



Camael (Dark Warrior Alliance #27)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A warrior archangel with nothing left to lose

As the leader of Heavens elite Angels of Retribution, Camael has spent millennia delivering divine justice. When Lucifer breaks free and threatens to unleash primordial chaos, Camael knows hes the only one who can stop his fallen brother. He just never expected that his greatest challenge could come in the form of a green-eyed witch who makes his ancient heart race

A witch with extraordinary power that could save them all

Amelia was born to channel both shadow and light a gift that marks her as the key to preventing cosmic catastrophe. As corruption spreads like a virus through New Orleans, she must master abilities that havent been seen since Creation itself. The last thing she needs is an overprotective archangel distracting her with heated glances and soul-searing touches.

A collision between Heaven and Hell

With fallen angels stealing innocent fledglings and supernatural barriers cracking, Camael and Amelia join forces to prevent reality itself from unraveling. But as their explosive attraction threatens to ignite into a passion that transcends the divine, they discover their forbidden bond might be the universes last hope. In a war between good and evil, will their love be powerful enough to save existence itself?

Dont miss this sizzling new series where celestial warfare meets steamy romance in the sultry heart of the Big Easy.

Total Pages (Source): 22

CHAPTER 1

The cotton shirt was giving Camael holy hell. The shirt was tight across his chest in all the wrong ways. It made him jones for his white toga, like a junkie needing a fix. And wasn't that just perfect? He'd been through multiple millennia of celestial warfare. Here he was, getting punked by some designer label that Rami swore was 'essential for blending in'.

Truth? The archangel was supposed to be all about that live-and-let-live lifestyle. No judgment, open mind, and welcoming all perspectives. You know, the whole kumbaya package. At least that's what he kept telling himself while staring at his reflection in the bathroom mirror like it might offer up some divine wisdom.

His ice-blue eyes stared back at him. The familiar sight of his hard-as-diamonds and twice-as-sharp peepers was reassuring. Not everything was unfamiliar. There was a reason for his current get-up. The new threads might be a pain in his ass, but even he had to admit they worked with his build. All six-feet-four-inches of warrior muscle. Contrary to what many might believe, he'd earned his physique through endless centuries of celestial throwdowns.

His jaw was strong enough to cut glass, and his face... well, humans tended to stare. Apparently, being carved from divine light had that effect on the ladies. True story. This was the second time in his endless existence that he was questioning his own damn sanity.

With a curse that would've made a lesser immortal blush, he yanked at the offending fabric. Like his wardrobe crisis meant jack when Lucifer was strutting topside doing

God knew what. That was the only thing that mattered in this clusterfuck of a situation.

The bathroom counter cracked under his grip. With a grimace, he forced himself to ease up. Breaking shit wasn't going to help anyone, especially since their new HQ was already racking up a maintenance tab that would make Jeff Bezos wince. "You break it, you buy it," Rami called from the hallway. His second-in-command had radar for his emotions lately. He was certain the male was worried about Camael's mental state, but he didn't need to be. He was right as rain.

"Like we ain't already bought it," Camael fired back as he ran a hand through his short hair. The gesture was human. He'd learned it from centuries of observation. Oddly enough, it helped center him. Somewhat.

"True that. But maybe ease up on the remodeling until we've been here more than forty-eight hours?" Rami countered.

Camael stalked out of the bathroom. Their new digs were a straight-up mansion in the heart of NOLA. It screamed old money and older secrets. Michael and Raphael had thrown down the location. Everyone was hoping Lucifer was tethered to the city thanks to the Rowan sisters and their powerful spell work. The logic was solid. As solid as anything could be when dealing with the Prince of Lies and his poster child for daddy issues.

The witches - all three Rowan sisters plus Amelia and Ceilia - had confirmed the magical chains were still locked down tight. Their theory? That bitch Crocell had pulled some next-level tactics and created interference that let Lucifer slip through a tear in reality before the spell could bitch-slap him back to Hell. It was a smart move. Too smart for an archdemon who used to be an Angel of Salvation upstairs. She and her sister hadn't been built for that kind of deviousness.

Just thinking about Crocell made his wings itch to manifest. Back in the day, she'd been something else. She was all righteous purpose and divine light. Now? She was Hell's favorite problem child. She served up chaos with a side of crazy.

"You got that look again," Rami observed as he fell into step beside him. "The one that says you're thinking about ripping someone's wings off."

"Crocell," Camael confirmed. His voice dropped to a growl that made the air vibrate. "Can't wrap my head around how far she's fallen."

"She chose her path," Rami reminded him. "Just like her sister. Just like Lucifer. Our job isn't to understand it. It's to stop them. You taught me that."

And now Camael was left holding the supernatural bag of flaming shit. He could've bounced this mission to Michael and played backup instead of point. But leaving Amelia's safety to anyone else? Not happening. And that compulsion? That obsession? It rode him hard and put him away wet. From first sight, that sexy-as-sin witch had him locked down tight. He'd even wondered if she'd worked some mojo on him.

"About the witch," Rami ventured. Apparently mind reading was now part of his skill set. "She's due over later to reinforce the wards."

Camael's body tightened at the mere mention of her. She was five-foot-seven, full of curves and attitude. She also had power that made the air around her crackle. And her eyes saw straight through his celestial bullshit. "Good. The place needs it."

"Uh-huh." Rami's knowing look could've stripped paint. "That's why you're already flexing."

"I don't flex," Camael growled as he loosened his fists.

"Right. And Lucifer's just misunderstood," Rami countered.

Their steps echoed through the mansion's entryway, where a chandelier that probably cost more than most humans made in a decade threw light across marble floors. Fresh flowers perfumed the air from a massive vase. It was his favorite touch in the place, not that he'd admit that shit to anyone. Some things a warrior angel had to keep to himself.

The living room looked like Architectural Digest had a baby with Supernatural Weekly. Along with the high ceilings and crown molding, were enough wards to make a demon's eyes bleed. Irritation flowed through him when he hit the space. Malachi was sparring with Zach and acting like teenagers instead of ancient celestial warriors.

"Your left side's wide open," Malachi taunted, dodging Zach's grab with supernatural grace.

"Your mouth's wide open," Zach fired back, feinting right before going low.

"Ladies," Camael drawled, "if you're done with the foreplay, we've got actual work to do." Sometimes, leading these angels was like herding cats.

Both warriors straightened immediately. His eyes rolled when he noted how their grins stayed in place. That was the thing about his Angels of Retribution. They might be Heaven's most feared fighting force but they were family first.

"Just keeping our skills sharp, boss," Malachi defended as he straightened his designer shirt. It cost more than some cars.

"Yeah?" Camael raised an eyebrow. "Sharp enough to finish organizing those glasses you abandoned an hour ago?"

Zach had the grace to look sheepish. "We were getting to that."

"Get to it faster." The words came out like a whip crack. Camael's shoulders tensed as he surveyed the chaos of boxes and bubble wrap. Organization wasn't just about aesthetics. It was about control. And right now? His control was hanging by a thread thinner than angel hair. Nothing cranked his anxiety like disorder. It made his battle-honed senses fire on all cylinders and search for threats in the shadows of all that random shit.

The rest of his crew worked their domestic game like pros, thanks to Rami and his mate Kara's 'Earth For Angels 101' tutorial. Not that they needed it. Most of Camael's soldiers had done tours down there before. Him? Not so much.

Unlike the others, who'd adapted to human ways faster than demons to sin, Camael was used to the celestial hookup. Up in Heaven, angels manifested everything from Egyptian cotton sheets to California king beds with a thought and a nod. Down here? Shit required actual money. The green kind. With dead presidents on it.

And comfort? Please. Humans clearly hadn't gotten that memo. The rock-hard mattresses and IKEA furniture weren't much better than the ground. The fact that his warriors had already figured out how to handle it just proved they were better at this Earth gig than their commander.

The kitchen became his domain as he attacked boxes of cookware that had shown up an hour ago. Each angel had their assigned duty. Well, except for the wonder-twins currently playing grab-ass in the living room. Cassiel hoisted the armoire like it weighed less than his ego, which was saying something. His celestial tats - the ones that marked him as Heaven's favorite fortune teller - danced across muscles built from millennia of divine throwdowns.

"Remind me again why we couldn't get this joint pre-furnished?" he grunted, though

the weight wasn't giving him shit. "Better yet, I wish we could just manifest stuff like upstairs?"

Camael looked up from where he was wrangling enough cookware to feed the entire heavenly host. "What's wrong, pretty boy? Manual labor cramping your style?"

"Please." Cass waved at the disaster zone of cardboard and bubble wrap like it had personally offended him. "Back home, we think it, we get it. None of this 'assembly required' bullshit. One prayer to the interior design department and boom - instant cribs episode."

Jo's eye roll could've registered in three states. Her golden braid swung like a pendulum as she positioned some fancy-ass vase with military precision. "News flash, Instagram angel. Our celestial platinum card got canceled when we moved Earth-side. You want human digs? You do human work."

