



Leda's Log

Author: *Ella Summers*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: Come save the universe again, just one more time.

It isn't easy being the Angel of Chaos. The hours are long, the monsters abundant, and the gods are always scolding you for disrupting the natural order of the universe. Touché!

Join Leda Pandora and Nero Windstriker for an all-new adventure across time and space as they encounter new magic, new allies, and new enemies.

Warning: may include abnormally-large cats and adorable baby angels.

Leda's Log is a behind-the-scenes, slice-of-life look into the Legion of Angels, hosted by Leda Pandora, the Angel of Chaos. A tale starring Leda and Nero's daughter Sierra as a teenager is also included in this book.

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PART ONE

CALAMITY AT STORM CASTLE

Calamity at Storm Castle is set between Phoenix's Refrain (Book 10) and Demon's Mark (Book 11) in the Legion of Angels series.

CHAPTER 1

SIERRA & ANGEL

One of the perks of being the Angel of Chaos is that no one asks any questions when the big stack of paperwork you were supposed to have read and signed by the end of the day spontaneously catches on fire. But I swear it wasn't my fault.

At least not this time.

Ok, maybe I should rewind this story a bit.

Today started out well. Sure, the cat woke me up early by scratching at the door to come in, but she often did that. She spent most of her nights hunting on the former Plains of Monsters that lay on our doorstep.

"Hey, look what the cat dragged in," I declared, grinning at my daughter Sierra.

She blinked, totally not appreciating the genius of my statement. Well, she was only two years old.

I looked at the ‘present’ Angel the cat had dropped at my feet. Most cats brought their humans dead mice, but Angel wasn’t most cats, and I wasn’t human. The bird she’d caught was the size of a large turkey, but it still looked small next to my lion-sized cat.

Angel stared up at me, waiting.

“Good girl,” I told her, knowing that’s what she wanted to hear. But I couldn’t help but tack on, “Any chance you could hunt down a tub of cookies-and-cream ice cream next time?”

The cat lifted her nose in the air and strutted past me, unimpressed with my request, as though she considered ice cream runs to be beneath an apex predator like her.

But she must not have been too upset with me because she did later follow me and Sierra down to the canteen for breakfast. Though she was probably just following Sierra. The cat adored Sierra, even though my crazy baby angel was always trying to grab her and carry her around like she was an oversized teddy bear. Did I mention my daughter’s really strong?

Anyways, breakfast was waffles with strawberries and lots of whipped cream. After the three of us devoured a few waffles (yes, the cat helped), we headed to my office. I got to work on the ominous mountain of paperwork, and Sierra got to work on redecorating my walls with crayon drawings. As for Angel, the cat plopped herself down in the middle of the doorway to take a nap. Being a cat was a really exhausting profession.

“Hey, what are you doing?” I asked Sierra about ten minutes later.

I’d looked up from the boring building proposal I was reading because I’d heard giggling. Lots and lots of giggling.

“Pretty.” Sierra showed me the piece of paper in her hands. It was one of the mission reports I was supposed to read today. And my cheeky daughter had doodled dragons and unicorns all over the page. “Better now,” she told me proudly.

And she was probably right. The report was written by Sergeant Burrows. All his mission reports read like the ingredients list on a cereal box.

“Daddy doesn’t like it when you doodle on mission reports,” I told Sierra.

Ok, so technically Nero had told me off for doodling on mission reports. He wasn’t swayed by my argument that every good mission report required visual aids. Like mother, like daughter, I guess.

“Daddy loves Sierra’s pictures!” she squealed, grinning.

Yeah, Nero was one proud papa. Our daughter could set the world on fire, and he would pat her on the back for a job well done.

Speaking of fire...

Sierra sneezed, and my big stack of paperwork burst into flames. I waved my hand, casting a little ice spell to freeze the fire. In retrospect, maybe that hadn’t been the best idea. Now the papers were singed and soggy.

“Hey, Leda, I...”

Alec, my head of security, froze just in front of the doorway, his eyes locked on the steaming, sizzling pile of paperwork on my desk. He snorted.

“I helped!” Sierra declared, her eyes sparkling with pride.

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Alec laughed. “Good job, Mini Angel.”

Sierra started bouncing up and down.

“Well, at least you didn’t set the curtains on fire this time,” I said to her.

She giggled.

Alec took a big step over the napping cat in the doorway. She didn’t try to stop him—or even open her eyes.

“Some guard cat you are,” I told Angel.

She continued sleeping.

And I sighed. “What’s up?” I said, turning toward Alec.

“We just got a call from Basanti at Storm Castle,” he replied. “They’re in trouble and need our help.”

CHAPTER 2

STORM CASTLE

Angel’s pointy ears perked up at the wordtrouble. Cats had a deep-seated mistrust of any trouble that they weren’t the cause of.

“What’s the nature of the emergency?” I asked Alec, grabbing my sword from the wall stand.

“Basanti mentioned something about abnormally-large and adorable baby ducklings?” Alec frowned in confusion. “And then the line cut off.” He shook his head. “Honestly, it didn’t make much sense.”

“Since when has life at the Legion ever made sense?” I pointed out. “Ok, I’ll bring a team to Storm Castle to check it out. Get an airship prepped for departure. We leave in five.”

Angel rose to her feet with a long, languid stretch.

“Oh, and get a babysitter for Sierra,” I added.

“No!” my two-year-old protested. “Wanna come with!” She stomped her foot. “Wanna see duckies!”

Angel meowed in agreement.

I squatted down so I was eye-to-eye with Sierra. “You can’t go. It’s too dangerous.”

“Duckies!” When she stomped her foot again, all the lights in the room flickered.

“You will get to see duckies,” I promised her. “While I’m gone, Lucy will bring you to the big pond in the park, the one with all the duckies. There’s a pack of dried bananas in my desk drawer. You can feed them to the duckies.”

I felt magic ripple through me, and then the bag of bananas was in Sierra’s hand. The little rascal had teleported it out of my locked snack drawer. She tucked the bag into her cute little satchel. One hand grabbed mine, the other squeezed Angel to her like

an oversized teddy bear. Space folded in around us. My office blurred out. A familiar room faded in.

I rose out of my crouch, my eyes going wide as they panned across Storm Castle's throne room. "You brought us all the way across the continent," I muttered in disbelief. "I didn't know you could teleport that far."

Sierra grinned at me.

"Leda?"

I turned at the sound of Basanti's voice.

"Wow, you got here fast." Her gaze dropped to Sierra and Angel. "But I have to admit, when I asked Alec to send backup, this isn't what I had in mind. Does Nero know you brought his daughter into battle?"

"I didn't bring her into battle," I replied in frustration. "She brought me here. And, hey, she's my daughter too, by the way."

"Yeah, there's no doubt about that," Basanti said when Sierra giggled, and all the curtains in the room burst into flames.

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“In any case, what is this emergency I heard about?” I asked as Basanti’s soldiers rushed to put out all the fires.

“That.” Basanti pointed at the throne room’s massive double doors.

“Doors. How terrifying,” I said drily.

The closed doors shook, like someone with a very big fist had just knocked.

“Duckies?” Sierra wanted to know.

“Among other things,” Basanti said warily.

There was a loud snap against the door, like the crack of a whip. And the next moment, a perfect cylinder of wood about the size of a wine cork hit the floor.

“Well, that doesn’t look good,” I commented as smoke started oozing through the newly-made hole in the door.

“Pretty,” Sierra cooed, pointing at the growing cloud of mist in front of us.

She was right. The smoke was bright purple andverysparkly. It’s what I imagined amethysts would look like if they turned into a gas.

“Yeah, it’s pretty all right.Prettydangerous.” Basanti lifted her sword.

The sparkling purple smoke rumbled like thunder, then spat out a sparkly purple

duckling. The duckling was bigger than my massive cat.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Three more sparkly smoke creatures peeled out of the mist: an emerald squirrel, a turquoise turtle, and a sapphire stallion. Sierra jumped up and down, clapping her hands in delight.

“Easy there, little one,” Basanti said. “They might look pretty, but they will zap you if you get too close.”

“What are they?” I asked her as the mist popped out a swarm of ruby butterflies.

“No idea.”

“What do they want?”

“No idea.”

“Where did they come from?”

“The Elemental Magic Lab down the hall,” Basanti said. “Leila had a team running experiments aimed at increasing the amount of elemental magic the Legion’s standard enchanted weapons can hold.”

“Where is Leila? Please don’t tell me the mist ate her.” I cringed.

“No, she’s away from the castle at the moment. She left this morning to repair some damage on the Elemental Expanse, and she took most of our soldiers with her. When all hell broke loose here, I tried to contact her.” Basanti’s brows crinkled with worry.

“No response.”

I set my hand on her back. "I'm sure Leila is fine."

"Yeah, but we won't be if we can't stop this mist."

The smoky squirrel scampered past one of the soldiers. It must have gotten too close because the soldier instantly toppled over like a felled tree.

"Ok, so in case this wasn't already obvious, you don't want to touch that weird mist," Basanti said as two soldiers pulled their fallen comrade to safety.

"Is he all right?" I grabbed Sierra before she could run off after the purple duckling.

"He'll be fine. He's only unconscious. The mist has knocked out a few of my guys, but as long as we get them away from it right away, they recover within a few minutes."

"So what happens when you don't get them away from the mist fast enough?"

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“I really don’t want to find out,” she said darkly.

I clutched Sierra tightly to me. We were running out of time—and space. The sinister fog was quickly filling the room, from floor to ceiling. So we couldn’t even fly away.

“Sierra.” I set her down but kept a firm grip on her shoulders as I crouched before her. “I need you to teleport out of here.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Can’t leave Angel.” Her voice quivered. “Can’t leave Mommy.”

My heart crashed against my chest. “Sure you can. Think of it like a game.”

“A game?” She perked up.

“Yes, a game. You and Basanti are a team.” I set her hand in Basanti’s. “You need to teleport the two of you to Daddy as fast as you can, ok?”

Sierra nodded vigorously.

“Good girl.” I kissed her on the forehead, then looked at Basanti. “Tell Nero what’s happening here. Bring back help. I’ll hold off the mist until then.”

“Hold it off?” Basanti’s eyes went wide. “How?”

Before I could answer her question, Angel leapt at the flock of butterflies, swiping her paws through the air, batting at the mysterious creatures. Unlike the soldier, she

didn't pass out when the smoke touched her. In fact, she pushed it back. I'd always known my cat was special.

"We'll manage," I told Basanti. "But please hurry."

"You got it." Basanti swooped up Sierra into her arms. "Ready to go, Mini Pandora?"

Sierra gave me a little wave, then the two of them vanished from the throne room.

"Well, it's up to us to hold off the mist until reinforcements arrive," I said, looking at Basanti's soldiers.

"What are we supposed to do against that?" one of them asked me when the fog spat out a bright orange dragon.

He had a point. There were only seven of us. And one of us was currently lying unconscious on the floor.

"Hey, don't worry, guys. Have you all forgotten who I am?" I said as Angel trotted up to my side. "I am the Angel of Chaos, and I've beaten far worse odds."

CHAPTER 3

THE MAGICAL MACHINE

I'd never seen so many sparkly animals before in my life. It looked like a rainbow had exploded inside of Storm Castle, setting off dozens of glitter fireworks.

"Ok, so we need to get past this sparkle fest, make it to the lab, and switch off whatever ill-fated magical experiment turned this place into a twisted fairytale," I said.

“And exactly how are we supposed to do all of that?” a soldier asked, his eyes tracking the enormous purple duckling stomping back and forth across the throne room like a wind-up toy. “Anyone who gets too close to one of those fiends is immediately knocked unconscious.”

“Yeah, well, this plan is a work in progress,” I admitted.

One of the soldiers turned to her comrades. “Basanti warned us that Leda Pandora likes to fly by the seat of her pants.”

They all nodded.

“Hey, it’s called improvising,” I protested, “and it’s totally a legit skill.”

I wasn’t surprised that none of them jumped up and down with enthusiasm, but they could have at least made an effort to wash those doom-and-gloom expressions off their faces.

“Angel,” I said, turning to my cat. She was the only one here who didn’t look totally convinced that we were all going to die. Honestly, people needed to have a little faith. “You’re immune to whatever sleep mojo those sparkly creatures are letting off.”

Angel sat back on her back legs and proceeded to primly groom her face with her paw. I took that as an invitation to continue.

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“I need you to lure all the sparkle beasts over there.” I pointed to the other side of the throne room—far, far away from the door. “Meanwhile, I’ll make a run for the lab. Ok?”

And for once, my cat actually cooperated instead of doing whatever the hell she felt like doing.

“Hey, what about us?” one of the soldiers asked me as Angel trotted over to the sparkling tangerine dragon.

“You guys back up Angel,” I told them.

“She wants us to play backup to acat.”

“This is a new low.”

“I’m never going to get promoted at this rate.”

“Stop your bellyaching and get to work,” I snapped in my best Nero imitation. “Distract those sparkling things by whatever means necessary. The fate of this world may very well depend on it.”

My Nero voice must have worked because the soldiers all hurried off after Angel.

“Here, ducky, ducky!”

“Get over here, you squirrely squirrel!”

“You call yourself a dragon? I’ve seen more intimidating puppies!”

The soldiers’ childish taunts did the trick. The sparkling creatures immediately rushed over to them, leaving me with a sliver of an opening in the fog.

I’d take what I could get.

I sprinted toward the door, dashing and ducking, slipping and sliding. I made my way between belching frogs and snapping dragonflies, sliding under buzzing bees, leaping over growling wolves. And, finally, I reached the lab at the end of the hallway.

I spotted the source of the chaos immediately: a machine about the size of a refrigerator. The machine had no doors or latches or levers that I could see, but there was a pretty sizable hole punched into the side of it. Thick mist oozed out of that hole, pouring to the ground in an odious, pulsing stream.

“Well, there’s our problem,” I commented, moving toward the machine.

I had to jump back when the mist solidified into an army of bright red rats. They scurried past me, drawn toward all the banging and booming coming from the throne room down the hall.

I turned my attention back to the machine—and that big hole. There had to be some way to seal it.

“How about a little shifting magic?” I waved my hands in front of the hole, trying to coax the raggedy metal edges together.

The machine rewarded my efforts by pumping out fog even faster and thicker than before.

“Ok, so no magic.”

Magic must be what had caused this problem in the first place. I searched the room for some other way to plug the hole.

“I wonder,” I said, eyeing a roll of duct tape that lay on the counter.

The machine let out a sound that sounded suspiciously like a belch. It was never good news when creepy machines started burping. More sparkle-smoke monsters were sure to follow.

“Enough wondering, Leda. More doing,” I chided myself, snatching the roll of duct tape off the counter.

I wrapped it round and round the machine until the tape roll was empty, the hole was sealed, and my fingers were numb and sticky. The machine let off one final, pitiful whimper, then shut off.

“Ha! Got you! Leda: 1, Creepy Machine: 0!” I gave it a smug smile.

“Pandora.”

The sound of Nero’s voice stirred up a few happy, loopy butterflies in my stomach. I turned around. And there he stood, looking so perfect, his gaze sharp, attentive—and one-hundred percent on me.

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My heart started fluttering in time with my fluttery stomach. “Glad you could make it.” I shifted my weight. “As you can see, I have everything under control.”

His gaze cut past me, to the machine behind me. “Is that duct tape?”

“No, of course not.” I shifted again to block more of the machine. “Because using duct tape to solve a magical catastrophe would be totally unbecoming of an angel.” I flashed Nero a grin.

And he just snorted. “I’ve missed you, Leda.” He moved in, wrapping his arms around me. “Now that the situation is all wrapped up,” he said, his gaze flickering briefly to the machine, “how about we head to the dining hall and get something to eat?”

“Great idea.” I lowered my head to his chest, drinking in the scent of him. “Because I’m famished.” I glanced up to wink at him.

His chest rumbled with delicious laughter. “Well, let’s just see what we can do about that, shall we?”

CHAPTER 4

VALENTINE'S DAY

Unfortunately, Nero was literally talking about dinner. I wouldn’t have minded a little one-on-one private snuggle time with my husband, but I guess it was just as well. We had to keep an eye on Sierra. After all the excitement, our daughter was totally

wound up. She was running around the dining hall, chasing after Angel. Every so often, they crashed into something. They hadn't set anything on fire—yet—but it was only a matter of time. Baby angels were a real handful, especially when duckies and desserts entered into the equation.

“Where did she get that cookie?” I asked Nero.

He shrugged, but Basanti said, “I gave it to her.”

“Why?” I asked her.

“Because she likes chocolate-chip cookies.”

“Yes, but why?” I gasped. “Cookies make Sierra totally crazy.”

Basanti snorted. “She gets that from you, Leda.”

“Cookies donotmake me crazy.”

“Uh, didn't you once stab your fork through Harker's hand because he stole your cookie?”

“First of all, that was cake, not a cookie. And secondly, well, there were extenuating circumstances.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Basanti chuckled. “Your daughter is the result of those extenuating circumstances.”

I blushed.

“And our daughters too,” Leila said, sitting down next to Basanti.

Leila Starborn was a model angel. Her dinner tray was filled with healthy, sensible things like broccoli and cauliflower. I'd skipped right over those in favor of ice cream and banana bread.

"Where are Iris and Selene anyway?" I asked.

"They're with the babysitter," Leila replied.

"We thought that would be safer as long as you're around, Leda," Basanti added, smirking at me.

"She's kidding, of course," Leila said quickly. "The girls would love a playdate with Sierra."

"Just let me procure some fireproof clothing for them first," said Basanti.

I sighed. Sierrareallyloved to set things on fire. I hoped it was just a phase that she'd outgrow.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the infamous Leda Pandora herself!" Ivy proclaimed, sitting down opposite me.

I grinned at my friend. "Actually, I prefer the termfamous."

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“Famous and fabulous.” Ivy flicked her long, red hair off her shoulder.

“You forgot ferocious,” I told her.

“No one doubts your ferocity, Leda.” Drake sat down at the table. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Ivy,” he declared, setting a black-and-white box in front of her.

Eyes twinkling, Ivy lifted the lid. The box contained a magnificent assortment of fancy chocolates, decorated with sparkles, sprinkles, and swirls.

“Hey.” I gently nudged Nero with my elbow. “You forgot Valentine’s Day.”

“No. I did not.” His brow twitched. “I have something far more adventurous than chocolate in mind.”

His words made me very, very curious.

“Choco!” Sierra squeaked. “Gotcha!” She hopped up and grabbed Ivy’s box of chocolates. Then she ran off, trailing giggles and squeals.

As she left, Angel returned. And she came bearing gifts.

“Wow, thanks. You shouldn’t have,” I said as my cat dropped a dead rat at my feet. “Really.”

When it came to presents, I vastly preferred chocolate to dead rats. Where had Angel even found a rat? The Legion had strict anti-pest measures in place at all of its

facilities.

“Say, Leila, you don’t happen to have a pest problem at your castle, do you?” I asked her.

“No. Of course not.”

The rat chose that moment to scurry out of the hall. Apparently, it wasn’t dead after all. Angel took off after the rat, and Sierra took off after Angel. A moment later, lots of crashing noises echoed down the hall. Totally in sync, Nero and I jumped out of our seats and rushed toward those noises.

We found Sierra in the magic lab, standing beside the duct-taped machine.

“Kitty,” she cooed with big, green eyes.

I followed her gaze to Angel. But Angel wasn’t alone. She was currently battling it out against a big, black monster.

CHAPTER 5

THE SHADOW CAT

Like Angel, the monster was an abnormally large cat. But it wasn’t white; it was as black as night.

“Hey, shadow cat! Leave my Angel alone!” I shouted at the black monster when it nipped at Angel’s leg, eliciting a howl and a hiss from my cat.

Angel whacked the shadow cat hard in the face, and it started sparkling like an onyx rainbow.

“Those sparkles are disturbingly familiar,” I muttered.

Angel spun around and pounced on an empty patch of air. Except it wasn't empty at all. A fat turtle suddenly appeared. Angel struck the turtle again, and it started glowing green.

“It appears your duct tape was ineffective,” Nero noted, his voice perfectly level.

“Yeah,” I agreed as Angel revealed another sparkly smoke creature. “The beasts never left. The machine in the lab simply revealed them. And when we turned it off, we couldn't see them anymore.”

I shivered at the thought of all the creepy creatures that we still couldn't see. Angel's tail was swishing back and forth, sharp and agitated. She could obviously sense the creatures. And like the machine, she could make them visible to the rest of us.

As usual, Nero and I were on the same page. “We need to have Angel reveal the rest of the beasts,” he said. “Then we'll know exactly what we're up against.”

Unfortunately, Angel was too busy to help us at the moment. She and the shadow cat were engaged in a rolling, growling, scratching fight for feline supremacy.

“Maybe we should turn on the machine again,” I suggested as Leila and Basanti came to a running-stop beside us. “At least that way, we'll be able to see the creatures.”

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“I’ll do it,” Leila said, hurrying toward the machine. She frowned. “Leda, did you really have to use so much tape?”

I shrugged. “I wasn’t sure how well it would hold.”

“Too well,” Leila growled, tugging at the tape.

“Here,” Basanti said, cutting through the tape with her knife.

Working together, the two of them quickly got the machine back up and running. There was a rustling noise, like someone crinkling up a piece of paper into a ball, then more smoke animals appeared.

And, oh, boy, there sure were a lot of them. They were all around us.

Which left me with only one option.

“Stop.” Nero caught my wrist. “Before you do something reckless.”

“Such as?”

He considered my question for a moment before he said, “Tying up all those monsters in duct tape.”

His comment made me laugh. That did sound like something that I’d come up with. But I played it cool anyway.

“I would never do anything of the sort,” I said earnestly—or at least half-earnestly. “But I suppose you have a better idea?”

“Naturally.”

“I’m all ears, General Smexy.”

I never got to hear Nero’s brilliant idea. His words were cut off by a loud, shattering noise. And then a woman with a stylish high ponytail as black as her leather armor crashed through the window, gliding in on bright white wings.

At first, I thought it was Nyx, here to save our bacon, but her face was all wrong—at least what I could see of her face through her eye mask. And, come to think of it, Nyx didn’t wear masks when she went into battle. As far as I knew, no one at the Legion did.

The mystery woman pulled her arms apart, and a bow suddenly appeared in them. It glowed bright and golden, as though she’d woven the weapon out of pure light. She turned and shot, turned and shot, unleashing her glowing arrows on the smoke animals. Her movements were sharp, calculated, efficient. She moved so fast that my eyes could barely keep up. Her aim was picture-perfect. Within seconds, she’d hit them all.

She didn’t hurt the animals, though. Each time an arrow met its mark, it dissolved into a visual spectacle of light and sound, like little mini magical fireworks. One by one, each animal sat down, suddenly totally calm and docile.

“Pretty!” Sierra exclaimed, clapping her hands. “More!”

“Who is that woman?” I asked Nero. “An angel?”

He watched her closely, analyzing her every move. “No.”

“A god?” I wondered.

“No,” he said. “I think she is something else entirely.”

“Oh, you’re definitely right about that,” the woman declared, coming toward us with powerful, dynamic strides. “Greetings. I’m Cupid. Happy Valentine’s Day.”

CHAPTER 6

CUPID

“Well, this is a mess.” Cupid’s gaze locked with mine. She had a fierce look about her, like she’d been forged in fire.

Hardship typically affected a person in one of two ways: either it broke them, or it made them stronger. There was no doubt in my mind which camp Cupid belonged to. She donned the demons of her past like a suit of armor—no, like a war trophy.

And yet a spark of lingering humor flashed in her eyes. A remnant of her former life?

“You definitely live up to your reputation, Leda Pandora,” Cupid told me.

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“You’ve heard of me?”

“Of course I’ve heard of you. You’re the source of all chaos in the universe.”

Basanti snorted.

I ignored her. “But I’ve never heard of you,” I told Cupid. “You’re truly not an angel or a god?”

“I am not.”

“And yet you have wings.”

“Yes.” There was that spark in her eyes again.

“So what are you? Something older?” I asked, thinking of the ancient Immortals.

Her response was cryptic. “No. I’m something new.”

“What kind of some?—”

“It’s a long story. What I am is not important.” Her words cut through mine like a guillotine. “What’s important is that we send those spirit animals back where they came from before they decide to get frisky again and take over your entire castle.”

“Spirit animals?”

“Creatures from another dimension. You drew them here when you turned that on.” Cupid indicated Leila’s experimental machine. “The machine also put the spirit animals into an agitated emotional state. I calmed them down.”

“By shooting them with your arrows,” said Nero.

She nodded. “Yes. That’s my specialty: using my magic to influence the emotions of people and beasts. I can make someone feel calm or angry or sad. I can also make them fall in love.” Her gaze cut to Alec, who’d arrived at Storm Castle during dinner.

A slow, sly smile curled Alec’s lips. Yeah, I’d bet he would love to have Cupid’s powers. He was such a playboy.

Meanwhile, the sparkling animals had gathered around Cupid, and she was talking to them like she knew them. “Ok, Ruby, Jade, Ginger, Onyx...” She rattled off what I presumed were the creatures’ names. “I’m going to need you guys to go back through the void to your own dimension now.”

A chorus of overlapping creature noises answered her all at once.

“What did they say?” I asked Cupid.

“Honestly, I haven’t got the faintest idea,” she replied. “I’m just the spirit animal tracker, not the spirit animal whisperer. But they understand me.” She frowned. “Or at least I think they do.”

She must have been right about that because the spirit animals turned around and vanished from sight. Sierra sniffled in disappointment.

“Are they actually gone this time?” Leila asked.

I didn't blame her for being skeptical. We thought we'd banished them before.

"They're gone," replied Cupid. "All but one."

I saw it too. The shadow cat hadn't left with the others. Instead, it was strutting back and forth in front of Angel, trying to get my cat's attention.

Angel gave him a cool look, clearly unimpressed by the show.

"Shadow," Cupid said to the shadow cat, "I don't think the lady's interested."

Shadow ignored her. Instead, he tried to impress Angel by jumping on top of her and giving her a big nip in the back with his sharp fangs. As though that was the surefire way to a lady's heart.

Angel fought back like the apex predator that she was, but that didn't seem to discourage Shadow at all. If anything, it made him bite her with even greater enthusiasm.

"Shadow love Angel!" Sierra clapped her hands as Shadow chased Angel across the room. "Angel has boyfriend!"

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Basanti and Alec laughed.

“You said you use your magic arrows to control emotions, right?” I said to Cupid.

“You made your cat fall in love with my cat, and now he won’t leave her alone!”

“First of all, Shadow is not my cat. He’s just an...acquaintance. I promised to watch him.” Cupid said it like Shadow was her roommate’s brother who was crashing at her house for the weekend, and now she was stuck babysitting him. “And secondly, I would never do such a thing. Love is the most dangerous of all emotions. You don’t mess with love.”

“Indeed,” Nero agreed, coming up behind me like a protective dragon. He set his hands on my shoulders.

And, yeah, I might have swooned a little.

At least on the inside. On the outside, I was all business, the perfect cool and collected angel.

“If you didn’t make Shadow fall in love with my cat, then why is he making a total fool of himself in front of her?” I asked Cupid.

She shrugged. “Because she’s pretty?”

“Pretty!” Sierra agreed.

Cupid winked at her, which demonstrated more emotion than I’d seen her show

anyone else. Maybe she liked kids.

“Plus, at the end of the day,” she said, “whether human or beast, guys tend to lose their minds and turn into total boneheads whenever a pretty girl walks by.”

“I like her,” Basanti laughed. “She’s spunky.”

“So is Angel,” I said. “And my spunky cat is totally going to smack Shadow if he doesn’t stop provoking her.”

Angel did indeed smack Shadow in the face, but the lion-sized black cat wasn’t giving up. He launched into some kind of melodramatic feline opera with a generous accompaniment of meows, howls, and yowls.

Angel turned and strutted away from him, tail high in the air.

“Maybe I should check on her,” I said as Shadow shot out of the room after Angel.

Nero caught my hand. “Pandora, your cat hunts hurricanes and hell beasts. I think she can handle one lovesick tomcat.”

“Shadow is harmless,” said Cupid. “Just be happy Duke isn’t the one enamored with your cat. He doesn’t take no for an answer.”

“Which one is Duke?” I asked.

“The big purple guy.”

“Ducky?” Sierra said hopefully.

“That’s the one,” Cupid told her.

I snorted. “Wait, so, he’s Duke the Duck?”

“Yes.” Cupid shrugged. “Look, I didn’t name him. I just convinced him to go back where he came from. You’re welcome for saving your castle and everyone in it, by the way.”

“Howdidyou happen to be here, right when we needed you?” Nero asked, his voice hard with suspicion. “You showed up out of nowhere with just the right powers to solve our problem.”

“Oh, it’s not by luck or through some fluke of fate, I assure you,” Cupid said. “I was tracking those spirit animals.”

“How?” I wondered. “And why?”

“I’ll tell you all about it,” Cupid promised. “But first, do you happen to have anything to eat in this castle? I’ve been following those creatures all day, and I’m absolutely famished.”

CHAPTER 7

CHOCOLATE IS A DISH BEST SERVED...ALWAYS

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We returned to the dining hall to refuel. And no one refueled as fast as Cupid. She might have been built like a model, but she ate like a horse. She was popping chocolate balls into her mouth like they were grapes, devouring them with inhuman efficiency. Now, I really liked chocolate, but even I didn't eat it like that.

"So, Cupid," I began as she dipped a chicken nugget into a big bowl of fudge, "tell us more about your powers. I've never met someone with your kind of magic. It doesn't really fit into the rules of magic as we understand them."

"Rules change. You should know that better than anyone, Leda Pandora," Cupid declared, then shoved the whole fudge-covered nugget into her mouth.

Well, wasn't she cryptic? And you know who else enjoyed being cryptic? Gods and demons. If it weren't for Cupid's whole rules change philosophy—and her rather conspicuous love of junk food—I might have thought she was one of them. But if she was a deity, she was a deity cut from an entirely different kind of cloth.

"You are being evasive," Nero told her. As always, he cut right to the point.

Cupid shrugged and grabbed the fried rice...then proceeded to eat it straight out of the bowl with a serving spoon.

"When's the last time you got anything to eat?" I asked her.

"A few hours ago," she replied between bites.

I looked at Nero, who lifted a disapproving brow. My husband was big on decorum.

“Gods, her table manners are even worse than yours, Leda,” Basanti snickered.

Cupid slammed the bowl down on the table, drawing her bow. For a moment, I thought Basanti’s words had offended her, but she turned to aim her weapon at the dining hall doors. A moment later, the doors quaked, like someone had pounded it with a battering ram.

“This isn’t good,” Cupid muttered.

The wooden surface of the doors started to sparkle, then swirl, like it wasn’t entirely solid anymore.

“I thought we’d have more time,” she added.

The wood continued to sparkle and swirl like molten metal. There was a wish!—then a gargantuan creature melted out of the door.

“I thought you sent those creatures back where they came from,” I said to Cupid.

“I did.” Her bowstring hummed with magic as she drew it back. “This is a different breed of beast entirely.”

I saw that as soon as the creature finished taking solid form. The armored beast looked like a cross between a giant kangaroo and an angry armadillo. Oh, and its spiked, wrecking-ball tail was on fire.

“How did this ‘something else’ make it into my castle?” Leila demanded.

“The same way as the other creatures did,” replied Cupid. “Through the dimensional rift in the lab.”

“The rift is still open.” Nero’s voice was level, calm, threatening.

“Yes, it’s still open,” said Cupid. “And as long as it is, creatures from that dimension will continue to come here.”

“Tell us how to close the rift,” Nero said in that same dark and dangerous voice.

“We can’t do anything about it,” replied Cupid.

“I don’t believe that,” I told her.

“Of course you don’t. But nonetheless, that is our reality.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I insisted. “Somehow. We always do.”

Cupid didn’t say anything.

“But in the meantime, can’t you do something about that guy?” I pointed at the armadillo-kangaroo. “Can’t you calm it down or something? You did that to the other creatures.”

“It won’t work.” Cupid shot an arrow at the beast anyway. It sank into its arm, exactly between two plates of armor. But instead of the beast going docile like the others had, it let out a bone-chilling roar. “See? This creature is different. Its emotions are not its own. They’ve been bottled up. And its free will’s been stamped out. The creature is being controlled. Changing its emotions won’t help if it doesn’t have any control over its own body.”

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“You should try to be a little less pessimistic,” I told her.

“I’m not pessimistic,” she replied. “Merely realistic.”

I glanced at Nero. “She stole your motto.”

He looked at Cupid. “You knew the rift was still open.”

“Yes.”

“But instead of telling us, so we could find a solution to the problem, you insisted on coming to the dining hall for a snack.”

“Yes, I did.” Cupid didn’t look sorry at all. “Chasing spirits across dimensions makes me hungry. I needed to refuel. I’m no good to you without my magic.”

“Apparently, you’re no good to us with your magic either,” Basanti pointed out. She glanced at Leila. “If we gathered enough soldiers together, we’d probably have enough firepower to take down that beast.”

“No. Stop.” Cupid’s words sliced through Leila’s nod. “That creature is not your enemy. It’s not here by choice. Someone is controlling it. It’s a victim in all of this.” Cupid’s voice wavered. “It’s really, really scared.” She cleared her throat, and when she spoke again, her voice was all steel. “We have to help it, not harm it.”

“Who’s controlling it?” I asked.

Cupid shook her head. “I do not know. I can just feel it.”

Our gazes locked. “There’s more to your magic than just shooting arrows, isn’t there?”

She dipped her chin in a slow, smooth nod. She was hiding something, but still, for some reason, I just knew I could trust her.

“Ok.” I looked at Nero. “Do you think you can keep the beast distracted while I try to break the spell it’s under?”

“That won’t be a problem.”

A gentle breeze, sudden and as soft as feathers, kissed my skin. There was a whisper, followed by a flash. Nero’s dark wings unfolded from his back, stretching out wide. I took a moment to appreciate the magnificent, magical tapestry of black, blue, and green.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s do this.”

The delightful eyebrow tilt Nero gave me was as delicious as any kiss. Then he launched into the air and flew toward the armadillo-kangaroo. The beast took the bait, batting at him with its stubby arms like a cat swatting a fly. The sight was unsettling, but I forced myself not to worry. Nero had faced thousands of beasts during his tenure at the Legion of Angels. He could handle this one too.

I closed my eyes, drawing in a deep breath. On the exhale, I punched out with my magic, a braided band of Siren’s Song and Ghost’s Whisper. That band cracked, and like a pair of scissors, the two blades of persuasion and telepathy cut through the vile spell cast over the creature, breaking the bonds that had enslaved its will and silenced its emotions.

“It’s done,” I said, opening my eyes.

But instead of calm, the beast was enraged. It roared and stomped and swiped at anyone who got too close.

