

# By a Silver Thread

DFZ Changeling Book 1

Rachel Aaron

# Chapter 1

Halloween in the Detroit Free Zone was madness.

The moment the summer heat gave the faintest hint of weakening, the streets—both the looping elevated bridges of the Skyways and the gridlocked, shadowed underpasses of the Underground below—were saturated with flashing advertisements for Halloween-themed everything. There were costumes, candy, special-edition vampire-themed sodas, full-immersion VR horror experiences, rolls of preprinted spellwork tape that would illusion your apartment to look like a haunted graveyard complete with howling ghosts that flew through your guests on command. Anything and everything you wanted for the holiday, and a bunch of stuff you didn't, could be yours for a low, low price, provided you didn't ask any questions about what went into making it.

Even the wealthy neighborhoods weren't spared the capitalistic bonanza. The bedroom community of Windsor, Canada, was more restrained—and safer, since, unlike the DFZ, Canada had laws against virtual advertisements popping into drivers' faces or through people's windows—but even here, the mansions were decked out in the best horrors money could buy. There were flights of witches cackling through the sky, zombie hands that sprang up from the perfectly manicured lawns whenever a car drove by, even a skeletal dragon that roared green fire from the top of the Great Yong's riverside mansion—a gift, raved *Dragon Watch Weekly*, from his human daughter, who was famous for her love of kitsch.

Many a cutting op-ed had been penned in the various magical journals about the backwardness of decorating with ghouls and witches when there were real dragons and spirits flying through the skies. But holidays were about tradition, and Windsor *loved* tradition. This was where all the rich people who wanted to be near the money explosion that was the world's most capitalistic magical city—but didn't want to deal with the DFZ's lawlessness and perpetual disasters—lived.

Cowards, Victor called them. But cowards with money and clout, which was why Lola had been sent here tonight.

Teetering on the sky-high heels of the rail-thin model body she'd been assigned for this job, Lola strode up the walkway to the only house in the neighborhood that wasn't lit up with three figures' worth of professionally installed Halloween decorations. There were no lights on inside, but the etched-glass door opened before she could touch it, snatched out of the way by a wild-eyed man wearing a dirty designer suit six months out of style.

"Do you have my pills?"

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