"Facts," Rami chimed in from behind a stack of paperwork that promised to give Camael a headache. "Besides, this is grade-A real estate. It beats holing up in some demon-infested dump downtown."

But Camael had to admit Cass had a point. The whole 'no powers for interior decorating' rule was some first-class BS. It made him miss the simplicity of Heaven. Instead, they were stuck doing things the mortal way. It sucked harder than a black hole .

Az snorted from where he was arranging weapons behind a false panel. The guy looked like he'd stepped out of a Special Forces recruitment poster. He was all sharp edges and deadly grace. "Hey. Give us some credit for basic survival skills. We'd make any place work."

"Debatable," Camael drawled as he scanned the fancy-ass floors and rugs that

probably cost more than some countries' GDPs. But he couldn't deny the earthly luxury had its perks. The place was a straight-up sanctuary. "Just remember we need this house fortress-ready. Amelia's dropping by to lay down more wards."

The air seemed to thicken with her name. Did everyone recognize its significance? Or maybe that was just him getting worked up over a witch like some rookie angel on his first Earth rotation.

"Speaking of wards," Jo piped up. Her hands moved in precise gestures as she layered protection spells into the walls. "We should talk about the power grid in this place. The magical kind, not the human version."

Remi descended from his mirror-hanging gig like some divine handyman. His massive wings were tucked away with a whisper. "Just keep the property damage to a minimum. We don't need contractors all up in our business. Humans tend to ask questions when they see scorch marks from celestial weapons."

"Or demon blood on the hardwood," Zach added helpfully as he finally got around to those glasses.

"That too." Remi's wings twitched. It was a tell that meant he was picking up something. "Boss, you feel that?"

Camael did. The air had shifted. It carried whispers of danger on currents only angels could detect. Working his way through the kitchen setup, he hit Rami with a strategic play. "What if you and Zakara went up to her NYC pad? Give us eyes on another front line. "

Rami gave a sharp nod, that tactical genius of his already spinning scenarios. The kid might be the newest addition to the AORs, but he'd earned his wings faster than anyone in celestial history. He was a natural-born strategist with street smarts to

match his book smarts.

"Sounds good," he agreed as his shoulders straightened like the soldier he'd become. "Z's been jonesing for her NYC fix anyway. I know you like keeping the squad tight, boss, but extra eyes never hurt. Especially eyes that know the concrete jungle like she does." Rami had come a long way from the fresh-faced recruit who'd shown up at Heaven's door after being killed by a skirm. Now? The male was Camael's right hand for a reason.

"You could get some solid intel," Az added as he closed the weapons panel with a satisfying click. "The Big Apple's got more supernatural traffic than Grand Central. You might catch whispers we'd miss in the Big Easy."

But Camael barely registered the strategy session. Something just bitch-slapped his internal warning system harder than that time Michael caught him sleeping during combat training. Every battle-honed instinct screamed danger with a capital 'OH SHIT'. The cookware hit the counter as he moved. He was pulled to the fireplace like Heaven's most paranoid moth. His palm found the fancy-ass mantle. It's cool surface was the only thing keeping him grounded while his gut did backflips. Something wicked this way comes. And it wasn't stopping to ask directions.

Jo materialized at his six. She moved as silent as death despite her five-inch heels. The girl had style, even in combat. "What's got your wings in a twist?"

The entire crew went still. Centuries of fighting together were evident in how they responded to his tension. Flaming weapons appeared in hands, wings rustled beneath the veil of reality, and eyes locked onto potential entry points .

"I'm not really sure. I've got a bad feeling," Camael admitted. His voice dropped to a place that made lesser beings tremble. "Could be Earth-side adjustment."

"Or it could be your archangel Spidey sense picking up trouble," Malachi suggested. All traces of his earlier playfulness were gone.

Rami's brow furrowed as he materialized his favorite weapon. A seven-foot blade of pure celestial steel that burned with blue flames hot enough to make Hell itself sweat. The thing was beautiful as sin and twice as deadly.

"Those instincts of yours?" He spun the flaming sword like it was a cheerleader's baton. "They're the reason you got promoted to archangel while the rest of these guys were still learning to fly. You feeling something hinky might be the difference between putting Lucifer back in his box or watching that sonofabitch ghost on us again." The flames from his blade cast dancing shadows across his face. It made him look every inch the divine warrior he was.

The phone in Camael's pocket went off like a bomb. It made Rami jump like a rookie. Tech was still foreign territory for Camael. Heaven didn't exactly have 5G coverage. The hotline number flashing on the screen had his heart double-timing. Zander had set it up for dealing with this situation.

His squad crowded in as he answered. All pretense of domestic bliss was long forgotten. They were warriors ready for war. "You got eyes on Lucifer?"

"Negative," Izzy's voice crackled through the speaker. "But Crocell's cooking up something major. Our intel suggests they're planning a convergence. We intercepted demon chatter that indicates they're targeting a witch in the French Quarter."

The temperature in the joint took a nosedive faster than a demon's morals as Camael's power leaked out like a broken dam. And wasn't that just perfect? Nothing said 'archangel losing his shit' like frost forming on the windows in the middle of a New Orleans summer.

"Amelia." Just saying her name had his heart doing a full cardiac arrest. Because if those hell-spawned bastards were anywhere near his witch? Someone was about to have a really bad day. The kind that ended with celestial steel and eternal darkness.

"I can't confirm it's her," Izzy continued, "but Aison, Donovan, Micah and I are mobilizing. The Dark Warriors are ready to provide backup if needed."

"What's the location?" The words came out more growl than speech.

"I'm still triangulating," Izzy replied. "But there's something else. Reports suggest Crocell's working independently now. That she's split from Lucifer."

"Bullshit," Rami cut in as he leaned closer to the phone. The softness in his expression when he heard his charge's voice had vanished. "She wouldn't..."

A scream ripped through Camael's mind. It was psychic and raw. Amelia. His power flared and his wings manifested in shadows on the wall behind him. "I've gotta go." He ended the call and was already moving. "She's in trouble at her place. Move out."

The next thirty seconds were organized chaos as the Angels of Retribution mobilized. Battle armor materialized out of nowhere, replacing those fancy-ass designer labels faster than a shopaholic's credit card limit. Wings unfurled with lethal grace, filling the space with enough divine power to make a demon spontaneously combust. They went from Ralph Lauren to ready-for-war in less time than it took humans to order their morning coffee. Nothing said 'about to rain celestial vengeance' like black battle armor shot through with threads of divine light and wings that could slice through steel like butter. Shit was about to get real. Real messy.

"Formation Delta," Camael barked. His Sword of Light blazed to life in his grip as he stood on the back patio. "Jo, Az, you're on the perimeter. Mal and Zach take the high ground. The rest of you are with me. And remember. These demons took one of

ours."

The 'ours' slipped out before he could catch it. His warriors' faces showed they caught the significance. Amelia wasn't just some witch under their protection anymore. He'd essentially claimed her. She was family.

They materialized in Amelia's front yard like avenging angels out of humanity's darkest nightmares. The door hung open. Her wards were shattered. The stench of demon magic fouled the air.

"I've got a trail," Rami announced before Camael had a chance to go nuclear. "They're not even trying to hide it."

"It's a trap," multiple voices said in unison.

Camael's smile would've sent lesser beings running for cover. "Good. I need to vent."

They followed the demonic energy signature through streets still bearing scars from Katrina. Houses stood empty. Their windows were like dead eyes watching their passage. The vibe screamed demon hideout so loud it might as well have had a neon sign.

"There." Cassiel pointed to a particularly decrepit structure. Shadows writhed unnaturally around it. There were sigils of dark power pulsing on its walls. "I'm getting readings off the charts."

Camael signaled his team into position. "Remember. Amelia's safety is priority number one. After that? No mercy."

The battle that followed would've made Michael himself proud. Demons poured out of the woodwork like roaches when the lights came on. The Angels of Retribution

were ready. Jo and Az became whirlwinds of flaming celestial steel. Their synchronized fighting style was beautiful in its brutality. Mal and Zach rained holy fire from above. Rami and Remi moved like death's shadow through the chaos.

Camael carved a path straight to where he sensed Amelia. His Sword of Light left trails of divine radiance in its wake. Every demon that got in his way learned why the archangels were Heaven's most feared warriors. He found her in what had probably once been a living room. It had been transformed into a chamber of dark ritual. Chains of shadow energy held her suspended. She was surrounded by demons chanting in tongues that would've driven mortals mad.

Their eyes met across the space. The relief in her gaze hit him harder than any demon ever had. "I knew you'd come," she managed. Her voice strained but unbroken.

"Always." The word carried more weight than he'd intended. There wasn't time to analyze it, and he had zero desire to take it back. "Let's get you out of these chains."

"Careful," she warned as he approached. "They're trying to corrupt my power. They want to turn it dark."

That explained the ritual. Rage burned cold in his chest as he raised his sword. "Hold still."