“Well, that didn’t work,” I commented, frowning.

“It did,” said Cupid. “The creature is no longer being controlled.”

“I think things were better when it was being controlled,” Basanti commented.

“It’s just scared.” Cupid drew her bow. “And angry.” Her arrow hit the beast just below the knee.

It only sort of helped. Fear won out over anger. The creature tried to dive under one of the tables, but its body was so large that it fell onto the table rather than under it. The wooden sheet snapped in half. The poor creature staggered to its feet, stomping, roaring, and crying.

“Well, that’s not good,” I said as Nero landed beside me.

The skylight shattered.

“What the hell is going on today!” Leila growled as a woman dropped into the dining hall on a black rope. “Who are you?” She looked appalled that a second stranger had managed to breach her castle’s defenses in one night. “And what do you want?”

“Just a sec. Be right with you.” The woman pivoted toward the frightened interdimensional creature. Like Cupid, she wore a black mask over her eyes. “Hey there, big fellow.”

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The creature stopped raging. It looked at the woman, whose skin had begun to glow. Actually, it was the tattoos all over her arms that were glowing. One of the tattoos peeled off her skin, just like the creature had peeled off of the closed doors. The tattoo turned into a white wolf. It glowed just like the creature before her. Just like Duke the Duck and the other creatures we'd met earlier.

"There's no reason to be afraid." The woman stepped toward the kangaroo-armadillo, reaching out with her hand.

The creature looked at the white wolf, who barked.

"That's right," she said, continuing to move forward. "We want to be your friends. Would you like that?"

The creature whimpered.

The woman smiled. "You're lonely. I thought so. Come on." She beckoned it forward. "I'll take care of you. I promise."

The creature strode toward her—and then into her. It passed through her like smoke. And then the smoke was just gone. A new tattoo appeared on the woman's neck, just above the collarbone. A tattoo of a cute, golden kangaroo-armadillo.

The white wolf's howl echoed through the hall.

"Don't look at me like that, Whitney," the woman sighed at the wolf. "Arvie was lonely. I had to help him."

“Arvie?” I wondered.

“The creature.” The woman flicked her long hair off her shoulders. It was brown with subtle auburn highlights that glowed like her wolf—like all of our interdimensional visitors glowed. “His name is Arvie.” The glow on her highlights and tattoos faded.

“Ok, but who are you?” I asked her.

“I’m Dreamcatcher.” Her gaze flickered to Cupid, then snapped back to me. “And I’m here to fix the craptastic mess you folks have gotten yourselves into.”

CHAPTER 8

DREAMCATCHER

Dreamcatcher clapped her hands together. “It’s done,” she declared, turning around to face us. “I’ve sealed the rift between realms.”

“Just like that?” I asked her.

“Just like that,” she confirmed.

Leila frowned at her. “What did you say your power was?”

“I didn’t.” Dreamcatcher scratched Whitney the wolf behind its ears.

“But you did say you call yourself Dreamcatcher.” I smirked at her. “Nice name.”

Her gaze swept up my singed clothes, then she smirked right back at me. “Nice outfit.” Her eyes slid over to Cupid. “I told you to wait for me.” There was a hint of agitation in her voice.

“So you two know each other?” I asked them.

“Of course,” Cupid said, her voice serious but serene. “Dreamcatcher is my sidekick.”

Laughter burst out of Dreamcatcher’s lips. “She likes to tell people that, even though it’s not true. I am no one’s sidekick.”

“So, no-one’s-sidekick,” Cupid said with a smooth, enigmatic eyebrow lift, “how about you tell your buddy Shadow to knock it off before we’re kicked out of here for his scandalous behavior.”

“What’s that rascal doing now?” Dreamcatcher pivoted, her eyes scanning the hall for the shadow cat. “Please don’t tell me he killed someone’s pet bird again?”

“No.” Cupid’s lower lip twitched, a fleeting hint of amusement on her otherwise solemn face. “He tried to seduce the Angel of Chaos’s pet cat.”

“Oh.” Dreamcatcher snorted. “I see,” she coughed out. Her eyes were dancing with laughter. “Well, Shadow has been feeling rather lonely lately. It’s not easy being an oversized interdimensional cat. Everyone thinks he’s so fierce and frightening, but he’s really such a sweet teddy bear.”

Sierra perked up. “Fluffy teddy bear?”

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“Yes,” Dreamcatcher agreed.

“Angel and Shadow make baby fluffy teddy bears?” Sierra said hopefully.

Dreamcatcher grinned at her. “Yes, I think Shadow would like that.”

Basanti was grinning too. “I wonder what their babies would look like.”

Yeah. Those kittens would be epically huge.

“Shadow!” Dreamcatcher called out. “Come here, you raunchy tomcat!” She whistled, and Shadow trotted obediently over to her. He did look pretty reluctant to abandon his vigorous wooing of Angel, though. “Be cool, kitty cat. Be cool.”

Shadow planted himself next to her, seated upright and alert. His big, gold eyes gazed longingly across the hall at Angel.

“Sit down,” Cupid told Dreamcatcher. “They have good food here.”

How generous of her to offer Leila’s hospitality.

“It’s a good thing I got here when I did,” Dreamcatcher said as she scooped a mountain of mashed potatoes onto her plate. “If that rift had stayed open much longer, it would have ripped your castle apart from the inside.” She sprinkled peas all over the potatoes. “But not before ejecting a ton of otherworldly creatures into this world.”

“So your powers allow you to seal rifts between dimensions,” Leila said.

Dreamcatcher nodded. “That’s right. I can also travel between this dimension and the dream dimensions. And I can communicate with the spirit animals in the dream dimensions.”

“Like Shadow.” I glanced at her shadow cat.

“Shadow, Whitney, my new friend Arvie...all of the creatures from the dream dimensions.” Dreamcatcher downed her whole glass of orange juice in one draft, then licked her lips. “And if I can convince a spirit animal to be my friend, it tags along with me on my journey.”

“Tags along with you in there?” Nero indicated one of her tattoos.

“Being in this dimension is very exhausting for them,” replied Dreamcatcher. “They rest inside my magic tattoos. And when I need their help, I can summon them.” As her hand hovered across the tattoos on her arm, they glowed in and out, one by one.

“Pretty,” Sierra cooed, her eyes wide.

“They really are, Mini Pandora,” Dreamcatcher agreed.

“How do you guys know so much about me?” I wondered.

“You are rather infamous,” Cupid told me.

My smile faded. “I had no idea my reputation transcended dimensions.”

“Oh, we’re not from another dimension,” Dreamcatcher said. “We’re from right here. From Earth.”

“You claim you’re both from Earth.” Nero’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. “And yet your powers are unlike anything we’ve ever seen before.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not like other people.” Dreamcatcher winked at him.

“Obviously,” he replied, his face blank.

Ok, so maybe Nero could ignore her flirting, but I was having a hard time doing the same. My pulse was pounding, my skin burning, and I was really tempted to throw her out of the massive hole she’d just made in Leila’s window, but I decided to be mature and not attack the woman who’d just saved Storm Castle.

Like he’d read my mind, Nero took my hand, entwining his fingers with mine. “Tell us about your powers,” he said as my pulse started pounding for an entirely different reason. “Were you born with them?”

“No,” Cupid said. “We were born human. We only got our powers a couple of years ago.”

“And how did you get those powers?” I asked.

“Because of you, Leda Pandora.” Cupid’s gaze locked with mine, but the look in her eyes was more resigned than accusatory.

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“Because of me?” I asked, confused.

“You’ve already said too much,” Dreamcatcher told Cupid. “We’re supposed to be keeping a low profile.”

“You’re right,” Cupid said as they both rose from their seats. “Well, goodbye.”

Before I could say another word, Dreamcatcher clapped her hands, and the two women—along with all their spirit friends—vanished from the dining hall.

CHAPTER 9

WE RAN OUT OF CHOCOLATE

“That was certainly exciting,” Basanti commented, then casually sat down to finish her slice of red velvet cake.

After our visitors’ dramatic exit, dinner quickly wound down. It was late, and there had been way too much excitement for one day.

“She’s totally wiped out,” I commented, my gaze dropping to Sierra as we stepped into our apartment.

Nero carried her to bed, then tucked her in under her favorite fluffy blanket.

“Duckies,” Sierra muttered in her sleep. “Angel. Shadow.” She clutched the pink blanket with her adorable little hands. “Kittens.”

Angel jumped up onto the bed and lay down in front of Sierra like a shield, ready to guard her from anything and everything that might threaten her.

“Let’s hope the craziness is done for today,” I told the cat.

Angel gave me a very skeptical, very feline look.

“Yeah, I’m worried about her too,” I replied with a sigh.

Angel stretched out her massive paws, revealing an impressive set of razor-sharp claws.

“I’m glad you have her back.” I petted Angel on the head, then Nero and I left the room—and left our daughter under the care of her guard-cat.

I followed Nero across the living room. Along the way, I paused for a quick pit stop at the kitchen counter to snatch a clementine from the fruit bowl.

“Still hungry?” Nero asked, amused.

He was already sitting on the sofa. I plopped down next to him. “Yeah, well, you know me.”

He nodded. “I certainly do. Which is why I’m surprised to see you eating something not covered in chocolate.”

I stopped peeling the clementine just long enough to shrug. “We ran out of chocolate.”

“Nowthatdoesn’t surprise me.”

I winked at him. “So,” I said, scooting closer. “How shall we spend the rest of Valentine’s Day?”

Nero didn’t answer.

So I tried again. “Shall I slip into something...” I licked my lips. “...way less comfortable?”

Still no response.

“Nero?” I tapped his arm.

He blinked. “Hmm?”

“Are you playing hard to get?”

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“No.” His hand dropped to mine, capturing it. “I’m sorry, Pandora. I’m a little preoccupied at the moment.”

“With what happened at Storm Castle?” I asked.

“Yes. I’ve been thinking about what Cupid and Dreamcatcher said about you.” He watched me for my reaction. “That you’re the cause of their powers.”

“I’ve been thinking about that too.” I shook my head. “But I can’t see how I could have given them their powers. It’s not like I can snap my fingers at someone and—bam!—they suddenly have magic. I mean, that’s crazy, right?” I met his serious eyes. “Right?”

“I don’t think this happened because you snapped your fingers.”

“Ok, what then?”

“They said they got their powers a couple of years ago. The Great Battle for Earth took place a couple of years ago, Leda.”

“Huh.” I bit my lip. “I guess I thought that couple was just an expression. Not specifically two years.”

“There was a massive surge of magic that day,” Nero continued. “You tore open the Guardians’ Sanctuary. Angels and gods clashed on the battlefield. Seven angel offspring came into this world, all at once. And then there was the lingering magic of all those sacrifices that led up to that explosive moment. Everything converged that

day. And when there's a big convergence of magic, there are always consequences."

"Like new powers," I realized. "New kinds of magic."

"Yes."

The clementine slipped from my fingers. "You think I created new kinds of magic?"

He nodded. "I think you were the catalyst that allowed that to happen, yes."

"You think there are more people out there, don't you? More people like Cupid and Dreamcatcher with new powers?"

"Yes."

"Wow." I collapsed against the back cushion.

"I know this is overwhelming."

"Overwhelming? How about life-changing?" I said, my laugh uneven, forced. "How many lives did I change that day, Nero? How many people did I change against their will?"

"We'll figure it out." Nero took my other hand now too, entwining our fingers. "But for now, we need to keep this between the two of us. We can't tell anyone."

"Yeah. No need to give Faris more people to hunt down and add to his Orchestra." I tried to clear my gravelly throat, but it didn't really work. "If Daddy Dearest knew what I've done, he'd probably try to figure out a way to make me repeat it, no matter how many people might die in the process."

“Yes. And that’s why we need to keep these new powered people a secret for as long as we can,” said Nero. “For all our sakes.”

“But how can this be the first time anyone is hearing about these people?” I wondered. “It’s been over two years. And uniquely-powerful people don’t exactly blend into the crowd.”

“Yes, that is a mystery,” he agreed. “But it’s one for a later date.”

“You’re right. If we investigate this too hard, we risk exposing those people.”

“There’s that,” Nero said. “And there’s the fact that it’s Valentine’s Day. I want to be alone with my wife. I want just a few hours of just the two of us together without rushing off to save the world.” He cast a long, leisurely look down the length of me.

“I am totally on board with that.” I traced my hand down his chest—very, very slowly.

He caught it. “I have something for you.” A small square box, ivory-colored with a black bow, appeared in his other hand. “A Valentine’s Day gift.”

I peeled back the lid of the box, peeking inside. “Oh, Nero,” I gasped, grinning, “you shouldn’t have.”

PART TWO

KILLING TIME

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:06 am

Killing Time is set directly following Calamity at Storm Castle, between Phoenix's Refrain (Book 10) and Demon's Mark (Book 11) in the Legion of Angels series.

CHAPTER 1

THE GIFT

It was a pen. And not just any pen. It was the pen. The one I'd been holding in my hand at the very moment Nero and I had met all those years ago, the day I'd joined the Legion of Angels. As soon as he'd stepped into that office, something about him—his presence, his aura, his soul—had captured a piece of me and never let it go.

"I wasn't sure if you'd recognize it," Nero said.

"Of course I recognize it." I brushed my fingertip across the familiar pen's smooth, blue-and-beige marbled surface. "How could I forget a single detail from the first time you ever scolded me?"

I loved the tingle of magic in Nero's chuckle. It rumbled in the air in deep, delightful, measured ripples, buzzing against my skin like a beloved melody. I would never grow tired of Nero's song.

"What's this?" I said, turning the pen in my hand. "You had it engraved?"

It was one word, written in bright gold letters: Conformist.

"It seemed appropriate," Nero replied, his face completely serious.

And that made me laugh. “It’s amazing!” I hugged him.

That’s me. Conformist, obedient, toeing the straight and narrow line.

I’d spoken those words to Nero that day when he’d grilled me on my reasons for wanting to join the Legion. I’d tried to convince him that I was a conformist. Of course I’d been totally lying.

“It’s way better than simply ‘appropriate’. This is the perfect pen for the Angel of Chaos,” I told him.

His lip twitched. “You do have an interesting relationship with irony, Pandora.”

“Oh, you really had no idea what you were in for when you marched into that office to confront me,” I chuckled.

“No.” He twined his fingers with mine. “You certainly were not what I expected.”

“Good. I hate being predictable. It’s much more fun to...” I squeezed my eyes shut.

“What’s wrong?” Nero’s voice sliced through the migraine that had come upon me without warning.

“I’m not sure.” I swayed. “A sudden wave of dizziness.”

“I feel...” Nero’s hands caught me. “I feel it too.”

We tumbled off the sofa and hit the floor. I tried to stand, but I couldn’t even open my eyes. My head was spinning, my eyes watering, my ears ringing. My body twitched, muscles misfiring at random.

But then, slowly, the pounding and spinning and spasming stopped. I opened my eyes.

“Nero, are you all right?”

He wasn't there. I flipped over, searching for him. But he was gone. I drew in slow, deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart, trying to silence all the wild, frightened fears flashing through my head.

“He's fine,” I assured myself. “He can take care of himself.”

But what if Nero was unconscious? What if he was all alone out there, hurt and needing my help?

“Pull yourself together, Leda,” I chided myself. “Don't panic.”

Easier said than done. The Legion had really honed my ability to function under pressure, but this wasn't some monster horde or enemy army I was facing. The love of my life had disappeared, and I was totally falling to pieces.

Somehow, I managed to peel myself off my living room floor. Except I wasn't in my living room anymore. I was somewhere...else. I looked around, struggling to get my bearings.

“I know this place,” I whispered.

I was inside Legends, the shadiest bar in all of Purgatory. Well, at least it had been the shadiest bar in all of Purgatory. When the Legion had shut down the district lords, they’d also shut down Legends. This bar didn’t exist anymore. It shouldn’t exist anymore. We’d demolished it years ago to make space for one of the Legion’s new office buildings.

I ran-stumbled for the exit. People who shouldn’t be here, drinking beer that shouldn’t exist, turned to watch me go. Outside the bar, the air was hot and sticky. The pavement was stained with vomit, moonshine, and stagnant rainwater. Potholes checkered the road like lunar craters.

And past those blackened stains and crumbling craters, the great Magitech wall glowed bright and golden. Its quiet hum was barely an acoustic band-aid over the growling, hissing, snarling Plains of Monsters beyond.

“The monsters,” I muttered. “They aren’t supposed to be here.”

CHAPTER 2

BLAST FROM THE PAST

A bar still owned and operated by the district lords’ now-defunct criminal organization? Freshly-cleaned streets covered in potholes and grime and vomit? Long-gone monsters lurking behind a glowing Magitech wall, threatening my town?

What the hell was going on here?

There was only one explanation that I could think of, and it was impossible. Somehow, I'd gone back in time. Sure, I'd read about it in books, but this was real life. And according to the laws of magic, time travel wasn't possible.

Then again, as the Angel of Chaos, I did tend to break the laws of magic. On occasion. And totally accidentally.

But here was the million-dollar question: could I fix what I'd broken?

"Leda?"

I turned toward the woman who'd called my name. Tall, bouncy, and sporting a perfect hourglass figure, Cindy was the most vivacious member of Purgatory's over-40s singles crowd. Or at least she had been before finding her Happily Ever After with my former next-door neighbor. But judging from the skintight, thigh-high, cherry-red sweater dress that she was wearing right now—which matched her hair and shoes perfectly, by the way—none of that had happened yet.

"What are you doing here?" Cindy asked me.

Lurking didn't sound all that legit, so I went with option B.

"Working?" Cindy repeated, her full lips pinching together in confusion. "Didn't you take the train with Calli and the rest of your family this morning?"

I must have looked pretty confused myself because she added, "Bella's first day at the New York University of Witchcraft is today. You all decided to go along and give her a proper sendoff."

“Oh. Yes. Right.”

Cindy looked at me like I'd hit my head on something. “I saw you in the Witch's Watering Hole last night, Leda. Just how much of old Monroe's moonshine did you drink?”

“None,” I told her.

She gave me a hard look.

“Really,” I insisted.

I hadn't gone to Purgatory's favorite bar that Friday night for the fine liquor and highbrow company. I'd gone there to work. My mark: an escaped vampire criminal named, ironically, Mark. Unfortunately, he hadn't surrendered himself peacefully into the safety of my handcuffs, so my brother Zane and I had to get assertive. That's the night Zane had risked a public display of his powers in order to save my life. It was the night my brother had been kidnapped, the watershed moment that had changed my life, setting me on my long path to join the Legion of Angels and gain the magic I needed to save him.

That's 'when' I was: the day my new life had begun. Surely, this couldn't be a coincidence. I'd been thinking about this very day just moments before I'd been catapulted through time.

A loud, deranged cackle rumbled down the narrow alleyway. I looked past Cindy, honing in on the source of that terriblenoise. It was a big, bulky, pale-as-a-stick-of-white-chalk man. He was in his early twenties, and built like a human gorilla. He lumbered toward me, his lips curled into a sneer.

He stopped beside Cindy. “Leave now,” he growled at her. His words were thick, like

he was speaking through a mouthful of gravel—and lots of spittle.

Cindy let out a terrified, high-pitched squeak, then scurried off. Her high-heeled stilettos clicked like horseshoes against the pavement.

The man watched her go, chuckling, then he turned back around to face me. “Leda Pierce.” He slid a calloused hand over his shiny bald head. “I’ve been looking for you.”

I’d met this man before. I just couldn’t remember where. Or when. I studied him closely—from his white tank top and ripped jeans, to the tattoos that covered both of his arms and most of his neck. My gaze snagged on the tattoo at his shoulder. It read ‘Rosie’.

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When I saw that name on the guy, everything clicked. I knew exactly who he was. I'd encountered him during my bounty hunter days, over a year before I'd joined the Legion of Angels. His name was Masher, and 'Rosie' was the girlfriend he'd beaten until she blacked out. And then the degenerate had followed up that fantastic display of assbattery by stealing Rosie's car and making a run for it.

I'd caught Masher just seconds from the town border, tasered him, and duct-taped his hairy backside to the 'Welcome to Purgatory' sign. Naked. And I'd been very generous with the duct tape. It took Sheriff Wilder over an hour to extract Masher from the welcome sign—and rumor had it that by the end of the de-taping, the scumbag didn't have a single hair left on his body.

Thinking back on it now, I was almost glad that some mysterious force had transported me back in time so I could do it all over again. Only this time, I didn't just have a roll of duct tape. I had a full angel arsenal at my fingertips.

"I've thought about you a lot over the last eighteen months." Masher's eyes locked with mine. "Each and every single day, as I sat in that stinking jail cell."

"Sorry, big guy. You're not my type." I took a step back to give myself more room to maneuver.

Masher misinterpreted my strategic thinking for complete cowardice. "Yes, you should be afraid, little girl," he said, flashing me a grin that was full-on psycho. "Because I am going to hurt you."

He surged forward to grab me, but I sidestepped. As he passed me, I gave him a

rough shove, sending him headfirst into a stack of wooden delivery crates filled with tomatoes and other fresh produce that the delivery guy had just deposited outside Dale's grocery store. Masher roared in anger, and the delivery guy scrambled back into his truck and sped away, tires screeching, the driver-side door still half-open.

"You will regret that," Masher told me, wiping the wood chips and ripe tomato flesh off his face.

He charged at me like an enraged bull. I lifted my hands to summon a gust of wind to knock him off his feet.

Nothing happened. The spell didn't work.

Shock froze me for just a second, but that was more than long enough for Masher to grab my shoulders and slam me hard onto a locked garbage dumpster. A jolt of pain cut down my spine. I kicked and punched and heaved with all my strength, but all my strength had left me. I wasn't supernaturally strong anymore.

Masher's smug, cruel face glared down at me. "I told you that you'd regret it." One of his enormous hands locked around my throat, and he started to squeeze. "But if you apologize for what you did to me, I might just let you go."

"No..." I coughed. "...you won't."

"No, I won't," he agreed, laughing in glee. And squeezing harder.

I dug deeper, trying to drag my powers to the surface—any of my powers—but they just weren't there. My magic was gone. I was completely human again.

I'd been so wrong. I hadn't just been sent back in time; I actually was that person back in time. I wasn't Leda Pandora, the Angel of Chaos, anymore. I was Leda Pierce,

totally powerless bounty hunter. A Leda without magic. A Leda almost as weak as any human. Except for my memories, there wasn't anything magical about me.

Dark spots blinked in front of my eyes. Masher was slowly strangling the life out of me, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

CHAPTER 3

DIRTY FIGHTING

Once again, I was that weak human I used to be—in everything but my memories. Those memories smashed together inside my frail body, like popcorn popping inside a delicate paper bag, threatening to burst out.

But it didn't matter what I remembered. It didn't matter who I'd been. This was who I was now: fragile and feeble, but not helpless.

I'd never been helpless.

"I lost eighteen months of my life because of you, bitch," Masher snarled, his grip tightening on my throat.

"Not because...of me," I choked out. "You assaulted someone...learn from your mistake...or you'll lose...another eighteen months."

"I'm not going back to that jail. Never," he growled. "Don't worry, sunshine." His hard, scarred lips cut into a smile, like a dagger thrusting up into a victim's chest. "No one will ever know I was the one who killed you." He gave me a conspiring wink. "They'll never even find your body."

He was even crazier than I remembered.

“Admit it,” Masher said, his eyes lit up with a fiery, manic glee. “I won.”

He certainly won in the psycho category.

“Say it.” He pulled my head off the garbage dumpster lid, then smacked it back down again.

Ouch. Black splotches stained my vision, swirling and burning.

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“I want to hear you say I won.” He licked his lips. “I want to hear you beg for mercy.”

“Can’t...” I clawed at his hands, trying to pry them off my throat. “...speak.”

“Oh, right,” Masher said with a stupid chuckle. His grip loosened. “Go ahead then, pumpkin. Tell me what I want to hear.”

I opened my mouth. A scratchy croak came out.

“I must have damaged your windpipe,” he laughed. “Oops.”

A strange, persistent ringing hummed in my ears.

“Say it, nice and quiet.” Masher leaned in closer to hear me better. “Now beg.”

I blinked.

He leaned in even closer. I watched him. My eyes could barely focus right now, so I kind of had to wing it as best I could. I waited until his ear was nearly pressed to my mouth...

Then I screamed as loudly as I could.

Masher stumbled back, disoriented, clutching his head with both hands. I sat up slowly, carefully, and slid off the garbage dumpster. I got a sudden, brutal blood-rush to the head as soon as my feet touched down. It was like the whole world had tipped

over. I blinked a few times, but it only sort of helped. I still felt like I was caught in a whirlpool that just wouldn't stop spinning.

Masher was already righting himself. He glared at me. "You crazy b?—"

I thrust out my hand, poking him hard in the eye.

He hunched forward, roaring in pain. While he was blindly fumbling around, I used the heels of my hands to pound him hard on the sides of his head. He dropped to the ground, unconscious.

"Nice going, genius." I stared down at his limp body. "You obviously didn't learn anything from your incarceration." I massaged my sore throat with my hand. "All you did was level up from 'assault' to 'attempted murder'."

My head still swimming in dizziness, I staggered away from him. Masher, insane as he was, was only a mildly inconvenient symptom of a much larger problem. I had to figure out what was going on. What had happened to me. How I'd gotten here. And, most importantly, how to get back home.

But first of all, I needed to find Nero. The whole world had gone totally sideways, and I had to know that he was ok.

CHAPTER 4

BACK TO NEW YORK

I called Nero's phone—repeatedly—but he didn't pick up. I tried not to let that worry me, but, yeah, I was worried. Nothing was going right today. If only I'd had my magic, I could have reached out to him telepathically. But I didn't. I didn't have anything but my wits, an ever-deepening sense of dread, and a massive headache

from when that lunatic Masher had smacked my head against the dumpster lid.

Oh, and five dollars. I also had five dollars in my pocket. That wasn't enough to buy anything, so I snuck aboard the next train out of Purgatory headed for New York. Gods, it was great being poor again.

New York. That's where I'd met Nero on this very day. He had to be there. He just had to be. I'd find him, we'd team up, and then we would find our way out of this mess and back to our daughter.

At least that was the plan. Unfortunately for me, the Legion's killjoy soldiers had other ideas. They stopped me before I'd made it two steps into the lobby.

"Guests are required to check in at the front desk," intoned a dour-faced corporal that I didn't even remember.

Luckily, he didn't remember me either—or, more like, he hadn't met me yet. Thank goodness for small favors. If he'd already known me, he might have grabbed his sword—or, at the very least, a fire extinguisher. I didn't exactly have the best reputation in this time. Actually, come to think of it, I didn't have the best reputation in my time either. People thought chaos followed me wherever I went.

I couldn't imagine what had given them that idea.

I offered the grumpy corporal a congenial smile, then walked up to the front desk. "I'd like to see Nero Windstriker," I told the woman there.

She gave me a contemptuous, cursory glance. "So do a lot of girls."

She said girls, but what she really meant was floozies.

I withheld a sigh. It was Alicia Henson. Of course I had to get my very least favorite receptionist. And she was keeping me away from Nero.

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“Oh, come on,” I said as serenely as I could with my angry heart thumping in my chest. “Do I look like an angel fan girl?”

Henson looked me up and down, then declared, “Yes.”

“Please.” I pressed my hands together. “It’s very important. I need to see Nero.”

“Colonel Windstriker is very busy,” Henson snapped. “If you want to see him, you can fill out a petition, just like everyone else.”

She passed me a green sheet of paper fixed to a clipboard. All of the Legion’s paperwork was color-coded. Green was the color to petition the Legion of Angels for aid.

“You can fill it out over there,” Henson added, pointing at the very full waiting area.

She was brushing me off, and we both knew it. I was so tempted to punch the counter, but since it was made of marble and I didn’t have my powers right now, I’d only end up breaking my hand.

So I changed tactics. I knew what day this was. I knew how to get Nero’s attention. And it wasn’t with a silly petition. Corporal Sourpuss Henson would just toss it to the bottom of the big stack of petitions, and no one would see it for months.

“No, not this one.” I waved the green clipboard away with an easy smile. “That one.” I pointed at a yellow clipboard.

Henson simpered. “That is an application form, Miss, not a petition.”

I nodded, still smiling. “Yes, I am aware of that.”

“You want to join the Legion of Angels?” She gave me another long, assessing look, and I just knew she was cataloging every rip in my shirt and the blood stains all over my pants. “You?”

I hastily pulled my messy hair up into a ponytail. “Yes, of course.” I tried to smooth out the wrinkles in my clothes, but of course it was hopeless. “I would make an excellent soldier, don’t you think?”

“No,” Henson replied coolly.

Someone chuckled behind me. I turned my head to find Alec Morrows. He hit me with a flirtatious wink, then circled around the desk to stand behind Henson.

“Just hand me the application form, Corporal Henson,” I said tightly.

“How do you know my name?” she demanded, her eyes squinting with suspicion.

Gods, this was taking far too long.

“It says so on your uniform jacket,” I said impatiently.

“I am not wearing my jacket.”

“No, you’re not.” I folded my arms over my chest. “And I doubt Colonel Windstriker will be impressed by your dereliction of duty.”

Corporal Henson glowered at me.

Alec snorted again. “I like her. She’s spunky.” And when he looked at me, I was pretty sure he was picturing me naked.

I ignored him. “So, are you going to give me that application form or not?” I asked Henson.

“Fine.” Henson extended the clipboard to me, but she kept a firm hold on it. “Fifty bucks says you don’t survive the initiation ceremony,” she added with an icy smile.

I snatched the clipboard out of her hands and, brows lifted, replied, “Thanks for the vote of confidence, but tell me, Corporal, who exactly do you expect to pay you if you’re right and I don’t survive the ceremony?”

Henson frowned. A crinkle formed between her beady eyes.

Laughter echoed behind me. Familiar laughter. “She’s got you there, Henson.” Basanti slid smoothly up to the counter beside me, leaning her hands against the glossy marble top.

“Hey, Bas—uh, Major Somerset.” I stopped myself just in time. “Nice to see you.”

“Major?” Basanti laughed. “I’m a captain, blondie.”

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“Maybe Colonel Windstriker secretly promoted you,” Alec joked. “He could have slipped you some extra Nectar while you weren’t looking.”

“That would explain this massive Nectar hangover.” Basanti rubbed her head. “Never challenge an angel to a drinking contest,” she told me with a wink.

I shrugged. “You could have won if you’d cheated.”

Basanti gave me a long, hard look, then she burst into laughter. “Good one,” she said, patting me hard on the back. Her gaze dipped to the yellow form attached to my clipboard. “And, hey, for what it’s worth, I hope you survive the initiation ceremony. The Legion needs more soldiers with a sense of humor.”

While she’d been talking, I’d filled out the form. It wasn’t so hard once you’d done it before—and already knew all the expected answers.

“Thanks for the recommendation.” I handed Basanti my completed form. “If you like me so much, how about you personally present my application to the Angel of New York?”

“You’ve got guts, that’s for sure,” Basanti laughed. “So, hey, why not?” She snatched the form out of my hands.

Henson bristled. “But that’s not?—”

“Oh, yes, please give me a lecture on protocol, so I can return the favor, Corporal. As Spunky here pointed out, you neglected to put on your jacket this morning.”

“Also, her shoelaces aren’t tied in the standard Legion knot pattern,” I pointed out helpfully.

Basanti glanced under the counter at the Corporal’s boots. “You’re right. Good catch, initiate. I think you’ll fit in nicely here.”

Then Basanti gave me another hearty pat on the back, which really hurt. Once again, I found myself lamenting my total lack of magic. It was so annoying being weak and human. I’d gotten used to being strong. Used to having magic. This just felt wrong, like I didn’t belong in this body.

I watched Basanti pass through the security gates, disappearing down a long hallway. The doors slid shut behind her.

Corporal Henson was giving me the double evil eye, so I moved toward the crowded cluster of chairs. “I’ll just wait over here.”

I was waiting for a long while. Some time later, a soldier came up to me and escorted me through the security gates.

“So you’re taking me to see Colonel Windstriker?” I asked him as we walked down the long hallway.

He didn’t even look at me. “Yes.”

Finally, I was making progress. I’d meet up with Nero, we’d figure out how the hell we’d gotten all the way here, and then we’d find a way home again. There wasn’t any problem we couldn’t conquer together. When it was us against the whole wide world, I pitied the poor world.

But, wait. What if there was nous? What if the Nero I was going to see now

wasn't my Nero? No one else I'd encountered so far in this wonky, out-of-time world was from my time. So why was I assuming Nero would be? What if this Nero had never met me, didn't love me, and had absolutely no reason to trust me?

The soldier opened the door to one of the tiny meeting rooms along the hallway. I stepped inside. Nero was standing there, directly in my path, dressed in black battle armor, looking exactly as he had the day we'd met. Just as beautiful. Just as deadly.

His eyes were focused on me. Cold. Assessing. Distant.

Like he didn't know me at all.

"That will be all, Sergeant," he said curtly.

I heard the soldier leave, clicking the door shut behind me.

Nero strode forward, his movements smooth but surging with power, his emerald gaze never leaving me. He stopped in front of me and demanded sharply, "Who are you?"

My breath stuttered, and my heart sank. He didn't know me. This wasn't my Nero.

"Captain Somerset said you seemed to know her," he continued. "And me." Suspicion hardened his eyes. His voice was piercing. "I asked you a question." He captured my wrists, slamming them against the wall, trapping me. "Who are you?"

I held his gaze. "The woman of your dreams."

He stopped, surprised.

"That's right, Windstriker," I said. "I know you dreamt about me last night."

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His eyes widened in shock. His hands popped open, and I wiggled free.

“Who am I, you ask?” I strode forward, puffing out my chest, trying to make myself look at least halfway formidable. “I’m Leda Pandora, the Angel of Chaos.” I pressed my index finger to his chest, demanding, “Who the hell are you?”

Nero moved like lightning. His hands closed around my wrists. But he didn’t trap me. He lifted my fingers to his lips and whispered, “I am Nero Windstriker, your husband.”

CHAPTER 5

PANDORA & WINDSTRIKER

I cupped my hands around Nero’s face. “You remember?” My eyes burned with anxious, cautious, happy tears.

His eyes locked with mine. “Yes.”

“You’re you?” I asked, blinking back the tears.

Nero pressed my palm to his heart, then he set his hand over mine. “Yes.”

I threw my arms around him, hugging him. “Oh, sorry,” I said when I realized I was squeezing him as tightly as Sierra squeezed the cat. I backed up.

“I am very durable, Pandora,” he reminded me, his voice low, teasing—and yet

serious too. Angels were, after all, proud of their strengths.

“I’m just so happy that you remember me!” I exhaled. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all day. Granted, my day thus far has consisted of waking up on the floor of a shady bar in Purgatory, finding out the monsters are back—awesome news, by the way—and then being attacked by a thug I caught way back in my bounty hunter days. Did you realize when we are, by the way? It’s the day we met. Met for the first time, I mean.”

