

READ IT FIRST

DARK VICTORY

MICHELE LANG



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My doom was trapped inside a tin of Hungarian paprika.

I rolled the thin metal canister between my fingers and almost dropped it; the tin was hot enough to burn my skin. In the silence of my dusty little kitchen on Dohány Street, in Budapest's Seventh District, my pulse pounded in my ears. I knew that if I could not control the demon I had captured, Hitler would invade Poland. And the world would explode.

The situation was just that simple and that difficult. I had captured Hitler's personal demon. But I didn't know how to use him.

We simply didn't have any time left. Hitler was going to invade Poland in two days, on September 1, 1939. I knew it. Gisi had seen this dark future in a vision more than a month ago. And knowing this, as a Jewish witch, I was in mortal danger.

But on this hot and over-bright August morning losing my own life was the least of my problems. My breath caught in my throat. I longed to put the tin down, curl up on my cot, and hide from the demon in dreams.

But I could not rest—not with war so close. I had warned the diplomats of the Polish embassy of the imminent war. I also had sent word to the Zionists through my best friend, Eva Farkas, who had joined their number. But now I had to put this demon, Asmodel, under my power, somehow.

I licked my lips and forced myself to breathe. It was time to call forth the bound and hidden Asmodel; only he could tell me what September first would truly bring. Only he could stop Hitler before he unleashed the war.

I had the strength to bind him, but I had to find out whether I had enough magic to compel him to my will.

My little sister Gisele had begged me not to take Asmodel out of the tin; my beloved Raziel, once an angel but now a mortal man for my sake, only shook his head and laughed when I told him I meant to challenge my captive spirit.

I sat in my chair at the kitchen table and cupped the paprika tin in my hands, my fingertips dancing over the hot metal. Raziel stood behind me, and I was grateful that I could not see the expression on his face. Only a day or two before, the demon had fought Raziel, an angel of the Lord, hand to hand, and Raziel stopped him, but at the cost of sacrificing his very place in Heaven.

Gisele, trembling like a wind-tossed leaf, sat next to me, her left arm trailing over my shoulder as we stared together at Asmodel's makeshift prison. The paprika tin Gisele had found proved a surprisingly sturdy prison for Asmodel's soul, with only a dusting of paprika left inside.

“Have a care,” Gisele whispered, and her arm tightened around mine. Her sweet solicitude drew tears to my eyes. The cleverest part of me, the part that had seen Gisele and me through the hard years after my mother’s death, wanted nothing more but to throw the tin in the Danube and run away to Paris, like my friend Robert Capa had done. I could save Gisele that way.

But Gisele, my little mouse, was also the one who had dared me to rise above my craving for self-preservation. In her quiet way, Gisele dared to resist. Some heroes, like my little sister, are born that way. Other people, like me, are forced by sheer desperation into daring.

I struggled to hold back the tears, and tried to paste a brave-looking, enigmatic smile onto my lips—bravado will carry a person surprisingly far in this world of illusions. The demon was well bound with the spells I had recently learned from an ancient and powerful witch in Amsterdam. But despite all these precautions, Asmodel was by far the stronger of the two of us, and we both knew it.

I flipped open the sifter with my thumb, and immediately I heard Asmodel’s low, creepy laughter. Powdered paprika wafted out of the sifter like a pestilent little cloud, and I fought the sudden urge to sneeze. I ran my palm over the top of the sifter, made sure Asmodel wasn’t trying to slip into the little cloud and away.

I took a deep breath and a sudden calm descended over me. “Peace, ancient one,” I said. I recited the central verses of the Testament of Solomon, the ones that the king himself had used to bind Asmodel, to make sure the demon stayed put.

Somehow the great king had compelled this very demon to serve a larger good, long ago. I was a Lazarus, a witch of the

blood, and I now had the power to cast spells. Could I too rule Asmodel?

The low, rumbling laughter stopped, and for that I was grateful.

“You disturb my peace, Jewish witch.”

His peace? The creature locked inside the paprika tin disturbed my peace far more, as did his former host and master, the Führer of Germany. In fact, like Hitler, Asmodel disturbed the peace of all the world.

My voice trembled as I spoke, though my nerves stayed steady. “September first, Hitler invades Poland.”

The demon scabbled against the bottom of the tin like a trapped mouse, and the tin twisted ominously in my fingers. “Maybe, maybe not,” he growled. “Who knows?”

Tension knotted the base of my skull. “You know, Asmodel. And you will tell me.”