The Sword of Light made short work of the shadow chains. And its divine energy canceled out the corruption. Amelia fell forward. Camael moved swiftly and caught her against his chest. He held her like she belonged there.

"We've really got to stop meeting like this," he quipped, trying to lighten the moment.

She snorted. The sound was pure attitude, even in their situation. "And miss out on this ambiance?" Her smile struck him dumb for a split second. "I tried to hold them

off. There were too many after Crocell shattered my wards."

Her admission hit Camael's bloodstream like liquid nitrogen. Crocell hadn't just sent her B-team for this job. The psychotic ex-angel had shown up to direct this clusterfuck personally. Which meant this wasn't some random grab-and-go. This was end-game level shit.

His first instinct was to shield Amelia from the carnage about to go down. But his witch? She was already channeling power that made the air around her crackle like a live wire. Damn, if that didn't make him hot.

She threw spells at demons trying to reach them while his Angels of Retribution were turning the place into a demon slaughterhouse deluxe. Jo and Az owned the high ground. Their flaming swords left trails of blue fire through the air and demon blood splattered across walls.

Camael's weapon caught a demon right in the throat. Its head went one way, and its body went another. Both dissolved into black ichor that smoked when it hit the ground. Two more rushed him and got split from sternum to skull for their trouble. Their death screams hit notes that'd make a soprano jealous.

Mal and Zach had their own party going by the door. Their tag-team style throwdown had demons literally losing their limbs. Mal's blade took the first one apart at the joints while Zach's follow-through turned another into demon confetti. When a particularly huge bastard tried to rush them, they double-teamed his ass. One went high, one went low. Suddenly there were two smoking halves of demon decorating the floor.

Rami and Remi were working their way through the shadows like death's personal choreographer. Three demons thought they had them cornered. Camael jumped into the fight. It was the last mistake they'd ever make. His blade sang through the air. The

first strike took out knee caps. The second opened a throat. And the third? Camael turned it into hell's favorite jigsaw puzzle .

Black blood painted the walls like the world's most satanic Jackson Pollock. The smell of burning demon flesh violated at least six EPA regulations. Camael wanted to shield Amelia from this side of their nature. The raw violence that made the Angels of Retribution Heaven's most feared fighting force.

But his witch was helping and had zero fear. She was one hundred percent 'bring it on'. Power danced around her fingers like she was eager to continue scorching demon ass. Because that was the thing about Amelia. She wasn't some delicate flower needing shelter from the storm. She was the damn storm.

When she caught him staring, she arched an eyebrow. "Taking notes?"

His laugh probably scared the remaining demons more than the slaughter. Because that right there? That's why she was perfect for him. The female could stare into the abyss and ask it if it wanted coffee.

Cassiel wiped his brow as his seer marks glowed with power. "The metaphysical currents surge with both chaos and potential. Our actions here will ripple through the celestial tapestry, shaping destinies yet untold."

"What the hell nonsense is he spouting now?" Samil demanded as he wiped demon ichor off his blade. "That doesn't even make sense."

"Post-battle prophetic bullshit," Zachariel translated, grinning. "You know how he gets."

Malachi stepped forward. He was all business. "We need to cleanse this place. The dark sigils will keep gathering power for Crocell and Lucifer if we don't."

Ramiel's sharp intake of breath drew everyone's attention. "Holy shit. What if this isn't the only one? Crocell could have these power collection points all over the city."

The implications hit hard. These houses weren't just hideouts - they were batteries. They were storing corrupt energy for whatever endgame Crocell and Lucifer had planned.

Amelia shuddered against Camael's side. "Something in here was trying to twist my power and make it serve them instead of nature."

That was all Camael needed to hear. He pressed his Sword of Light to the nearest wall, letting the divine fire start to spread. Amelia's hand on his arm stopped him. "Let me help." Her Latin incantation wove through his celestial flames. Her enchantment amplified them and directed them to consume not just the structure but the dark magic infesting it.

"The celestial fires cleanse and renew," Malachi observed with satisfaction when they reached the lawn. "Their darkness doesn't stand a chance."

Camael kept Amelia close as they watched the building burn. Her warmth against his side felt more right than anything had in centuries. "We'd better get out of here before the human authorities show up."

His Angels of Retribution vanished first. They were headed back to their new headquarters. Camael looked down at Amelia. His gaze met eyes that held power and secrets. There was also something that made his ancient heart skip beats.

Without a word, he transported them back to the mansion in Marigny. The war was just beginning. Lucifer was still out there. Crocell was playing power games. And the balance between realms hung by a thread. Standing there with Amelia at his side and his warriors at his back, Camael knew one thing for certain. His life would never be

the same.

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CHAPTER 2

The magic hit Amelia like a freight train that was loaded with darkness and bad intentions. She jerked upright in the soft bed. Her tank top clung to her sweat-slicked skin as power crackled through the air. The digital clock on her nightstand read 3:33 AM. It was the witching hour's sweet spot. She should have known this shit couldn't wait until a decent time. That wasn't how evil worked.

"Well, fuck." The curse slipped out as another wave of wrongness washed over her magical senses. This wasn't your garden variety demon activity. This was something else. Something bigger.

Throwing back the covers, Amelia padded to the window of her room in the Angels of Retribution mansion. After the attack at her place, Camael had insisted she move in temporarily. Right. Like anything involving that male was temporary.

The New Orleans night spread out before her. It was a tapestry of lights and shadows that usually sang with magical energy. But tonight? The song had gone discordant. Almost as if someone had taken a baseball bat to the cosmic symphony.

The powers she'd inherited from a long line of witches who made the Salem crew look like amateurs picked up every wrong note. The usual demonic signatures that plagued the city were there, yeah. But underneath them was something other. Something that made her magical core shiver.

"You feel it, too." The deep voice traveled down her spine, making her shiver.

She managed not to jump at Camael's voice behind her. The archangel moved like a damn cat when he wanted to, all lethal grace and controlled power. She turned to find him watching her with those ice-blue eyes. They seemed to see straight through her bullshit.

"Yeah." No point lying to an angel who could probably taste deception in the air. "This is different. Bigger."

He crossed the room to join her at the window. Holy mother of magic, did the male fill up space. Six-foot-four of just divine warrior wrapped in black sleeping pants and nothing else. His chest looked like it was carved from celestial marble. It caught the moonlight in ways that should be illegal. Focus, witch.

"Tell me what you're sensing," he said. His deep voice rumbled through her bones.

Amelia closed her eyes, and she reached out with her magical awareness. "It's like... imagine the universe is sheet music. There's all the normal stuff. Humans, animals, and even regular demons. They're playing their parts. But something's introducing new notes. Wrong ones. These shouldn't exist in this reality."

"Lucifer?" Camael asked.

"No." She was certain about that. "This is older. It's also a different flavor of wrong."
"

Camael cursed in what might have been Enochian. "Show me."

Amelia hesitated for only a second before placing her hand on his chest. Skin-to-skin contact amplified magical connections. She needed all the juice she could get for this. His skin burned hot under her palm. It was like touching a star that had decided to take human form.

"Sweet Lord in Heaven." The words slipped out as her magical senses merged with his celestial ones. The resulting awareness was like IMAX compared to a flip book.

The wrongness was everywhere. It was threading through reality like corrupt veins in marble. But it was concentrated in... "The cemetery," they said in unison.

Camael's hand covered hers where it still rested on his chest. "We need to-"

A scream split the night. It wasn't a human scream. This was the sound of reality itself protesting. Amelia doubled over as magical feedback slammed through her system. Images flashed behind her eyes. Ancient beings were stirred from eternal sleep. Cosmic forces were twisted against their nature. And there was darkness. So much darkness.

Strong arms caught her before she hit the floor. "What did you see?" Camael demanded, concern roughening his voice.

"This is not about collecting power for their use," she gasped out. "They're trying to wake something up. Something old. I'm talking pre-dating angels old."

The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees as Camael's power leaked out. "That's not possible. The Oldest Ones were bound before Creation itself."

"Tell that to whatever's trying to pick their cosmic locks." Amelia straightened. She had to force her legs to remain steady. "And here's the kicker. They need a key. A very specific kind of key. "

Understanding dawned in those ancient eyes. "A witch with both celestial and infernal bloodlines in her heritage. One who can channel both light and shadow."

Well, shit. "That's why they took me before," Amelia realized as the pieces clicked

into horrible place. "They weren't trying to corrupt my power. They were testing it. Seeing if I could handle both energies."

"And now they know you can." Camael's wings manifested. They were massive things of divine power spreading across the wall behind him. "We need to move. Now."

The door burst open as Rami charged in, battle-ready. "Boss, we got problems. Something's happening at-"

"St. Louis Cemetery," Camael finished. "Rally the troops. Full battle gear."

"Already on it." Rami's gaze flicked to where Camael's hand still gripped Amelia's arm. He wisely kept his mouth shut. "We'll be ready to go in five minutes."