Nero nodded. “I am aware.”

“You can’t imagine all the insanity I had to go through just to see you! First off, I had no money, so I had to sneak aboard a train bound for New York. It would have been so much easier to fly here, but I don’t have any wings because, guess what, I’m not an angel anymore.”

“Just because you don’t have any powers,” replied Nero, “that doesn’t mean you’re not an angel.”

I wiggled my finger at him. “Stop flirting with me. It’s adorable and makes it hard for me to concentrate.”

“Good.” Nero brushed his hand down my face.

And, yeah, I got a bit fluttery. And very flushed.

I planted my hands on my hips. “This is serious, Nero.”

He snorted.

I wrinkled my nose at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing,” Nero replied, his voice light, almost playful. “It’s just amusing to hear you lecture me about being serious.”

“Yeah, I know.” I rubbed my head, which was still pounding from my encounter with Masher.

Nero tapped my temples with his magic fingers, and the pain vanished.

“Thanks,” I told him.

“Always, Pandora.”

He was so cute.

“I just want us to get back to our time, our lives, and our daughter,” I sighed.

“We will.” He kissed me on the forehead, then backed up a few steps.

Which was good. Being so close to his body was going to give me heatstroke. On the other hand, he was just far enough away from me now that my eyes could truly appreciate that beautiful body.

“Pandora?” His brows peaked.

“Yes?” I asked, wetting my lips.

“You were rambling,” he reminded me.

“Right. I guess I should get back to that,” I said. “So this is what we know so far: we’ve traveled back in time, to before I had magic. Which is really inconvenient, by the way. I never thought I’d be annoyed to be human, but here I am. You once told me that the Legion changes people, that magic changes people. I guess I’ve changed more than I ever realized.”

“Not in the ways that matter,” he assured me. “Mostly, magic just made you harder to kill.”

“And more fun in bed?” I smirked at him.

His brows shot up even higher. “I don’t have a comparison point. But if you’d like?—”

“Oh, I’d definitely like,” I informed him without delay.

His lips curled slowly.

“Hey, what’s gotten you so frisky, Windstriker?” I asked, twining our fingers together.

“You mean, besides the joy of seeing that you’re all right? Well, if memory serves, last night was the night Basanti dragged me out ‘for fun’.” He humphed. “There was a lot of Nectar involved, so that’s still in my system.”

“Oh, right. Basanti mentioned something about losing a Nectar-drinking contest with you,” I laughed.

“Yes, that was shortly before she abandoned me to proposition the bartender.”

I laughed again. “It’s so weird to be back here. For Basanti to not be with Leila. And to watch Alec Morrows flirt with me without being totally terrified that you’ll smite him.”

Nero stiffened. “I would be more than happy to drive fear into his heart.”

“You can’t do that,” I said, catching his hand as he turned toward the door.

“Of course I can,” he replied silkily. “I am quite adept at terrifying people.”

“No one here knows we’re married, Nero. In fact, we aren’t even married in this time. If you start threatening any man who comes near me—a woman you supposedly just met—what will people think?”

“That I have good taste,” he countered.

Score another point for the smooth angel.

“Ok, so it’s just the two of us here, out of time,” I said, trying to get us back on track.

“How did we get here?”

“The pen,” he said immediately. He’d obviously already thought this through. “We

were holding it, talking about this day. And then we appeared here.”

“So the pen is magical?” I wondered.

He frowned. “It wasn’t magical before. I held on to that pen for years, Pandora, and it never did anything remotely magical.”

“So maybe it gained magic recently?” I suggested.

Comprehension dawned on his face. “I had it with me at Storm Castle.”

“When all that wonky interdimensional magic was going on,” I said, latching on to the idea. “So maybe the pen absorbed it somehow.”

“Or perhaps this isn’t mere chance. Perhaps someone wanted the pen to absorb that magic,” Nero said, “so they could send us here.”

“But why?” I asked. “Why send us into the past? What possible reason could anyone have for doing that?”

Nero shook his head. “I don’t know. But figuring that out is the next step toward getting us home.”

CHAPTER 6

A WEIRD AND WONDROUS PLACE

Hand-in-hand with Nero, I turned the doorknob to leave the meeting room. But instead of a long, boring tunnel hallway, we found ourselves somewhere else entirely.

We were inside a car—no, a truck. It was one of the Legion’s trucks. The uneven, potholed road rumbled and shook beneath the thick, sturdy tires.

Up ahead, the forest opened up into a clearing of three buildings. Two of the buildings had long since run into the ground, but the third was still standing. And from the flickering of lights shining through the windows, someone was home.

“How did we get here?” I muttered.

Nero sat beside me in the backseat. He looked just as confused as I was.

“Fall asleep, did you, Pandora?” Basanti chuckled from the front.

She was in the passenger seat. And Mira Ravenfall was the driver.

“Stop the truck and turn off the engine,” Basanti told her.

We all got out of the truck, and suddenly there were many more of us.

“Spooky place,” Ivy commented as she and Drake walked up to me.

They didn't even look at Nero. It was like they couldn't see him at all.

"Let's go, newbies," Basanti said, keeping her voice low, like she was speaking over a grave.

We stalked toward the forest, keeping to the cover of the trees.

"I know where we are," I whispered to Nero. "I know when we are."

The snow was coming down harder now. It was getting difficult to see through the gusts of flurries whistling across the land.

"The Wicked Wilds."

Nero's voice boomed in the carefully-kept silence, like a door slamming shut in the dead of night. But again, no one noticed.

"Yes, this was my second assignment with the Legion of Angels."

"I remember," Nero said. "You infiltrated a rogue vampire hideout."

"But we found more than just vampires there."

Memories of the dreadful scenes that would soon follow flashed through my mind. My stomach twisted.

"It's a trap!" I shouted.

But no one heard me.

I ran heavy-footed through the thick snow, trying to catch up with Basanti, to warn

her of what was coming. But no matter how fast I went, I couldn't catch her. I felt like I was running against a moving sidewalk. And then, like a rubber band, I snapped to the front, along with everyone else. We were inside a large central chamber.

"No, not again," I growled as vampires jumped out of the floorboards, fully awake.

The doors burst open, and witches and werewolves streamed in from the connecting rooms, surrounding us.

Basanti drew her freakishly large sword. Slash. Slide. Cut. Cleave.

The witches brewed.

The werewolves snarled.

The vampires tore.

Drake was wrestling with one of the werewolves.

Ivy shrieked. A seven-foot werewolf held her in his claws, his teeth dripping her blood.

Nero punched the werewolf in the face, and the beast flew across the room.

“This isn’t how it happened,” I muttered as a wave of dizziness shook my body.

I reached out to catch myself, but my grasp turned into a punch. A psychic-powered punch.

Someone caught my fist, then threw me to the ground. I kicked back up to my feet, preparing to strike again.

The man yawned very loudly. “I’ve grown bored of your stubbornness, Leda Pierce.”

In a flash of magic, wings sprouted out of his back. They were a brilliant, iridescent mixture of blue and green, bearing a striking resemblance to a peacock’s feathers.

“You’re not supposed to have wings,” I said, frowning at the angel.

It was Balin Davenport, the Legion traitor. Except his new name was Soulslayer. I

just hadn't known that at the time.

"And you're not supposed to have magic," he countered.

No, wait. He hadn't said that.

"Please spare me the inner monologue," Soulslayer laughed.

"You're a dark angel," I said.

This was playing out all wrong. It was totally out of order.

Blasts of dark magic bombarded me from every direction. I tried to run out of their path, but I was too slow. I tried to resist, but my body was giving out. Fireworks of pain pounded at my head, dragging me into the abyss.

"You are pathetic." Soulslayer sneered down at me.

And then Nero punched him in the face. The dark angel fell. And his minions faded to smoke.

"Thank you," I told Nero, clutching him for support.

"Always." He wrapped his arms around me.

The ground disappeared beneath our feet, and then we were falling, falling, falling. An airship burned like a dying sun in the sky above us. Magic sizzled across my back, and my wings flashed out to catch my fall.

"What is going on?" I asked as Nero landed beside me, sprinkling me with a light layer of black, green, and blue feathers.

I caught one of the feathers floating in the air and pressed it to my nose, inhaling his scent. The scent that felt like home. The scent that grounded me, wherever I was.

“I have no idea what’s happening,” Nero said, gazing across the forest-speckled plains.

Monsters were coming. But these monsters weren’t wolves or birds or even dinosaurs. They were trees. The many small forests were on the move.

“They’re coming for us,” I said quietly.

I didn’t have time to react. A deep howl thundered across the expanse. My skin went cold, my body stiff. I looked toward the Fire Mountains. A pack of wolves stood in front of the burning rocks. There were dozens of them, each one as large as a pony. Their eyes burned as red as the mountains’ five fiery peaks.

Nero and I were back in another Legion truck, in another place, in another time.

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“Whatever—whoever—is doing this to us, they’re ping-ponging us through time,” I said.

A streak of orange lightning flashed across the expanse, then slowed to match the truck’s speed. A dragon-like lizard was running alongside us. Seven more giant lightning-fast lizards surrounded us. One of them slammed its spiked tail against the truck, and the vehicle jumped like it had hit a massive pothole. The wheels slammed down on the road again, the impact nearly throwing me from my seat. Another lizard readied its tail to hit us, but Nero spun the truck away from the beasts.

“I’m not sure we’re traveling through time at all,” Nero said.

Gigantic metal men were charging at us. They ran so fast, their feet were on fire.

“Those are supposed to be wolves,” Nero said. “That’s not how this really happened.”

But what was real? It felt like nothing was real anymore. It felt like someone had shoved the last few years of my life into a blender and cranked it up to full power.

The metal giants weren’t men anymore. They were mechanical wolves, a hybrid nightmare somewhere between reality and fiction.

I drew my guns and fired at the metal wolves. But for every wolf I hit, two more joined the fray. They spilled out of the Fire Mountains like a river of flames. I was going to run out of bullets long before the mountains ran out of monsters.

I felt a fluttery sensation in my stomach, a precursor to the next dizzying wave that

would catapult us into another time and place, another mismatched montage of different memories from different moments of my life. Each new jolt spiraled us more and more out of control. Each one made less and less sense.

“You’re right,” I told Nero. “We aren’t traveling through time.”

I jumped out of the truck and sprang into the air. Angel wings burst out of my back, as bright as an orange sunset. I hovered over the monster horde, my wings beating hard. My mind was finally crystal clear.

“Stop,” I commanded the monsters.

And they stopped.

“Be gone,” I said.

And they disappeared.

I flew back to the ground, landing on the hood of the truck. Nero had parked it in front of the entrance to the Fire Mountains.

“No, I think I’d prefer something a little more peaceful,” I said, snapping my fingers.

Then the burning volcanoes were gone, replaced by a quiet lake. Waterlilies floated on the surface. Owls hooted in the distance. A refreshing breeze cooled my cheeks.

“How are you doing this?” Nero asked me. “How are you changing everything?”

“This place,” I said, turning, indicating the ever-shifting landscape, “it’s not real. It’s...well, I’m not sure what it is exactly. It’s kind of like a dream...and yet not a dream. And just like in a dream, once you know it’s not real, you can take control.”

I clapped my hands, and my cat appeared in front of me.

“The pen,” Nero said, his eyes sharp, his voice serious. “It must have drawn in some of that inter-dimensional magic from our adventure at Storm Castle.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” I agreed. “And now we’re in some wacky recreation of the past, born from our memories, formed out of our thoughts at the exact moment we touched the pen and set off this spell.”

“The question is: whocast the spell?” Nero said.

“I don’t know, but we can totally find out. We can control this place, Nero. That means we can make it reveal the person whoput us here.” I rubbed Angel behind her ears. “Oh, you like that, girl, don’t you?”

Nero watched me, amused. “You know the cat isn’t really here, right?”

“Angel and I share a special connection. We’re bonded by magic. That means she’s as much here as we are.”

“Yes, but herbodiyisn’t here,” he said as I rubbed the cat’s sides, nice and rough, just as she liked it. “So she can’t truly enjoy what you’re doing.”

“Shall we test out just how much we can enjoy ourselves here?” I suggested with arched brows.

He chuckled, dark and tantalizing. “Come on, Pandora. Let’s find the evil mastermind who trapped us here.”

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Angel let out a meow of protest when I stopped petting her to take Nero's hand. "Ok, how shall we do this?" I asked.

"Villain, show yourself," Nero declared, his voice deep and assertive.

His command shattered the scene—literally. The peaceful lakeside panorama broke like a smashed mirror. The jagged shards poured down, revealing the world hidden behind the facade.

We were now standing in an orchard, but it wasn't like any orchard that I'd ever seen. The trees were heavy with pears and plums and mangoes...but also candy canes, cupcakes, and carrots. There was even a tree full of shoes. And one with meowing kitten statues.

Angel hissed at them.

"Don't feel threatened by those noisy kitties," I comforted her. "You're way bigger than any of them."

Her ears drew back, and she meowed in appreciation. Or at least I was going to label that meow 'appreciative'. Honestly, I never had any idea what my cat was saying.

"You're smiling," Nero noted.

"Am I?"

"Yes."

“Oh, I was just imagining how cool it would be to be able to speakcat,” I told him.

“If anyone can learn how to communicate with cats, it will be you, Pandora,” he laughed.

So I decided to give it a try. I bent down and asked Angel, “Which way to the bad guy?”

She blinked at me.

“Come on,” I coaxed her. “I’m sure you can smell him.”

Angel made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a sigh, then she trotted deeper into the orchard. We followed her. And the further we went, the weirder everything got. We passed trees heavy with fashion magazines. Trees with spears for branches and big, red, juicy apples impaled on their sharp, metal tips. There were trees made of glass. And upside-down trees that grew out of the thick, cloudy ceiling.

This place was both wondrous and weird. But most of all weird. Really, really weird.

Angel had stopped at the foot of a very large, very normal tree.

“Now what?” I asked her.

She lifted up her paw and wiped it on the rippled trunk.

“This is no time to clean your paws,” I scolded the cat. “We’re looking for the guy who brought us here.”

Angel rolled her eyes at me. And there was that exasperated sigh again. She tapped the tree.

“The tree?” I asked, frowning. “The great and powerful criminal mastermind behind this catastrophe is a tree?”

I looked at Nero, who shrugged. He didn’t look any more impressed by our nemesis than I was.

“Please,” a voice called out.

“That plea for help came from the tree,” Nero said. He looked like he never wanted to utter anything so ridiculous ever again.

“Help me,” the tree spoke again. “Please, help.”

CHAPTER 7

MAGICAL CHANGES

The tree had a full head of lush green leaves and big, red, juicy apples. Each of the apples was at least twice as large as any apple that I’d ever seen. Besides that, there wasn’t anything remarkable about the tree.

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Well, except for the fact that it had spoken to us.

“Please, help me,” the tree said again.

I pressed my ear to its rough, rippled trunk, listening. Almost at once, I jumped away.

“It has a heartbeat! It’s alive!”

“Most trees are,” Nero pointed out.

“You’re adorable when you’re being a smart-ass, Windstriker.” I blew him a kiss.

Angel slid past me, rubbing the side of her face against the bark. She looked at me and meowed.

“I think she’s trying to tell me something.”

“Yes,” Nero agreed.

I crouched down in front of my cat. “Ok, I’m listening,” I told her.

Angel meowed again, which, honestly, wasn’t all that helpful.

“Maybe you could act it out?” I suggested.

Angel turned her back on me, tail high in the air, which gave me a spectacular view of her rear end. Then she rose onto her hind legs, pressed her front paws to the tree, and sniffed it.

“I believe she wants us to smell the tree,” Nero said.

“Sure, why not?” I laughed. “That wouldn’t even be the craziest thing that we’ve done today.”

But after getting a whiff of the tree, I had to reassess that statement.

“It smells human.” I looked at Nero. “There’s someone inside the tree.”

“Actually, I don’t think there’s someone inside the tree.” He pressed his hand to the trunk and took another whiff. “I think this someone is the tree.”

My gaze slid down the tree trunk. My eyeballs might have popped out of my sockets when I saw a ripple of bark that looked just like a braid of human hair. And one of the tree’s branches was reaching upward, like an arm, complete with five fingers.

“A tree-human hybrid?” I asked.

Yep, that was weird. And saying it out loud made it feel even weirder.

“Tree people.” I chuckled. “Suddenly, interdimensional sparkly smoke animals seem totally normal by comparison.”

“I’m not a tree person,” the tree told me. The voice was distinctly feminine. “My name is Aspen.”

“That’s a pretty tree-y name,” I told her.

“Yes, well, I was not always a tree,” she replied. “I was once a person, just like you.”

“And when was that?” I asked.

“A few days ago? A week? I don’t know actually. I’ve lost track of time. It passes strangely here.”

“Where is here?” Nero asked her.

“A waypoint between dimensions,” she replied. “Everyone passes through this space when using the magic mirrors or teleporting. It just happens so quickly that normally you don’t even see it.”

“So how did you get here?” I wondered. “And, for that matter, how did we get here?”

“I got stuck while using the magic mirrors. A freak accident that should not have happened. Somehow, I materialized here, right inside of this tree, and the flowers and branches grew around me.” Aspen’s leaves rustled, like she was shaking out her skirts. “As for you...” Another leafy rustle. “Well, I asked my animal friends to bring you here.”

“Animal friends?” I looked at Angel.

She blinked at me, two eyes, very, very slowly.

“Yes, my animal friends,” said Aspen. “They live here, in this place. They found me here, stuck in this tree, and we quickly became friends. They couldn’t free me, but they could go look for help. They found you, Leda Pandora. They came back to tell me all about your exploits, your unique mindset which helps you solve unusual problems.” Aspen’s branches fluttered. “My problem is unusual.”

“It definitely is,” I agreed.

“As soon as my friends told me about you, I knew you were the right person to help me.”

“These friends,” said Nero. “You’re speaking of the animals we encountered at Storm Castle. They are interdimensional beings.”

“Yes.”

“And they brought us here?”

“Yes. But they didn’t mean any harm,” she added quickly.

“They attacked us at Storm Castle,” said Nero.

“They weren’t trying to hurt you. That strange machine drew them to your castle.

They got scared. They were just looking for a way home. And then they saw her.” One of the branches pointed at me. “They realized she could help set me free.”

“So they ensnared us,” Nero said.

“No!”

“They threw us in a time-and-space dreamworld blender,” I pointed out. “Or at least they enchanted Nero’s pen to do it.”

“They just wanted to help me. Thatblender, as you call it, was the best way to get you here.”

“Ok, so let’s say we believe you.” I looked away from a ripple in the bark that looked like a leg. It was all just so creepy. “What do you expectmeto do about your situation?”

“Free me,” Aspen said serenely. “I know you can. You are a master at fixing weird problems.”

Maybe I should get a t-shirt that said just that:Leda Pandora, Angel of Chaos, a Master at Fixing Weird Problems.

“Well, I guess I could try to help you, as long as you promise you’re not evil.”

“Evil?” Aspen repeated, her trunk crinkling like a furrowed brow. “Why would you think that I’m evil?”

“Because evil people have a knack for finding me and causing all kinds of trouble.”

Nero nodded in agreement.

“I am not evil,” Aspen insisted.

She sounded so sincere that I couldn’t help but believe her.

“Well, ok, then,” I said. “I’ll help you.”

“You will?” Hope crept into her voice, and her apples jingled like bells. “Oh, thank you! Thank you!”

I lifted a warning finger. “Just don’t make me regret it.”

Her apples stopped jingling. Her voice grew quiet, serious. “I won’t. I promise.”

“Okie dokie, how about you tell me how you got stuck in that tree?”

“I already told you. I was taking a magic mirror?—”

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“Details. I need details,” I told her. “Paint a picture, play by play, and don’t leave anything out.”

“Oh, of course.” Aspen cleared her throat—or at least I thought that’s what she was doing. She was a tree, so it sounded different, kind of like the sound a woodpecker made drumming its beak against a trunk. “Well, you see, I am a princess. Or at least I’m supposed to be. The official list hasn’t been announced yet, but everyone expects me to be on it.”

“Official list?”

“Yes, on my world, the new monarch is decided by popular vote.”

“So anyone can be monarch?”

“No, of course not,” she giggled. “That’s where the official list comes in. In order to make the list, you must build up enough support. You must form alliances. If your alliances are strong enough, you are added to the official candidate list. The people on that list are named the princes and princesses of the Court. They’re the only ones eligible to become monarch at the next vote. Which will happen very soon, following a series of pageants and contests.”

Wow. And here I’d thought deity politics were complicated.

“I’d just about gathered all of my documentation to be signed by the royal notary when the accident happened,” Aspen continued. “I was bringing along a basket of apples.”

“Just in case you got hungry?”

“No, to bribe the notary, of course,” she tittered. “I’ve found that when I bring him apples, I’m always jumped straight to the front of the queue.”

“Because you give him apples? Really?”

I would have understood cookies or cupcakes, but apples?

“Apples are a rare delicacy on my world,” Aspen said. “They don’t grow there. So I went on a little shopping trip to Earth to pick them up. On my way home through the magic portal, I ended up here. Like this.” Her bough shook, raining down apples. “And every moment that passes, I become more and more a tree. Soon I won’t even be able to speak anymore.”

I picked up one of the apples she’d dropped, lifting it up to my nose. “The apple smells like you, Aspen.” I inhaled again, more deeply this time. “And you smell like apples.”

“Yes, the apples and I appear to have, well, merged during transport. We combined into one being, an apple tree stuck here, at this waypoint. My friends and I have tried to separate the apples from me?—”

“Why would you do that?” I cut in.

“Because I don’t want to spend the rest of my life as an apple tree.”

“I think you’re going about this all wrong,” I told her. “You shouldn’t try to separate the apples from the woman. You’ve already merged. You are one being now. There’s no way to separate you.”

“So I’m doomed to stay like this forever?” The tree sagged.

“No.” I gave the trunk a comforting pat. “Not if you stop fighting it.”

“Fighting what?”

“Fighting yourself,” I said. “Remember what I said? You and the apples are one being now. But you haven’t accepted that. You’re fighting the transformation.”

“Of course I’m fighting it! I don’t want to be a tree!”

“But you are a tree now, or at least some part of you is. Denying that won’t change anything. You need to embrace the change.”

“No!”

“This magic,” I said, indicating the talking apple tree, “it’s unusual, yes, but at the end of the day, it seems to follow the same fundamental rules of magic. When magic touches you, it changes you, whether that’s Nectar, Venom, or mysterious interdimensional tree voodoo. To survive that change, you can’t fight it. You must accept it. You must welcome it with open arms and an open mind. Because this is who you are now.”

Silence descended on the orchard for a long while. Finally, Aspen spoke.

“You’re sure about this?” she asked me.

I shrugged. “As sure as I can be.”

“Ok.” A slow, thick wave rippled across the trunk, like Aspen was swallowing her fears. “I will do as you say, Leda Pandora.”

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Puffy clouds and bursts of sunshine washed across the sky like watercolor streaks, twirling, swirling, dancing around each other. The apple tree began to sing. The song was joyous and sad, violent and calm—but most of all, it was beautiful. The conflicting notes and emotions clashed and collided at first, but they soon blended together into a smooth, seamless rhythm.

The tree canopy trembled, then completely disappeared. The apple tree was gone. In its place stood a young woman, tall and beautiful. Her hair, ash-colored, twisted into a braid, almost touched the ground. Apple blossoms grew between the strands. Her long gown was apple-red. And when Aspen lifted her hand, palm-up, tiny leaves sprinkled out of her fingertips. The leaves flitted up, up, up, moving through the air like a swarm of butterflies.

“Wow,” she gasped. She did a tight turn, laughing. “This is amazing!” She fluttered her fingers, and a new tree grew out of the ground in front of her.

“By embracing her new self, she has gained some new magic,” Nero observed. “A special affinity with plants.”

Aspen drew in a deep breath, closing her eyes. “Yes, I can feel them all. All the trees and flowers.”

A glowing white bunny hopped through the field of new flowers blooming all around us. My huntress cat crouched down into the tall grass, watching and waiting.

Aspen opened her eyes. “You’re here!” She dropped to her knees and petted the bunny on the head. “Say hello to my new friends, Leda Pandora and Nero

Windstriker.”

The bunny took one look at us, then hopped away in fright. Angel let out a long, disappointed meow.

“Thank you!” Aspen clasped my hands. “You saved me.”

“You saved yourself,” I told her. “Once you accepted your magic.”

“Yes, I guess I...” She frowned.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“It’s so late,” she gasped. “So very late! I’ve lost so much time here. I have to go.”

I caught her hand as she turned to leave. “But not before you send us home.”

“Oh, right. Yes, of course. Of course.” Aspen waved, and the bunny came hopping back to us.

Angel’s ears perked up.

“Clover will show you the way home,” Aspen told us.

“So just follow the bunny?” I looked at Nero. “Sounds easy enough.”

It wasn’t easy at all, of course. That bunny was fast. Even Angel was having trouble keeping up with it, and she was very, very motivated to catch it. Eventually, just past the cherry trees, Clover the bunny did a little somersault in the air, revealing a glowing portal. Then it hopped away.

“No, not that way,” I told Angel, grabbing her by the scruff of her neck. Or at least trying to. It had been a lot easier back when she’d been a kitten. “We want to go home.”

Honestly, Angel looked like she wanted to keep on chasing bunnies, but between me and Nero, we convinced her that home was way better than an interdimensional orchard waypoint. We might have also bribed her with promises of cat treats and cake. My cat really liked cake.

The three of us tumbled through the portal and into our living room. Everything looked exactly as we’d left it.

“Are we sure we’re really home?” I asked aloud—because someone had to.

“We’re home,” Nero told me. “I can feel it.”

We found Sierra asleep in our enormous bed. When Angel jumped up there, she muttered a sleepy ‘fluffy teddy bear’, then snuggled up to the cat. Nero and I joined them and drifted off to sleep, happy and content.

Until our next adventure.

PART THREE

THE BALL OF CHAMPIONS

The Ball of Champions is set shortly after Gods’ Battleground (Book 12) in the Legion of Angels series.

CHAPTER 1

A DESTRUCTION OF CATS

The Plains of Purgatory were lovely this time of year. A lush, velvety carpet of flowers blanketed the ground in soft pastels. Pink and green and yellow and red—nature had reclaimed the monsters’ former stomping grounds. And it was a kinder, gentler nature than the feral plague that had held our world hostage for so long.

It smelled a lot better too. I inhaled deeply, drinking in the soft, sweet scent of early summer. It smelled like life and victory and family.

“This really is the perfect spot for a picnic,” I said to Nero.

“Yes, it is.” He leaned back on his elbows, his manner so easy, so relaxed. “Good thing I thought of it.”

His expression was so adorably smug that I just had to laugh. Sierra was laughing too, but she wasn’t looking at her father. She was totally enthralled by the litter of kittens prancing and pouncing across our enormous picnic blanket.

“Chicken?” Sierra grabbed a chicken wing out of the big bucket and tossed it at the kittens, giggling in delight when they started wrestling one another to claim the prize.

Angel and Shadow were cuddled up at my feet, watching their babies with a profound sense of accomplishment. Oh, and by the way, each of those ‘babies’ was as large as a lion cub.

“They’ll make pretty formidable warriors, don’t you think?” I said, giving Nero’s hip a playful bump with my own.

“Indeed.” He watched the kittens closely. “In time. And with the proper training.”

“You actually think you can train a cat to do anything?” I chuckled.

“Why not?” He brushed a wayward strand of hair out of my face. “After training you, Pandora, even cats should be easy.”

I smirked at him. “Oh, is that so?”

He shrugged.

“Hey, I was an excellent student.”

“Yes.” He leaned in. “Excellent,” he whispered against my lips.

After that, we wrestled a little bit ourselves. The cats didn’t seem to mind. Neither did Sierra. In fact, she started cheering Nero on.

“Go, Daddy!” she squealed in delight. “Win!”

“Thanks for the support,” I told her as I struggled to escape Nero’s iron grip. Man, he really had me pinned.

“Daddy fights better,” Sierra said with a shrug, totally unapologetic.

“Only because he won’t let me cheat,” I said, looking Nero straight in the eye.

As he gazed down upon me, his expression wasn’t just unapologetic. It was

triumphant. I cast the bucket of water bottles a longing look.

“Don’t even think about it,” Nero warned me.

“Think about what?” I said with an innocent smile and a demure flutter of my eyelashes.

“Throwing those water bottles at me.”

“I totally wasn’t thinking about throwing them at you.”

“Sure you weren’t.” He leaned down to kiss me.

“Mmm, yes,” I purred. “I like thismuchbetter than getting my butt busted.”

“No!” Sierra disagreed. “Fighting better than kissing! Kissing boring!”

Chuckling, Nero and I sat up and cracked open the picnic basket. Sierra sighed in disappointment, then ran off to chase butterflies with the kittens. Apparently, they were way more interesting than we were.

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“So, how’s life at the Vanguard?” I asked Nero, handing him a sandwich.

That’s what was keeping him busy at the moment: training the Legion’s most elite soldiers. We’d defeated all our foes—that we knew about—but new ones always seemed to pop up to take their place. An optimist would call that ‘progress’. It was very easy to be an optimist when the sun was shining, the cats and kids were playing, and I got to cuddle up with my sweetheart.

“Training is going well.” Nero nudged the cookie box toward me, an acknowledgement of my philosophy that desserts made the best appetizers. “Your friend Captain Morrows is happily taking a beating.”

“Yeah, that sounds like Alec.”

Alec was new to the Vanguard, but he wasn’t new to Nero’s demanding training sessions. He’d once served under him in the Legion’s New York office, just as I had.

“How are things going with the councils?” Nero asked me.

“The usual,” I sighed. “You know gods and demons. They love to fight over everything. The latest squabble is over the refreshments menu during council meetings.”

“If that’s all they have to fight about, things must be going well,” said Nero.

“They spent eight hours debating between chocolate cake and strawberry cake. Eight hours, Nero.” I opened the cookie box. “Do you know how much cake I could have

eaten in eight hours? A lot. And I would have enjoyed eating that cake a hell of a lot more than just talking about it.” I took a deep breath. “But we’re not here to complain about work. We’re here to totally forget about work.”

Nero and I didn’t get to enjoy that many picnics nowadays. This was a rare quiet moment together in a sea of chaos, and I was determined to enjoy it. So I shoved all those problems aside and focused on this perfect moment.

We sat there for hours, eating and laughing and basking in the warm sun. We breathed in the sweet air. We watched our daughter and the destruction of cats chase butterflies and flower petals. Sierra had enchanted the flock of petals to amuse her feline friends.

“Her magic is growing stronger. More subtle,” Nero commented with an air of approval.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It’s nice that she’s finally moved beyond only being interested in setting the curtains on fire.”

“She does have a taste for danger,” said Nero.

“Speaking of danger...” I looked out across the field, past the butterflies and petals and kittens.

A familiar face stared back at me. And that face looked very, very worried.

“Leda Pandora,” she said, rushing up to us. “And Nero Windstriker.”

“Aspen?” I rose to my feet, and so did Nero. “What are you doing here? What’s wrong?”

“Everything,” said the troubled princess, her chest heaving, sucking in breaths. She looked like she’d run all the way here from her world, wherever that world might be. “I’m in trouble, and I need your help.”

CHAPTER 2

LEDA PANDORA AND THE SEVEN KITTENS

Aspen blinked at me, her eyes hopeful. “So, what do you say, Leda Pandora? Will you help me?”

Angel let out an enthusiastic meow.

“Your opinion is duly noted,” I told my cat. Then I shifted my attention back to Aspen. “What exactly do you need me to help you with?”

“I need you to help me become Queen,” she declared, then folded her hands in front of her.

She was so prim and proper in her princess dress, complete with a tightly-laced corset, airy sleeves, and a full skirt adorned with gemstones and embroideries over layers of petticoats. One of Angel’s kittens—Tiger Lily, whose elegant black stripes over a sleek white coat made her look like a cute, lovable white tiger plushie—batted playfully at Aspen’s skirt.

“Help you become Queen?” I laughed. “Oh, is that all?”

A crinkle formed between Aspen’s eyes. “I’m serious.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are,” I said. “It’s just, well, I’m not really much of a Queenmaker.”

“Leda Pandora can do anything she sets her mind to,” Aspen declared with a congenial smile.

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“Leda Pandorawasalso trying to take some much-needed time off.” I sighed. “All right. Come on over.” I waved her forward. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to hear what you have to say.”

I sat back down. Snow, our snow leopard kitten, plopped down in my lap. I rubbed him under his chin, and he immediately started purring like an engine.

“Thank you.” Smiling, Aspen dipped her chin to me, then carefully lowered herself onto the picnic blanket.

She’d only just finished spreading out her skirts when Duchess stretched herself out on the silky fabric. The kitten’s light silver coat sparkled in the warm sun, glittering nearly as much as the gemstones on Aspen’s dress, in fact.

“So, how amIsupposed to make you Queen?” I asked as Nero sat down beside me.

“Remember how I told you that in my world, the new Queen is decided by popular vote? The form that vote takes is a series of contests and elimination rounds called the Princess Games. Each candidate demonstrates her skills, and the people vote for their favorite princess. The winner is crowned Queen.”

“That sounds like quite the spectacle,” I said.

“This system has existed for thousands of years. And in all that time, it’s never failed to ensure that the best candidate becomes Queen. The system works. At least itdidwork.” Aspen sighed. “I’m not going to make the list. Iwouldhave made the list easily, but then I got stuck in an apple tree for a few weeks. That threw all my plans

into chaos. The Ball of Champions is upon us—the gala where the candidate list will be decided and declared—and I’m not ready. I thought I could count on my allies, or at the very least my friends...” Her sigh was heavier this time. “But she’s the very reason I’m even in this situation to begin with.”

“She?” I asked.

“Lavinia, one of the other princesses. She’s my friend—or at least I thought she was my friend. It turns out that she was the one who magically-sabotaged the apples. So that when I traveled between worlds, the apples reacted to the portal energy, drinking it up. The apples and I merged into one being, and that tree planted itself in the space between realms. Lavinia fully expected me to remain forever stuck in interdimensional limbo.”

“She sounds like a real charmer,” I commented.

“Yes,” Aspen said tightly, “and if I don’t become Queen, she surely will. That would be catastrophic for my world. That’s why I need your help, Leda. I need you to find a way to get me on the candidate list. I need you to get me into the Princess Games. Once I’m in, I’m confident I can win.”

“Why me?”

“You have an uncanny ability to come up with solutions that other people miss, to think outside the box,” she replied. “Like when you saved me from the tree. No one else would have thought of embracing the apples rather than fighting them. That’s the kind of sideways thinking that I need right now.”