The laughter rose again, muffled but clearly intelligible from inside the tin. “How will you make me? You have the power to bind me, but not the power to compel my speech, witchling.”

“And yet, a baby witch like me somehow bested and captured an ancient, cunning creature like you. How embarrassing. Your humiliation was witnessed by my own army of imps and demons, by other mortals. And by the Angel Raziel himself.”

The laughter devolved into an inarticulate, furious roar. But I ignored Asmodel’s outburst; he still resisted me. “I cannot summon the truth out of your soul, demon. But I can convince you to speak the truth of your own volition.”

I began singing the Ninety-first Psalm to him in Hungarian, my favorite psalm for banishing and parrying evil spirits. I am

not known for my melodious voice, so I am not sure whether it was the substance or my delivery that tormented him more.

After a minute or two, Gisele joined me in the tender serenade; Raziel's hard laughter from behind my shoulder fortified me even as Asmodel snarled.

Gisele and I started singing again, and tried harmony this time. The snarl rose to a shriek. "Stop it! For Lucifer's sake, shut up!"

I paused, took a deep breath to steady myself. I had won the first move in the deadly game we played. "So shut me up then, Asmodel. Tell us."

"Tell you of your death? Tell you of death? It is too late to avert the future, you hapless bitch. What more do you need to know besides the fact that you die?"

Gisele's fingers dug into my shoulder. I ignored her. "Tell me."

"You die at Ravensbruck. Tortured to death—the SS interrogators there are under orders to take their time. They break you, you betray your fellows, and you die in disgrace. Mortals warded from magic murder you—none of your spells and tricks will stop them."

I did not know what Ravensbruck was, but it did not sound good. I swallowed hard. "Go on."

"Your insipid little sister dies right here in Budapest, machine-gunned along the railroad tracks after the local commandant is done with raping her. A pity, he won't know what he has, the potential you have. A waste. Your entire life."

A tear dripped onto my forearm. "He sees, too," Gisele said. "The things that I see he knows."

Gisele was wrong. She had to be. Asmodel knew nothing except

how to conjure fear and despair like demonic minions. Raziel and I had fought too hard, stirred up too much celestial mayhem, for his words to remain true.

I pushed forward. "It's too late for all that, Asmodel. Your prophecies are out of date. Raziel and I have turned them aside. Tell me something that is of use to me."

"Oh, I don't think I am wrong about you, witchling child. The world has a date with destiny on September first, and so do you on the day of your death."

"You lie. I have already had a date with death, a number of them in fact. And still I walk the Earth, quite alive."

The vehemence of his roar rattled me. I rocked back, clutching the tin to keep it from wriggling out of my grasp altogether. We wrestled for a few minutes and I stood up to brace the tin better against the table.

The white metal grew even hotter in my hands, and his low growl rose from between my fingers. "See if I speak right, bitch, then know your end is foreordained. Hitler will orchestrate a provocation. He is staging a supposed act of terrorism by Poles on the border, at the radio station in Gleiwitz. Every detail has been arranged. They will dress the corpses in partisan costumes, though the dead men are concentration camp prisoners. . . ."

The demon spoke faster and faster, a litany of overwhelming destruction and misery, echoing like gunshots. He unfolded a grim picture of the war to come, Hitler's plan to crush Poland, to buy time with guns and lies until he could turn his sights to further conquest, richer prizes to both the west and the east.

Asmodel finished his litany of curses and bellowed with laughter. "You little fool. It is too late for you to avert the des-

tiny of the world. You struggle like a fish already on the hook. You are already caught. And every twist and turn only brings you closer to the fishermen's deck. You are already dead!"

My stomach churned, I tasted acid in my mouth. "Death is nothing new to me," I stammered out. "If the Nazis murder me at this Ravensbruck, so be it. I will only summon myself back."

"Oh no, you won't," he replied, the low rumble rising to a horrible bark of laughter. "This last death will be so agonizing, so dehumanizing, you will run toward death. You will embrace it. They will burn your body before you will even consider coming back again. And supreme evil will reign over all the Earth."

His words made me queasy. They hung like acrid smoke in the kitchen, as if Gisele had burned a cake made out of brimstone. I understood better now why Gisele had tried to stop me from speaking to the demon. "You never told me all that," I reproved her mildly.

She shrugged, even as the tears poured over her cheeks. "I told you what you needed to know. Like you said, the details don't really matter, do they?"

Unfortunately, they did. Though Asmodel's words sucked the very air out of the room, I took faint comfort in the fact that if he was right, at least I had nothing much left to lose.