Once they were alone again, Camael fixed her with a look that could've melted steel. "You're staying here."

Oh, hell no. "Like fuck I am." Amelia channeled power into her hands. She let witch-fire dance between her fingers. "They're using my heritage for this mess. That makes it my fight."

"They're trying to wake up beings that pre-date Creation," he growled. "Beings that could unmake everything you know."

"Exactly. And I'm the only one who can sense exactly what they're doing with the magical currents." She stepped closer. She had to crane her neck to meet his gaze. "You need me on this, Archangel. Deal with it."

For a long moment, they engaged in a staring contest so intense the temperature in the room dropped twenty degrees. The chandelier crystals started tinkling like wind

chimes in a hurricane. Divine power met witch attitude in a clash that would have had the demons in Hell taking cover. Finally, Camael cursed long enough to make a sailor blush. "Fine. But you stay close."

And wasn't that just perfect? Heaven's most badass archangel, getting schooled by five-foot-seven full of curves and magical attitude. "Wouldn't dream of being anywhere else," she drawled. She chose to ignore how true that statement actually was.

Five minutes later, Amelia found herself in the middle of what looked like a celestial SWAT team briefing. The Angels of Retribution had transformed the mansion's dining room into a war room. It was complete with maps and weapons that glowed.

Jo tossed Amelia a leather jacket. "Here. It's warded. It won't stop a direct hit, but it's better than nothing."

"Thanks." Amelia shrugged it on. She appreciated the protection and the style. The Angels of Retribution looked fine as hell when heading into battle.

Cassiel stood in a corner. His seer marks glowed like neon as he stared at nothing. "The veils between worlds grow thin. Ancient eyes open in eternal darkness."

"That's not ominous at all," Malachi muttered before checking the edge on a blade that gleamed with divine light.

Rami spread a map across the table. "St. Louis Cemetery is the oldest in the city. It makes sense they'd pick it for whatever cosmic horror show they're planning."

"They'll have guards," Az pointed out. His wings twitched with battle readiness. "Lots of them." It was claustrophobic with so many wings crowding the room. Even with them folded against their backs.

Camael's smile made Amelia shudder. It wasn't the sexy smirk he reserved for her. "Good."

Amelia barely heard the tactical discussion that followed. Her magical senses were screaming now. She was picking up disturbances that felt like nails on the cosmic chalkboard. The wrongness was spreading. It was beginning to corrupt the natural flow of power through the city. Underneath it all was a pull. A call that sang to something deep in her blood.

"They've started," she announced. Her words cut through the discussion. "Whatever ritual they're doing is already in motion."

All eyes turned to her. Camael stepped closer. His presence was both steadying and electrifying. "What are you picking up?"

"It's like..." She searched for words to describe the indescribable. "Imagine reality is fabric. They're pulling on threads that shouldn't be touched. They're creating holes where something else can peek through."

"It should stay buried," Cassiel interjected. His eyes were now glowing solid gold. "The Oldest Ones stir in their prison of stars and shadow."

A shiver ran through Amelia as his words resonated with something in her magical core. "There's more. They're doing more than just trying to wake these things up. They're trying to bind them. Control them."

"Ambitious," Rami noted dryly. "Stupid, but ambitious."

"How much time do we have?" Camael demanded.

Amelia reached out with her power and tried to gauge the ritual's progress. The

feedback nearly brought her to her knees. Images flashed through her mind. Stars went dark. Reality began unraveling at the seams. And something vast and ancient turned its attention to their tiny corner of existence.

"Not long," she managed through gritted teeth. "An hour. Maybe less."

"Then we move now." Camael's voice carried the weight of divine authority. "Jo, Az. You're our eyes in the sky. Mal and Zach, you're on perimeter control. Rami, you're with me and Amelia. The rest of you know your positions."

The angels moved with practiced efficiency. Weapons appeared, and battle armor materialized. But before they could head out, Cassiel grabbed Amelia's arm. "The stars remember," he said in a voice echoing with power. "When the First Light split the darkness, your line was there. Bearer of both shadow and flame. Walker between worlds. You are more than you know." Well, that was new.

"Cass?" Rami stepped forward. "You okay there, brother?"

But the seer's grip on Amelia's arm tightened. "The blood of stars runs in your veins, witch. The Oldest Ones know this. They fear it. That's why they send their servants for you. You are a key forged before..."

Power surged between them. Suddenly, Amelia wasn't in the mansion anymore. She was floating in a void of stars and darkness. She watched as beings of pure light and pure shadow waged war. And there, in the midst of it all, was a figure wielding both energies. She was weaving them together to create... The vision shattered as Camael yanked her back. He broke Cassiel's grip. "Enough."

His interference came a little too late. The knowledge was already burning in Amelia's mind. It was reshaping everything she thought she knew about herself. Her family line was there at the beginning. They'd helped forge the barriers between light

and shadow. They put up the veils between the Earth and what lay beyond it.

"Well, shit," she breathed as she steadied herself against Camael's solid frame. "That explains a few things."

"You okay?" His voice rumbled through her where they touched.

"Define okay," she muttered while she straightened and let her power settle. "We can unpack my cosmic family drama later. Right now, we've got bigger problems. "

As if to emphasize her point, another wave of evil rolled through the city. "Move out," Camael ordered. The Angels of Retribution vanished in a flutter of wings and divine light.

The cemetery materialized around them. Old stones and older magic created a maze of shadows and power. But something was wrong with the familiar necropolis' energy. The usual whispers of the dead had gone silent. They'd been replaced by something that made Amelia's magical senses recoil.

"There." She pointed to where dark energy writhed around one of the oldest mausoleums. "They're using the tomb as a focal point. It's smart. All that death energy amplifies their ritual."

Demons lurked in the shadows. Their red eyes gleamed as they spotted the celestial invasion. But these weren't your standard-issue Hellspawn. These were older and darker. They carried traces of the power she sensed in Cassiel's vision.

"Anyone else missing regular demons right about now?" Malachi muttered as the creatures emerged.

The battle erupted like someone had popped the cork on Hell's finest vintage of ass-

kicking. Jo and Az took to the sky. Their wings cast moonlit shadows as they rained celestial steel on anything ugly. One particularly nasty piece of work, seriously, it was all tentacles and teeth, caught Az's blade right through what might have been a face. It exploded into goo that would've given Lovecraft nightmares.

Mal and Rami worked the ground game. They moved like twin dealers of divine destruction. When three ancient horrors sporting more eyes than a spider convention rushed them, the warriors didn't even break stride. They fought seamlessly. Before she knew it, there were a lot fewer eyes in the cemetery.

Zach was a one-angel demolition crew. His flaming sword cut through monstrosities like they were made of cosmic tissue paper. "These are some ugly-ass motherfuckers!" he shouted, decapitating something with too many heads.

Amelia threw out spells, taking out monsters in the process. She turned so she was back-to-back with Camael. Her witch-fire painted the night in shades of arcane purple while his divine blade wreaked havoc with celestial light. They moved together like they'd been doing it for centuries. Her magic covered his blind spots while his blade kept the nastiest pieces of work off her six.

While they battled, something was yanking at her magical core. It pulled her toward that mausoleum like a cosmic magnet. The same something that had been singing in her blood since this shitstorm started. She was so focused on the pull that she missed ugly demon number forty-seven coming in hot on her left.

The bastard was fast. Faster than anything that looked like rejected concept art from Silent Hill had any right to be. Its claws raked across her arm before she could throw up a shield. The leather jacket Jo had given her took most of the damage. Unfortunately, enough got through to draw blood. Nothing said 'party time' like bleeding in the middle of a supernatural throwdown. Power surged through the cemetery as her blood hit the ground. The chanting from the mausoleum reached a

fever pitch.

"No!" Amelia realized what was happening a second too late. "They didn't need me there. They just needed my blood! This whole attack was a setup!"

The ground began to shake as something vast and ancient stirred beneath them. Cracks appeared in the air. They leaked darkness older than time. "How do we stop it?" Camael demanded. His wings flared with his anger.

Amelia's mind raced. "My bloodline helped forge the barriers. Maybe..." She didn't finish the thought. Instead, she reached deep into her magical core. She worked past the carefully constructed walls that had kept parts of her power safely contained. Light and shadow responded to her call. They twined around her like loving pets. "Cover me," she told Camael.

She didn't wait for his response. She charged straight for the mausoleum. Her magic was already gathering around her hands like eager attack dogs straining at their leashes. A demon with three heads lunged for her left flank. Above her, Jo dropped out of the night sky like an avenging Valkyrie. Her flaming sword took out all three heads in one graceful arc. Black ichor sprayed the tombstones as the demon's body dissolved into goo.

"Keep going!" Jo shouted. She'd already pivoted to slam her steel-toed boot into another demon's face. The crack of breaking bone was deeply satisfying.