“Yeah, I do excel at moving sideways.” I tapped my fingers against the picnic blanket, and Bonbon, our kitten with the black-and-white spotted cow-pattern coat, pounced on my hand. “Ok. I guess I could help you.” I tickled Bonbon on her tummy.

“How much time do we have?”

“Until the end of the day.” The princess wrung out her hands. “The Ball of Champions is tonight.”

“Ah, so no pressure then,” I quipped.

“There is a lot of pressure,” Aspen replied, dead serious. “The Princess Games only come around once every few centuries. If I’m not on that list by the end of the day, I will forever lose my chance to rule the kingdom.”

“I see.”

Tux, Angel’s enormous tuxedo-coat kitten, let out a tiny, pitiful meow, as though to say, Aren’t I just the cutest little fluff ball that you’ve ever seen? You have absolutely no excuse not to give me your full and undivided attention!

“All right, here you go.” I tossed a cookie at the begging kitten.

He meowed in appreciation, then tore into the cookie with his sharp teeth.

Aspen watched him, her eyes wide with surprise. “Your cat eats human food.”

“He’s not the only one,” I said. “It’s a family trait.”

Duke, our dark silver kitten, pounced on his brother. The two boys rolled and wrestled, fighting over the remains of the cookie. Nero watched them, cool and quiet, like he was assessing potential soldier candidates. Sierra, in contrast, squealed with delight.

Those squeals grew even louder when Blaze joined in the fight. Blaze was mostly

white with black accents on his face, legs, paws, and tail. He sported a big, bright white blaze right between his baby-blue eyes. His blaze looked like war paint, a symbol that marked him as a fierce warrior.

“Seven kittens.” Aspen’s gaze swept across Angel and Shadow’s babies.

“Yeah, we like to call them ‘the Lucky Seven’,” I chuckled.

“Onlyyoucall them that, Pandora,” Nero said. “Everyone else calls them ‘the Destruction Seven’.”

I smirked at him.

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“Do the kittens have any special powers?” Aspen asked.

“Well, they poop a lot,” I said, shrugging.

Her nose crinkled up. “I see.”

“I think we’ll have to wait and see what powers they get, if any. They are still very young.” I leaned back on my hands. “So, returning to your quest to be Queen. Before we get started, is there anything else I should know?”

“I won’t lie to you, Leda,” Aspen said. “This quest, as you put it, won’t be easy. In fact, I might even call it impossible. From what I hear, the Committee has already chosen their twelve candidates for Queen. The announcement at the ball is just a formality. Furthermore, the ball itself is only a few hours away. Even if we can persuade the Committee members to change their minds, I don’t see any way to obtain the missing documents I need to qualify.”

“Documents?” I asked.

“All I need is a stamp on my application packet,” she said. “But the notary refuses to even see me. I suspect Lavinia paid him off.”

I was hating this Lavinia more and more. I couldn’t stand bullies and dirty cheaters.

“Don’t worry,” I told Aspen. “I know things seem grim, but that’s why you came to me, right? I’ve faced more impossible odds than these and won. I will get you on that list. That I promise you.”

CHAPTER 3

PREPARING FOR BATTLE

Angel clearly wanted to join us in our mission. She gave Aspen such an enthusiastic body-bump that the poor princess nearly fell over.

After Angel and Shadow kissed noses in farewell, the sleek black panther opened up a portal. He and the seven kittens hopped through the swirling ring of magic, and then they were gone.

Sierra and Angel sighed in unison.

“The kittens will be ok,” I assured them. “Shadow knows how to keep them out of trouble.”

Angel shot me a dubious look.

“Ok, so there was that one time when he took them to visit a dragon,” I admitted.

Poor little Duke had come back with half the fur singed off his tail. But it had grown back—eventually and with a little help from Bella’s potions.

“Shadow won’t make that mistake again,” I said.

Angel stared at me, unblinking. Sometimes I really wished I could hear what my cat was thinking.

“He’s still growing into his role as a father.”

Angel started grooming herself. I wasn’t sure how to interpret that.

“Ok, Aspen, show us the way to your world,” I said.

And so she did. Our first stop was the formal attire shop. To gain entry into the Ball of Champions, we had to dress the part.

“The Committee will formally announce the candidates at the end of the Ball,” Aspen said. “That’s how long we have to get my name on the list.”

I waved away the sleek midnight blue gown she offered me. “Beautiful, but impractical. The skirt is too tight. I won’t be able to kick anyone in the head.”

She frowned. “Do you expect a fight?”

“I always expect a fight.” I snatched a scarlet dress off the rack. The skirt was nice and flowy. I’d definitely be able to move around in this. “What do you think of this one?” I held the dress in front of my body.

“That’s Iliana’s color,” she told me.

“Iliana?”

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“Lady Iliana, a contestant in the last Princess Games,” Aspen explained. “She did not succeed in becoming Queen, but she certainly acts like a royal pain. She’s decided that scarlet is her signature color—and her color alone. She even made a public declaration to that effect.”

“Ok, then...”

I hung the dress back on the rack. I was going to be way too busy helping Aspen at the Ball. I certainly wouldn’t have time to banter with a delusional noblewoman who thought she held total dominion over the color scarlet.

“I have to ask, though, Aspen,” I said, “why does this shop even sell dresses in that color if it’s going to cause so much drama?”

“Because people here love their drama,” she replied. “I mean, we hold a public spectacle to decide who will become the next Queen and the next King. Princesses fight each other to become Queen. Princes fight each other to become King. Doesn’t that just say everything right there?”

“And yet you want to participate,” I pointed out.

“I have to participate. I can’t allow the evil and the cruel to rule our world. They will ruin it.”

“That’s very noble of you.”

She sighed like being noble made her tired. “I know.”

I eventually settled on a black dress, then Aspen and I headed into the men's section of the shop, where Sierra was helping Nero select his outfit for this evening.

"How's it going?" I asked him.

"Suboptimally."

I slowly trailed my gaze up his body. "You look pretty optimal to me." I brushed my hands down his chest. The smooth black fabric of his tuxedo was soft and supple to the touch. "Veryoptimal."

"No," Sierra said. Her cute little nose scrunched up. "Not that one."

I peeled back the lapels of Nero's tuxedo. "Yes," I whispered into his ear. "This one."

"No, Mommy," Sierra snapped. "Work now. Kiss later." She waved her hand at Nero, dismissing him to the changing room.

"How many tuxedos has she had you try on so far?" I asked him.

"This will be number fifty-two," he said, taking the new tuxedo Sierra handed him. "And she says we won't stop until we've found the perfect one."

I chuckled. "Our daughter can be quite bossy."

"I wonder where she gets it," he said, magic flashing in his eyes. Then he stepped into the changing room.

I closed the curtains behind him before I gave in to temptation and followed him in there. The shop door opened and a crowd of random strangers poured inside. They made a beeline for Angel, who was keeping herself busy napping on one of the

massive carpets.

“I’ve never seen such a large cat!” cooed a woman. “Who’s a good girl?” The woman crept closer. “Who’s a goood girl?”

Angel opened her eyes just wide enough to shoot the woman an annoyed look, as if to say, How dare you interfere with my very busy life of being a lazy cat? Then she went right back to sleep again. The woman inched closer. She reached out her hand to pet Angel...

My cat let out a thunderous roar that sent the crowd scrambling for the door. But they didn’t leave. They just stood there, staring at Angel in awe.

“She is so fierce!” said a man.

“I could watch that cat sleep all day,” sighed the woman who’d tried to pet her.

She wasn’t alone in that. A line soon formed outside the shop. It stretched all the way down the street.

“Your gigantic cat is great for business!” said the lady shopkeeper. “She’s welcome here anytime!”

I chuckled to myself. Sure, she was happy now, but just wait until afterwards, when she tried to remove the twenty pounds of cat hair that Angel had left behind on her carpet. I could already see them now, delicate white hairs floating in the air, getting on all the dresses and tuxedos, like falling ash after a fire. Angel’s hair was everywhere. The shopkeeper would never get it all out.

“I am surprised to see you here,” said a sharp, simpering voice.

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I turned to find Aspen locked in a staring contest with another woman. The woman who'd spoken those words. Her face matched her voice perfectly, all fake smiles and smug glances. A heavy dress bag hung over her arm.

“What do you want, Lavinia?” Aspen said tightly.

“From you? Nothing.” Lavinia laughed. “Here I was, just picking up my gown for tonight, and who do I find here? The most unexpected person imaginable.” The smirk sizzled on her lips. “I don't know why you're even bothering getting a gown, Aspen. There's no reason for you to go to the Ball at all. You won't be participating in the Princess Games. You don't even have your paperwork ready.”

Aspen stood there, so cool and collected. So regal. I felt the urge to express outrage on her behalf. Yes, and that outrage would be best delivered via a punch to Lavinia's pretty little plastic face.

But I didn't do that. I couldn't. The only real way to strike back at Lavinia—the only way to make her pay for being such an insufferable menace—was to get Aspen's name on that princess list.

As Lavinia left the shop, she turned to fire a parting shot. “You were meant to remain forever trapped, Aspen,” said the snotty princess. “It would have been better for everyone if you'd just stayed in that tree like you were supposed to.”

And with that said, Lavinia left the shop.

Gods, she was as sweet as acid, wasn't she?

“Don’t worry,” I told Aspen, more determined than ever before to help her. “That woman is about to be booted out of the Princess Games.”

“Oh?” she replied. “I haven’t heard anything about that.”

“It hasn’t happened yet, but it will,” I said, a plan taking seed in my mind. “We’re going to kill two birds with one stone. We’re going to get Lavinia kicked out of the running for Queen. And while we’re at it, we’re going to make sure that you take her place.”

“How are you going to do that?”

I flashed her a grin. “With the help of an old friend.”

CHAPTER 4

THE ROYAL NOTARY

We left Sierra and Angel behind at the shop to supervise Nero’s continued tuxedo search. Our next stop was the royal notary. We had to get Aspen’s papers in order so she was qualified to take Lavinia’s place when the snotty little princess got herself kicked out of the running for Queen. Unfortunately, the notary’s receptionist was proving somewhat of a challenge.

“Princess Aspen, you say?” She made a big show of checking the appointment calendar. “I’m sorry, you’re not on the list.”

But I wasn’t backing down. “I’m sure the notary can spare just a few minutes?—”

“Mr. Barrens is very busy,” the receptionist cut me off. “If you want to see him, you will need to make an appointment, just like everyone else.”

“Ok, then make us an appointment,” I said.

“What time works for you?” she asked.

“How about right now?”

The receptionist continued her show of looking through the calendar. “Mr. Barrens is really quite booked up. The earliest he can possibly see you is...” She flipped through the pages. “...in five years.”

This was ridiculous.

“Ok, let’s just cut to the chase.” I started slapping gold coins onto the table. “How many coins will it take for you to ‘find’ us an appointment for this afternoon?”

The receptionist pretended to look offended. “You are attempting to bribe an agent of the Crown!” she said, her chest puffed out.

I shrugged. “I suggest you take the gold.”

She pulled a gun on me. Seriously? What was wrong with this woman?

I considered her coolly. “Put that away before you hurt yourself.”

That’s when the crazy bitch shot me in the shoulder. Luckily, my jacket was bulletproof. It was such a pain in the ass to dig bullets out of my body.

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“Ok, now you just pissed me off,” I told her.

I waved my hand, casting a sleep spell over her. Nothing happened.

“Ha! Your magic doesn’t work on me, witch!” the woman laughed.

I rolled my eyes at her. “I’m an angel, not a witch. But no matter. I have other means than magic at my disposal.” I snatched her arm, holding her steady as I duct-taped her mouth. “Why can’t people ever do things the easy way?” I sighed at the struggling woman. “You should have just taken the money.”

“No doubt Lavinia already paid her off,” Aspen pointed out.

“I’m hating this Lavinia more and more with every passing minute.” I taped the receptionist’s arms to the legs of her desk. “There. That should do it.” I secured the tape roll to my weapons belt.

Aspen watched me in fascination. “Why do you carry duct tape around with you?”

I shrugged. “It’s versatile. You never know when it might come in handy. And, look, it just did.”

“You are very strange, Leda Pandora.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I know.”

“But I knew I could count on you. You’re a good person.”

“Uh, thanks.”

“Unlike Lavinia,” she sighed.

“Yeah, your former BFF is something else,” I agreed. “How can your society give someone so horrendously morally-bankrupt even a tiny sliver of a chance of becoming your queen?”

“Her chances are far greater than a sliver,” Aspen said. “In fact, Lavinia is the strongest contender. Unless I can stop her, she will in all likelihood become Queen. And as for how my government can let someone like her rule, well, the rules of the Princess Games favor the strong. Too often, the strong are cruel, callous, and completely driven by selfish desires.”

“So the other candidates are just like Lavinia?” I asked.

“Some of them.”

No wonder Aspen was willing to go through so much pain, suffering, and outright nonsense to stop them from becoming Queen.

“So what’s your current Queen like?” I asked her.

“She is one of the good ones,” Aspen told me, smiling. “She was the one who asked me to enter the Princess Games. She wants me to become Queen.”

“She couldn’t just name her successor?”

“No. That’s not how our society works. The new Queen is determined by the Princess Games. No one can sidestep the process, not even the current monarch. But she can influence people. Because she favored me, I would have likely become Queen.

Until...”

“Until Lavinia got you stuck in that tree,” I finished for her.

“Yes. Her betrayal hurt more than anything. I thought she was my friend, but then she showed her true colors. She wants to be Queen, and she would do anything to get rid of the competition.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It will all come back to her in the end.”

“So you believe in karma?”

“I believe in taking karma into my own hands. Now, come on.” I waved her forward.

“Let’s see if we can’t snatch just a few minutes out of Mr. Barrens’s very busy schedule.”

We found the notary in the office at the end of the hall. He didn’t look particularly busy, though it must have been quite a challenge to eat a sandwich and play games on his phone at the same time.

“Mr. Barrens,” I said, trying to get his attention.

He didn’t look up from his game. Well, he certainly had his priorities straight.

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I snatched the phone out of his hand. “You’re a hard man to get an appointment with,” I told him.

He glowered at me in annoyance. “You don’t have an appointment.”

“Yes, exactly my point.” I set a folder on his desk.

“What’s that?” he asked, licking ketchup off his fingers.

“Aspen’s paperwork to join the Princess Games.” I snatched a pen out of the cup on his desk. “We’d like you to notarize it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re the notary, and it’s your job to notarize things.”

He waved the pen away. “You’re too late. The candidates for the Princess Games have already been selected.”

“Selected perhaps, but not yet announced,” I said. “Which means there’s still time.”

“Time? Time to do what? To change the Committee’s mind?” He laughed. “Once they make up their minds about something, they don’t change them.”

“You let us worry about that. You just sign the documents.” I set his pen on the folder.

“You’re wasting your time.” He made an impatient noise. “And mine.”

“Look, the documents are all there, ready and prepared.” I tapped the folder. “All we need to make them official is your signature.”

“What’s the point? The Committee isn’t even going to look at them.”

“I don’t know about that,” I countered. “I can be very persuasive.”

He looked me up and down, assessing me. “You’re an angel.”

“A deity actually. Half goddess. Half demon. And all awesome.”

He didn’t look impressed. “How nice for you, but that’s not going to help you here. Why do you think this kingdom is independent and free? Why do you think we don’t worship either gods or demons?”

“I don’t need you to worship me, Mr. Barrens,” I said with a strained smile. “I just need you to sign a piece of paper.”

He ignored me. “We don’t worship gods or demons because your magic tricks don’t work on us. We are strong.” He pounded his chest.

“Nice try, but I know magic works on you guys.”

“Magic, yes. But not your magic.”

Gods and demons didn’t like to admit that there were any other kinds of magic than their own, but I wasn’t like other deities. I’d experienced other kinds of magic firsthand, magic that didn’t fall along the usual spectrum.

“I am not signing this.” The notary slid the folder back across the desk to me.

Of course not. I’d hoped he would see reason and do this the easy way, but no one ever did it the easy way. They always forced me to get mean.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Barrens.” I set his phone on the table, then bowed to him. “We will be back.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” he warned me, grabbing his phone.

I gave him one final smirk, then left his office with Aspen. The high-pitched beeps of whatever game he was playing followed us down the hall. As we passed her desk, the receptionist gave us an angry glower and tried to scream her way out of the duct tape.

“That went well,” Aspen said, deflated.

“It was worth a shot, but your people really do like to make things difficult, don’t they?”

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“Yes,” she said, her shoulders slouching lower.

“Don’t worry,” I said, setting a brisk pace away from the building. “We’ll convince him to sign that document.”

“How?”

I winked at her. “With magic, of course.”

“How? Mr. Barrens was right about your magic, you know. It doesn’t work on us.”

“Yes, I saw that with the receptionist.” I nibbled on my lip. “Why is that, by the way?”

“Our skin is like armor, a shield against magic. It keeps magic out. It protects us.”

Well, that was something new.

“How did you manage to make your skin magic-proof?” I asked her.

“It wasn’t anything we did. We were just born that way. Our civilization is old. Our kingdom has been around since before gods and demons. Even the ancient Immortals couldn’t work their magic on us.”

“Did they try to?” I asked.

“No.” Aspen shook her head. “The Immortals were not conquerors. Many people

worshiped them for their incredible powers, but since those powers didn't work on us, we never did. We had a few encounters with them over the millennia. According to historical records, the Immortals were quite perplexed by our resistance to their magic. Apparently, that's uncommon."

"Yeah, in their time, the Immortals were kind of the magical powerhouses of the known universe," I said. "But it's not like other kinds of magic don't exist out there."

A new, improved plan was taking shape in my mind.

"So what now?" Aspen looked at me like I had all the answers.

And I had no intention of disappointing her.

"Remember what I said about killing two birds with one stone?" I said. "Well, I'm actually going to need two stones. But luckily they seem to travel in pairs."

Aspen blinked, clearly perplexed. "You are a very unusual, very confusing person."

"I know." I flashed her a grin. "Now, come on. Let's go find those stones."

CHAPTER 5

RENDEZVOUS IN THE PARK

She met up with us in a small park not far from the notary's office, wearing red leather armor, a pair of tight Dutch braids, and a skeptical expression. "You called?" Cupid asked, brows lifted.

"And you answered," I replied with a big smile.

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re trouble, Leda Pandora. I’ve always said that.”

I shrugged. “And yet you came.”

“Yes.” Her sigh was soft, almost silent. “I can’t seem to help myself. I’m drawn to trouble.”

“I have that effect on people.” I smirked at her. “It’s a gift.”

Cupid’s gaze slid to Aspen standing right beside me. “How did Leda draw you into this?” She waved her hands around. “Whateverthisis.”

“Actually, I dragged her into it,” Aspen told her. “She’s here to help me.”

“Help you do what exactly?”

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“Become Queen and rule the world.”

“I see.” Cupid didn’t even blink. “Yes, that’s pretty much a day in the life of Leda Pandora, isn’t it?”

“So you’ll help us?” I asked her.

Cupid looked at me again. “You always look out for people. You help them when they’re in need. How could I not do the same?”

I nodded along to her words. “Plus, you really want me to owe you a favor.”

Cupid showed me a rare smile. “Yes, those favors do come in handy, don’t they?” She inhaled slowly. “So, what can I do for you?”

“Well, like Aspen said, we’re trying to make her Queen, but Lavinia, one of the competing princesses, is proving to be quite uncooperative.”

“How inconsiderate of her,” Cupid said, and I couldn’t tell if she was being serious or sarcastic. For someone who could control people’s emotions, she sure didn’t show many of them herself.

“We’re about to pay another visit to the grumpy notary,” I continued. “He’s stubbornly refusing to sign Aspen’s documents, which she needs in order to compete for the crown. We’re fairly certain that Lavinia paid him off. We need you to use your considerable talents to make him reconsider his poor choice of allies.”

“You have powerful siren magic,” Cupid said. “Can’t you just use that to persuade him yourself?”

“The people of this world are immune to traditional magic,” I told her.

“Really?” Cupid looked around at the other people in the park, her gaze pausing on a woman walking her dog. “Interesting.”

When the woman caught her staring, she picked up her tiny dog and ran the other way. Cupid frowned.

I looked between Cupid and the fleeing woman. “Do you always have such a strong effect on people?”

“Do you?” Cupid countered.

I smirked at her. “Obviously.”

“It’s the leather.” Cupid slid her hand down her armored forearm. “I told Dreamcatcher it intimidates people, but she insists that ‘superheroes wear super-suits’.”

“So you’re a superhero now?”

“Dreamcatcher seems to think we are, and I’ve found it’s easier not to argue with her when she gets a crazy idea in her head.”

“I don’t think the idea’s crazy,” I said. “I think it’s super.”

“Funny,” Cupid replied, her voice monotone.

“And since you’re such a superhero,” I continued, “how about you help us save the world from the villainous princess who wants to take it over?”

“You said your magic doesn’t work on these people,” Cupid said. “So how do you know my magic will?”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” I said, glancing at Aspen.

“Yes, I suppose there is.” Cupid drew back her bow, aiming an arrow at the princess.

Aspen’s eyes went wide. “Wait.” She took a step back. “You’re going to shoot me?”

“Don’t worry. If this works, you won’t feel a thing.” Cupid’s voice was calm but hardly reassuring—especially when spoken from behind a notched arrow.

“And if it doesn’t work?” Aspen asked, taking another step back.

“Then you’ll hardly feel a thing. It’s like a mosquito bite, nothing more.”

“How do you know?” Aspen hiccuped, panic creeping into her voice. “Have you tried this on yourself?”

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“You mean, do I make a habit of shooting myself?” Cupid said levelly. “No. I can’t say that I do.”

“But—”

“Look, I know what I’m doing. I do this sort of thing all the time,” Cupid told her. “If you want my help, you’re going to have to trust me. This is the deciding moment. Right here and now, you have to decide just how badly you want to be Queen.”

Silence filled the vacuum of conversation, and the two women just stared at each other.

“You’re right,” Aspen finally said, settling her shoulders and standing tall. She swallowed. “Do it.”

“Good,” Cupid said, a hint of approval shining through her serious facade. “Now relax and hold still.” Then she shot the arrow at Aspen.

CHAPTER 6

CUPID’S ARROW

Cupid’s magic did indeed work on Aspen’s people. In fact, it worked very, very well.

“Wow,” I said, looking at all the sleeping security guards on the floor.

They’d been waiting for us the moment we’d stepped into the notary’s office, swords

raised and ready to attack. It hadn't helped them. Cupid had taken them all down in like two seconds. She was wicked-fast with that magic bow and arrows.

"Wow, indeed," Aspen said, looking wide-eyed at Cupid. "I'm still surprised your magic works on my people. No off-worlder's magic ever has."

I snatched the keys off the sleeping secretary's desk. The notary had been so worried about our return that he'd barricaded himself away behind a dozen armed men and at least as many locked doors. This would take a while.

"Cupid is different," I told Aspen as I set to work figuring out which key opened the first lock. "Her powers are a whole different kettle of fish altogether. They don't come from the gods or the demons. She didn't get magic from Nectar or Venom."

"Then where did you get your powers?" Aspen asked Cupid.

"It all started with this massive magical shockwave that Leda set off."

"Are you in the habit of setting off massive magical shockwaves?" Aspen asked me.

"No."

Cupid snorted.

"Ok, yeah.Sometimes," I added quickly. "But it's always for a good cause, I swear."

"In this case, she was destroying an evil hideout and thwarting the plans of the malicious people who lived there," Cupid explained.

"They werereallymalicious," I pointed out.

“So this is your thing?” Aspen asked. “Destroying evil hideouts and thwarting malicious people?”

I shrugged. “Destroying evil hideouts. Thwarting malicious people. Saving the world. Basically, yeah. I do that kind of thing all the time.” I threw her a smirk over my shoulder.

“Well, then,” Aspen said quietly. “I guess I picked the right ally to help me.”

“Yeah, you did.” I smiled when the lock clicked open. “Now let’s go convince the notary that he picked the wrong ally.”

My dramatic words turned out to be a little anticlimactic. It took me another five minutes to get through the rest of the locked doors. I wasn’t worried, though. I’d gotten a good look at the building on my first visit. There were no exits at the back.

I led the way, creeping down the hall, keeping my eyes peeled for more guards. There weren’t any. The moment we entered the notary’s room, though, he reached for the gun on his desk. Cupid was faster. She shot an arrow at him, pinning his hand to his desk. He yowled.

“Nice aim,” I told her.

Mr. Barrens snarled. “You degenerate?—”

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“No name calling,” I cut him off. “You’re the one who tried to shoot us with a gun.”

“You will suffer for this outrage. You will all suffer!”

“He does like to talk,” Cupid commented.

“It’s not all talk,” Aspen said. “He’s been known to kill people who annoy him. Well, actually he has his guards kill them while he watches. He likes to watch.”

“Charming,” I said. “How does he literally get away with murder?”

Aspen sighed. “He has friends in high places.”

“You like to hurt people? Do you like to kill them?” Cupid said, leaning down to meet the man’s gaze. “Do you like to pretend that you’re big and powerful?”

“I don’t need to pretend. I am big and powerful,” he spat in her face. “I hold the fate of this whole world in my hands. That’s why you’re here. You need me. That’s how I knew you’d be back.”

“Sorry to steal your thunder, but actually, you knew we’d be back because I told you so,” I replied.

He glowered at me.

“Well, then, let’s get down to business, shall we?” I set Aspen’s folder on his desk.

“You know why we’re here, Mr. Barrens. I think it’s safe to say that we all want us to

be out of here as quickly as possible, so could you please just do your job and sign Aspen's papers?"

He spat a string of curses at me.

I looked at Cupid. "What is a 'sparkle-eyed angel duster'?"

"A poorly-executed insult?" she suggested.

"Indeed," I agreed, then looked at the man. "Seriously, dude, if you're going to insult me, at least do it properly."

My helpful suggestion only made Mr. Barrens angrier. He struggled and thrashed, pulling on his arm. The arrow dissolved. He clutched his uninjured hand for a moment, like he couldn't believe his luck. Then he jumped over the desk, running for the door.

"Oh, for crying out loud," Cupid said, notching an arrow. "Making such a scene and such a mess." She shot him in the back.

He froze in his tracks, standing perfectly still for almost a minute.

Finally, I whispered, "Is he just stuck there?"

"For as long as I want him to be, yes," Cupid replied.

Mr. Barrens turned around slowly, drawn to the sound of her voice. The fight in his eyes was gone. When they fell upon Cupid, his mouth lifted into a dopey smile.

I walked up to him. "He certainly looks docile." I tapped him lightly on the forearm, and he very nearly tipped over. "Whoa, how strong did you make that arrow?" I

asked Cupid.

“Strong,” she replied. “You did say these people are resistant to magic.”

I looked on as the arrogant, belligerent Mr. Barrens gave Cupid googly eyes. “But not your magic clearly.”

The man licked his lips, eyes still glued on Cupid.

“Ooh, he really loooves you,” I laughed.

“Lucky me,” Cupid said in her usual dry tone.

Aspen watched Mr. Barrens jump up and down to get Cupid’s attention. “Remarkable. Making someone sleepy is one thing, but this is something else entirely. You have him completely under your spell.”

Mr. Barrens chose that very moment to try to kiss Cupid. She sidestepped, and he tripped over his chair.

“That’s my girl Cupid, spreading love and joy wherever she goes,” I chuckled.

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Mr. Barrens got to his feet, gazing upon Cupid with that doting look, like she could do no wrong.

“Ok, Aspen, hand Cupid your bundle of paperwork,” I said. “Then she will give them to Mr. Barrens.”

“Me?” Cupid asked.

“Sure. You’re the one he’s in love with, so you’re the one who can convince him to sign Aspen’s papers.”

“He’s not actually in love with me,” Cupid said as she took the papers from Aspen. “The arrow’s just made him susceptible.”

“Susceptible to your charms?” I smirked at her.

“Susceptible to suggestion,” she said tightly, clearly not in the mood to be charming.

That only made me want to tease her more. “Susceptible to your charming suggestions?”

Cupid made an impatient noise. “Seriously, Leda, you spend an awful lot of time speaking nonsense.”

“I know. A little sprinkling of nonsense goes a long way toward making life interesting.”

Cupid's eyes narrowed. "And what does a lot of nonsense do?"

"Shall we find out?"

"No."

"It's weird how he's staring at her," Aspen commented, frowning at Mr. Barrens. "All silent and stalky."

"Sometimes a powerful arrow robs the target of their ability to speak." Cupid waved her hand in front of his face, but all he did was smile even more. "The effect is temporary."

"Is his case of the lovesies temporary?" I asked her.

"Of course."

"Do you want it to be?" I gave my eyebrows a mischievous wiggle.

"Of course!"

"So he can't talk." Aspen snapped her fingers in front of Mr. Barrens's eyes. He didn't react, not even to blink. "But can he understand us? Because it's going to be hard to get him to sign my papers if he can't understand anything."

Cupid handed Mr. Barrens the papers. "Take these."

He took them.

Cupid looked at Aspen and declared, "He understands us." Then she pointed at the papers in the notary's hands and barked in that same commanding voice, "Sign

these.”

“Hey, try using a little honey, sister,” I said.

“Sorry, all the honey I’ve got was in that arrow I shot into his back,” she said drily.

“I totally believe you,” I laughed.

But it didn’t seem to matter. Honey or no honey, Mr. Barrens was more than happy to sign Aspen’s papers and put his big official stamp on them. The problem came when we packed up to leave. He tried to follow us out of the office.

“No, you stay here,” I said, blocking the door.

Mr. Barrens looked at Cupid, his eyes wide.

“Tell him,” I said to her.

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“Uh, right,” she said uncomfortably. “Listen to Leda. You need to stay here.”

Mr. Barrens latched on to her arm.

“Don’t worry. Everything is going to be all right.” Cupid tried to peel his hand off of her, but he wasn’t having that. “I’ll...uh, call you.”

He let go instantly, grinning like an idiot. Then he sat down at his desk and stared at the phone, waiting.

“Nice going, Cupid,” I chuckled as the three of us left the building. “He’s a real catch.”

“Oh, shut up,” she snapped.

I winked at her, then turned toward Aspen, who was clutching her bundle of papers like it was a lifeline. “Ok, one insurmountable problem down, one to go. Let’s get ready for the ball!”

When we arrived back at the dress shop, the crowds were still there, gawking at Angel. She hadn’t made much progress on her nap. Nero and Sierra had made progress, however.

“That one,” our daughter declared, pointing at the tuxedo Nero was wearing.

“Are you sure?” Nero asked her.

“Sure!” Sierra clapped her hands.

“Because there might be another two hundred tuxedos in the back that I could still try on.”

“No.” Sierra pointed at him again. “That one.”

I looked him up and down, smirking.

His gaze slid to me. “Yes, Pandora?”

“While I do enjoy your usual black battle leather,” I said, wetting my lips as I took one more long, leisurely look at him...and then another...and another, “I must say that you look wicked good in a tux.”

He hooked an arm around me, scooping me in closer. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I whispered against his lips, nibbling playfully on them. “It certainly accentuates your features.” I slid my hands across his chest, around to his back, then plunged lower, grabbing his butt.

“Did you hitherwith one of your arrows?” Aspen asked Cupid.

“No.” Cupid sighed. “They’re always like that.”

“Ok, ok. We’ll behave.” I kissed Nero once, then pulled away from him. Regretfully.

The twinkle in his eyes was so inviting, so tempting, that I had to look away so I didn’t give in to the urge to throw myself at him again. Nero’s chuckles echoed delightfully in my mind.

I cleared my throat. “Ok, Princess,” I said to Aspen. “Let’s get you to the ball!”

CHAPTER 7

THE ROYAL BALL

The castle was an island at the center of the city lake, encircled by a cape of rose trees. It was a summer castle, a castle that had never seen war. It had been built with aesthetics in mind, rather than defense. Waterfalls plunged down its polished stone walls, sparkling in the evening sunlight. Its towers were white, rimmed with gold. The lawns that surrounded it were a beautiful shade of green, too perfect to exist in nature.

It was a castle of luxury and excess, not battlements and bloodshed. And it must have taken an exorbitant amount of labor—both physical and political—to keep it that way.

I walked across the ornamental drawbridge toward the castle, my arm linked with Nero’s. Sierra skipped ahead of us, the puffy pink skirt of her party dress bouncing with every hop. She wore glittery silver slippers and a sparkling silver crown. She bore the gigantic crown with natural ease, like she was destined to rule an empire.

I had higher hopes for her. I hoped she would live a happy life free of politics and drama, out of the spotlight. It was a grand, optimistic wish, given that she was my daughter.

“Leda Pandora, the Angel of Chaos!” the herald at the door announced me, surely to the delight of all the party guests. I mean, who wouldn’t be thrilled by the arrival of ‘the Angel of Chaos’ to a formal royal event?

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I made to move past him, but he put out his arm like a gate to stop me. Apparently, he wasn't finished with me.

"Also, the Goddess and Demon of Telepathy," he continued, his loud, booming voice still going strong. "The Angel of Purgatory, Angel of the People, Angel of Hope, Angel of the Plains of Monsters, Angel of the Earth." He kept going, his wind power impressive. "Daughter of Faris, King of the Gods. Daughter of Grace, Queen of the Demons."

Finally, he took a short, measured breath. He didn't even look annoyed by all of my titles. He just did his job like a true professional. But we weren't done yet. He still had to do Nero.

"General Nero Windstriker, the Chief Marshal and the Executive Officer of the Legion of Angels. The Slayer of Traitors, the Victor of the Crimson Coast, and the Destroyer of Darkness. The former Angel of New York and the former Angel of the East Coast of North America. Son of the Immortals Cadence Lightbringer and Daniel Dragonsire."

The herald turned a prospecting glance on Sierra.

"She's good," I told him.

"This is a royal ball, madam," the herald said stiffly, clearly offended. "No man, woman, or child may enter until I have announced them with all their titles."

Madam? Wow, way to make me feel old. I was tempted to correct him, to say that

‘madam’ should actually be substituted for ‘your holiness’ or some such, but I was afraid he’d start over with all the title announcements and add that one on too. He had said all titles.

Instead, I deflected. “Sierra is three. She doesn’t have any titles yet.”

Well, unless you counted ‘Savior of the Universe’, but that was just speculation at this point and certainly not official.

“Hmm,” was all the herald said, but he let us go with a quick, “Sierra Pandora Windstriker, daughter of Leda Pandora and Nero Windstriker.”

Well, almost.

His gaze dropped to Angel, and he frowned. “Your cat will have to wait outside.”

“Why?” I asked.

“This ball is for royalty only,” he said with an impressive amount of ego, especially for someone talking to two angels.

Things really were different on this world.

“Angelisroyal.” I gave my giant cat a rub behind her ears.

“Oh?” he said, looking skeptical.