But we were at an impasse, now. Asmodel and I both knew the only way I could control him for sure, force him to serve my purposes. Gisele must have caught the rebellious glint in my eye, for she shook my shoulder.

"No!" she cried, and I winced—her voice wasn't too loud in my ear, but the pain in it pierced my heart. "Please, Magduska. You overreach yourself. Close up the tin and rest."

I had a hard time replying; my jaw was clenched too tight. I

kept my eyes on the tin, knowing that Asmodel was ready to pounce at the slightest evidence of weakening in my resolve. “My darling, of course I overreach. I must.”

She knew what I was after; she wanted me to find it, too, as long as I didn’t lose my soul in the hunt. *The Book of Raziel*: the ancient book of spells that Raziel himself had given to Eve when the world was young and human beings faced existential danger, as they did now. And everyone in that room, demon, fallen angel, and mortal, knew that Book was my rightful inheritance.

A version of it resided with Adolf Hitler in Berlin, but I could not let that fact stop me now. Perhaps I could find a way to force Asmodel to get it for me, somehow.

To find out, I needed to converse face-to-face with my nemesis. “Asmodel,” I whispered. “Come forth, still bound by spell, but in your chosen guise.”

Asmodel materialized on the splintery wooden surface of the round kitchen table, in the form of a breathtakingly beautiful youth, completely naked, curled up like a fern frond on the mossy, slippery banks of a hidden stream in Eden. Slowly he lifted his head, and his enormous almond eyes met my gaze. The breath caught in my throat.

“This is my true aspect, Magduska,” he said, in a soft, warm baritone. So changed, so transformed, yet I recognized him in this guise.

His beauty threw me off balance, and I struggled to maintain my self-possession. “Don’t say Magduska,” I shot back. “Only those who love me may call me that.”

His smile was gentle. “You invoke love? I know of love. Your

Raziel fell from Heaven the same way as did I, for love of a woman. Naamah was as beautiful as you, her kisses were as sweet as yours. We had many hours of bliss, lying together and knowing love when the world was young and such things were common.”

My cheeks burned. About the ways of magic, I had few illusions left, but I was still a novice at the sorcery of the love a man and a woman might share.

Raziel drew closer to the back of my chair, and his mere presence cut through the confusion of Asmodel’s words.

“You lie,” Raziel said, and though he spoke bitter words, his voice remained kind. “Brother, you descend not to help mankind in their exile, but to grind them into the dust. You want the Earth and all its dominion for yourself.”

The demon’s honeyed smile grew jaded. “What of it? That is no secret, not like your blessed secrets, the secrets of your blasted Book with its elemental magic.”

I gathered up my strength, leaned back in my chair, and looked directly into the demon’s eyes for the first time. “Yes, the Book. We must talk about that Book. It is mine by birthright. I want it. You will help me. I am willing to go to Berlin to get it if I have to.”

Asmodel stretched his arms over his head and smiled at me, the sleepy rapturous grin of a lover who wants more satisfaction. “Magduska, the copy of the Book in Berlin means little. Not even Hitler himself can use it without cracking open its magic and mastering it. His best wizards could not do it. He needs a witch like you.”

The very thought of serving Hitler as a witch of the Reich made my skin crawl. “I will never serve Hitler, and you know it.

But the Book will serve him, if they can find a dark sorcery to enslave its magic. I won't let that happen, Asmodel. The Book is mine, in its every form."

"You can forget the Book in Berlin, little fool. You do not need it. The original of your Book still exists."

My body stiffened in shock, and only with a desperate effort was I able to keep my composure. All of us had fought a terrible battle over the mere reconstitution of the Book only a day or two before. If Asmodel spoke the truth, if the unsullied original could still be found . . .

I closed my hand over the now empty paprika tin, the sharp edges cutting into my palm. I tried to imagine what the original Book, in my power, could mean to the future that Asmodel had predicted.

"You are the prince of lies," I said.

His gaze locked onto mine, and my heart raced at the sight of him. I blinked hard to keep my focus despite the seduction of his words.

Asmodel's smile grew even wider. "But I tell the truth. It is your beautiful love, your own fine fallen one whom you tempted, your Raziel, who murders truth now with his silence."

I tore my gaze away and twisted around to look at Raziel, standing tall behind my chair. His face was as still as stone.

Asmodel's voice, soft now, snaked into my ears. "Tell her, brother, of the elemental nature of your Book. Tell her of the Sapphire Heaven. And of the power your girl may command with the gem in her hand."

Raziel said nothing.