Twenty feet from the mausoleum steps, something massive reared up. It had tentacles and too many eyes. Before Amelia could even raise her hands, Mal's blade burst through its center mass from behind. Blue flames ate through corrupted flesh. The warrior grinned at her through the dissolving demon parts. "Ladies first!"

But it was Camael who really cleared her path. The archangel moved like a force of

nature. His Sword of Light left trails of divine fire that burned Amelia's retinas. She caught glimpses as she ran. His blade took a demon's head clean off. His wings blocked a spray of acid from another. His fist punched through one particularly ugly bastard's chest.

Three priests saw her coming and started some kind of dark chant. Amelia didn't let them finish. She unleashed both sides of her power at once. Witch-fire and shadow magic combined into something that violated every fire safety law. The priests' human disguises burned away. She saw the horrors beneath just before her magic turned them into ash.

The head priest remained and was towering over his ritual circle. His hands were raised to the bleeding sky. His true form leaked through around the edges. Seven sets of eyes blinked at her. Their color was a shade she couldn't identify. They were blue, but also purple, green, brown, and black. His flesh rippled and shifted. When he opened his mouth to chant, she caught glimpses of a throat that spiraled down into darkness forever. It was lined with razor-sharp teeth that chimed against each other. They were wind chimes made of razor blades.

His hands - there were more than two now - reached toward the hemorrhaging heavens. They kept splitting and reforming. Each finger ended in points of steel that would cut holes through cement. Power rolled off him in waves.

"You want old power?" The snarl ripped from Amelia's throat as her magic rose around her like a storm. "Let me show you what that really means."

Cassiel's vision blazed through her mind. The ancient knowledge she got from the glimpse burned away any hesitation. Her hands slammed onto the ritual circle as she let her power flow free. Raw light and primordial shadow poured from her hands into symbols carved before time learned to crawl. The two powers should've shredded each other on contact. Like matter meeting antimatter. Her magic chose to dance

instead of detonate. The opposing forces braided together under her will and turned those runes into something else. Everything froze for one endless second. Then everything went boom.

"Holy shit," she heard Rami breathe from somewhere behind her.

The cracks in reality began to seal themselves as her hybrid magic reinforced the ancient barriers. The darkness retreated. And the vast presence that had been stirring retreated. Unfortunately, the dark priests weren't done. Their leader launched itself at her with inhuman speed.

"The Key must die!" It shrieked in a voice that hurt reality itself. "The bloodline must end!"

A blade of pure darkness materialized in its hand. It was aimed straight for her heart. Amelia knew she wouldn't be able to dodge in time. Fortunately, she didn't have to. Camael appeared between them. His Sword of Light met the dark blade with a clash that sent out shockwaves. "Wrong move."

What happened next would've made Michael Bay retire from action movies. Camael hit that ancient horror like a freight train made of pure badass. His first strike sent the thing flying back ten feet. But the horror was fast. It came back swinging with limbs that kept changing shape. What remained the same was the fact that each one ended in claws that could cut holes in Camael.

The archangel moved like violence given form. He ducked under a swipe that would've taken his head off. He came up with an uppercut that stunned the leader. When the horror tried to wrap those ever-shifting limbs around him, Camael grabbed what might have been an arm and used it as leverage to throw the thing into a mausoleum wall. Stone cracked. The horror screamed.

Meanwhile, Amelia worked on dismantling that ritual circle. She tried to ignore how the energy was trying to call back the ancient entity. It wasn't a surprise that the power they'd called up was fighting back like a demon at an exorcism.

"Incoming!" Jo's warning came with a blast of power that lit up the night. Above them, cracks spider-webbed across the sky like black lightning. It spread faster than kudzu on steroids.

"Shit." The curse slipped out as understanding hit Amelia like a supernatural sledgehammer. "They tied the ritual to their own life forces! If we kill them-"

"Reality goes boom," Rami finished for her as he matrix-dodged a demon's claws. "Fantastic."

The head priest's laugh sounded like a symphony played on broken glass and lost souls. "You cannot stop what has begun. The Oldest Ones will rise. Your pitiful barriers will shatter!"

Time did that weird slow-motion thing it does when you're about to either have a brilliant idea or fuck up spectacularly. They couldn't kill the priests without everything falling apart. But they couldn't exactly let them wake up things that predated existence either.

The answer hit her. A detail from the vision burned through her brain like magical neon. The first barriers hadn't been created by force. They'd been woven. They were the universe's most complicated friendship bracelet. "Camael!" Power gathered around her hands as she shouted. "I need your blade!"

The archangel didn't even hesitate. His Sword of Light went spinning through the air toward her. Without a hiccup, he switched to hand-to-hand combat with that horror. He caught one of its maybe-arms and used it to beat the hell out of what might have

been its face. The sword landed in Amelia's grip like it belonged there. The power thrumming through it made her magical core sit up and howl. Time to show these ancient asshats what happened when you pissed off a witch with a divine blade and something to prove.

She drove that sword straight into the heart of their ritual circle. The impact sent shockwaves through the cemetery strong enough to knock over tombs, but that was just the opening act. Her two favorite flavors of power spiraled out from where the blade pierced those ancient symbols. Instead of destroying them, she wove that power through the priests' life forces like she was rewriting their DNA. Their energy was redirected to reinforce the very barriers they'd tried to break.

The head priest figured it out a second too late. "No-!"

But that train had already left the station, baby. Those seven sets of eyes went wide as his connection to the Oldest Ones snapped. His true form began to stretch and warp as it was pulled toward the barrier like water down a cosmic drain. The air rippled as his ancient essence got sucked into the walls between worlds. His stolen meat suit crumpling empty to the ground. One by one, the other priests followed suit. Their screams echoed across dimensions as they became part of the very thing they'd tried to destroy.

The cemetery went dead silent. "Well," Amelia managed. She felt like she'd run a couple dozen marathons. "That was fun." Her knees decided that staying vertical was overrated. But before she could face-plant into the ritual circle, Camael was there.

"You have an interesting definition of fun," he rumbled. Damn if his voice didn't do things to her even when she was about to pass out.

The Angels of Retribution gathered around, looking like they'd just survived a supernatural blender. Their clothes were torn. They had various cuts and bruises. And

enough demon goo between them to fill a swimming pool. But they'd won this round.

Cassiel's eyes were doing that glowy thing again as he studied her. "The stars sing of change. The bloodline awakens fully at last."

"Does he ever just say 'good job'?" The words slipped out before she could filter them.

The scattered laughter that followed helped break the apocalyptic tension. Camael's expression stayed serious as those ice-blue eyes locked onto hers. "We need to talk about what just happened. About what you are."

"Yeah." She let herself lean into him because staying upright was becoming a serious challenge. "But can we do it after coffee? Saving reality works up a hell of a thirst."

His lips twitched in what might have been a smile. "Coffee first. Then we figure out why beings older than time itself are interested in your family tree."

"And why they want me dead," she added helpfully. If they answered that, they might stand a chance of stopping whatever had been set into motion.

CHAPTER 3

Dawn painted New Orleans in shades of rose and gold, but Camael wasn't feeling the romance. They'd spent hours after the cemetery throwdown sweeping the city for any lingering traces of ancient evil. Now, they were gathered in their mansion's war room with coffee and beignets. His men looked like they'd gone ten rounds with a cosmic meat grinder.

Camael leaned against the fireplace as his ice-blue eyes fixed on Amelia. She'd claimed the room's most comfortable armchair and was nursing what had to be her fifth cup of coffee. The dark circles under her eyes testified to the night's toll. Power still crackled around her like static electricity.

"So," Rami broke the tension-thick silence. "Are we gonna talk about how you went all cosmic locksmith on those ancient barriers?"

"Great question." Amelia's laugh held an edge of hysteria. "Got another? Maybe one I can actually answer?"

"Start with what you saw," Camael suggested. His deep voice carried through the room like thunder. He was still upset at how close she'd come to being killed. "In Cassiel's vision."

The witch's grip tightened on her coffee mug. "It was confusing and overwhelming. I swear I watched the universe being born in IMAX. There were beings of pure light and pure shadow. They weren't fighting. They were creating something together."

"Creating what?" Jo perched on the arm of a nearby sofa. Her wings were half-spread with curiosity.

"Everything, I think." Amelia's voice dropped to just above a whisper. "And there was someone there. Someone like me. They were weaving light and shadow together like it was the most natural thing in the world."

Cassiel's eyes glowed as he stepped forward. "The First Weaver."

Camael recalled the stories about how the veils came to be. "When reality was young, and the barriers between realms were being forged, there were those who could work with both energies. They helped create the walls between worlds."

"But that's impossible," Malachi protested from his position by the window. "Light and shadow are opposites. They can't coexist."

"Tell that to twilight," Az drawled. He was cleaning demon goo off his favorite blade with methodical precision. "Or dawn. Or dusk. Nature's full of places where light and shadow dance."

Silence fell as they absorbed that. Camael pushed off from the fireplace and moved closer to Amelia. "Can you tell us what you did with your power in the cemetery? Did you redo those barriers?"