And when I provided him with my cat’s titles, that skepticism elevated into mild annoyance. But he didn’t turn away from his sworn duty.

“And Her Royal Pussycat Angel Pandora Windstriker!” the herald declared loudly.

“Chaser of Mouse Tails and Slayer of Dust Bunnies!”

His duties fulfilled, the herald waved us along, glad to be rid of us. Sierra and I entered the ballroom giggling. Nero followed behind us, looking as serious and dignified as always. Angel looked quite dignified herself, descending the stairs like a queen, her nose lifted high in the air, her tail swooshing with elegance.

“You are not taking this seriously, Pandora,” Nero whispered to me.

I linked my arm with his. “Sure I am.”

“Chaser of Mouse Tails and Slayer of Dust Bunnies?”

I snorted.

“Angel is a great warrior,” Sierra told him, very serious. “She won many battles. She wants titles too.”

Nero looked like he didn’t know how to argue with her logic. Meanwhile, the herald was announcing Aspen. She was soon standing beside us.

“Ok, now we just need to wait for Cupid and Dreamcatcher,” I told her as Angel and Sierra went to go chase down a server for snacks. “They’re preparing the next phase of the plan.”

“Which is?” Aspen asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lavinia said sharply, cutting in. “Whatever it is that you’re planning, it won’t work.”

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I folded my arms over my chest and gave her a serene smile. “You only say that because you don’t know me.”

“The Angel of Chaos, Goddess and Demon of Telepathy...” She made a derisive noise. “Is all that supposed to impress me?”

“I don’t waste my time trying to impress people like you, Lavinia,” I countered, still smiling.

“PrincessLavinia,” she said with an acidic smile. “Since we’re naming titles.”

“Very well, then,PrincessLavinia.” I grabbed a champagne glass off a passing server, then lifted it in the air. “Cheers. And may the best princess win.”

“Don’t worry,” she simpered, looking overly fond of herself. “I will.”

I glanced at Aspen. “I see what you mean about her. Good thing she’ll never be Queen.”

“I heard about what happened at the notary,” Lavinia hissed. “But Aspen having her paperwork in order won’t help her. She missed the deadline. The Committee members have already convened. They’ve already selected the candidates for the Court. So everything you’ve done to help Aspen—everything you’ve done to meddle in our affairs, outsider—is for nought.”

For nought? Did people actually talk like that nowadays? Apparently so, on Planet Royal.

I smiled back at Princess Unpleasant. “We’ll see.”

Lavinia humphed, then pivoted away, her skirts swirling after her.

Angel was back, and she looked pretty tempted to attack those skirts.

“Best not,” I warned her. “You might get cooties if you touch her.”

Angel sat back down on her hind legs, sulking.

“Snacks?” Sierra asked, holding up a plate.

“What did you find?” I asked her, taking a closer look.

“Chocolate.” Sierra showed me her teeth. They were coated in melted chocolate.

“Good idea. We need to keep our energy up.” I took the chocolate ball she offered me. “It is going to be a long night.”

CHAPTER 8

SPECTACLE

The evening progressed with more fine dining and music. I was on my fifth prepackaged piece of pretentious chocolate when a scream sliced through the ballroom. The orchestra stopped playing. Everyone stopped to stare. They were staring at Lavinia. She was the one who’d screamed.

“Guards!” the princess shouted, her eyes wide with terror. “Kill them!”

Two nearby guards exchanged confused looks.

“Don’t just stand there and do nothing!” she shouted at them. “Kill the spiders!”

The guards scanned the ballroom. They blinked.

“What spiders?” one of them asked.

“Thosespiders!” Lavinia said, pointing in front of her.

The other guard looked, then declared, “There’s nothing there.”

“What are you talking about?” Lavinia growled. “There are four enormous black spiders right there. And they’re coming right toward me. Get them! Kill them!” She ducked behind the guards.

The two men looked at each other again.

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“They are there,” Lavinia insisted. “And there’s also a big, sparkly purple duck standing next to the punch bowl. And some bizarre armored beast that I’ve never seen before is rolling across the dance floor.”

Quiet laughter rippled through the crowd.

“I want what Princess Lavinia is drinking!” someone shouted. “I want to see sparkly creatures!”

More laughter followed that proclamation.

Lavinia looked at the glass in her hand. She quickly put it down on a standing table, then stumbled back. Her eyes swept the ballroom, narrowing to angry slits when she saw me.

“It was the outsider! Leda Pandora!” she shouted. “She put something in my drink to make me see things! Arrest her!”

“Hey, there, everyone. I’m Leda.” I gave the crowd a big wave. “I’m the one your lovely princess just accused without any evidence whatsoever.”

“It was you,” Lavinia hissed. “I know it was you.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “Just exactly what do you think I did?”

“You worked me over with your vile magic,” she hissed.

Whispers simmered from the crowd.

“I assume the vile magic you’re referring to is my god and demon magic?” I asked.

“Yes!” Lavinia turned to address the crowd. “The gods and demons have attacked me. They’ve attacked us.” Her gaze snapped back to me. “This will mean war,” she said to me through tight lips.

I walked toward her, nice and easy and relaxed. “You certainly have an interesting imagination.”

Lavinia glowered at me. “This attack will not go unanswered. When I become Queen?—”

“I think you meant if you become Queen,” I cut her off.

Lavinia looked like she wanted to slowly drop me into a vat of acid and then dance circles around it. “Yes, of course,” she said with a dainty flutter of her hand toward the other guests. “If I become Queen.” She smiled sweetly. “Though I am confident any other reasonable choice for monarch would not hesitate to strike out against the fiends who dared to attack me.”

“And by fiends, you mean me?”

“You and your brethren.”

“Gods and demons?” I asked.

“Yes. You cannot stand that our kingdom does not fall under your domain. And it never will.”

There were murmurs of agreement from the crowd gathered around us.

I waited for them to die down, then asked Lavinia, “How?”

“How?” She shook her head in confusion.

So I clarified. “How is it that your kingdom has never fallen to the gods’ or demons’ armies? All the neighboring worlds have.”

“Because we are strong,” Lavinia said proudly, standing tall, tapping her hand to her chest.

“You are indeed strong,” I agreed. “I’ve heard that neither the magic of gods nor of demons works on you.”

“That is true,” Lavinia said with an upward lift of her nose.

I continued, “In fact, I’ve heard that not even the magic of the Immortals, the most powerful magical beings to ever live, works on you.”

“Indeed,” she snapped. “So you must realize now how foolish it was of you to attack me.”

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“Attack you with what?” I spread my arms and shrugged. “I thought my magic didn’t work on you.”

Lavinia’s smug smile died on her lips. Murmurs rose from the crowd.

I moved closer to the princess. “I am not responsible for this spectacle. You are.”

The murmurs grew louder, faster.

Lavinia bristled. “How dare you?—”

“You know what I think, Princess Lavinia?” I said with an indulgent smile. “I think the stress of the upcoming Games has gotten to you. You’ve lost your mind. You’ve cracked. You’ve gone totally and completely bananas, and now you’re seeing things that just simply are not there.”

“They’re there!” Lavinia insisted.

“And yet no one can see them but you.”

Lavinia’s mouth dropped.

I turned to address the crowd. “Or is anyone else here seeing giant purple ducks, big black spiders, and some dancing armored creature?”

The crowd answered in the negative.

I turned back to Lavinia. “Well, there you go. And that’s too bad. People who’ve lost their marbles can’t compete in the Princess Games to be the next monarch, can they?”

“You did this, Leda Pandora!” The accusation exploded out of her mouth, and she rushed toward me, reaching for my neck.

But before she could grab me, she stopped.

“Get it off of me!” Lavinia shrieked, frantically brushing her hand down her arm. “Get it off! Get it off!”

And that really was the cherry on the top of this spectacle. Guards moved in and seized her, carrying her away. She screamed all the way out of the ballroom.

I grabbed another glass and lifted it to Aspen. “Well, I’ll say this for your monarchy: you guys sure know how to party.”

CHAPTER 9

PLAYING PRINCESS

Later, as we were leaving the ball, Aspen caught up to us on the drawbridge. The large silver moon lit her up like a searchlight in the darkness. Her whole gown glittered like diamonds, but it was her face which was truly beaming.

“Leda!” she said, sucking in air.

We stopped and waited for her to catch her breath.

“The Committee just announced the candidates for the Princess Games. I’m one of them!”

I winked at her. “Yes, I had a feeling you would be.”

Her smile faded a little. “Leaving so soon?”

“We have to head home. Sierra’s beat.” I indicated our daughter, sleeping contently in Nero’s arms. “I think it’s the post-sugar crash. She must have eaten at least twenty cupcakes tonight.” I set my hand on my stomach. “And so did I.”

“I did warn you about overindulging in all that icing,” Nero said.

“Yes, well, I figured if I could drink poison, I could handle a little icing.” My stomach gurgled. “In any case, Aspen, what happened after they dragged Lavinia away?”

“Things got pretty heated in the ballroom,” she told me. “The royal psychologist declared Lavinia mentally unfit to rule, which means she’s been disqualified from competing in the Princess Games. That threw the Committee into complete disarray. They were just about to announce her as one of the candidates.”

“Then I’d say her outburst in the ballroom happened just in time,” I commented.

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“Oh, yes,” Aspen said, grinning. “The Committee quietly pulled me aside and asked me to take her place since I already had all my paperwork in order.”

“How fortunate.”

Aspen took my hands, shaking them, bubbling over with excitement. “I can’t thank you enough for what you did, Leda. But I have to know...howdido you do that? How did you make Lavinia see monsters that weren’t there?”

“Who says they weren’t there?” I countered with a sly smirk, waving Dreamcatcher out of the shadows. Cupid was by her side.

“You did this?” Aspen asked them. “How?”

“Dreamcatcher has very unusual magic,” Cupid told her.

Aspen’s brows peaked. “More unusual than controlling people’s feelings by shooting them with magic arrows?”

“I can manipulate interdimensional energy,” Dreamcatcher said. “I used my powers to reveal the interdimensional creatures in the ballroom, but only to Lavinia. That’s why she was the only guest who saw them.”

Aspen looked at me. “And this was your idea?”

“One of my better ones,” I said, feeling pretty good about myself. “Since no one else could see the creatures, people naturally assumed Lavinia was imagining things.

Dreamcatcher just made sure she ‘imagined’ them quite vividly and publicly.”

“Yes, my friends put on quite the performance,” Dreamcatcher chuckled. “I’ll need to remember to bring them a thank-you snack basket.”

“What do interdimensional creatures eat?” Aspen asked her.

“Most of the same things we eat,” said Dreamcatcher. “Fruits, vegetables, healthy grains...”

I frowned. “That doesn’t sound like the kinds of things I eat.”

A chuckle rumbled in Nero’s chest, soft and subtle. He was being very careful not to wake Sierra.

“Duke the Duck is particularly fond of bananas,” Dreamcatcher continued.

“Duke the Duck?” Aspen blinked once. And then again.

“A very large, very glittery purple duck,” I told her.

“I see. Lavinia mentioned such a creature. I would love to meet him.”

Dreamcatcher laughed. “I’m sure that can be arranged. Though be warned, Duke is a real ladykiller. He’ll probably try to woo you.”

Aspen looked like she didn’t know what to make of the idea of a duck wooing her.

“In any case, it was your magic that saved the day.” I bowed my head to Dreamcatcher and Cupid.

“Oh, yes,” Aspen said, giving them a polished curtsy. “Hopefully, if I become Queen, I will be able to thank you properly.”

Aspen returned to the ball, and Cupid and Dreamcatcher returned to their exciting lives. Nero and I brought Sierra and Angel home. We’d planned to have a quiet romantic evening, but our daughter had other ideas. The journey had jolted her awake, and now she was dancing back and forth across the living room, pretending to be a princess at the ball.

“So I guess we won’t be taking that bubble bath together after all,” I said to Nero.

“Apparently not.” He caught the pillow Sierra had used as a dancing partner—until she lost her grip mid-twirl, and it zipped across the room.

Chuckling, I took the pillow from Nero and tossed it onto the sofa. “Well, our lives have never been predictable.” I darted in, swooping up Sierra as she spun. “Hey, I have an idea, little princess. How would you like a magic crown?”

She giggled. “Yes!” She backflipped out of my arms, twisting herself midair to land facing me. “A crown! A crown!”

So I spun her a crown out of magic. And, just for kicks, I made myself one too.

“Look.” I brought her over to the mirror. “Now we match. What do you think?” I asked Nero as he walked up behind us.

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“Nice crowns,” he said.

“I was inspired by Princess Aspen’s story. How about you?” I leaned back against him, and he folded his arms around me. “Do you ever wish you could be king?”

“No,” he said, leaning down to kiss my shoulder. “I am content to be an angel.”

“Oh, I get what you’re saying, Sir Sexy Tux.”

Nero’s brows arched at the new nickname.

“But I think it might be nice to wear a crown. A real crown, I mean,” I said. “I’d look wicked in a crown, don’t you think?”

He chuckled, dark and delicious. “You always look wicked.”

Turning around to face him, I said, “Flirt with me some more, Windstriker.” I took a step forward. “I like it.”

Sierra jumped between us. “Make Angel a princess too!” she demanded.

So I summoned a magic crown and other accessories, and Sierra had a lot of fun decorating Angel with them.

“The cat looks miserable,” Nero commented, direct and to-the-point as usual.

“Oh, I don’t know. She isn’t trying to knock the crown off,” I pointed out.

“She’s indulging you.” Nero watched Sierra adjust Angel’s fluffy tutu. “Both of you.”

“Actually, I think she’s indulging herself. And why not?” I looked at Angel. “You deserve a little pampering now and again, don’t you, Princess?”

“Princess Angel!” Sierra agreed, clapping her hands. Then she reached for a pair of slippers.

That did it. Angel must have finally had enough dress-up. She struggled out of Sierra’s hold, kicked off the unwanted costume, shot past me and Nero, and escaped through the open door. Sierra ran out after her.

“Like I said, the cat looked miserable.”

“All right, you were right,” I conceded.

“Obviously.”

Chuckling, I closed the distance between us, draping my arms over his shoulders. “So what now?”

“Now, Pandora,” he said, his words falling against my lips like forbidden secrets, “we call the babysitter. I have a date with my wife, and I intend to keep it.”

PART FOUR

THE DAUGHTER OF ORDER AND CHAOS

The Daughter of Order and Chaos set nine years after Gods’ Battleground (Book 12) in the Legion of Angels series.

CHAPTER 1

THE ANGEL COMMANDER

My sister wasn't very good at taking vacations. She always brought a suitcase of work along 'for some light reading'.

"You're one to talk, Leda," Bella chuckled. "You can't even take a day off without it ballooning into a quest to save the universe."

Bella's mood was light, airy. She was leaning back against the sofa, her muscles so relaxed that she was practically melting into the cushions. She'd just returned from her vacation this morning, and I hadn't seen her so relaxed since...well, ever.

I'd had my doubts when Harker had outlined his plan to take her on the perfect vacation, a mission months in the making. It involved a tropical resort, lots of cocktails, and 'accidentally' forgetting Bella's suitcase of paperwork.

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I shouldn't have doubted him. No doubt there'd been some tension when Bella noticed the missing suitcase, but she'd clearly gotten over it. She looked anything but tense right now.

"Actually, things have been very quiet around here lately," I told my sister. "Too quiet. I'm so bored." I slid my gaze to Harker, who was sitting beside her. "So I decided to mix things up a little at the New York office."

His whole body went stiff. "What did you do to my territory?" he demanded, low and level, his lips hardly moving.

I'd offered to run Harker's territory while he and Bella were away on vacation. Right now, he looked like he was really regretting taking me up on that offer.

"Don't worry. It's all still in one piece. Mostly." I winked at him.

Bella took his hand, twining her fingers with his. "Leda is just teasing you."

"I'm not so sure." Harker watched me with the wary air of a lion who'd spotted a tiger in his forest. "What did you do to my territory?" he asked me again.

"I optimized things."

"Optimized?" He cleared his throat. "You?"

"I can be orderly when I want to be."

“Yeah, that’s the thing, Leda.” He sighed. “You don’t want to be.”

I waved off his words. “Don’t be so negative. I fixed your office’s decor, food, dress code?—”

“Pandora.”

I smiled at Nero as he sat down beside me. “Yes?”

“If you give Harker a heart attack, I will have to send him on another vacation so he can recover.”

I sighed. “Oh, I suppose you’re right.”

“Leda did not manage your office while you were away,” Nero told Harker, his arm curling around me. “I did.”

Harker’s shoulders relaxed in obvious relief. I wasn’t offended. Much. I suppose my nickname, the Angel of Chaos, was well-earned.

“So how have you been keeping yourself busy, if not redecorating Harker’s office?” Bella said with a twinkle in her eyes.

“The usual: drowning in deity politics.” I grabbed myself a cookie from the big bowl on the coffee table. I deserved it.

“Serving as the bridge between gods and demons is an important role,” said Bella.

“Sure it’s important,” I replied, “but after nine years, you’d think I would have accomplished more. You’d think I could have gotten the gods and demons to at least kind of get along. But the only two deities in that chamber who don’t hate each other

are Faris and Grace. Of course, Faris always makes a point to vote against Grace so he can continue pretending he doesn't have feelings for her."

A knock sounded on the door. My oversized feline Angel opened an eye, halfway, then went back to sleep in front of the fireplace.

"It's Nyx," Nero said, rising.

My husband could identify over a hundred people by their knock alone. It was one of his many, many talents.

"Any idea what the First Angel wants?" Harker asked me as Nero crossed the room.

I shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine."

Nyx strode into the living room, magnificent in her black battle armor. She always wore armor, like she expected a war to break out at any given moment. Her dark hair was pulled up into a high, dynamic ponytail that swirled around her face, flowing and free, like she was underwater. That was Nyx's distinctive magic at work. The First Angel was always still, always moving—always both at once.

"I have a new assignment for you, Windstriker," she said as we all rose to greet her.

Nero set his hand over his chest and bowed his head. "I am ready."

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“No, you’re not. But you will do just fine.” A flash of amusement peeked out from behind her serious eyes. “I am promoting you.”

“Promoting me?” Confusion was a rare look on Nero, but he wore it now.

So did the rest of us.

“Ronan and I have matters to attend to off world. Long term,” Nyx added, watching him closely. “That means the Legion will need a new First Angel. That angel is you.” She handed him a platinum pin in the shape of an elaborate crown.

“I’m going to need to come up with some new nicknames for you,” I told Nero as he took the pin from Nyx. “Chief Angel. Top Angel.” I smirked at him. “What do you think, my liege?”

He pinned the crown emblem to his uniform. “I think you’re going to have to do better than that.”

“Angel Commander?”

He nodded. “Better.”

“You can brainstorm nicknames later,” Nyx said. “You have more pressing matters. Such as selecting your Executive Officer.”

“Harker will do just fine,” Nero said.

“I was thinking Fireswift,” she countered.

I snorted.

Nyx looked at me, her eyes narrowing.

“That was a joke, right?” I said. “Nero and Xerxes Fireswift do not get along. He and Harker do.”

“Fireswift is a general,” Nyx said, all sensible and boring. “Sunstorm is not.”

“Then promote him.” I looked at Harker. “You have my vote, Second Angel. Of course that means your old job is open. I think you should make Li an angel and give the job to him,” I told Nero. “He has my vote too.”

“Don’t micromanage, Leda,” Nyx scolded me. “It is the archangels who decide which soldiers shall be made into angels at the Legion, not the gods’ council.”

“Well, then, Li gets Nero’s vote,” I said. “And Harker’s too.”

“Nice of her to give us votes,” Harker muttered to Nero.

Nero snorted.

I turned toward them. “Oh, don’t worry, I will totally make it worth your while.”

“Is she talking to both of us?” Harker asked Nero.

Nero locked eyes with me. “She’d better not be.”

“I second that,” Bella added.

“Get your minds out of the gutter, guys,” I laughed. “When I said I’ll make it worth your while, I of course mean I’ll treat you to my excellent cooking.”

“Excellent cooking?” A crinkle formed between Bella’s eyes. “You make pasta out of a can, Leda.”

“I don’t think she knows what ‘excellent’ means,” Harker commented.

“Oh, you guys. Such naysayers. I’ll have you know that while you were away, I got kind of bored. There are only so many hours I can sit in council meetings. I decided I needed a hobby. So I learned to cook.”

They turned to Nero for confirmation.

“She’s right,” he said. “Most nights after dinner, I don’t even end up in the infirmary.”

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“That’s because you’re immortal,” Harker pointed out.

The three of them laughed.

“You guys are hilarious.” I rolled my eyes to let them know what I really thought.

Nero wrapped his arm around me. “Seriously, though, Leda cooks quite well now.”

“Really?” Bella looked like she still didn’t believe it.

“It’s true.” I nodded. “I was really motivated. Sierra is a very picky eater.”

“Let us bring this charming conversation back to business, shall we?” Nyx said with arched brows. “I will prepare the paperwork for the transfer of power and send it over right away.”

The former First Angel left, and we turned to less serious matters.

“Anyone up for watching a movie?” I asked. “I have two tubs of ice cream in the freezer.”

A scream cut through the building, shaking the walls. A moment later, our twelve-year-old daughter burst out of her bedroom. Sierra’s auburn hair was a mess. Her pajamas were drenched in sweat.

I rushed to her, wrapping my arms around her, holding her trembling body against mine. “What is it? Did you have a nightmare?”

“It’s more...” Her voice shook. “...than a nightmare.”

Her nightmares always were.

She pulled back to meet my eyes. “It’s real. It happened.”

“What happened?” Nero asked, coming up to us slowly.

“I saw someone attack the Legion of Angels,” she said. “I saw an explosion...debris...and...” She swallowed hard. “And death.”

CHAPTER 2

VISIONS

It took nearly half an hour to get all the details of the attack from Sierra. Someone—or something—had broken into the Legion’s research lab and stolen a magic artifact. And they’d blown a sizable hole in the facility in the process.

“Is the thief still there?” I asked Sierra as Nero pulled out his phone to call the facility.

“I don’t know. It all went by so fast,” she replied, her lower lip trembling. “They were just flashes in my mind, like lightning. All those fragmented images spinning by.” She gripped my hands tightly. “Bodies falling...” Pressing her lips together, she shook her head and said no more.

“The commander of the facility knows nothing about any attack,” Nero said, returning to us.

“Maybe it was a stealth attack?” I suggested.

“An explosion is not very stealthy, Pandora.” He looked at Sierra.

“It happened,” our daughter insisted with an air of stubborn resolve that could only be genetic. “I know what I saw.”

“I believe you,” Nero told her.

She gave him a tired smile.

“Perhaps someone was impersonating the facility commander,” I suggested. “Or he was under duress.”

“I know Major Ashmore’s voice. Just as I know the man. No amount of ‘duress’ would compel him to lie to me.”

“Magic can do many things, Nero.”

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His eyes locked with mine. “Then there is only one thing to do. I must go to the research lab at once and see for myself what is going on there. I have no intention of losing a Legion facility not even an hour after being made First Angel.”

I stepped forward. “In that case, I am going with you.”

A small smile touched his lips. “I was hoping you would say that.”

“You will look after Sierra?” I asked Bella and Harker.

She nodded. “Of course.”

“It would be our honor to watch over your daughter.” Harker set his hand over his chest.

But Sierra had other ideas.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?” I asked her when she returned from her room, fully dressed.

“I am coming with you.” She slipped into her jacket. “Naturally.”

I looked at Nero, holding back an amused smile. “Naturally, she says.”

“You need me,” Sierra insisted. “I had the vision. I know what to look for.”

“A big hole in the side of the research facility,” Nero said drily. “I think we can

manage.”

“Dad—”

“I am not bringing my daughter into a potentially dangerous situation.”

Sierra folded her arms over her chest and stared him straight in the eye. “Didn’t you teach me to always use every advantage you had? Well, I am the advantage you can’t afford to leave behind. I can track people and magic better than anyone. You will need me to find the thief. And recover what he took from the Legion.”

Nero looked at me.

“She can track artifacts better than anyone,” I said.

“Fine.” His expression hardened. “But she will be surrounded by armed soldiers at all times. And we’re bringing Harker with us to assist in her protection.”

Sierra rolled her eyes at her dad. “Why don’t you just stick me inside a big, protective ball and roll me around?”

“Don’t tempt me,” he replied in a deep, level voice. “If you’re to come along with us, I expect you to follow my orders.”

“I can do that.”

“Are you sure?” he countered. “Think carefully, Sierra. You need to be absolutely certain. This isn’t the time for teenage rebellion. I don’t bring just anyone into the field. I need someone who won’t endanger herself or others. If that’s not you, then you can take off your shoes now and go back to bed.”

She bristled. “I can do this, Dad. I will do this.

Nero held her gaze for a few silent seconds, then nodded. “Very well. But wear your other jacket, the black one with the extra padding on the arms. It’s fireproof.”

As Sierra hurried off to switch her jacket, I turned to Nero. “Hmm.”

He grabbed his sword. “Is there something you wish to say, Pandora?”

“I’m surprised you agreed to bring her along, is all.”

“What should surprise you is that I convinced our twelve-year-old daughter to agree to do whatever I say.”

I snorted. “Why should that surprise me? I’ve known you long enough to appreciate just how persuasive you can be.”

“Yes.”

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“Sierra is pretty persuasive herself,” I commented.

“She is certainly stubborn,” he said. “She gets it from her mother.”

“Right. Because you’re not stubborn at all, General.”

A slow smile curled Nero’s lips.

Sierra squeezed between us. “Are you guys going to kiss now? Because if you are, a heads up would be nice, so I can get out of here before that happens.”

The comment drew a round of laughter from the rest of us.

When it finally died down, Nero declared, “Fun’s over. Time for us to find out who dared to attack the Legion of Angels.”

CHAPTER 3

AN IMPOSSIBLE THEFT

An angel was waiting for us when we arrived at the research facility.

“Sunstorm?” General Fireswift said, his eyes narrowing to suspicious slits. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask the same,” Harker replied, unruffled. He and Nero had been dealing with Xerxes Fireswift for so long that his biting personality didn’t even faze them.

“I do not need to explain myself to you,” General Fireswift said, his voice cutting like glass. “This facility lies within my territory. Which means you should have contacted me before you came here.” His gaze snapped to Nero. “Both of you.”

“The First Angel does not require your permission or your approval,” replied Harker.

“Of course not. But she is not here.”

“Heis.”

General Fireswift’s agitated brow furrowed further. “What nonsense are you?—”

“Nyx promoted Nero,” Harker told him. “He is the new First Angel and your supreme commander.”

“If this is a practical joke—” Fireswift’s eyes predictably turned to me. “—I am not amused.”

“It’s not a joke,” I told him. “Nero is the First Angel now. See?” I pointed at the new pin on Nero’s uniform.

“In that case,” General Fireswift said, bowing to Nero, “Congratulations.”

He said ‘congratulations’ like he was speaking a curse. He’d spent the last couple centuries despising Nero. This new development couldn’t have been easy for him.

“We are here to take a look around the facility,” Nero said.

“I know why you are here.” General Fireswift’s lips thinned. “And of your...theory.”

“It’s not a theory!” Sierra exclaimed.

General Fireswift's brows lifted in surprise at her sudden appearance. She'd squeezed herself between me and Nero.

"I saw the thief," she said, meeting the angel's hard stare without a shred of fear. "I saw him steal a magic artifact from this facility."

General Fireswift looked at Nero. "Is this how you will command the Legion of Angels? At the whims of a young girl?"

"Diligence is not a sin, General," Nero replied coolly. "Nor is our presence here a challenge to your authority."

"What it is, however, is a monumental waste of my time," countered General Fireswift. "There was no attack, and nothing was stolen. If anything were amiss, I would know about it. But there's been nothing on the security cameras and nothing on the magic sensors. The guards patrolling the facility have all been questioned. They've reported no unusual activity. And to top off this massive waste of time, we just performed a full inventory. Nothing is missing. No magic artifacts. No weapons. Not even a single roll of toilet paper is unaccounted for."

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“If everything is perfect, you won’t have any problem if we look around a little.” I winked at him. “For the sake of all the toilet paper.”

He shot me an annoyed look. “Yes, by all means, waste your time as well as mine. None of us has anything important to do whatsoever.” Every word dripped with sarcasm.

But he showed us to the treasury anyway. Then, while we took a look around, he just stood there with his arms crossed and his jaw clenched, watching us with an air of irked indulgence.

Sierra went up to him. “Hello.”

“Go away. I don’t like children.”

Her eyes darted to the name on his jacket. “You’re General Fireswift.”

“Congratulations, small one. You’ve learned to read.”

“I’ve heard about you. People say you’re grumpy,” she observed.

“Yes.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I do not like it when people waste my time.”

“Why?”

“My time is valuable.”

“Why?”

He glanced down at her, looking rather pompous. “I’m an angel.”

“Why?”

“Because the Legion of Angels made me one.”

“Why?”

“Because I am very good at my job.”

“Why?”

“Some people are simply more competent than others.”

“Why?”

“Incessant child, do you know any other words?” he hissed.

“Sure.” She shrugged. “When I need them, I’ll use them. Words are like weapons. You need to choose them wisely.” She arched her brows. “Do you choose your words wisely, General?”

He stared at her like he was seeing her for the very first time. “You are a very odd child.”

She nodded, grinning. “I know.”

It surprised me, seeing how content they both looked in this conversation. Then again, maybe it wasn’t so surprising after all. Sierra loved to ask questions. And Fireswift had always been happiest when he was the center of attention. He liked to have people hanging on his every word, peppering him with questions. I suppose he saw it as an invitation to wax poetic about himself.

“Sorry to interrupt this enthralling conversation, but I need Sierra’s help,” I told them.

“See you later, Gramps,” Sierra told him with a wink, then followed me to the back wall.

“This is where it happened.” She pressed her palms against the smooth wall. “There was an explosion.” She walked, dragging her hand across the wall. “Here. This is where the thief entered the building.”

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“She is clearly delusional,” General Fireswift commented, joining us. “The wall is perfectly intact. There are no signs of forced entry.” He tapped his fist to the wall. “Or of an explosion.”

“Tell us what you saw in your vision, Sierra,” Nero said. “Exactly, step-by-step.”

“Well, there was a man...” Her nose scrunched up in concentration, like she was trying to remember details that had eluded her before. “...he was a...djinn. A teleporter. He had a halo, a djinn halo. Kind of a greenish color. He teleported into the facility. That’s how he got in.”

“Doesn’t this facility have anti-teleportation wards?” Harker asked Nero.

But General Fireswift answered. “It does. Dragonsire installed them. So what she’s describing simply isn’t possible.”

“The teleporter nullified the wards,” Sierra said. “He was holding a book...” She squeezed her eyes shut. “...an ancient book with magic unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. It allowed him to get past the wards and teleport into this room. Then he grabbed the ring and stuffed it into his bag.”

“Ring?” I asked. “What ring?”

Sierra’s eyelashes fluttered open. She pivoted and pointed at a display case. There had to be over twenty different rings in there, each one with its own velvet-coated pedestal.

“That one.” She pointed at a gold ring. The gold wasn’t just in the material. It seemed to come from within the ring itself, the warm golden kiss of a summer sun. “He took that one.”

“The ring is clearly still there,” General Fireswift said in his typical, clipped, no-nonsense style. “All the rings are still there.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” I said, moving in for a closer look.

Sierra cut in front of me, moving quickly, impatiently, like a string was drawing her toward the display case. Her gaze didn’t deviate from its target. Harker stayed by her side, just as he’d promised Nero.

“She’s in a trance,” I realized.

A murmur of movement, a slight tickle in my fingertips—that was the only warning I had of the impending explosion—and it came too late.

CHAPTER 4

DIVING INTO DISASTER

Thank goodness Harker was right there beside Sierra because I never would have made it to her in time. The display case shattered, the broken shards shooting out like glass bullets. Harker folded his body over Sierra like a shield, taking the brunt of the damage himself.

And out of nowhere, a man in a purple cloak was suddenly here too. He snatched the gold ring out what little remained of the display case, then tucked it away inside the bag slung across his chest. Tucked under his arm was a book with ancient symbols carved into the cover.

“It’s him.” Sierra pointed at the man, her voice shaking as much as her hand.

“She didn’t see the present,” I said to Nero. “She saw the future.”

Legion soldiers had accompanied us into the treasury. They hadn’t wasted any time rushing forward to confront the thief, but even they weren’t fast enough.

“He’s making a run for it!” Nero shouted as that familiar buzz super-charged the air, the telltale sign of an impending portal.

It burst open a moment later, bright and brilliant. The thief hurled the book and the bag with the ring through the portal opening, then moved to go through himself.

Like lightning, Nero’s hand flashed out to catch his arm. He pulled the thief away from the portal, throwing him to the floor.

“Who are you?” Nero demanded of the thief as Legion soldiers moved in to secure him.

The thief said nothing. He simply smiled.

“What do you want with the ring?”

The thief remained silent.

“We found the ring only last week,” General Fireswift said, closing up beside Nero.

Nero turned toward him. “Where?”

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“In the Veil. At an old Immortal site.”

The two of them exchanged loaded looks.

“Are you all right?” I asked Sierra, leaning down to check her for injuries.

“I’m fine. Thanks to him.” She looked up at Harker like he was the shining star of her universe.

I waved one of the soldiers forward. “Take Colonel Sunstorm to the medical ward.”

He waved off my concerns. “I’m fine, Leda.”

“No, you aren’t.” I plucked a glass shard out of his arm, and he winced. “You look like a porcupine. You can either allow this friendly soldier to bring you to the medical ward, or I will drag you there by your hair.”

“Fine,” Harker bit out. “I’ll go.” He turned to leave.

“Harker.”

He turned back around.

“Thank you for protecting my daughter,” I said, wrapping my arm around Sierra. “I am very grateful.”

“Grateful, you say?” He snorted. “I’d hate to see you upset, Leda.”

“Is he going to be all right?” Sierra asked me quietly as Harker left the treasury.

“Of course. He’s an angel. And angels are tough.”

“Will he...have any scars?”

“He shouldn’t. Angels heal fast.”

“Good.” She took a deep breath, nodding to herself. “He has such a pretty face.”

I chuckled. “Just don’t say that to your Aunt Bella.”

“Why not?” Sierra blinked. “She has eyes. She must realize what a hottie he is.”

“Yes, well, some of us can be a little possessive of our hottie husbands.” I looked toward Nero.

Sierra followed my gaze. The moment her eyes crossed Nero’s, they went from soft and dreamy to sharp and serious.

“I told you that you were being robbed,” she said, striding toward him. “You really should listen to me, Dad. I’m an angel. That means I’m always right. You taught me that.”

I snorted.

Nero’s gaze passed from Sierra to me.

