more than five feet tall, her dirty face still showing signs of the beauty she must have possessed. Dressed in a plain shift and barefooted, she stumbled forward, tripping and straining at the ropes that bound her, one around her hands, one around her waist and the third around her neck.

As the guard yanked the Marquise back, her head rose and, for the first time, she saw the crowd. Her lips curled, face contorting in a snarl so awful that the old woman beside Nicolette fell back, hands clawing for her rosary. As the Marquise snarled, her face seemed to ripple, as if her very spirit was trying to break free. Nicolette had seen ghosts before, been seeing them since she was a child—as did her mother and great-uncle. Yet, when the Marquise's spirit showed itself, everyone around her fell back with a collective gasp.

Nicolette snuck a glance around. They'd seen it, too?

The guard prodded the Marquise into a tumbrel. No horse-drawn gilt carriage for this voyage. Her conveyance was a dirty cart, barely big enough to hold her, filthy straw lining the bottom. She had to crouch in the cart like an animal, snarling and cursing as the cart disappeared.

Around Nicolette, the crowd began to move, heading for the Cathedral of Notre Dame. She hesitated, quite certain she didn't want to see the final part of the Marquise's journey, but the mob buoyed her along and, after a few weak struggles, she surrendered.

They'd erected the platform before Notre Dame. Nicolette watched as they dragged the Marquise up the steps, forced her down and began cutting her long hair.

Nicolette had a better vantage point than she liked, but the crowd behind her was so thick she had no chance of escaping. As she tried to divert her attention from the platform, a man stepped from the crowd. A foreigner, with olive-skin and dark wavy hair. That alone might have been enough to grab her attention, but what held it was his beauty. Nicolette, who considered herself above such things, found herself staring like a convent schoolgirl.

He looked like a soldier—not his clothing, which was everyday—but his bearing. A man who commanded attention . . . yet not one eye turned his way. To Nicolette, that could only mean one thing. He was a ghost.

The ghost climbed the platform. At the top, he stopped and stood at attention as the guard continued to hack at the Marquise's hair. Clearly the ghost wanted a front row seat. Had he been one of the Marquise's victims?

Finally, as the executioner withdrew his saber from the folds of his robe, the ghost held out his hands, palms up. An odd gesture, as if checking for rain. His lips moved. Something shimmered in his hands, then took form. A sword. A huge, glowing sword. As he slid his hand down to the hilt, Nicolette realized what he was, and dropped to her knees, crossing herself.

As dense as the crowd was, the angel noticed her gesture, his eyes meeting hers. In that moment, every misdeed she'd ever committed flashed through her head, and her gut went cold, certain she was being judged . . . and felt wanting. But the angel's lips curved in the barest smile, and he tipped his head, as casual as a passing neighbor. Then his gaze returned to the Marquise, expression hardening to stone.

As the executioner's saber sliced down, the angel raised his sword. A sigh rose from the crowd as the Marquise's head thumped onto the platform. Nicolette didn't see it fall. Instead, she stared, transfixed, as a yellow fog rose from the Marquise's body. The fog twisted and grew dense, taking on the form of a young woman.

The angel lifted his sword, and his voice rang out, as clear and melodious as the bells of Notre Dame. "Marie-Madeline d'Aubrey de Brinvilliers, for your crimes, you have been judged."

As he swung that huge sword, the spirit flowing from the Marquise's body threw back its head and laughed.

"I am not the Marquise, fool," it spat.

The angel's brows knitted, a look of confusion, as human as the nod he'd given Nicolette, on his handsome face. But the sword was already in flight, cleaving toward the ghost.

The spirit's lips twisted. "You have no jurisdiction over—"

As the sword struck the spirit, it let out a scream that made Nicolette double over, hands to her ears. All around her, people jostled and pushed, trying to get a closer look at the Marquise's body as they set it afire, oblivious to the screams.

Nicolette raised her head. There, on the platform, stood the angel, with the spirit skewered on his sword. The thing twisted and shrieked and cursed, but the angel only smiled. Then they were gone.