Amelia hesitated for only a moment before setting down her coffee. Power gathered around her hands. Not the pure witch-fire they were used to seeing, but something more complex. She slowed the process so they could see as light and shadow twisted together like lovers in an eternal dance.

"Holy shit," Rami breathed. "That's not supposed to be possible."

"Story of my life lately." Amelia let the power fade. "I didn't know I could do it before I saw that vision. But it feels right. Something in my blood recognizes it."

"Your bloodline." Camael's voice had dropped to that place that made windows rattle. "It's older than any of us realized. Those priests called you 'The Key'."

"Yeah, about that." She ran a hand through her dark hair. "Any chance that's just a cute nickname and not some absurd job description?"

"When's the last time we got that lucky?" Zach muttered.

Camael's wings manifested as he paced. They filled half the room with deadly grace. "Something about this feels familiar. I swear, I've seen references to it before, but..."

"But what?" Amelia prompted when he trailed off.

"But those references would be in the Celestial Archives." His jaw set in a way that made demon lords nervous. "Which means dealing with the Council."

"You're one of the stuffed robes upstairs." Rami's grimace spoke volumes.

"I want to go with you. This is about me. I need to be there," Amelia insisted.

Malachi shook his head. "The others aren't gonna like a witch accessing the archives. They'll have celestial coronaries."

"You can't go," Camael told Amelia. "The Council's already going to be pissy about working with a witch. Showing up with you unannounced would be like dropping a hellhound in their birdbath." He took a moment to send his fellow archangels a mental request for a meeting, pointing to the disturbance as the reason why .

"So, you're going to, what? Ask them pretty please with sugar on top to share their secrets?" Her power flared with her temper. "In case you missed it, this is my cosmic destiny we're talking about."

"Trust me." Camael moved closer. He was near enough that she had to crane her neck to meet his gaze. "I'll get answers. But I need you here, working with the team to figure out what Crocell and Lucifer's next play might be."

Their eye contact held enough electricity to power the Eastern Seaboard. Finally, Amelia cursed. "Fine. But you better come back with something good."

"Don't I always?" He smirked and ran a finger down her cheek.

"I'll alert the medical ward," Rami interjected. "In case the Council needs treatment for collective apoplexy."

His comment was enough to break the tension and keep Camael from dragging Amelia back to his room. "Keep the wards strong," Camael ordered as he prepared to leave. "And try not to start any apocalypses while I'm gone."

"No promises," several voices chorused.

With a final look at Amelia that carried more weight than a neutron star, Camael vanished in a flutter of wings. He materialized in Heaven's administrative district like a dark cloud in paradise. The place hadn't changed since Creation. It was all gleaming towers and pristine streets that usually sang to his battle-worn soul. His black leather jacket and combat boots stood out among the flowing robes and sandals of the celestial paper-pushers. For the first time since donning the uncomfortable clothing, he was glad. He wasn't there to play nice.

The Hall of Reckoning rose before him, a testament to divine authority that managed

to be both awe-inspiring and annoying as hell. Elaborate golden double doors stretched three stories high. They were flanked by white marble columns that disappeared into the clouds above. The whole setup screamed 'important shit happens here' in a way that made Camael's battle-hardened soul itch.

The scent hit him first. Bay leaf and spice. It was the signature fragrance of the Council of Archangels. It was different from his first visit centuries ago when the air had been sweet with a hint of roses. Guards at the entrance straightened as he approached. Their wings twitching with recognition as they bowed to him. The massive golden doors swung open without a sound.

Inside, white marble floors stretched out like a frozen lake. They were polished to a shine that reflected the eternal flames dancing in braziers along the walls. The ceiling soared overhead and was supported by columns that would've made the Parthenon jealous. The whole space managed to be both enclosed and oddly infinite. It was a neat trick that only celestial architecture could pull off.

The focal point was a long table with ten chairs. Each was carved with the sigil of the archangels who sat their divine asses in them. Currently, most of those seats were occupied by beings who looked like they'd just bitten into celestial lemons.

Through the massive windows, Camael could see the living quarters of other angels. They were that weird mix of cloud and solid structure that Heaven favored. They were all open to the air unless an angel specifically chose to close their space off. The view somehow managed to make this chamber feel even more imposing. More separate from the rest of Heaven's architecture.

His boots echoed across that perfect floor as he approached his seat at the table. News traveled faster than divine light up here, especially when one of their own decided to shake things up. "Brother." Michael's voice filled the space with a mix of exasperation and grudging respect. "You've certainly been busy."

"That's what I do," Camael said as he claimed his chair. The sigils carved into it flared with recognition. "But you all knew that when you voted me into the Angels of Retribution command."

"We endorsed a warrior," Gabriel cut in, his white wings shifting with agitation. "Not someone who'd upend the entire celestial order."

"Funny." Camael's smile wasn't friendly. "I don't remember those being mutually exclusive. You know the reason for this meeting."

Raphael's sigh could've powered a wind farm. "The witch. Amelia. Your... association with her has raised concerns among our brethren."

"Concerns?" Camael's laugh made the flames in the braziers dance. "She just saved the day and kept Lucifer from his end goal. But please, share these concerns with the class."

"The natural order-" Jophiel began.

"Is changing," Camael cut her off. "The old ways aren't cutting it anymore. Lucifer's playing a different game. We need to adapt, or everything we serve and protect will be taken from us."

"By allying with witches?" Azrael's white wings spread wide. "The balance between realms exists for a reason, brother."

The temperature in the chamber dropped twenty degrees as Camael's power leaked out. "The balance is already shifting. Or would you prefer we cling to tradition while Lucifer rewrites the rules of existence?"

"We understand your position," Arianna interjected. She was the peacemaker when

shit went down. "But this goes beyond traditional boundaries."

"Maybe it needs to." Camael's wings manifested and spread wide to match Azrael's display. "Because from where I'm sitting - and yes, that's at this table with all of you - we're facing threats our traditions never prepared us for."

"He's right." All eyes turned to Metatron. Their eldest rarely spoke unless the situation truly warranted it. When he did, even Michael paid attention.

"The signs are clear," Metatron continued. His ancient eyes swept the table. "The old barriers between realms are shifting. This witch's bloodline is mentioned in prophecies that predate our Council."

"Prophecies can be interpreted many ways," Chamuel argued, but there was less certainty in his tone.

"True." Metatron's gaze fixed on Camael. "But some things are written in stone. Or should I say... starlight?"

Understanding hit Camael like a thunderbolt. "The Archives. You've found something in the First Records."

The ancient archangel nodded. "Walk with me, brother."

Jeremiel started to protest, but Michael raised a hand for silence. "We should all go. If Metatron believes this important enough to access the First Records, we should all pay attention."

The Council rose as one. Wings of pristine white rustled with barely contained power as they fell into formation behind Metatron. Divine energy rippled through each set of feathers differently. Michael's crackled with warrior's might. Azrael's shimmered

with death's touch. Gabriel's pulsed with heaven's authority. And Arianna's glowed with celestial grace. Camael took his place between Michael and Azrael. The raw power radiating from the gathered archangels made the eternal flames in the braziers dance and the marble floors vibrate beneath their feet.

"It's been an age since we've all entered the Archives together," Jophiel observed.

"The last time was during the First War," Raphael reminded them. His healing energy left traces of ozone in the air. "When Lucifer's betrayal was fresh."

Jeremiel's wings twitched. "Perhaps not the most encouraging precedent."

"Or exactly the precedent we need," Chamuel countered.

Metatron led them down a corridor of pure white marble. Its walls were inscribed with flowing script that shifted and changed as they passed. His ancient robes whispered across the floor as he approached a section of wall that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. Unlike the rest of Heaven's pristine surfaces, this wall bore no decoration or markings. Its perfection lay in its absolute simplicity.

The eldest archangel raised his hand, revealing sigils etched into his skin that glowed like captured starlight. His fingers traced an intricate pattern across the marble. Each touch left trails of divine fire that burned so bright they made Camael's immortal eyes water. The symbols he drew were older than human speech. It was the first language and spoken when the universe was young.

A doorway melted into view with a sound like distant thunder. Golden scrollwork framed the massive opening. Each curve and line told stories of creation in a script so ancient it predated human existence. The entrance to the Archives promised knowledge that could shake everything up.

"The Archives have changed," Michael observed. His warrior's instincts were as sharp as his sword. "The power feels different."

"Everything changes, brother," Metatron responded. "Even that which we believed eternal. Few venture here. Even fewer return with their sanity intact."

"Good thing sanity's never been our strong suit," Camael drawled. "Otherwise, we might've noticed how batshit this job was centuries ago. "

Gabriel's response was pure old-school archangel. He was all proper posture and narrowed eyes that promised celestial lectures about protocol. But Azrael? That male's smirk could've cut glass. His amusement leaked into the air like smoke, which earned him a side-eye from Michael that could've stripped paint.