“Hey, she does have a point,” I told her. “Plus, I thought you’d be happy that she’s learned your lessons well.”

His brows lifted, ever-so-slightly. “She’s learned your lessons equally well, Pandora.”

General Fireswift’s words distracted me from flirting some more with Nero.

“Stay back,” he was telling Sierra. “That wall isn’t sound. It might collapse on you.”

“I’m an angel,” she replied, pushing back her shoulders. “And I can survive a wall falling on top of me, thank you very much.”

I reached out and took her hand. “Even so, let’s put some distance between you and the completely unstable wall. This is a disaster zone, Sierra.”

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She gave me a cool look. “When has that argument ever kept you away from trouble, Mom?”

This time, it was Nero who snorted. “She’s right, Pandora. You always dive into disaster.”

“I need to get a closer look at that debris to search for clues.”

“You know, I think those were her first words,” I told Nero.

“No, I’m fairly certain her first words were, ‘fluffy teddy bear’.”

Good thing Angel wasn’t here. She didn’t care much for explosions. They took away from her all-important napping time.

“What I need is in that debris,” Sierra insisted. “I’m sure of it.”

A chunk of the wall broke off and hit the ground. Sierra was not deterred. Not in the slightest.

I tightened my grip on her hand, pulling her back. “Let’s not be reckless.”

“She can’t really help it, Pandora,” said Nero. “She is your daughter after all.”

But Sierra was not just my daughter. She was his too. She was reckless and cautious—and so was her magic. She gave me a sharp zap through our connected hands.

“Nice,” I said, letting go.

“I have to figure this out,” she said, either to herself or to me.

“She has that look in her eyes,” Nero commented.

“What look?”

“The same look you get right before you stick your nose in something you shouldn’t.”

“That’s just my default look.”

“Exactly,” he purred.

Sierra stopped her pacing and turned to face us. “We need to figure out where the ring is and get it back.”

“We?” said Nero.

“Yes, Dad. We. I was the one who had the vision. I’m the whole reason you even knew about this guy.” She glanced at the thief, then back at us. “I will be involved in this investigation. You aren’t keeping me away from it.”

Nero sighed. “I suppose there’s no talking you out of this once you’ve made up your mind.”

“Exactly.” She nodded in victory, then continued combing the scene for clues. “This is where the portal was.” She waved her hands through the air, wiggling her fingers. “I can still feel the residual magic.”

Nero came up behind her. “Can you tell where he sent the ring and the book?”

“I don’t know...”

“I wonder what that ring does,” I said to Nero as Sierra continued waving her hands through the air, swimming through the fading magic.

“The lab techs haven’t discerned its purpose yet,” said General Fireswift.

“Maybe we should askhim?” I tilted my head toward the thief. “He must have wanted the ring for a reason, right?”

“A surprisingly sensible suggestion,” General Fireswift said, the syllables just rolling off his tongue. He started to move toward the prisoner, then just stopped. He looked at Nero. “After you.”

An eerie cackle cut through the room, stopping the two angels in their tracks. The terrible noise had come from the thief.

“Did you really think I would make it that easy for you?”

Those were his first—and last—words to us. He phased out of his restraints, pushed free of the two soldiers holding him, then pounded both fists to his chest and exploded.

CHAPTER 5

DEAD MEN LEAVE NO BODIES

The dead man left no body behind. Whatever spell he’d used had completely vaporized him. The Legion of Angels wouldn’t be questioning him after all, which was obviously exactly what he’d wanted.

“Why would he do this?” I said as the soldiers checked the treasury for further damage.

The two explosions in five minutes had left their mark on the building.

“Why go through all the trouble to find an ancient book? Planning the ring heist—getting through our defenses—must have required a great deal of planning. And then when he was captured, his first move was to kill himself?” I shook my head. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“He must have been stealing the ring for someone else,” Nero said. “Someone he fears so much that he killed himself rather than allow himself to be captured alive and subsequently interrogated.”

“You might be right about that.” I set my hands on Sierra’s shoulders. “Are you all right?”

She was rocking back and forth on her heels, clutching her arms. Despite her bravado earlier, the two close explosions had clearly rattled her.

“Don’t worry, Mom.” Sierra blinked a few times and stopped rocking. She drew in a slow, deep breath. “I was born on the battlefield. Death is my life. And it always will be.”

She sounded so resigned. So young and already so sure of her fate.

“Your future is not set in stone,” I told her. “You can choose your fate, Sierra.”

She sighed, looking thankful for my words but nonetheless unconvinced.

“Sierra can no more choose her fate than you can, Leda. She is wise to accept that. Wiser than you.”

I turned toward the familiar voice, frowning at Faris, the king of the gods and my father. He swept into the room with his usual air of arrogance, coupled with a forceful, quiet indulgence, like we should all be grateful for the honor of his company.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

He spread his arms wide, the better to show off his new suit of armor. It was a deep, dark crimson, the color of spilled blood.

“I’m not sure I like the tone of your voice.” His smile, perfected over thousands of years, always rang false to me. “Can’t I just stop by to visit my daughter and

granddaughter?”

“No.” I folded my arms across my chest. “You always have an ulterior motive.”

He pretended to look offended. “I most certainly do not.”

The trill of light laughter echoed in the room for a few seconds before she appeared: Grace, queen of the demons.

“Come now, Faris.” She hooked her arm in his. “Don’t lie to our daughter.”

He shot her a scathing look and extracted his arm from her grasp. Grace was unfazed. Her smile shone as brightly as ever before.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said to me. “I got tied up in my work.”

My gaze shifted back and forth between my parents. “How did you know we were here? Are you spying on us?”

“Of course,” Faris said, like it was the most natural thing in the world to spy on your daughter.

“We keep an eye on you because we care. We only want to help, Leda,” Grace added pleasantly.

They were both insane.

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“Help me?” I replied. “Or help yourselves?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you?—”

“And I’m sure you know exactly what you’re doing,” I cut her off. “Both of you.”

“The stolen ring must be very valuable for someone to go to all this trouble to steal it.” Nero came up behind us, placing one hand on my shoulder, the other on Sierra’s.

“That is why you are here.”

“They are like vultures circling around a carcass whenever there is a magical artifact to be found,” I agreed.

“I resent that analogy,” Faris said stiffly.

“You can resent it all you want,” I replied. “It doesn’t make it any less true.”

“What does the ring do?” Nero asked my parents.

Grace’s gaze flickered to Faris, then to Nero. “We have no idea whatsoever. That is why we are here. To find the ring and learn its secrets.”

“You’re about ten minutes too late,” I said. “The ring is gone. And so is the thief who stole it.”

“I found it!” Sierra exclaimed suddenly, like she’d just come out of a trance. She grinned at me. “I know where he sent the ring!”

“Excellent.” Faris slunk forward. He extended his hand toward her, palm up. A small glowing ball rested in it. “Show us.” He tossed the magic ball into the air, and it exploded like a tiny firework.

“A map of the cosmos,” Sierra whispered, reaching toward the sea of glowing dots. She watched them blink in and out like fireflies, her eyes full of wonder. “It’s so beautiful.”

Faris passed behind her, saying in a soft, soothing voice, “Where is the ring? Which world?”

Sierra lifted her hand to point, then stopped herself. “No.” She spun around and glared at Faris. “I won’t tell you.”

Grace glanced at Faris. “She was looking at this one.” She tapped one of the glowing dots, and it rang clearly, a single musical note. “The ring must be there.”

Faris moved in closer, so his eyes were level with the pulsing dot. “That is the world of Palak.”

“It’s a big planet,” Sierra told him, hands on her hips. “Your soldiers will never find the ring. Not without my help.”

Grace gave her a curious look.

“I can track down the ring the djinn took,” Sierra continued. “But I won’t do that if you try to cut my parents out of this.”

“Why would we do that?” Grace said, all sugar and spice.

“It is a powerful artifact. And you are deities who collect power. You want the ring

for yourselves.”

Grace chuckled. “Clever girl. Only twelve years old and already you understand the game of demons and gods.”

Sierra stood a little taller.

“But that wasn’t our plan at all.” Grace glanced at Faris. “At least not my plan.”

“Then what is your plan?” Nero asked.

“We heard you were in danger,” Faris said. “We were concerned.”

I snorted. “You mean, you were concerned that someone might have gotten their hands on powerful artifacts. This literally happened ten minutes ago, and you already know all about it. News sure travels fast.”

Faris turned his nose up at the allegation. “There are many here loyal to the gods.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You mean you have spies here.”

“I have spies everywhere.”

“I’ll bet,” I said with a forced laugh.

“Don’t be so bitter,” he said. “This would all be a lot easier if you remembered we are on the same side, Leda.”

“Are we? With the way you act, it’s so easy to forget. I’m on the council too, you know.”

His wry smile was immediate and not at all unexpected. “Which is why I’m sure you would have called a meeting to report the ring’s theft to the rest of us.”

I smiled back. Hard. “Just as I’m sure you always share everything relevant you learn with the council.”

Faris folded his hands together. “Naturally.”

I snorted in disbelief.

I didn’t trust my parents, but I did trust that they wanted to keep Sierra safe, even if only to use her for her powers. So in the end, we all agreed to work together to retrieve the ring.

CHAPTER 6

THE PYRAMID

Palak, the world Sierra had seen in her vision, was a complex, variable world with even more ecosystems than Earth, but you wouldn't know it from where we were. We'd teleported into the middle of a dense rainforest. Trees, trees, and more trees stretched as far as the eye could see, and they all looked exactly the same.

"It's that way," Sierra declared.

"That's what you said two hours ago," Faris chided her. "Are you quite certain you know where you're going?"

"Tracking magic artifacts isn't like plugging in a lamp, Gramps," she shot back. "It's a multistep process. I have to narrow down the location, step by step."

"And how long will these steps take?"

"As long as they need to. What's the hurry? I'm sure a great and powerful god like you has mastered the art of patience by now." She smirked at him.

Faris glowered at her, but he said nothing more. And we all continued our trek through the forest. It was hot. And humid. Water pooled inside the broad leaves. It was dripping down the tree trunks. It was dripping down me.

Wait, no. That was just my own sweat. I wiped the back of my hand across my forehead. I was boiling in my tank top and shorts. I could only imagine how Faris felt in his suit of crimson armor. Or Nero in his thick black armor.

"Yes?" my husband asked me.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"If it's only nothing, why do you keep looking at me?"

“Because you’re hot.” I winked at him.

“Hmm.”

“I was referring to your body temperature.”

“Of course you were, Pandora.”

A shrill, inhuman cry sliced through the canopy. Faris drew his sword, which, unsurprisingly, was a perfect match to his armor. Blood-red.

“Take it easy,” I said. “It’s just birds.”

“There are creatures far worse than birds in these woods,” Faris replied, his words clipped. He kept his sword primed and ready.

Despite his dire warning, we didn’t encounter any creatures—birds or otherwise—for the next hour. What we did find was far more interesting.

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“A pyramid?” I stared at the enormous, pointy-topped building in front of us.

“Yes, they are all over these parts,” Faris told me. “The top is merely decorative. The most interesting parts are below ground.”

He was right. When we entered the pyramid, there wasn’t much to see except a big, empty, stone chamber of nothing and a staircase leading down. We opted for the staircase. It continued down, down, down...and then split? There were now three staircases, each leading down in a different direction.

Sierra stood there for a moment, then declared, “This way.”

We followed her lead, hoping she was right. None of the rest of us could sense the ring at all.

“Stop,” she said many twists and turns later, when we finally reached the bottom.

“What is it?” Nero asked her. “Is the ring close?”

“Yes, very close now,” she said. “But first we have to get past that.” She pointed at the long, empty hallway that stretched out before us like an underground tomb.

Sierra bent down, filling her hands with dirt. The dirt was dry and loose, a soft powdery sand that had accumulated on the ground over many millennia. She flicked the sand in front of her, illuminating a web of crisscrossing lasers.

“Sensors.” She squinted at the walls. “But where are the traps?”

“Let’s not find out,” Nero advised her. “Best to avoid the sensors altogether.”

She nodded in acknowledgement. “Right.” She frowned.

“I can take the lead,” Nero offered.

“No, I can do this. I just need to see the pattern again.” She grabbed two more handfuls of dirt and tossed them to reveal the pattern once more. “Right. I’ve got it now.”

“In that case, after you.” Nero extended his arm in front of him, indicating for her to go first.

Sierra led us through the web with the grace of a dancer and the composure of a soldier. I was so proud of her—and so terrified for her. She was twelve. It just wasn’t normal for twelve-year-olds to spend their days bypassing boobytraps inside ancient pyramids in search of magical treasure.

“Well done, Sierra,” Grace told her when we’d all made it through safely. “Such a well-considered, orderly solution to the problem.” She stole a glance at me. “So unlike your mother.”

“Thanks, Grace,” I said with a tight smile.

Whereas her smile was radiant, genuine, and one hundred percent victorious. “Oh, you are very welcome, Leda.”

Damn it. You’d think that after all these years, I would have learned not to thank a deity. Like angels, they took the words as an admission that you owed them a favor. And they didn’t consider sarcasm an adequate excuse to discharge you from that favor either.

Well, there was nothing I could do about it now except grin and bear it—and hope that future favor didn't bite me in the ass.

“Sierra learned from the best,” I said, smiling at Nero.

In so many ways, she really was just like her father.

“Yes, well done, Sierra,” Faris said as we approached the underground treasury. “I knew there was a reason you were my favorite grandchild.”

“I'm your only grandchild,” Sierra pointed out.

Faris shrugged off her comment. “You will always be my favorite.”

“Well, you're not my favorite grandfather.”

Faris's smile faded. “You prefer Damiel Dragonsire,” he cut out.

Sierra shrugged. “Grandpa Damiel treats me like a person, not like a weapon.”

I grinned at Faris. “See? I told you she noticed.”

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“This is all your fault,” Faris snapped at me.

“Me?” I pointed at myself. “What did I do?”

Faris opened his mouth to deliver what was sure to be a very eloquent, very scathing review of my numerous sins, but Sierra cut him off before he could even begin.

“And besides, Grandpa Damiel makes the best pancakes.”

“Pancakes?” Faris spluttered in disbelief. “Your loyalty can be bought with pancakes?”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you’d ever tried Damiel’s pancakes,” I told him.

His eyes narrowed. “You are not helping, Leda.”

“I wasn’t trying to.”

The next thing I knew, I was on the ground, looking up at Faris. The psychotic god had knocked me down.

“What the hell?—”

Something green and spiky burst out of the ground. Right where I’d been standing a moment ago.

I jumped to my feet as more spiky green things shot out of the ground. They looked

like plants...like weeds. Except there weren't many weeds that could walk on their leaves like they were legs, spit thorns out of their mouths, and fire baseball-sized seeds like they were torpedoes.

"Nightshade monsters," Nero said, setting his blade on fire.

"Nightshade monsters?" I asked. "I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure."

"Nasty creatures," he told me. "They prefer darkness and solitude. They must have taken over this pyramid sometime during the centuries since it was abandoned. Watch out for their seeds." He pulled me out of the way of a projectile seed. "If even the smallest fragment of one finds its way inside your body, it will take root there."

I took his warning seriously. I had no intention of being turned into a plant.

"Arrr!" Sierra shouted, charging like a berserker at one of the monster plants.

She moved swiftly and surely, grabbing the plant by its leafy top. The monster wiggled furiously, struggling to free itself, but Sierra was having none of that. She used her fist to thump it on the head. She must have found the sweet spot because the monster spat out a seed. A calculating smile curled Sierra's lips, and maniacal laughter burst out of her mouth. She turned the monster on its leafy brethren and fired.

The plants shrieked in terror and fled the seedy bullets. Sierra tossed the struggling creature in her hands at the others, bowling them down. They all scattered, shrieked some more, then dove back into the ground.

The hall fell silent. Everyone stared at Sierra.

It was Grace who spoke first, though it was more laughter than words that came out

of her mouth. “Splendid!” She clapped her hands. “Marvelous!”

“Abhorrent.” Faris’s words sliced through Grace’s laughter like a hot knife. He didn’t have any appreciation for dirty fighting. “And undignified. I don’t even need to guess who taught her to fight like that.” His gaze cut to me.

“Sierra truly is the daughter of order and chaos,” Grace said brightly.

“Indeed,” Faris replied, and there was nothing bright about his tone.

I stood with Nero just inside the vault chamber, watching Sierra move about the room, searching for the ring.

“It is here,” she muttered. “Or it was here. Maybe both...”

“I’m worried about her,” I said to Nero.

“Sierra is strong.”

“I know.” I took a measured breath. “But she shouldn’t have to be.”

“I found it!” she declared, holding up the ring in victory.

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An invisible force sucked me and Nero out of the room. We slammed into Faris and Grace.

“What happened?” Faris demanded, jumping to his feet.

The door to the vault slammed shut.

“Sierra’s trapped in there!” I ran to the door and tried to pull it open. It wouldn’t budge. “Sierra!”

“Mom! Dad!” Her voice cried out from the other side of the thick door. “The door won’t open! Get me out of here!”

“Something is blocking my magic. I cannot teleport into the vault,” Nero said. “Can you teleport out of there?”

“No! It’s not working for me either! Nothing is working!” Panic gripped her voice.

“Stand by,” Nero said, projecting calm.

A beastly, primal howl came from the vault. My heart stopped. And Sierra screamed.

CHAPTER 7

TREASURE TROVE

As a parent, there was nothing worse than feeling helpless when your child was in

danger. Fortunately for us, the current speed bump in the road of parenthood was short-lived. The door to the vault creaked open, and Sierra stepped out. Her eyes were dazed and her whole body was trembling, but there wasn't a scratch on her. Luck must have been just another one of her many superpowers.

"It's gone," she said, she took a step toward us on stiff legs, then stopped, pausing in the doorway. "Dead."

"What was it?" I asked.

"A beast." She turned to glance over her shoulder, then shuddered.

Nero rushed past us into the vault. He knelt down beside the dead monster. From here, I couldn't see much more than fur. Lots and lots of fur. The creature—whatever it was—was larger than a werewolf.

Nero returned to us. "You did well," he told Sierra.

"Where is the ring?" Faris demanded.

"Inside." Sierra pointed into the vault, her finger quivering. "And there's more."

Intrigued, Faris went inside. Grace followed him. I stayed with Sierra, holding her tightly to me. She looked like she would fall to the ground if I let go.

We watched Nero and my parents assess the contents of the vault. There was a lot in there. Books and treasure chests and urns and all kinds of magical curiosities in all shapes and sizes.

"An odd assortment of items," Nero said.

I looked at the set of silver spoons he was showing me. “It does feel rather arbitrary,” I agreed. “It’s like the collector went to a bunch of random garage sales in search of magical objects.”

“These magical objects weren’t bought.” Faris set a dagger in my hand. “They were stolen.”

Now that I held it, the dagger did seem familiar. “I encountered this years ago. It’s an immortal artifact.”

“Yes.” Faris took the dagger back from me. “A dagger that belongs to me.”

“And this shield was once mine,” Grace said, swinging the heavy silver shield in front of her. “I have not seen it in many years. Not since it was stolen.”

“Everything in here was stolen,” Faris said. “Either from the gods or from the demons. Those two magic urns belonged to Maya and Meda. Aleris owned that trident. And that throne was Zarion’s.”

Faris rarely spoke of his brother anymore. Once, Zarion had sat on the gods’ council but no longer. His new home was the inside of a prison cell in one of Faris’s many castles. I didn’t even know which one. It had been years since anyone had seen Zarion, and that was exactly what the gods preferred. They tended to keep their mistakes tucked away. It helped them pretend that they didn’t have any.

“There is much in here that was stolen from the demons’ treasuries as well,” Grace said, pacing along the treasure piles.

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“And from the Legion of Angels.” Nero held up a battle helmet. “Whoever this collector is, he’s stockpiling magical objects. There are a lot of very powerful artifacts here. I have to wonder what he was planning to do with them.”

“It no longer matters,” Faris said. “It’s not his anymore. It’s mine.”

Grace snatched the bangle from his hand. “I think you meant ‘ours’. We shall of course return the treasures to their rightful owners.”

To both gods and demons, an object’s ‘rightful owner’ loosely translated to he-or-she-who-was-mighty-enough-to-claim-it. One could argue that the teleporting thief had fit that definition quite well, but I wasn’t up to arguing that point right now. The thief was dead, my daughter was tired, and it was time to go home.

Naturally, there would be some infighting between the gods and the demons over the artifacts, particularly those which multiple deities had once owned. It could take years to sort this all out, and I really wasn’t looking forward to the paperwork.

Nor did I believe that we had heard the last of this mysterious collector, the villain who’d frightened the djinn so much that he’d taken his own life.

PART FIVE

THE QUEEN OF MAGIC

The Queen of Magic is set thirteen years after Gods’ Battleground (Book 12) in the Legion of Angels series, starring Sierra Pandora Windstriker.

CHAPTER 1

SWEET TALK

Usually, I had lunch with my Aunt Bella every Tuesday, but she'd missed the last three weeks. She'd been pretty busy.

"What do you think?" Bella asked me as we sat outside the Sweet Talk cafe in New York City, sipping pink lemonade and basking in the warm summer sun.

I looked at the baby in her arms. My newborn cousin was a red-faced, roly-poly sort of creature with drool oozing out of his mouth. We'd only been sitting here for five minutes, and he'd already kicked off his socks twice. He'd also spat up all over his expensive outfit and pulled Bella's hair out of her pretty braid. Given all the trouble babies caused, I couldn't understand why any sane person would choose to have one.

"He's...lively," I told my aunt.

Her laugh was light and polished. Even though she looked like a mess—thanks to the little demon in her arms—she carried herself with such confidence and grace, as though she were a princess at a ball, not a tired mother with dark circles under her eyes and broken fingernails.

At least her outfit looked good. She was wearing an elegant wine-red business suit. The jacket had three-quarter lengthsleeves. It tucked in to a tight waist, then flared out a little on the hips. The skirt stopped just above the knees, showing off my aunt's long legs. She looked good for a woman who'd had three kids, each only a year apart.

"I hope our food comes soon," I said. "I'm starving."

"It's that angel metabolism of yours, Sierra," Bella replied. "Magic burns a lot of

calories. And so does growing. You're still growing, right?"

"No, I'm not growing anymore, Aunt Bella. I'm sixteen."

"Already?" She frowned. "I must have lost track of time."

"Going senile in your old age?" I teased her.

She laughed. "That must be it."

Actually, Bella looked exactly the same as she always had, minus the sleepy circles around her eyes. But those would fade by themselves with time, and if they didn't, well, she'd just whip up a potion to erase them. My Aunt Bella was a talented witch. She was even a department head at the New York University of Witchcraft. I couldn't imagine how she got so much work done with three rug rats distracting her all the time.

"So are you planning on having any more children?" I asked her.

"Only if you promise to babysit." Her eyes twinkled at me.

I cringed. "I think I'd rather join one of my dad's training sessions at the Legion."

"That's not saying much. You've been joining in your dad's training sessions since you could walk. Fighting comes second nature to you by now."

"Physical and verbal fighting, yes," I agreed.

"You get your verbal sparring skills from your mom. Your dad prefers to keep the chit-chat to a bare minimum."

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“If you can talk, you’re not training hard enough,” I quoted in my dad’s deep voice.

My rendition of the Legion’s First Angel spooked our waiter, who looked around nervously to look for Nero Windstriker. He set our plates down, then scuttled back inside, crouched over, like he was afraid the sky would come crashing down on his head.

Bella and I laughed, then set our sights on our sandwiches. The bread slices were perfect squares, like they’d come out of a form. I bet that if I measured the sides, they would all be exactly the same length. The cold cuts and cheese slices on the sandwiches were just as precise in shape, and the cucumbers looked like they’d been painted. My dad would have loved this place. Everything was just so orderly.

“I was—” Bella caught the baby’s leg before he kicked her sandwich.

I unfolded my napkin and spread it over my lap. “I’m so glad I never had any baby brothers or sisters.”

“They can get into mischief,” Bella said. “But so did you, Sierra.”

“Back in the day.”

“Not just back in the day. I’ve heard you still have a penchant for trouble, even today.”

“Maybe.” I cut my sandwich diagonally through the middle, then grabbed a slice. “Occasionally.”

Bella sighed. "Your parents always wanted to have more children."

"Really?" I took a bite of my sandwich. "They never said anything about it to me."

"Don't think they aren't happy, Sierra. You're the greatest gift they ever received. They love you more than anything in the universe. They just hoped they could grow that love." She smiled at me. "For all of you. But it never worked out."

"Because angels and deities are notoriously infertile."

"You know about that?"

"Of course. Everyone knows about that. That's the notorious part," I said. "It's the Nectar and Venom. The same poison which gives people magic also makes them infertile."

I put down my sandwich. I tried to tell myself it was the ick factor, the very idea of my parents having sex, that had caused me to lose my appetite, but that was just a convenient lie. The truth was it was guilt that had soured my stomach. My guilt.

"It's my fault," I said quietly. "I'm the reason they didn't have more kids."

"How could this possibly be your fault?"

"Because for years I wished that I would remain an only child. And my wish came true."

"Oh, Sierra." Bella reached across the table to take my hand. "Wishing for something doesn't make it true."

"Maybe it does for me. Even after all these years, we still don't understand

everything about my magic. What if my magic made it so? What if I'm the one who did this to them?"

"It's not your fault your parents never had any more children, Sierra." She squeezed my hand. "Like you said before, it's the Nectar and the Venom."

"Harker is an angel, you are mostly demon, and you guys have absolutely no problem having children," I countered.

"Yes, well, we're...different. Your mom told you how I was conceived?"

I nodded. "Some kind of magic involving immortal artifacts. You really think that's the reason you've been able to have so many children?"

"I don't know for sure, but it's the most logical explanation I can think of. No one really understands my magic either. All we do know is that I'm different. I don't get my magic from Nectar or Venom. Not like your parents, the angels, even the gods and demons."

"Gods and demons are born with magic," I reminded her. "They don't need Nectar or Venom."

"Not to live, no, but they must consume it to keep their magic strong."

"I don't need Nectar or Venom to keep my magic strong," I said.

"Which means it's very likely you won't have any trouble whatsoever having lots of adorable children someday," Bella said brightly as her baby burped.

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I frowned. “Swell.”

“Don’t worry about your parents, Sierra,” she said in a soothing voice, like singing a lullaby. “They’ll be all right. They have you. And they have each other. They’re happy. So don’t beat yourself up over something you have absolutely no control over.”

“Hmm.” I looked down at my sandwich, then picked it up again. I was still kind of hungry. Ok, make thatreallyhungry. “So, how was your first week back at the university?”

Her smile faded. “Eventful.”

“What happened?” I asked, then took another bite of my sandwich.

“We’ve had some vandalism. Someone got into one of our labs and smashed things up.”

“Who?”

Bella shook her head. “I don’t know. The vandal took out the cameras and the alarms.”

“Do you think it was a student?”

She sighed. “I think it was vampires. The witches and vampires of the city are caught up in quite a heated dispute at the moment. Harsh words were exchanged. I suspect

this is only the next step in the cycle of escalation.”

“It never ceases to amaze me, all the in-fighting in the supernatural world,” I said. “We’ve faced the end of the world together—many times over, in fact—but as soon as the crisis is over, people just scurry back to their own corners and start hurling insults and more at each other.”

“That sounds like something Leda would say.”

“Mom has,” I replied. “Repeatedly. She’s pretty frustrated with people’s bullshit. Why is it when the danger subsides, everyone is so quick to abandon their unity and go back to fighting with one another?”

“It’s just the nature of our universe, I suppose.”

“Yeah, well, our universe sucks. Let’s make a new one.”

Bella chuckled. “You are just as ambitious as your mother, I see.”

“Hey, Sierra,” Eira said, sitting down at our table.

“Hey, twinsie.”

My best friend Eira wasn’t my twin. She wasn’t even my sister. She was actually my aunt, my dad’s little sister. But we were both born on the same day—the same battlefield—so we’d long ago decided that we were twinsies.

“What brings you here?” I asked her.

“Shopping.” She indicated the pile of shopping bags beside her chair. “There’s way better shopping here than in ‘the Palace’.”

“Is that what your parents are calling it now?”

“Dad thinks it’s catchy.” Eira rolled her eyes. “He’s such a dork.”

Bella’s baby screeched.

Eira flinched and gave the baby the side-eye. She pushed her shopping bags out of reach of baby projectiles.

“I still need to find a bikini that will totally freak out my parents. Want to help?” Eira gave her eyebrows a devious up-and-down wiggle.

I hesitated. I was supposed to be having lunch with my aunt. Though shopping with Eira did sound like fun.

“Oh, goodness, look at the time! I really should be getting back to work.” Bella gave us a wise smile, then waved her hand to call the waiter. “You two go on.”

“You’re cooler than other parents,” Eira told her, standing and gathering up her bags.

“I don’t have teenagers yet.” Bella winked.

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I was rising to join Eira when a sudden wave of dizziness slammed into me, knocking me back into my chair.

“Sierra?”

Eira’s voice was muffled, buried beneath a tangled mess of other sounds and sensations. The roar of an explosion. The crash of glass. The shimmer of a gold ring. And another. And another. They were falling to the ground, sixteen of them in all, almost identical in every way. Except for the text on them, shining before my eyes, burning into my brain.

“It means something,” I said, then my vision shattered.

“What means something?” Bella asked as I faded back to the here and now. “What did you see?”

“The rings. The text on the rings means something. I just can’t read it.” I looked at her, at Eira. “We thought there was only one ring, but there are more.”

“What ring?” Eira asked me.

I looked at her. “Remember the story I told you about my adventure with my parents a few years ago in the treasury of the Legion’s research facility? That ring.”

“And there are more of them now?”

“There always have been more of them. I just didn’t know it. Four years ago, a djinn

stole the ring. We got it back. But now..." I struggled to arrange the pieces of my vision in a way that made sense. "Someone stole it again."

"Who?" Eira asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. But I think it's the same person behind the last theft."

"I remember Leda telling me this story," said Bella. "Didn't you catch the thief last time?"

"We did. And then he blew himself up." I moved past the unpleasant memory. "Dad thought he was afraid to be captured and interrogated."

"So he was more afraid of the person who'd hired him than he was of the Legion of Angels?" Eira said. "And of dying?"

"According to my dad, yes."

"You mentioned writing on the rings," Bella said. "What kind of writing?"

"Ancient writing." I shook my head. "I don't recognize the language." I looked at Eira. "But maybe your parents would. They're Keepers. You have so many ancient texts and artifacts in your house. Maybe this language is in there somewhere."

"Come on, Sierra. Let's get you to my parents," Eira said, all thoughts of shopping forgotten. "They'll be able to help us."

"I hope so," I replied. "Something really bad is going to happen, and these rings are part of it."

CHAPTER 2

THE PALACE

On our way to the Palace, Eira and I swung by my house to pick up Snow. Years ago, my mom's cat Angel had given birth to seven kittens. When they'd grown old enough, she'd given one kitten to each of the kids born the same day as me. Seven kids, seven kittens.

Snow had gone to me. He was a big boy, even bigger than his mother, which might have made him the largest cat to ever walk the Earth. His coat was white with black spots, a perfect snow leopard pattern.

Eira's cat was a pretty girl named Bonbon. Like all of Angel's babies, Bonbon was a blend of her parents. She was white with big black splashes on her body, like the spots of a cow.

Bonbon was waiting for us when we stepped inside the Palace. As soon as Snow saw her, both cats took off running up the stairs. The two of them were as loud as a herd of bison. Luckily, Grandpa Daniel had reinforced every part of the Palace to withstand a battle.

Grandma Cadence was sitting in the kitchen when we entered. "Home already, Eira? Did you run out of—" She stopped. "Something has happened." She pulled out two more chairs. "Tell me."

"I had a vision," I said as Eira and I sat down.

I told her about the rings, the theft, and the mysterious person, cloaked in shadow, just past my field of view.

“Visions rarely give you everything on a gold platter,” Cadence said. “Tell me more about these symbols you saw on the rings.”

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“They’re words in some ancient language. I think.”

“Show me.” She slid a pen and a pad of paper across the table.

I filled several pages with words I didn’t understand in a language I couldn’t speak. When I was done, I slid the pad back to her.

“The same symbols were on the book the thief had. The one who broke into the Legion research facility four years ago,” I told her.

“I recognize the symbols.” Cadence tapped the pad. “They’re from a very old Immortal language.”

I leaned forward eagerly. “Can you read it?”

“No,” she said. “There’s an old book written in that language. It’s called Transformation. That is all I know of it.”

“Do you have the book here?”

“No, it’s not in our home library. I believe Eva and Jiro have a copy in their library.”

I jumped out of my seat. “We should go there.” My stomach gurgled.

Cadence looked down at it. “I think you should eat something first.”

“There’s no time to eat. The fate of the universe is at stake!”

“What, again?” Daniel said casually as he strolled into the kitchen, smiling.

“How much did you hear?” I asked him.

“Everything. I’m an accomplished eavesdropper. And very nosy.”

“He’s not wrong about that,” Eira sighed. “He knew Lycus Dragonblood was going to ask me out even before I did.”

I spun toward my best friend. “Why didn’t you tell me that Lycus Dragonblood asked you out?”

“Because he didn’t,” Eira said sourly. “Not after Daniel Dragonsire, former Master Interrogator and current pain in my ass, went to him and had the Talk.”

“What Talk?”

“The Talk is when your overbearing father goes to any boy who likes you and scares the living daylights out of him.”

“My dad doesn’t do that.”

Eira snorted.

“What?”

“Of course he does that, Sierra. My brother is just way more subtle about it than my dad. Nero scared him so badly that he didn’t tell anyone what happened.”

“What happened?” I asked. “And who is this ‘him’? Who likes me?”

“It doesn’t matter. He won’t do anything now that Nero got to him.”

I frowned. “I’m moving to a place where no one’s ever heard of my parents.”

Eira sighed. “Take me with you when you do, ok?”

“Are you two quite finished with your hysterics?” Daniel asked us.

“Your dad’s doing that thing again where he’s acting like an angel,” I told Eira.

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“He hasn’t stopped doing that thing since the day I was born,” she replied.

My stomach growled again, louder this time.

“Sit.” Daniel pointed at my empty chair. “Eat.”

“But the universe?—”

“Can wait,” he cut me off. “You won’t be saving anything if you collapse.”

“I just ate. Call my Aunt Bella if you don’t believe me.”

“And you have teleported how many times since you last ate?” he asked, brows lifted.

I didn’t answer him. He was just being unreasonable.

“Exactly,” Daniel said. “Now are you going to sit down and eat, or do I have to tie you to that chair?”

“He will totally do it,” Eira warned me. “He’s done it to me.”

“Fine. You win, you old coot.” I pulled out my chair and sat down. “But if the universe explodes while we’re sitting here eating, you’ll be sorry.”