The Celestial Archives stretched endlessly in all directions. Knowledge literally floated through the air in streams of pure light. They formed rivers of information that flowed into infinity. "Well," Arianna observed as she gestured to the phenomenon. "This is new."

The Archives had evolved since their last visit. Shelves that had to be miles high twisted up into a ceiling that might not have existed at all. Books lined them, their spines marked with titles many wouldn't be able to read. Some volumes were chained down with links forged from starlight. Others hovered and were surrounded by warning sigils that pulsed like heartbeats. One shelf appeared to be on fire with flames that cast no light. Another rippled like water but remained perfectly dry.

"The First Records lie deeper," Metatron said as he moved through the impossible space like he was taking a stroll through the park. The archangels moved as one. Their powers interwove in a dance as old as Creation.

"The knowledge here," Jophiel murmured, her scholar's heart evident in her tone. "It's

alive." Her eyes were wide with surprise.

"Knowledge always is," Metatron responded as he led them toward a circular chamber that seemed to be crafted from pure light. "That's what makes it so dangerous." He opened the door and entered the small room.

"The Lightbringer's Mirror," Metatron gestured to an item on a pedestal in the far corner. "It shows truth that even we can't hide. "

The artifact looked like mercury and starlight had a baby. Its surface rippled with images that changed too fast for Camael to make out. He wondered how the thing worked. Did you have to focus on the questions you needed answered? Before he could open his mouth to ask, he saw threads of power connecting Earth to Hell in its depths. They had Lucifer's signature all over them.

"Son of a bitch," he breathed. "He's been a very busy boy."

"Yes." Metatron's voice held ancient weight. "And only one with both celestial and infernal blood can help us stop him. The prophecies are clear on that."

Camael's jaw clenched. "Amelia."

"Indeed." The elder archangel's smile was knowing. "Perhaps now you understand why the universe has brought such an unusual ally to our doorstep."

"You knew this was coming. You've been waiting for it," Camael muttered.

"The universe has its own plans, brother. Sometimes even we must bow to them," Metatron replied.

As if on cue, the air in the Archives crackled like someone had stuck a fork in

Heaven's electrical socket. A burst of energy Camael recognized lit up the space brighter than Michael's ego. A second later, Amelia materialized in the middle of Heaven's most restricted section. Well, shit.

"Woah," she managed as she looked around with wide eyes filled with fear. "That was not on my to-do list for today."

The reaction from the assembled archangels was instant and nuclear. Wings snapped out, weapons materialized, and the temperature in the Archives dropped faster than Camael's heart. Gabriel's curse would've made a sailor blush. Michael looked ready to smite first and ask questions never.

"How dare-" Jophiel started, but that was as far as she got.

Camael moved faster than light. Amelia didn't even realize he'd moved until he had positioned himself between her and his celestial siblings. His wings spread wide, creating a white wall of don't-even-think-about-it. "Stand down," he barked. She had to fight the urge to press her body up against him. She was freaked the hell out and needed reassurance. Not to mention, she was ridiculously attracted to him.

"Stand down?" Raphael's voice could've frozen hellfire. "There's a witch in the Archives!"

"Trust me, this wasn't my idea," Amelia piped up from behind Camael's protective stance. "One minute, I'm trying to track the recent disturbances in New Orleans, and the next..." She gestured at the impossible space around them. "Poof."

"Poof?" Gabriel sounded like he was choking on the word.

But Metatron's laugh cut through the tension like a hot knife through celestial butter. "Right on time."

Every head turned toward the eldest archangel, who looked about as surprised by Amelia's appearance as he would be by sunrise. "You'll have to excuse their reaction. Your presence here is irregular," the lead angel told her. His pristine white robes looked like they cost more than her car. "It violates protocols established since the First War."

"Fascinating." Amelia let power gather around her fingers. She wasn't going to sit around and let them take her out. "You know what else is irregular? Being yanked away somewhere without your permission."

"Before we address Lucifer's plans," Arianna said, "perhaps we should discuss how a witch breached Heaven's strongest barriers."

"She didn't breach anything," Metatron replied. The ancient archangel moved closer to Amelia. She felt like a bug under a microscope within his gaze. "The Archives themselves called her. When the First Texts recognize one of their own, not even Heaven's barriers can deny them."

"One of their own?" Michael's hand tightened on his sword hilt. "Explain."

Metatron's smile carried the weight of ages. He introduced them to Amelia before explaining, "The First Texts were written in the original power. The force that existed before light and shadow were separated. They were sealed with that same power. And bound by those who could wield both energies in harmony." His ancient eyes fixed on Amelia. "Those like your ancestors, dear one. Those like you."

"My ancestors helped write these?" Amelia's voice came out steadier than she felt.

"Better." Metatron waved a hand. Images shimmered in the air between them. It was a home movie with her actual flesh and blood ancestors working in a chamber that made the current Archives look like a public library. The men and women moved

with purpose. Their bodies were marked with flowing scripts of light and shadow that twisted over their skin like living tattoos.

Their hands flew over massive texts that pulsed with raw power. They recorded the universe's deepest secrets in ink that seemed alive. Some worked with pure light, others with shadow, but Amelia's ancestors? They wielded both. Their fingers trailed both energies as they wrote.

"They were among the First Scribes," Metatron explained. His voice carried equal parts reverence and pride. "When the universe was young, and its laws were still being written, your bloodline helped record them. They understood that both light and shadow were necessary parts of existence. And they had the power to work with both."

"Holy shit," Amelia breathed as she watched a woman who could've been her twin sister several centuries removed write with what looked like pure starlight in her right hand and living shadow in her left. "That's some serious family history."

"The power that brought you here," Metatron continued, "it's the same power that wrote these texts. It recognizes your blood and your ability to channel both energies. When Lucifer's forces probed your wards, your power responded by seeking out its source." He gestured to the Archives around them. "These records have been waiting for one of your line. Waiting for the time when light and shadow would need to work as one again."

Camael wrapped an arm around her shoulders. His protective instincts practically radiated off him. "You're saying this is all part of some big plan?"

"The universe doesn't make plans, brother." Metatron's laugh echoed with ancient knowledge. "It creates possibilities. And right now, all possibilities point to a coming convergence. Light and shadow must find balance again. Or everything unravels."

"And I'm what? The mediator?" Amelia asked, letting her hybrid power dance between her fingers.

"You're the Key," Gabriel interjected. "Not just to opening barriers, but to restoring the original balance."

"Those priests were trying to use you to wake the Oldest Ones," Metatron confirmed. "And prevent you from fulfilling your true purpose. Lucifer knows what's coming. He knows that when light and shadow find harmony again..."

"His power over the shadows ends," Azrael finished for Metatron. "He loses his ability to corrupt the natural order."

"Because there won't be a separation to exploit," Amelia realized. The power flowing through her seemed to hum in agreement. "Light and shadow will be working together again, like they were meant to."

"Which is why he's trying to wake things that predate that balance," Camael growled. "Beings from before the first harmony was established."

"Precisely." Metatron's expression grew grave. "The coming battle isn't just about stopping Lucifer. It's about establishing a new order. And you, my dear," he fixed Amelia with those ancient eyes, "are the catalyst for that change."

"Just once," Amelia muttered, "I'd like to wake up and find out my destiny for the day is something simple. Like grocery shopping. Or filing taxes."

"Where would be the fun in that?" Camael's voice carried a hint of that sexy smirk she was starting to know too well.

"The question remains," Michael cut in, "how do we protect her while she learns to

control this power? Lucifer won't stop coming for her."

"That's why she has me and my angels," Camael replied. His tone allowed for no argument. "The Angels of Retribution were created to handle karmic justice. Looks like we finally found one worthy of our reputation."

Metatron's knowing smile could've powered Las Vegas. "Indeed. Though I suspect your personal interest in her safety goes beyond professional duty, brother."

The temperature in the Archives dropped about twenty degrees as Camael fixed the elder archangel with a look that could've frozen hellfire. Amelia warmed all over when he didn't deny it. Life couldn't get more complicated. Having a dangerous destiny, ancient power, and complicated feelings for an archangel were no simple things. Amelia was starting to think she should've read the fine print on this whole magical heritage thing.

CHAPTER 4

The trip back from Heaven's Archives felt like getting shot through a cosmic pinball machine. Amelia's stomach did backflips as everything bent around her. One second, she was surrounded by rivers of floating knowledge and disapproving archangels. The next she was materializing in the mansion's entryway with enough force to make her stumble.

"Mother of magic," she gasped and then grabbed the nearest solid object - which happened to be an expensive-looking side table - to stay upright. "No one mentioned forced celestial travel would feel like the world's worst hangover."

"Most mortals don't survive the trip." Camael's deep voice came from behind her as he appeared with considerably more grace. His massive white wings were still out, and they filled the space with deadly beauty. "Your heritage protected you."

"Lucky me." She straightened and tried to get her bearings as the room finally stopped spinning. "Next time I get yanked into Heaven without warning, I'm demanding frequent flyer miles."