“If the universe explodes, I doubt I’ll still be around to feel sorry about anything,” he said lightly.

“You really do have an answer to everything, don’t you?”

He smiled at me. “Do you want me to answer that?”

I said nothing.

“Smart girl.” He retrieved an apron from the cupboard. “So, what will it be, ladies? What would you like the Immortal Chef to prepare for you today?”

I glanced at Eira. “Did he just call himself ‘the Immortal Chef’?”

“I try not to listen to a word my dad says.”

“Focus, please.” When Damiel said ‘please’, it sounded an awful lot like ‘or else’.

“I’d like pancakes,” I told him.

“Oooh, good idea,” Eira said.

“Pancakes are a little odd for dinner, don’t you think?”

I braided my fingers together and rested my chin on them, smiling up at my grandfather. “It isn’t dinnertime where I live.”

He chuckled. “Good point.” He started gathering ingredients for the pancake batter.

“Besides,” I said. “It’s always the right time of the day for pancakes. Especially your pancakes.”

Daniel pointed his mixing spoon at me. “Bonus points for the flattery, Sierra. I’ve almost forgiven you for calling me an ‘old coot’.”

“Make those pancakes with chocolate chips and I might forgive you for threatening to tie me to my chair,” I said sweetly.

“Done,” he said, then grabbed a bag of tiny chocolate chips and emptied it into the batter.

Over the next half hour, Daniel cooked, we ate, and we all discussed the impending end of the universe. In other words, it was a typical meal for our family.

“When we’re done eating, we should visit Jiro and Eva,” Daniel said, flipping more pancakes onto my plate. “They have built up an extensive library. In addition to the book Cadence mentioned, they have many more ancient books from the time of the Immortals—and some even older. If anyone alive knows anything about that ancient language you saw, they do.”

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“They have books from before the time of the Immortals?” I spooned fresh whipped cream all over my pancakes. “What was there before the Immortals?”

“No one is quite sure,” said Cadence. “There are all these myths, but who knows which are true and which are just crazy stories.”

“A trip to the library with my girls.” Daniel licked the batter off his fingers. “How exciting!”

“Let’s hope it’s not too exciting,” Cadence said.

“It’s just a library, my love. What could possibly go wrong in a library?”

CHAPTER 3

THE IMMORTAL LIBRARY

Eira and I joined her parents for a trip to the library. This wasn’t just any library, however. It was the library of Jiro and Eva, two really ancient—and really weird—Immortals. Eva was my father’s mother’s mother’s sister, or whatever that made her to me.

“I think this place is haunted,” Eira whispered to me as we followed her parents, Eva, and Jiro down the long library aisle between bookcases.

I eyed the shuddering books on the shelves with suspicion. As we passed them, their pages began to flutter. And the spines were rumbling.

Jiro glanced back at us. “Don’t worry. None of the books have eaten anyone in ages.” He didn’t laugh, didn’t wink, didn’t even cough. He actually looked completely serious.

Which only freaked me out even more.

We came to an open area with several tables. Cadence set the pages of the ancient writing scribbles I’d made onto one of them.

“Do you recognize this language?” she asked the Immortals.

“Yes. It’s an ancient language, from before my time,” Eva replied. “It comes from the early days, when the Immortals were young. From what I understand, those appear to be laboratory notes.”

“Laboratory notes?” I squinted at the funny symbols on the page, but I still couldn’t read them.

“Yes.” Eva nodded. “From our early magical experiments. I believe we have a copy of the book those notes come from.” She snapped her fingers, and a book appeared in her hand. “Yes, this is the one.”

I recognized the book’s dark blue cover and silver foil lettering. The unreadable symbols were familiar too.

“This book is quite old.” Eva set the book on the table. “Very few copies of it remain. In fact, I thought our copy was the last one.”

“Is there anything about the rings in there?” I asked.

Eva’s brows squeezed together. “Rings?”

“I had a vision of sixteen gold rings.” I flipped through the pages of my scribblings until I found a drawing of the rings. “They look like these.” I tapped the picture.

“I believe so.” Jiro picked up the book, and, like magic, opened it to a page with a very similar drawing of sixteen rings. No, notlikemagic. It was magic. “Many millennia ago, the early Immortals created sixteen magic rings.”

“What do they do?” I asked him.

“They created them to separate and sort magic.”

I looked at Eira, who shrugged. She obviously didn’t understand what he meant any more than I did. And neither did her parents.

“What do you mean by ‘separate and sort magic’?” Cadence asked.

“When they put those sixteen rings onto a test subject who possessed all sixteen powers, that one person became sixteen individuals, each one possessing one of the sixteen powers,” Jiro explained.

“Why would they want to do a crazy thing like that?” I asked.

“So they could study each power in isolation,” said Eva.

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“And through these experiments, the Immortals created the first vampires, witches, changelings, genies, and all of the other sixteen supernaturals,” Jiro said.

“But the original supernaturals were not like those you know today,” Eva added.

“How so?” I asked.

“They weren’t human in form,” she said. “They were beasts.”

I frowned. “That’s...weird.”

Eva shrugged. “Not really. Those Immortal scientists didn’t want humanity to get in the way of studying the raw magic. That’s why they made them beasts.”

“So beasts were the original supernaturals.” Damiel rubbed his chin. “Fascinating.”

“Beasts...” My mind raced, rewinding back, back, back. “A beast.” I snapped out of my flashback. “That’s what I fought in the Treasury four years ago: an original supernatural.”

“But what was the beast doing in that Treasury?” Eira asked.

No one knew the answer to that question.

“On which world was this Treasury?” Jiro asked me.

“Palak,” I replied. “Do you know it?”

“Yes.” Jiro traced his finger across my sketch. “And which of these rings did you find there?”

I frowned at the picture. “Aren’t they all the same?”

“No.” He smiled. “You drew them. You know that.”

“She was half in a trance when she drew them,” Cadence told him.

“Well, in that case,” he said, tapping the page, “look closely.”

So I did. And he was right. The rings were almost identical, but onlyalmost. There were slight variations in the thickness, smoothness, color. And the text on them was completely different.

“That one.” I pointed. “That’s the one we found on Palak. That’s the ring the djinn stole from the Legion and sent to that creepy old Treasury.”

“Its original home,” Jiro said.

“What? Really?”

“Yes. The ring you found was the ring for Psychic’s Spell, the ring of telekinesis.” He turned a few pages to a picture of a very familiar Treasury. “And Palak is its origin world. The origin world of all psychics.”

“Someone brought that ring back to its origin world,” Daniel said. “It stands to reason that they would do the same for the other fifteen rings. Which means we will find them on their origin worlds.”

“Yes,” Jiro agreed.

“Then let’s go. Let’s get them.”

Daniel caught my arm as I turned to go. “Not so fast, Sierra. The last time you went after one of the rings, a beast was guarding it.”

“And I took care of it.” I shrugged off his hand. “I handled it.”

“Yes, you are very impressive, but how about we learn more about what’s going on before we charge in?” he said with a half-smile.

“Fine.” I looked at Jiro. “Tell me about these beasts, these original supernaturals.”

“They’re strong. And powerful.”

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“Yes, I remember. So if they’re so much more powerful than normal supernaturals, why didn’t the Immortals make more of them?”

“The beasts are difficult to control and quite violent. I suppose they got all they wanted out of those experiments, so they decided to move on. It was always the Immortals’ goal to create magical beings in human form, in our form. They made gods, demons, Guardians, eidolons, spirits. And all thesupernaturals we know today.” He closed the book. “And by then, they weren’t using the rings anymore.”

“Why did they stop using the rings?” I asked.

“The rings turned out to be a bit too random, too finicky,” Eva said. “They didn’t always work. Half of the time, they made beasts with no magic, which the Immortals had to kill. It wasn’t efficient. They came up with better methods, methods with a higher success rate.”

“The rings don’t even work properly?” I frowned. “This makes even less sense. Why would anyone want to steal something that’s defective?”

Eva chuckled. “Oh, the rings aren’t entirely defective, young one. They just didn’t work well enough for the Immortals’ experiments. The rings still make very good magic converters.”

“Magic converters?”

“They take someone’s own magic and convert it into other types of magic,” she explained. “In this way, someone can use magic they do not possess. For example, a

vampire's natural magic could be converted into, say, shifter powers that the vampire could then use. Or a djinn wearing the ring could have their magic converted into phoenix magic."

"So with these rings, someone could wield all sixteen kinds of magic?" I asked. "Just like an Immortal."

"Yes," said Eva.

I swallowed. "That sounds very powerful."

"But it's not so simple," Jiro told me. "A person has only a given amount of magic. The ring doesn't increase your magic; it just converts your magic into other kinds of magic you might want to use. The ring won't turn a witch into an angel, even if it allows the witch to choose from all of those powers. An angel simply has more magic than a witch. So even with the ring, the witch is no match for an angel. Or a god, for that matter."

"What about if someone had all sixteen rings?" I asked. "Would that make a difference?"

Eva shook her head. "No. Not really. It doesn't matter if you wear one ring, two, or even all sixteen. They can't increase your power. Your power level remains the same."

"So why did the thief collect all sixteen?" I asked. "And why send them away to different worlds? Would the rings being on those worlds maybe increase their power?"

"The rings are already made," said Eva. "It's done. According to the book, their power cannot be increased."

I sighed. “Then none of this makes sense.”

We tried brainstorming for a while longer, but neither Eva nor Jiro had any insights. They had no idea what the thief was up to. Jiro and Eva were Immortals, thousands of years old. If this had them stumped, then I didn’t know where else to turn.

CHAPTER 4

SLEEPOVER

Cadence and Damiel borrowed a few stacks of books from Eva and Jiro. They planned to research the rings further. That’s it. Research.

“We must know what we’re up against before we make our move,” Cadence said when I complained. “We can’t just go rushing in. We need a plan. We need to be prepared.”

“And you need to be patient,” Damiel added.

I hated being patient.

“So do I,” Eira said as we settled into her room in the Palace.

Besides a bedroom, she also had her own living room with two huge sofas. Her cat Bonbon was asleep on one of them. My cat Snow had taken the other. That left just the beanbags for me and Eira.

“Why are your parents always so boring?” I asked her.

“I don’t know.” She tossed me a fluffy pink blanket. “I guess because they’re old?”

“Not as old as Damon’s parents,” Troy Fireswift declared as he and Damon stepped into the room.

Damon’s parents were Nyx and Ronan. Nyx was the oldest angel. And Ronan was a god. I had no idea how old he was, but he definitely counted his birthdays in millennia.

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“What are you guys doing here?” I asked the boys.

Their giant cats strutted in after them. Damon’s cat was a girl named Tiger Lily with black-and-white tiger stripes. And Troy’s cat was a big boy, mostly white with black accents on his face, legs, paws, and tail. He was named Blaze for the white blaze on his dark face. Like Bonbon and Snow, Tiger Lily and Blaze were the offspring of my mom’s cat Angel and the interdimensional cat Shadow.

“Eira invited us over for a sleepover,” Troy told me as the new feline arrivals attempted to kick their siblings off the sofas.

“Oh, she did, did she?” I slid a look Eira’s way.

She glanced at Damon, blushing. She had a major crush on him. Luckily for her, both boys were busy setting up their sleeping bags, so they didn’t notice her blushing. Troy never would have let her hear the end of it.

“So, how are your parents boring?” Damon asked Eira.

“How are theynotboring?” She sighed. “Sierra found out someone’s after sixteen magic rings, and we want to go after the treasure before the bad guys use them.”

“Use them to do what?” Damon asked.

“No idea,” said Eira. “But that doesn’t matter. We have to stop them. That’s what heroes do. That’s what my parents have done so many times.”

“Before they got all boring,” I chimed in.

Eira nodded. “Yes, before they got boring. So now instead of taking action, they’re researching.” She growled the word. “There’s no time for that. The bad guys could make their move at any moment!”

“And who are these bad guys?” Troy asked.

“We don’t know,” I said.

“If you don’t know who they are, how do you plan to stop them?” Damon asked.

“We might not know who they are, but we do know where the rings are,” I said.

Troy perked up. “Where?”

I jumped off the beanbag, went over to Eira’s desk, sat down, and retrieved a piece of paper from the drawer. Then I started drawing.

Troy came up behind my chair. “Vampire’s Kiss,” he read the caption under the first ring.

“Each ring represents one of the Immortals’ sixteen magic abilities,” I explained.

“Sangean?”

“The ring’s origin world. And where it is now.” I continued to draw.

“Witch’s Cauldron,” he read under the second ring. “Maldion.”

Eira joined us. “Siren’s Song. Lartak.”

“Dragon’s Storm.” Damon was here too. “Kalpia.”

I kept drawing, and they took turns reading the text.

“Shifter’s Shadow,” said Troy. “Dandriane.”

“Psychic’s Spell,” Eira said. “Palak.”

“Fairy’s Touch,” said Damon. “Elaynia.”

Ghost’s Whisper was on Fairnley. Djinn’s Gateway on Borrellean. Mermaid’s Revenge on Vardyne. Genie’s Desire on Quixin. Phantom’s Veil on Telldom. Unicorn’s Relic on Aurory. Phoenix’s Return on Corsea. Elf’s Rune on Tashyn. And Changeling’s Curse on Zol.

So many rings and so many worlds.

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“You have everything you need,” Troy said. “You know where all the rings are. So let’s go. Let’s go get them.” He cracked a mischievous smile. He was so unlike his father.

I sighed. Now I was the boring one. “We can’t. Not without backup. It’s too dangerous.”

“Too dangerous?” He started strutting around the room, his hand on his chest in mock solemnity. “I thought you were the great Sierra Pandora Windstriker, the most powerful person who ever lived. And you’re scared?”

I rose to my feet—and to his challenge. “I am not scared. I’m smart.”

He snorted.

“Smarter than you, Fireswift.” I smirked at him. “And stronger. And as the strongest one here, it would be my responsibility to look out for all of you. It would be my responsibility to keep you safe.”

He rolled his eyes. “I didn’t ask for your protection.”

“But I would be duty-bound to give it,” I said. “No, we can’t go after the rings ourselves. We need backup. More soldiers. A full show of force.”

“You’re so boring.” Troy looked disappointed. “You’re scared of some unknown person and a few pretty rings.” He snatched my drawing and tossed it aside.

I caught it as it fell. And as my fingers touched the page, a deluge of images flashed through my head. A ballgown. Gems. A gloved hand. Lace.

“Sierra!” Eira called out. “What is it? Are you all right?”

“I’m having a vision.”

The woman in my vision slipped off her glove and tossed it aside.

“What do you see?” Eira asked me.

The woman lifted her hand to her face, and then I saw it.

“It’s her,” I gasped.

“Who?”

“Princess Lavinia.”

“Who?” Eira said again, even more confused.

“Someone from a long time ago. My parents stopped her from becoming Queen. And now...”

I watched Princess Lavinia put on the rings.

“And now she’s back. She’s the one who sent that djinn after the ring four years ago. She’s the one collecting all sixteen rings.”

“Why?” Eira asked. “What does she want with them?”

“She wants to be powerful. But her people are immune to normal magic, the magic of the Immortals, gods, and demons. So she’s going to use the rings...” I shook my head. “...somehow, I don’t know how...to gain ancient, raw, primordial magic.”

“And then?” asked Eira.

My vision faded out. I looked at Eira and declared, “And then she will take her revenge on all of us.”

CHAPTER 5

SIXTEEN

When I returned home the next morning, I overheard my parents talking in the living room. They were discussing my adventure in the Immortals’ library. Cadence and Daniel must have told them all about it. I waited just outside the closed door, listening.

“Sixteen rings,” Dad said. “With sixteen magic abilities. On sixteen origin worlds. Guarded by sixteen original supernatural monsters.”

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“So, in other words, just another day in the life of an angel,” Mom quipped.

“I don’t have time to deal with the end of the world today, Pandora,” Dad replied. “I have meetings with each of the angel territory commanders. Nyx didn’t promote me. She cursed me to a life of paperwork and bureaucracy.”

“There’s no rest for the wicked. Or the Top Angel.”

“Wicked and Top Angel.” Dad chuckled. “We make quite the team, don’t we?”

“Nero Windstriker, are you flirting with me?” I could hear the smirk in my mom’s voice.

“Of course,” he replied in that assertive, no-nonsense tone he liked to use.

My parents were admittedly sort of cute together. Well, as far as parents went anyway. Even so, I felt obligated to step in and break up their flirting session. I opened the door and walked into the room.

They were sitting on the sofa together. Actually, my mom was sitting on my dad’s lap.

“How was the sleepover?” she asked me.

“Good.”

Snow strutted past me and plopped down on the big rug in front of the sofa.

“You look hungry,” Dad observed. “I’ll make you breakfast.”

Breakfast was pancakes. He used eggs and sausages to make a crown and wings for the pancake stack. A crown and wings: that was the symbol of an archangel. Ok, so maybe I was supposed to be too old for stuff like that, but I couldn’t help but love it. And my dad.

“Ooh, these are so good.” Mom snatched one of the sausages out of the skillet. “Are they infused with maple syrup?”

“Among other things,” he replied cryptically.

“I will know your secrets, Windstriker,” she said in a faux-serious voice.

“You already do,” he countered, intercepting her before she could steal another sausage. “Here, Sierra.” He refilled my plate. “You look like you’re still hungry.”

Snow rubbed himself against my dad’s leg. Dad locked stares with him for a few long seconds, then tossed him a sausage. The cat caught it in his mouth and swallowed it whole. Then he looked to Dad for more.

“A warrior must learn self-discipline.”

“Is Dad lecturing the cat?” I asked Mom.

“Shh, don’t interrupt. They’re both enjoying themselves immensely.”

She was right. Dad enjoyed having a captive audience. And Snow enjoyed eating the sausages he was awarded for sitting there and listening so nicely. It was a win-win.

Too bad Angel wasn’t here because that would have been even more fun. She was

probably out hunting.

While we ate, I told my parents all about the rings.

“So Lavinia is back,” Dad said.

“And she’s the one who sent the djinn to steal the ring from the Legion research facility four years ago?” Mom asked me.

“I believe so.”

She frowned. “That woman is trouble.”

After breakfast, we all headed back into the living room and watched the news. Dad always watched the news before heading off to work, and Mom always added her own brutally-honest commentary to the news reports. He pretended to chastise her for it, and then they got into heated debates that usually ended with their kissing and my leaving the room.

They were great parents, even if they quite frequently drove me completely crazy. As I watched them today, Aunt Bella’s words were echoing in my head.

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Your parents always wanted to have more children.

They just hoped they could grow that love.

For all of you.

But it never worked out.

It was very likely that they would never get their wish.

Nyx arrived before we'd finished watching the morning news. And as always, the former First Angel didn't waste any time getting straight to the point.

"I know about the sixteen rings," she declared.

Mom's gaze slid from me, to Dad, to Nyx. "How?"

"Damon told me."

Eira never should have invited Damon over for a sleepover. He was such a goody-two-shoes. And a tattletale.

"I sent soldiers."

"Legion soldiers?" Dad's face was blank.

And so was hers. "Yes."

“If you want to be First Angel again, Nyx, you should have just said so.”

“I don’t.”

“And yet you are giving orders to my soldiers.”

“There wasn’t time to contact you, Nero. We had to move fast.”

“And?” Mom said. “What happened?”

“Our soldiers encountered complications on the ring worlds,” Nyx replied. “The demons had sent soldiers as well.”

“How did they know about the ring worlds?” Nero asked.

“Apparently, Troy Fireswift told one of his buddies in the Dark Force,” Nyx said tightly. “According to Damon, his friend likes to ‘mix things up’. Troy thought it would be amusing if both the gods and the demons sent soldiers after the rings.”

“I bet his father was amused,” Mom said.

Nyx’s eyes hardened. “Unlikely.”

“What happened on those worlds?” Dad asked. “Did our soldiers and theirs fight?”

“Not exactly. It was mostly posturing. Arguing over who got to recover the rings.”

“How many rings did we get?”

“None.”

Dad frowned. “I expected better of our soldiers. Even against demons. I will institute a new training regimen at the Legion immediately, a program designed to teach our soldiers how to fight deities. It’s about time they learned how to fight something stronger than they are.”

“I have a lot of experience in that,” Mom said. “Want some help?”

“No. I don’t think teaching my soldiers how to get deities tangled up in a clothesline will help, Pandora.”

Mom shrugged. "It always worked for me."

"Yes, but you're one of a kind," he said with a twinkle in his eyes, then looked at Nyx. "So the demons got all sixteen rings?"

"No. They didn't get any."

"We didn't get the rings. And the demons didn't get the rings." His eyes drew together. "So who did?"

"No one."

"No one?"

"Both sides brought in more specialists. Search teams and scientists and trackers," Nyx said. "They found nothing. No rings."

I rose to my feet. "They are there," I insisted. "I know what I saw."

"She was right last time," Mom told Dad.

"We will join the search," Dad declared.

Nyx nodded. "Glad to have you, Windstriker."

When they moved toward the door, I followed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Dad asked me.

“I am going with you.”

“Not this time,” he said in his First Angel voice, the one my dad always used when he was pulling rank.

I hated his First Angel voice.

My parents left with Nyx, and they left me behind. I considered following them. I did have way more magic than they did, after all, so it’s not like they would be able to stop me.

But in the end, I decided against that course of action. If I followed them, they’d send me back, and then we’d get into this big fight, which would totally distract us from the mission: finding the rings.

Well, no matter. When they failed to find the rings, they’d come to me for help. That was how I was going to play this. It would be faster. And immensely more satisfying.

In the meantime, I had another mission. I was going to pay a visit to Cadence and Daniel. They had the knowledge of the Immortals. If anyone could figure out a way to help my parents have more kids, they could.

CHAPTER 6

THE CURE

When I arrived at the Palace, Cadence greeted me with a cookie and a question. “Sierra? What are you doing back here so soon? Did you forget something?”

I took the cookie and told her all about how my parents had joined the search for the sixteen rings—and left me behind.

“It’s just as well,” she said when I was finished with my story. “You don’t want to get in the middle of a conflict between gods and demons.”

“I can take care of myself,” I said, standing taller.

“Of course you can,” she chuckled. “This isn’t about your magic or martial prowess. It’s about politics. Do you really want to stand there while the gods and demons trade insults and debate who should get the rings?”

“Not really,” I admitted. “That sounds boring.”

“Exactly.” She handed me another cookie, which I of course accepted. Cadence really was in full-out grandma mode right now.

“Is Eira around?” I asked.

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“No, she’s gone hunting for mushrooms with her father in the forest. He wanted her help to make a show of force.”

“A show of force? To what?”

“To the mushrooms, of course,” replied Cadence. “They are quite aggressive in these parts. Would you like to join them and help out?”

While the idea of aggressive mushrooms was certainly intriguing, that wasn’t why I’d come.

“Actually, I came here on another matter,” I said.

“Oh?”

“To speak to you about...” It was hard to say the words. They were so embarrassing. “About angel fertility.”

“Oh, I see.” She went into the kitchen and came back with two cups of hot chocolate. “So, what’s his name?” she asked as we sat down on the sofa.

“Who?”

“The boy.” She peered over my cup at me. “Yourboy.”

“My boy?” Oh. That. I blushed.

“There are herbs that can prevent pregnancy?—”

“You’ve got me all wrong,” I cut in, my whole face burning. “There is no boy. This isn’t about me.”

“Of course it isn’t.” She winked at me.

“It’s about my parents.”

“Oh.” She set down the cup. “I see.”

“Aunt Bella told me they want to have more children, but they’ve been unable to. Because of the Nectar.” I poked the marshmallow bobbing on top of a sea of hot chocolate. “You have all this knowledge, all these books. I was hoping you knew of a way to help them.”

“Oh, Sierra, that’s so thoughtful of you,” she said. “But I’m sorry. I don’t know what to do about that. Their power comes from Nectar—and Venom and Life. Those are all poisons. Those poisons give you something, but they also take something away. Your parents have to regularly consume it to keep their powers.”

“And if they were to stop consuming it?”

“It isn’t just about magic, Sierra. Their bodies would wither, grow weak. They are dependent on the poison, not just for magic but to survive.”

“Like Regin,” I said.

My parents had told me about the rogue god Regin. He’d been imprisoned for many years, completely cut off from everywhere, his body starved of Nectar. He’d turned into a weak, shriveled husk of a man. He’d also turned insane, though he might have

been that way before his imprisonment.

“I need to find a way,” I sighed. “I just want my parents to be happy.”

“Well, Regin found a way to have ten children,” Cadence pointed out.

“By sacrificing people.” I shook my head. “No. That’s not the answer. My parents would never do that. I would never do that.”

Cadence slowly stirred her chocolate. “There might be another way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think the answer lies within the book called Transformations. The djinn thief who stole the psychic ring from the Legion’s research facility had a copy of it. I borrowed another copy from Eva and Jiro’s library.”

“But what does that book have to do with this?”

“I’ve been studying the book. It describes the Immortals’ early experiments.”

“I’m listening.”

“Nectar and Venom have been around for a very long time, long before the gods and demons learned how to use them to give people magic,” Cadence said. “But this book is even older. It predates Nectar and Venom. It tells of the early Immortals’ experiments with magic.”

“Like how they made the sixteen rings and the original sixteen supernaturals. Monsters.”

“Yes,” she said. “And after the monsters, they moved on to creating supernaturals in human form. Then they created gods and demons. They created Nectar and Venom, potions that could give someone magic or increase the magic they already had. The Immortals changed themselves too.”

“They took the potions?” I asked.

“They did. At first, they thought they’d invented a miracle potion,” she said. “Until a rather large side effect came to light.”

“Infertility.”

She nodded. “The Immortals tried to reverse the effects, and when that failed, they stopped taking the potions altogether. But it was too late. The potions had changed them. The Immortals could no longer live without them.”

“What happened next?”

“The Immortal scientists continued to work on the problem. They were so sure that they would come up with a cure. They worked on this until the very end.”

“The end of what?” I asked.

Cadence sighed. “The end of their civilization.”

“And did they?” I swallowed. “Find a cure?”

“When the Immortals’ civilization collapsed, most of their scientists died. But one of the scientists who survived came up with a solution.”

I perked up. “So there is a cure?”

“A cure with a catch.”

“What is it?” I said eagerly.

“The cure is a very clever, very powerful spell,” she told me. “But it is also very permanent.”

“What do you mean?”

She set down her cup. “The cure is a spell that would destroy all Nectar, Venom, and Life in the universe, Sierra. It would completely wipe them out, unraveling the spell of their existence.”

“So it’s an all-or-nothing sort of deal?”

“Yes, no one is cured.” She paused. “Or everyone is cured.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” I said. “Unless it takes away people’s powers. The gods and demons wouldn’t go for that.”

“According to the book, everyone who already has powers would keep them,” she told me. “And they would no longer be dependent on the poison to survive. And since they were no longer being constantly poisoned, they would soon become fertile once more.”

“Why does this sound too good to be true?” I asked.

“Like I said, all Nectar and Venom would be spelled from existence. That means no more angels or dark angels could be made. And no more humans could gain magic by drinking the Nectar of the gods. Sierra, it would be the beginning of the end of the Legion of Angels.”

CHAPTER 7

AN OLD ENEMY

My mouth dropped, and I just stared at Cadence for several seconds before I said, “It would change everything.”

“But not necessarily for the worse.” She set her hand on my arm, offering me a smile. “Change is a part of life, Sierra. Sometimes we immortals forget that.”

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I left my grandparents' castle, my mind spinning. There was a cure, the answer to my parents' prayers. But it could mean the end of the Legion of Angels. It could mean the end to our entire way of life.

When I got home, my parents were already back. Dad was doing pushups. Mom was eating out of a tub of double chocolate chip brownie ice cream. That told me their mission had not gone well.

"You couldn't find the rings, could you?" I said.

"No." Dad stopped exercising. He grabbed a gym towel off the back of a chair and wiped down his face and neck. "We could not."

"Are you sure the rings are where you said?" Mom stared into her ice cream tub, frowning when she found it empty. She set it down on the counter with a sigh.

"That old immortal book said they were there." I closed my eyes. "And, yes, they're there." I opened them again. "I could go find them for you."

"No," both my parents said together.

I narrowed my eyes at them. "Why not?"

Mom set her hand on my shoulder. "It's too dangerous, Sierra."

"I've already fought and defeated one of the guardian beasts," I countered. "And I was only twelve when I did. I'm stronger now. Much stronger."

“I wasn’t talking about the guardian beasts, but, yes, those are a concern as well,” Mom said. “The danger I was referring to is Lavinia. She’s out for revenge.”

I snorted. “I think I can handle one pretty little princess. And besides, she’s not out for revenge against me. It’s you she wants, Mom. Maybe you should stay home. For your safety.”

“Lavinia most certainly wants revenge on me. And the best way to take revenge on me is to hurt my daughter.” Her mouth tightened. “You.”

“I am a soldier,” I declared. “It’s my duty to help.”

A smile twitched Dad’s lips.

“Don’t encourage her, Nero,” Mom sighed, then turned to me again. “You’re not a soldier yet, Sierra. You’re only sixteen years old.”

“I’m part Immortal, part god, part demon. I can handle it.”

Dad snorted.

Mom’s expression softened. She almost looked amused when she turned to Dad and asked, “Something in your throat, General?”

He quickly wiped his face blank, but he couldn’t hide the pride in his eyes as they looked upon me. “Your mother is right. You’re too young. The last time you went to recover one of those rings, a beast attacked you.”

“And I made short work of it,” I countered with a smile. “Thanks to your excellent training, Dad.”

He beamed at me.

“She’s trying to manipulate you,” Mom warned him.

Dad hit me with a proud smile. “Yes, and excelling at it too.”

“She does excel at that.” Mom’s expression was stuck somewhere between a smirk and a frown. “Sierra.” She set her hands on my shoulders. “We only want to keep you safe.”

“That’s a bit tough when everyone thinks I’m some kind of savior, so they all either want to kill me or use me.”

“Yeah, I know.” She exhaled. “It’s tough. But we’re your parents, and we love you more than anything in the universe. So we’re going to try to protect you no matter what. We’re a family, so we have to stick together. Always. Ok?”

“Ok.”

“Good, now I think it’s about time you finally finished your homework, don’t you? It’s due tomorrow, right?”

“No teacher is going to complain about late homework assignments if the world ends.”

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“True, but how about you do your homework anyway, just in case the world doesn’t end?”

“Fine.” I turned and went off to my room, shutting the door behind me. But I lingered next to it for a while.

“Are you really that worried about Lavinia?” Dad asked. “When we encountered her last, she did not strike me a formidable foe.”

“Never underestimate the power of a vengeful heart,” Mom replied. “Or the power of an Immortal artifact. Especially sixteen Immortal artifacts. And most especially sixteen Immortal artifacts with powers we do not truly understand. This is a volatile situation. We can’t encourage Sierra to be reckless.”

“That’s funny, coming from you,” he teased her.

“Yeah, I know. I’m reckless. But not with the lives of the people I love.”

“I know. Sierra couldn’t ask for a better mother.”

There was a note of longing in his tone. And now that I knew what I knew, I recognized it for what it was. He wanted to have more children. They both wanted to have more children.

“What are you doing?”

I turned at the sound of Troy’s voice. He was balanced in a crouch inside my open

window.

“I could ask you the same,” I replied. “What are you doing in my room?”

“I’m not technically in your room.” He swung his legs around and landed on my floor. “Now I am.”

“Smart-ass.” I snickered. “And you didn’t answer my question. What are you doing here?”

“Do I need a reason to visit my favorite angel?”

“Your dad’s an angel. And your brother’s an angel.”

“Your point being?”

“Shouldn’t they be your favorite angels?”

“Na. They’re boring. You’re way more interesting, Sierra.” He wrapped his arm around me.

And I peeled it off. I hit him with a hard look. “You’re bored, are you?”

“So. Very. Bored.” He fell back onto my bed.

“Get off my bed.”

“Why?”

I planted my hands on my hips. “Because if you don’t, I will set the sheets on fire all around you.”

“Hey, that’s my line.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

“One.”

“Oh, come on, Sierra.”

I lifted my hand. “Two.”

“Don’t tell me you’re getting boring too.”

“Three.” I rubbed my fingers together, igniting sparks.

He scrambled off the bed and away from me.

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“Thank you.” I clapped my hands together, and the sparks went out.

“What’s put you in such a mood?” he asked.

“You.”

“Yes, I do have that effect on girls.” He winked at me.

“Actually, I’m annoyed with you because you told the Dark Force about the rings. And where to find them.”

“Hey, calm down.” He lifted his hands in the air. “I only did it because Damon told his parents. The gods sent soldiers to search for the rings. The demons deserved the same chance. Got to preserve the balance of power, right?”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Troy Fireswift, master politician.”

“Yes, I am, aren’t I?”

“Let’s just be honest for a minute, Troy. You did it because you wanted to stir up some excitement. You did it because you were bored, didn’t you?”

He fluttered his eyelashes at me.

“Didn’t you?” I repeated, sinking more steel into my voice this time.

“Yes,” he admitted. “I was so freaking bored. I amstillbored, by the way. Let’s go on

an adventure!”

“Sorry.” I opened the textbook on my desk. “I have to do homework.”

“You don’t want to do homework, Sierra,” he said silkily. “You want to have fun.”

I looked at the book, then at him. “Your idea of fun always ends in trouble.”

“Begins and ends,” he agreed, grinning. “That’s what makes it fun. So, what do you say? Want to join me for an adventure?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Let’s show our parents that two teenagers can succeed where the armies of heaven and hell failed. Let’s find those rings.”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

“Nonsense!” he cooed. “It’s a spectacular idea. Unless you’re afraid?”

“Of course not.”

A mischievous smile twisted his lips.

“Ok, fine. I’ll come on this adventure of yours.” I shut the book. “You just try to keep up.”

CHAPTER 8

THE ORIGINAL SUPERNATURALS

It was just so easy. Defeating the original supernatural beasts wasn't even a challenge. Of course it wasn't. I mean, come on, I'd taken out the first one when I was only twelve. Single-handedly. Now I had four years more of experience, and Troy Fireswift by my side.

"As far as sidekicks go, you're not half-bad," I told him as the vampire beast fell dead to the ground with a thunderous roar that shook the treasure chamber.

He snorted. "Who says I am the sidekick?"

"I do. But only because I'm generous." I allowed a smirk to slowly curl my lips.

Troy mirrored my expression, though his smile showed a bit more teeth. "Cute."

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“Of course I am.” I snatched the ring off its pedestal. “Cute and badass.”

“You know, badass, one of these days, you’re going to meet an enemy that you can’t one-hit,” he warned me.

I laughed. “That hasn’t happened yet.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Do you ever get sick of being so perfect?”

“Nope.” I pointed at his boots. “You might want to take care of that.”

He looked down to discover that his shoelaces were on fire. He quickly stomped out the flames. “How did that happen?”

“It happened when you were throwing fire potions around with reckless abandon,” I told him. “You should try showing off a little less.”

For some reason, my statement made him laugh.

I frowned. “What?”

“You’re hilarious, Sierra.”

The heavy stone treasury door creaked open, and we prepared to leave. But a team of soldiers marched into the vault, barring the way. They were gods.

“What are you doing here?” I asked Stash, my mom’s cousin.

“We’re here to escort you home.”

I sighed. Of course they were.

“You guys couldn’t find the vault before. So how did you find us now?” I asked.

“We followed the trail of dead monsters,” Punch said with glee.

They were all here, all my mom’s friends from Heaven’s Army: Stash, Patch, Punch, Devlin, Arabelle, Octavian, and Theon.

“You’re even more trouble than your mother,” Octavian observed, and he too looked quite pleased with the notion.

My mom had weird friends.

Then again, my dad’s friends were weird too. His friend Harker enjoyed doing wing pushups. His friend Li had his entire bookcase sorted by color. And General Silverstar ironed his shoelaces and ate the same three meals every day. Ok, so technically General Silverstar was Dad’s grandfather, but still. He was the weirdest one of all.

“What are you doing here?” Stash demanded.

The question wasn’t directed at me. It was for the new arrivals, a team of demon soldiers.

“Grace sent us,” said Aerilyn, the notorious dark angel trickster.

She was another one of my mom’s cousins.

“Well, Faris sent us,” Stash told her.

Aerilyn’s brows lifted slightly. “To find Sierra?”

“Yes.”

She smiled. “Same.”

Great. So my parents had asked the King of the Gods and the Queen of the Demons to send their armies to come find me. The armies of heaven and hell were out searching for me like I was some kind of lost puppy. How embarrassing.

The gods and demons spent the next fifteen minutes alternatively glaring at one another and fighting over who got to drag me home kicking and screaming. And all the while, they were blocking the way out.

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I couldn't teleport in or out of this weird chamber—it must have been something in the rocks—so I was stuck. I could have bowled over the demons and gods, but if I did that, my parents would ground me for the next century. They still might. I had snuck out of the house and gone looking for the rings against their explicit instructions.

“Thank you, guys. You can go. We'll take it from here,” my mom said as she squeezed between Aerilyn and Stash to enter the vault.

Dad was right behind her. He was dressed for war. In addition to all the armor and weapons, he wore a blank expression.

Crap. I was so grounded.

“Lord Faris instructed us to bring Sierra to him,” Devlin told my mom.

“I'm sure he did,” she replied with a tight smile. “But I'm telling you to leave.”

He frowned.

“We were also instructed to bring Sierra with us,” said one of the demons.

“You may all remind Faris and Grace that we are Sierra's parents, not they,” she continued.

“There is a chain of command to be follow?—”

“Furthermore, you guys can remind Grace and Faris I'm on both councils,” she cut

him off. “In other words, all of you can get out of my way now before I smite the lot of you and have a very good time doing it.”

The gods and demons withdrew, some looking more willing than others. Mom asked Stash to bring Troy back home, which left me alone in the vault with my parents.

“You have tears in your clothes,” Dad noted. “And blood on your skin.”

“I’m fine,” I assured him. “Just a few minor bumps and bruises. None of my injuries were severe. They’ve all already healed.”

Mom winced. “I am trying real hard not to think about how you got injured, Sierra.”

“Look at her, Pandora. See the proud, excited light in her eyes.” Dad addressed me now. “I take it that means you were successful?”

Wait, no lecture about running off alone? I held my breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Yes. I got them all. All sixteen.” I dug into my pockets and fished out all the rings.

My parents just stood there, silent and...no, not angry. They definitely weren’t angry. They looked resigned, like they’d decided I was a lost cause and there was nothing they could do about it.

“Look, I’m sorry I went off after the rings when you told me not to,” I said. “It’s just that I knew I could find them, and we had to find them before Lavinia did, and then Troy showed up and, well, he might have egged me on a little. And I know I shouldn’t have, but I was...” My voice trailed off. There was something so wrong about the expressions on their faces. “What is it? What happened?”

Mom took a slow breath, then said, “While you were out, Cadence came to us with important news. She’s been reading through the Immortal books. And she’s figured out what Lavinia is trying to do.”

“Which is?” I asked eagerly, leaning in.

“The rings are more than the sum of their parts,” Dad told me. “They link together to form a necklace. But only after all the rings are powered up.”

“And how are they powered up?”

“Each of sixteen rings can be powered up,” Dad said, pausing to glance at the dead beast on the ground. “By killing the corresponding original beast. The magic of the beast—ancient, primal power—is then transferred to the ring.”

“Once all the rings are powered-up—once they’re primed with that magic—they can combine into a necklace,” Mom said.

“What does the necklace do?”

“It combines the powers the rings absorbed from the sixteen original supernaturals,” she said. “The person who wears the necklace can perform a ritual to become the ultimate being, someone who will wield powers far beyond anyone or anything we have ever seen.”

“Lavinia,” I gasped. “That’s what she’s planning on doing. She is going to make herself that ultimate being.”

“And then she will take her revenge.” Mom glanced at Dad.

“We’ll stop her,” he declared.

“Stop her? But I’ve already helped her!” I looked at the sixteen rings in my hands. “I thought I was stopping Lavinia by getting those rings and defeating the beasts, but I wasn’t. I was actually activating them for her. I was giving her everything that she needs.”

CHAPTER 9

FAMILY

Ifelt so incredibly stupid. I’d thought I was playing the hero, that I was stopping the bad guy, but it was just a trick, a manipulation. Lavinia had tricked me into killing those super-powered ancient supernaturals. She’d tricked me into helping her.

But that’s not what my dad was lecturing me about right now.

“Sierra, you must exercise more self-discipline in battle,” he said. “Not everyone is as resilient as you are.”

“Meaning?”

“I saw the singe marks on Troy Fireswift’s shoelaces. Friendly fire is a very real possibility when you’re too zealous with your magic.”

I could have told him that it was actually Troy’s fault that his shoelaces got burnt, but I was too annoyed with myself right now to argue with my dad. Actually, he was

probably only critiquing my battlefield performance to distract me from the fact that I'd screwed up big time.

I sighed.

"I know how you're feeling," Mom said, setting a hand on my shoulder.

"I doubt it." I shrugged her off. I didn't deserve to be comforted, not after what I'd done. "I let Troy egg me on. And why? Honestly, because I was bored and arrogant. I thought I knew better than the armies of heaven and hell. I thought I was hot shit. I wanted to be the one to solve this, to be the hero, like in all the stories you and Dad have told me. I wanted to do important, impossible things, just like you. Instead, I messed up. This whole thing is all my fault."

"Hey, your dad and I messed up plenty of times," she said. "It isn't your fault that bad people do bad things."

"If I hadn't helped her—if I hadn't killed the sixteen beasts—the rings' true power would still be locked."

"And if I hadn't thwarted Lavinia's plans to be Queen all those years ago, she wouldn't have gone after the rings in the first place," she countered. "So, you see, if you're going to blame yourself, Sierra, you might as well blame me too."

Her words made sense, but even so, they didn't make me feel any better. "Don't you understand? This was supposed to be my big thing, my debut. My story. My victory." A heavy sigh seized my chest. "And instead I helped the bad guy. I defeated the beasts. I activated the rings. I put the universe in danger. I might as well get myself a villain t-shirt and make it official. I'm evil."

"You are not evil." Mom wrapped her arm around me, and this time she wouldn't let

me squirm away. “Good and evil are not as simple as black and white. You made a mistake. I’ve made plenty, and I’ll keep making them. If you’re not making mistakes, you’re not trying hard enough to make the world a better place. You will find a way to make this right. I promise. And that journey starts here.”

I’d been so caught up in my worries that I hadn’t noticed where we were going until we were standing there, right outside Calli’s house in Purgatory.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Family dinner,” Mom told me.

I shook my head. “This is no time for dinner parties.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong, Sierra. This is precisely the time for that.” She rang the doorbell. “In bad times, families have to come together. Besides, maybe this will be a nice distraction from everything that’s troubling you.”

“I very much doubt I can be distracted.”

“I learned long ago that there’s no point in arguing with your mother when she’s made up her mind,” Dad told me.

Mom smirked at him. The door opened, and Aunt Gin ushered us inside. Aunt Tessa and Aunt Bella were there too and Uncle Zane. Then Calli came out of the kitchen carrying a bowl of hot dinner rolls, fresh out of the oven. We moved into the dining room, and as we sat down to dinner and dug into the good food and banter, I had to admit that some of the gloom was lifting from my mind.

It was all just so normal compared to everything else that was going on in my life. The taste of gossip was far sweeter than the bitter worry that weighed on me when the

future of the whole universe was in the balance.

Halfway through dinner, General Silverstar arrived. The archangel was ancient. He was so old, he was practically a living fossil.

“You would know. Dinosaurs roamed the Earth when you were a kid,” I teased my great-grandfather when he made one of his usual statements about the depravity of modern society.

“Yes, and I must say, I look quite good for someone who is over 200 million years old,” he replied.

His response made me laugh.

“I didn’t think General Silverstar even knew how to make a joke,” I said.

Aunt Tessa winked at me. “Actually, I don’t think he was kidding.”

“Sierra, could you help me with the dessert?” Calli asked.

“Of course.” I followed her into the kitchen.

“How are you?” she asked as she took the cherry pie out of the oven.

“What do you mean?”

She set the steaming pie on the stove. “Well, you are the most powerful magic user in the world, perhaps even in all the worlds.”

I opened the freezer and retrieved a tub of vanilla ice cream. “And?”

“And it can be a terrible burden to feel you need to live up to such great expectations.”

I frowned. “My parents told you what happened, didn’t they?”

“They haven’t told me anything,” she replied. “Is there something to tell?”

I clutched the ice cream tub to me.

Calli watched me. “No one is expecting anything from you, Sierra, except that you’re happy. You don’t have to prove anything. You don’t have to save the world every other week.” She set her hand on my arm and smiled. “You don’t have to be your parents. You can be your own person. And whoever that may be, whatever that may be, I know you will be magnificent.”

I blinked back tears. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For not talking to me like I’m just a kid,” I sighed.

“What’s wrong, Sierra?”

“I messed up, Calli.” I looked down at my feet. “I messed up badly.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

But I told her anyway, all about Lavinia and the rings.

“I’m the one who messed it up,” I finished. “So I have to be the one to fix it.”

“You’re very much like your mother, you know,” she said after a reflective pause. “Leda also always puts the weight of the world on her shoulders. But, please, whatever you do, remember that you aren’t alone. You can always count on your family. You can call on us anytime, anywhere, and we will come.”

“Thanks.”

“So,” she said, nibbling on a tiny piece of pie crust that had broken off from the pan.
“How do we stop Lavinia’s plans?”

I shook my head. “If only I knew.”

“There’s something else bothering you,” Calli commented. “Something you have not shared.”

“How did you know?”

She chuckled. “I have been a mother for a very long time, Sierra. Mothers can sense these things.”

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I wondered if my own mother knew I was hiding something from her. But what good would come of telling her? It would only make her sad. She would never act on it. She would never put herself above everyone else.

I could tell Calli, however. And so I did. I told her everything I knew about the Cure.

When I was done, Calli paced back and forth across the kitchen a few times, then turned to face me. “You want to do the spell, don’t you?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Who am I to decide all of this for everyone?”

The ring of the doorbell drew us out of the kitchen. My mom’s cousin Aerilyn had arrived.

“Hey, Foxy,” she greeted Zane with a wink, leaning her back casually against the wall.

“No, I will not have sex with you, Aerilyn.”

“I wasn’t asking.”

“You never ask.” He sighed. “You insist.”

“Really?” Mischief twinkled in her eyes. “That doesn’t sound at all like me.”

“No, of course not,” he replied, heavy on the sarcasm.

“Not to worry. I’m immortal. I have all the time in the universe.” She took the plate of pie Calli handed her. “And I’m persistent.”

“Annoyingly persistent,” Zane grumbled.

“Stop flirting with me, Zane Pierce. It only makes you look desperate.” She winked at him. “But such dalliances will have to wait, I’m afraid. I’m here on official business.” She looked at my mom. “Leda, Grace sent me to serve as Sierra’s bodyguard.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard,” I protested.

“Yes, clearly.” Aerilyn smiled at me. “You certainly haven’t thrown yourself into mortal peril.”

“Did Grace send you to protect me?” I asked her. “Or to make sure I didn’t mess up anything else?”

“It wounds me that you would even need to ask that, Sierra,” Grace declared as she and Faris walked into the dining room.

They must have been standing in the front lounge, just waiting for their chance to make a dramatic entrance. Deities. They always had to be the center of attention.

“We are aware of Lavinia’s plans. And the unfortunate turn of events,” Faris added, glancing at me. But then his eyes were back on my mom. “She plans to take revenge on you?”

“Very likely.”

“Leda,” Faris said with a dramatic sigh. “You do excel at making enemies.”

Her eyes locked with his. “Look who’s talking, Pops.”

“I will send more soldiers to protect you and the rings.” Faris glanced at Grace.

“It will be difficult,” she said. “My soldiers are otherwise engaged.”

Faris’s eyes drew together. “You aren’t planning on attacking me again, are you, Grace?”

“Don’t be so self-centered, Faris. Not everything I do is about you.”

“Then what is it about?” he countered.

“If you must know, some of my facilities have experienced recent break-ins. My soldiers are busy investigating.”

“Thefts?” he asked.

“Vandalisms, actually.”

His lips thinned.

“You’ve experienced something similar, haven’t you?” Grace said.

“Yes.”

“There’s also been vandalism at the New York University of Witchcraft.” I looked at Bella. “Right, Aunt Bella?”

“Actually, as it turns out, the vandalism was used to cover up something else,” she said. “Theft.”

Faris and Grace both frowned.

“The thieves vandalized the premises so we wouldn’t be looking for a thief, so we wouldn’t realize something had been taken,” Bella continued. “But I am very meticulous in my inventory-keeping. Things are missing that weren’t found in the debris.”

“What was taken?” my mom asked her.

“Fire lily extract.”

“Fire lily extract?” I chewed on that. “Isn’t that used as a catalyst for explosives?”

Bella nodded. “Yes. But there are other uses.”

“Was there anything missing from your facilities?” I asked Faris and Grace.

“You shouldn’t be getting involved in this, child,” Faris told me.

“Answer my daughter’s question,” Mom snapped.

“I have no idea if anything was taken. My soldiers told me it was vandalism, likely some boorish agitators trying to make noise to get a little attention for themselves.” He stroked his chin. “I will call them to see if anything turned up missing from the facility.”

Grace grabbed her phone. “I will do the same.”

“There’s something else,” Bella said as Faris and Grace went off to make their calls. “I was going to wait until after dessert to share this with you, but given what else is going on...”

“What is it, Bella?” my mom asked.

Bella pulled out her phone. “The thief was very careful to avoid the university’s security cameras—and even destroyed some of them—but we did manage to catch a face on one of the hidden cameras.”

We all gathered around to see what was on Bella’s screen.

“It’s her.” Mom looked at Dad. “It’s Lavinia.”

“Ok,” he replied, his tone perfectly level. At times like these, my dad didn’t have room for emotion, only strategy. “We need to figure out exactly what Lavinia stole

from all the facilities she broke into. We need to know what all those things make when combined. And then we need to stop her before she makes her next move.”

CHAPTER 10

ORDER AND CHAOS

Faris and Grace came back with the reports of what had been stolen from the gods’ and demons’ facilities. We spent the next several hours looking through them, trying to figure out what all those random magical herbs made when they were put together.

We didn’t have a clue.

But Cadence did. She and Daniel arrived sometime around midnight for a little magical knowledge backup.

“All those herbs put together,” she said, “it’s the formula for the Cure.”

“The cure to what?” Bella asked.

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“The Cure to Nectar and Venom,” I told her.

“The gods put a great deal of effort into mining Nectar,” said Faris.

“And the demons put a great deal of effort into mining Venom,” Grace added.

“So why should we wish to ‘cure’ it?” Faris huffed, looking quite indignant.

I looked at Cadence. “Do you want to explain it?”

And so she did. She told everyone how the Immortals had developed a Cure to counter the infertility caused by the poisons in Nectar and Venom. And that it was an all-or-nothing spell. Either everyone was cured, or no one was.

“So if this Cure is cast, it will wipe out all Nectar and Venom in the universe?” Nero said.

“Yes,” replied Cadence.

“Preposterous!” growled Faris.

“Agreed,” said Grace.

“Gods and demons would keep all their powers, and they would have no more dependency on poison,” Bella pointed out. “You could have children.”

“We already have a child,” Faris snapped with a glare for my mother, “and she is

trouble enough as it is.”

“I never thought I would say this, but I agree with Faris,” Aerilyn said. “Sure, the Cure would remove our dependency on Venom, but without Venom, we would also find ourselves unable to create new soldiers for the Dark Force.”

Harker nodded. “And the Legion of Angels. No, this is a very bad thing.”

“The effect of this extends far beyond the Dark Force and the Legion. Demons and gods would be unable to give anyone the gift of magic. We couldn’t make new witches, vampires, or any other supernaturals.” Grace’s glance slid to Faris. “Things would go back to the way they used to be, before we could bestow magic on humans.”

An ominous shadow darkened his face.

“How were things back then?” I asked.

“Bad,” Faris cut out. “Times were dark. There was so much waste.” His gaze shifted uneasily. “So much death.”

I couldn’t imagine what ‘too much’ death looked like to Faris, but apparently even brutal gods had their limits.

As though he’d read my thoughts, Faris said to me, “You think us cruel and callous, child, but back then, it was so much worse. We were all so much worse. We had to be. In order to survive.”

Grace’s lips thinned, and her cheeks paled. What the hell had the gods and demons done that was so bad, so horrible, that they could scarcely bear to think of it now? Deities weren’t known to be squeamish when it came to dealing out death and

destruction.

“Everything changed when we discovered how to give magic to humans,” Grace said. “We can’t go back to the way things were. It would destroy everything we have worked for these past few centuries.”

“Things would not go back to the way they were,” my dad spoke up. “Because unlike before, deities would be free of their dependence on Nectar and Venom. They would be able to have children more easily, unhindered by the poisons’ side effects. And so, unlike before, you would be able to replace your fallen soldiers in the armies of heaven and hell.”

“That’s only part of it,” Faris said coolly.

“Yes, and now we come to the crux of the issue.” Dad’s eyes hardened. “Power. This is about power. Your power.” He folded his arms over his chest. “You’re afraid you will start to lose your hold over your worshippers if you can no longer perform this miracle, if you do not have the power to bestow magic on people.”

“That is ridiculous,” Faris snapped back. “We fear no such thing.”

Dad’s eyes locked with his, and he didn’t disengage. “I don’t believe you.”

“So you want to let Lavinia cast this so-called Cure?”

“Actually, no. I believe we need to do everything in our power to stop her.”

Faris looked genuinely surprised.

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“After the Cure, deities would be able to have offspring with magic, but the same isn’t true of angels,” Dad said. “The children of angels are not usually born with magic. With no new soldiers to replace those who fall in battle—and no way to level up the soldiers we already have—the Legion and the Dark Force would die out in a matter of decades. And then who would protect the humans?”

Dad was looking out for the greater good over his own personal wishes. That was so like him.

“Lavinia cannot be allowed to use that Cure,” my dad declared. “No matter what else that means,” he added, taking Mom’s hand.

“You’re right,” she replied. Her nod was slow but certain. “We need to preserve the Legion, humanity’s protectors. If the Legion falls, who will protect humanity? Certainly not the gods and the demons.”

“What about Nerissa’s project?” Bella asked. “Wasn’t she looking for alternative ways to give people magic based on the Immortals’ research?”

“On one Immortal’s research, actually,” Mom said, “and even after all these years, Nerissa has only just scratched the surface of that research. She doesn’t understand how it works in theory, let alone how to recreate it in practice. Nectar and Venom are still the only methods we can use to accurately and reliably give someone magic. For now, they’re all we’ve got. We can’t lose them.”

Silence filled the room while everyone mulled that over.

“There’s one thing I don’t get,” Tessa said finally. “Why does Lavinia even want to do this spell, this Cure?”

“Yeah,” Gin agreed. “Why can’t she just use Nectar and Venom on herself to gain magic, like any sensible person?”

Their words were somewhat ironic, of course. There wasn’t anything inherently sensible about Nectar or Venom. They were poisons, plain and simple. And taking them was literally do-or-die. You were either strong enough to survive the poison and it leveled up your magic, or you died.

But I knew what my aunts meant. There was already an established way to gain magic. And here Lavinia was, spending years of her life working on this plan that involved two very old, very obscure Immortal research projects.

“Most magic doesn’t work on Lavinia’s people,” Mom said. “So it’s questionable whether Nectar and Venom would do anything to her. In fact, I doubt either substance would give her any magic at all.”

“Even if it could work, from what you’ve told us of her, I don’t believe she would use it,” Cadence said. “Someone like that would not wish to be weakened, to be dependent on poison to survive.”

“And as to why Lavinia wishes to get rid of Nectar and Venom entirely, she sounds like a real cuckoo,” said Damiel. “This is about power. She wants it all for herself. She must believe what Faris and Grace fear, that without the power to bestow magic on humans, the gods and demons will lose their hold on their followers. And then there she is, powered up and primed to take their place.”

“Lavinia couldn’t be the Queen of her world, but she intends to be the Queen of Magic,” Mom said quietly.

“Ok, this is all swell, but how do we stop her?” I asked, addressing the whole room.

“I believe there is a way, and it’s in here,” Cadence said, showing us the book in her hands. It was Transformations. “This book tells us that magic is not as simple as light and dark, active and passive. There’s a third axis, a third dimension.” Her gaze shifted from Dad to Mom. “Order and chaos.”

“Ok,” Mom said. “So how does that help us?”

“Lavinia’s rituals—the rings ritual, the Cure ritual—are spells of order. Of precision,” Cadence said. “But if we could dial up the chaos while she is performing them, if we could inject chaos into the spells, they might fall apart.”

“So when Lavinia tries to drain magic from the rings, the power they’ve collected from the original supernaturals—pure magic—the chaos makes it all go wonky and overloads the spell?” Mom asked.

“That is the theory,” Cadence said. “But it is only a theory.”

“Well, it’s worth a shot,” Mom said. “I’ll do it.”

“You?” Dad frowned.

“Who better than me?” She smirked at him. “I am the Angel of Chaos, after all.”

“There is a catch,” Cadence said.

“There always is,” Mom chuckled. “So, what is it this time? Do I have to drink some weird potion or wear special armor?”

“No, Leda.” She set her hand on my mom’s shoulder. “You have to die.”

CHAPTER 11

CORONATION

“That is not an option,” my dad declared.

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I agreed. “There has to be another way to stop Lavinia.”

“Well, we could just kill her,” Daniel said. “That would stop her quite effectively.”

Faris nodded. “We should do it now. She cannot be allowed to perform that ritual.”

“We don’t know where she is,” Grace said. “Yet.”

Everyone looked at me.

“You’re the best magic tracker we have, Sierra,” Dad said. “Can you locate Lavinia?”

“I can certainly try.”

I closed my eyes and focused on Lavinia. It had been a long time since I’d seen her, over a decade. I hardly remembered what her magic felt like. I did remember it felt weird. All the people on her world felt weird, like they were out of phase, out of sync, with the rest of us.

There was someone else whose magic felt that way. Two someones actually. Cupid and Dreamweaver. They’d gotten their magic when my mom’s army had destroyed the Guardians’ Sanctuary. Where had Lavinia’s people gotten their magic from?

“Where are the sixteen rings?” Daniel asked.

“Safe,” Grace replied gruffly, like the question was an affront to her competence as an all-powerful demon.

I kept my eyes closed and tried to drown out their voices. I had to focus on Lavinia. I had to find her. And stop her. This whole thing was my fault. I'd activated the rings. I'd made her crazy plan possible.

Now I had to make it impossible.

"I can sense her," I said.

I felt two hands on my shoulders.

"Where is she?" Mom asked behind me.

"She's...in transit. Going somewhere."

"Where is she going?" Faris asked impatiently.

"I don't know yet, but there's something else. A strange presence with her. A strange power. It's..." I opened my eyes. "It's the rings. She has the rings."

Faris swore. I didn't even know gods did that.

"How did she get them?" Mom asked.

"There's a spell book. Or maybe it's more of an instruction manual for the rings? She used it to summon all of the rings to her. Now she has them."

"Where is she?" Grace said. "We need to get to her now. We need to stop her now. Time has run out."

"I can see her." I shook my head. "But I don't know where she is."

Mom took one of my hands. Dad took the other.

“You can do this, Sierra,” he told me. “I have faith in you.”

“Ok.” I swallowed hard. “She’s in a cave. The rocks are glowing. And humming. There’s something special about them. They’re reacting to the rings’ magic. She’s going to use them to amplify the rituals.”

“Do you know where this cave is?” Mom wiped the sweat from my forehead. The strain of tracking Lavinia across worlds was intense. I was sweating everywhere.

“I think I can find it. Just one more moment...”

I felt a rough jolt, so sudden and strong that I toppled over. And I took my parents with me. We fell right through the floor like it wasn’t even there. There wasn’t anything anywhere except empty, black space. It was a void, a pit of nothingness. I couldn’t see anything, hear anything, feel anything—except for my parents’ hands, holding tightly to mine.

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And then it was over. We slammed against the ground. I definitely felt that.

“Everyone ok?” Dad asked.

“Yes.” I peeled myself off the rocks, rising, stretching. My neck cracked. A few other things cracked too.

“Where are we?” Mom wondered, looking around.

I didn’t need to. I already knew where we were. Those shimmering, humming rocks were strikingly familiar. They were still burned into my mind, an echo from my vision. I must have teleported us here without even meaning to.

“Lavinia is that way.” I pointed at the ragged, jagged opening in the rocks, like the mouth of a beast. Like a doorway to evil.

And evil we did find.

Lavinia stood in the middle of the cavern, enveloped in a glowing halo, a pulsing bubble of magical energy that changed color with every beat. Red, purple, white, blue, orange...more and more colors, flashing like a light show.

She had the rings, all sixteen of them. But they’d changed. They’d linked together, forming a long chain which she wore around her neck. The necklace, the halo, the rocks—they were all flickering and flashing in perfect harmony.

“Leda Pandora, we meet again.” She sneered at my mom. “I know why you’re here.”

“To stop you,” Mom declared, taking an assertive step forward.

“Yes.” Lavinia’s smirk stretched wider. “But you’re too late. This is my show. My coronation. I shall dine at this all-you-can-eat buffet of magic, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

Dad drew his sword, swinging at the glowing bubble around her. The blade bounced right off.

Lavinia cackled. “As I said, there’s nothing you can do to stop me. You’re too late. The ritual has already begun, and you can’t stop it. I will become the most powerful magical being in the universe, and destroy all other magic at the same time. This is the end for you.” Her gaze cut to me. “For all of you.”

“You’re a moron,” I told her.

Her nostrils flared.

“You obviously don’t understand those ancient books you read,” I continued. “Your spell won’t destroy all other magic. It will only destroy all Nectar and Venom. That’s hardly the same thing.”

“The effect will be the same, the end of dominance for the gods and the demons,” she snapped back. “It will just take longer. I can wait. And watch. And reign.”

“Who is going to follow you?” I laughed.

“They will. You’ll see.”

“No. They won’t,” I told her.

“I will be Queen!” she hissed. The magic bubble surged up around her, like an ocean wave crashing against the rocks.

“Take out that barrier,” Dad said in his angel-commander voice.

The three of us hit it with everything we had, a formidable artillery of magic. The bubble didn’t so much as whimper. It was humming faster and faster, burning brighter and brighter, building up to the finale. In a few seconds, the two rituals would be over, their spells cast.

Pulse. Pulse. Pulse.

Bam. Bam. Bam.

It was all happening so fast now. The blinking and humming. It wasn’t even really a hum anymore; it was a thump. A slam. A scream.

Lavinia was screaming in agony.

“Something’s wrong,” I said. “The spells have gone wrong.”

Power was bursting out of the chain of rings. Lavinia caught on fire. The sharp taste of metal stung my tongue. I knew that flavor. It was the taste of impending disaster.

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“It’s too much magic. She never should have tried to cast both spells at once,” I said.
“The rings are building up to an overload.”

Lavinia wasn’t screaming anymore. She wasn’t moving either. I didn’t think she was even breathing. And yet the spells continued on, spiraling toward catastrophe.

“No.” Dad caught Mom’s hand as she moved toward the barrier.

“I have to stop the spells.”

“No,” he growled, pulling her in close, kissing her head.

“It’s the only way, Nero. You heard Sierra. You see it for yourself. The spells are building up to an overload, and when that happens...” She glanced at me.

“This is old magic. Powerful magic.” My heart thumped. “The explosion will tear a hole in the fabric of time and space. It will destroy everything and everyone.”

“We’ll stop it,” Dad said, his hands shaking, even as they clutched Mom’s arms.
“We’ll find a way. We always find a way, Leda.”

“Not this time.” A tear slid down her cheek. “There’s no time. I have to stop the spells, stop the overload. There is no other way.”

“There is,” he said. “I will do it.”

“You can’t,” she said with a pained laugh. “You heard Cadence. Only chaos can

disrupt the spells. I am chaos.”

Tears were falling from his eyes too now. “I won’t let you do this. I won’t let you sacrifice yourself.”

“It’s a small price to pay to save the people I love.” She smiled at him. “It’s been fun, Nero.”

“It’s not over.” He refused to let her go.

And so did I. I wouldn’t lose either one of them. I just wouldn’t.

So I rushed toward the barrier, into the barrier. At first, I felt nothing. I was just stuck there, neither in nor out, suspended, frozen. I heard a crack, the boom before the avalanche. The forcefield shattered. It cracked like an egg, splitting open. The spells fizzled out and died.

And so did I.

CHAPTER 12

NEW BEGINNINGS

The good news was I wasn’t dead for more than a few moments, at least according to my parents. Apparently, when I’d charged into the magic bubble, the shock to my body was so severe that my heart stopped. They restarted it, and now here I was alive and breathing.

In other good news, my parents were also both still alive and I’d prevented the end of the universe. So yay.

Of course, there was also bad news.

While I'd saved the universe and stopped Lavinia from becoming the all-powerful Queen of Magic, I hadn't managed to stop the Cure.

Or maybe it wasn't bad news?

On the one hand, there wasn't any Nectar or Venom anymore. On the other hand, deities and angels weren't dependent on a poison to survive; and also, with time, as the poison faded from their bodies, they would have a much easier time having children.

Time would tell whether the Cure was good or bad, but one thing was for sure: the Cure had changed everything.

"The world—the universe—just got a hard reset, and nothing will ever be the same," Eira said.

She was visiting me in the Legion's Purgatory medical ward, where I'd been recovering for the last couple of weeks. Yes, weeks. I felt fine, but my overly-protective parents insisted that I needed 24/7 medical supervision. I guess my brush with death had them pretty freaked out.

It was so boring here. But at least they'd given me an extra large bed so Snow could sleep with me.

"Yes," I agreed. "The gods, the demons, the Legion of Angels, the Dark Force...everything is different now. I wonder what will happen next. How will people get magic? There's no Nectar anymore. There's no Venom anymore."

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“How about the Immortals?” Eira said. “They created the gods and demons. They can give people magic.”

“That was long ago,” Sunfire declared as he entered the room with my parents. “Only very few of us ever possessed such a power, and they are long gone. Those of us who remain can only bestow magic on people with the help of Nectar or Venom.”

“So that’s it?” I looked at him, at Eira, at my parents. “It’s all over? The Legion of Angels is finished?”

“Absolutely not,” Dad replied. “As always, we will soldier on. This isn’t the first setback the Legion has experienced.”

“Yeah, but you’ve got to admit it’s a pretty big setback,” I said. “You can’t make new soldiers. And you can’t level up the ones you have.”

“We will find a way.” Dad’s face was calm, and there wasn’t even a hint of panic present in his level voice.

“In fact, we might have a solution.” Mom looked at Sunfire.

The Immortal squeezed his cheeks in. “I have an idea. It’s not a solution just yet. But with time and patience, it could become one.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“You have encountered individuals who got their magic from something other than

Nectar or Venom.”

“Cupid and Dreamcatcher!” I realized. “They got their magic when the Guardians’ Sanctuary was ripped open.”

“That event resulted in a sizable release of magic,” Sunfire said. “The magic had to go somewhere. It went into the humans nearby, transforming them. Giving them magical abilities.”

“So you can recreate another sizable release of magic?” I asked. “And use that to give people magic?”

“It won’t be that easy,” replied Sunfire. “It’s unlikely that we could create another event of that magical magnitude, but we might be able to channel smaller amounts of magic. With time. And research. To start, I will need bodies.”

“Bodies?” I looked at Eira. “Like deadbodies?”

Sunfire nodded. “When someone dies, their magic isn’t lost. In the case of Immortal artifacts—and Nectar and Venom—that magic is channeled into something else. Well, what if we could channel the magic from those who die? What if we could channel it into the living?”

“You could make new Legion soldiers,” I told my parents. “Even without any Nectar.”

Mom nodded. “Yes.”

“Theoretically,” Sunfire reminded us.

“We will turn that theory into a reality,” Dad told him.

Mom took his hand. “If we’ve learned anything over the years, it’s that there’s always a way if you’re just stubborn enough to find it.”

“You are that, Pandora.”

She smirked at him. “Look who’s talking.”

I laughed at them. “You’re both as stubborn as they come.”

“As are you,” Dad told me.

“Yeah, well, I am your kid, after all,” I replied.

“Speaking of kids,” Sunfire said, saying the word like he didn’t quite approve of such things, “you should be aware that many things will change now that the Cure was cast.”

“They already have,” Mom said, winking at Dad.

“Pandora?” His voice was quiet, almost reverent.

She grinned at him. “Yes.”

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“Huh?” I frowned at my parents. “What am I missing?”

Mom peeled her lovey-dovey gaze away from Dad, meeting my eyes. “Sierra.” She drew in a deep breath. “You’re going to be a big sister.”

“Huh.” I blinked. “That happened fast.”

“Fast,” she repeated, chuckling. “Right. It only took sixteen years.”

Dad kissed Mom, then gazed upon her like she’d just given him the world. It was kind of sweet. Kind of. They were my parents, after all, and I really didn’t need to see them kiss or make googly eyes at each other.

“Wait,” I said, a new thought stopping me dead in my tracks. “Does this mean I’ll have to share my room?”

We all laughed. And through that laughter, my heart lightened. The world was different now—wild and unpredictable and chaotic—but through all that, at least I had the people I loved. Together we would face the future. Together we could do anything.