His lips twitched in what might have been a smile, but his ice-blue eyes were serious. "We need to talk about what happened up there. About what Metatron revealed."

"You mean the part where my ancestors helped write the universe's instruction manual? Or the part where I'm some magical key to preventing reality from unraveling?" She ran a hand through her long, dark hair. The gesture betrayed her nervousness, but she couldn't stop herself. "Because I've got questions about both."

"All of it." Camael moved closer. His presence filled her personal space like an approaching storm. "But first, you should sit down before you fall down. Dimensional travel takes a toll. Even on those built for it."

As if his words had permission to make it true, exhaustion slammed into her like a supernatural freight train. Her legs turned to jelly. The room started doing that annoying spinning thing again. Before she could face-plant into the marble floor, Camael's arm wrapped around her waist.

"I've got you," he rumbled. The words vibrated through his chest where she was pressed against him.

"My hero," she muttered with less snark in her voice than usual. She was too tired to maintain her normal attitude. Not to mention, he was too solid and warm to resist leaning into.

He guided her to the living room, where she sank into what had become her favorite armchair. It was a massive thing upholstered in butter-smooth leather that was softer than the chinchilla she had as a kid. The Angels of Retribution had excellent taste in furniture.

"You need to rest," Camael said. His wings settled and vanished as he took up position on the end of the couch. "In addition to the travel, your body's still adjusting to channeling so much energy. "

"What I need is answers." Try as she might, she couldn't stop the yawn that escaped. "And maybe coffee. Scratch that. The coffee is a must."

As if summoned by the word, Rami appeared with a steaming mug that smelled like heaven's brew. "Thought you might need this," he said and handed it to her. "You look like you went ten rounds with Michael's ego."

"Close. I'm sure you guessed I was yanked into Heaven's restricted section. A little warning would have been nice," she griped and then took a grateful sip of the coffee. She sighed gratefully. It was exactly how she liked it. Strong enough to raise the dead and sweet enough to give any being diabetes.

Rami's eyebrows shot up as he looked between her and Camael. "She was in the Archives? And the other archangels didn't smite her on sight?"

"It's been an interesting day," Camael drawled. The tension she felt in his posture belied his casual tone.

"When isn't it?" Amelia set down her coffee as a thought hit her. A thought she'd had before her unexpected trip to Heaven. "I need to check something at my grandmother's house." She still couldn't think of it as her house. It would always be Nana's place.

"You need to rest," Camael countered. His voice dropped to a place that made windows rattle.

"What I need is to follow my gut." She stood and had to force her tired legs to cooperate. He jumped up beside her and glowered at her. "Something's been nagging at me since before the Universe kidnapped me. It's something I wanted to check. Even more so after that little visit."

Camael shifted restlessly. "Explain."

"I had planned to look in the family journals for more information on my ancestors while you were gone. And when Metatron showed us those images of my ancestors working in the Archives, something clicked. The wards around my grandmother's house aren't normal protection spells like I always assumed. Now, I think they're hiding something." She started pacing. Her energy was returning as she worked

through the puzzle. "I always thought they were just complex because she was paranoid about supernatural security. But what if she was guarding something more important?"

"Your grandmother was a powerful witch," Rami observed. "From what we heard from the Dark Warriors while you were gone, the magical community still tells stories about her."

"That's true. But something tells me we didn't know the half of it." Amelia's power stirred as she remembered details that suddenly seemed significant. "The attic was always off-limits and I haven't tried to get in there since I moved in. Even after she died, the wards up there stayed active. I never questioned it because, well, witches are weird about their spaces. But now..."

"Now you're wondering what else she might have been protecting." Camael cocked his head and looked at her as if he could see into her soul. "Something connected to your heritage."

"Exactly." She grabbed her jacket from where she'd dropped it earlier. "And I'm going to find out what it is."

"Not alone." It wasn't a request. Camael's tone made it clear this was non-negotiable.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Archangel." Amelia popped one hip out, and her dark hair fell across her shoulder as she met those ice-blue eyes of his. The male was fine as hell, even when he was being overprotective. Maybe, especially then. "Besides, those wings of yours might come in handy if we need to reach the high shelves."

The tension between them crackled like a live wire. Possibility pulsed between them, making her giddy. Camael's massive frame shifted, drawing her eyes down his body. She admired the way his black leather jacket stretched across shoulders built for

battle. His wings might be hidden, but their deadly grace was evident in every predatory movement.

"We take my car," he growled as he headed for the garage. His boots made no sound on the marble floors. That was some kind of crime, given his size. The male moved like violence, waiting for an excuse to happen.

"Of course we do." Amelia rolled her eyes as she followed him. Heaven forbid they take her perfectly good Honda Civic when he had that black beast of a Dodge Challenger waiting in the garage. The thing was all muscle and attitude, just like its owner.

"Wait." Amelia planted her feet as something occurred to her. "Do you even know how to drive?"

From his position by the door, Rami's shoulders shook with barely contained laughter. The bastard was clearly enjoying this shit show. Her gaze remained on Camael as his ice-blue eyes narrowed. The temperature in the garage dropped about twenty degrees. His massive frame filled the doorway of that car like it had been custom-built for him. "I have commanded Heaven's most elite fighting force through multiple millennia of celestial warfare." His voice was pure don't-even-start-with-me. "I think I can handle one small machine."

The way he said 'small machine' made it sound like the Challenger was a tricycle. But there was something else in his tone. Something that suggested this wasn't his first rodeo with modern transportation.

"Besides," he added with a smirk that should've been illegal in at least three states, "Michael insisted we all learn after Gabriel tried to 'borrow' a fighter jet. That was an interesting week for the Archangel Council."

Well, shit. There went her last excuse to avoid getting into an enclosed space with all that concentrated male beauty. Sometimes a female's life just wasn't fair. Amelia thought of anything but how good he smelled during the ten-minute drive. It was easier to focus on the houses while they were cruising through the Garden District after that. His massive hands gripped the leather steering wheel like he was prepared to wage war with New Orleans traffic. Which, given the clusterfuck that was Magazine Street during tourist season, wasn't entirely unreasonable.

The tension in the car was thick enough to choke a demon. Every time he shifted gears, the movement drew her attention to those forearms marked with ancient Enochian script. The tattoos danced beneath his skin. It was a beautiful reminder that this wasn't just some pretty male playing chauffeur. This was a warrior archangel who'd seen centuries of combat.

And wasn't that just perfect? Here she was, ogling an archangel while they headed to her grandmother's house to uncover what could be world-changing information. And with luck, they'd discover some magical artifacts that could solve their problems. Her life had officially crossed into territory that would make reality TV producers weep with joy.

Her grandmother's Victorian stood exactly as she'd left it when she'd fled. Its gingerbread trim and wraparound porch were a testament to old New Orleans charm. She could see the wards that cloaked the property with her newly awakened senses. They were veils, hiding something powerful from prying eyes.

"The magic here," Camael said as they approached the front door. "is old. Older than the house itself."

"My family's lived on this land for generations." Amelia pressed her palm to the door. The wards recognized her blood and parted like curtains in a breeze. "Each witch has added their own layers of protection. I added mine when I inherited the house after

Nana passed."

She hadn't changed anything inside the house. It was still a testament to her grandmother's eclectic taste. Crystal prisms hung in windows. They caught the light and split it into rainbows. Books filled floor-to-ceiling shelves. Their spines bore titles in English and Latin. The one thing she loved about the place was that it still smelled of herbs and old magic. It represented home to her.

"The attic access is this way." Amelia led him up the worn wooden staircase. Each step creaked under their weight like the house was commenting on their passage. The male's massive frame made the space feel smaller, more intimate. And wasn't that just perfect? An archangel in her family home, about to discover God knew what in her attic.

Camael's ice-blue eyes scanned everything, missing nothing. His warrior's instincts didn't take breaks, even in supposedly safe spaces. "You haven't changed anything," he observed, voice rumbling through the narrow hallway. "The place looks frozen in time."

She paused at the top of the stairs. One hand rested on the banister her grandfather had carved decades ago. "I guess I've been waiting for something," she admitted. "Though I didn't expect that something to be an ancient destiny and an archangel houseguest."

"It's your home now." Camael's massive shoulders barely fit in the hallway as he moved closer. His presence seemed to fill all the empty spaces she'd been trying not to notice. "You should claim it properly."

"I keep telling myself I'll redecorate," she said as she led him into the study. "But every time I try, it feels like..." She trailed off, searching for words as she breathed in the familiar scent of old books.

Her gaze moved around the organized chaos. The space would give Martha Stewart an aneurysm but it made perfect sense to her nana and her. She trailed fingers over the massive oak desk where she'd spent countless hours learning her craft from her nana. Its surface was a roadmap of magical mishaps. There were burn marks from spells that had backfired. There were also crystal-shaped impressions from failed levitation attempts. The rings from the thousands of cups of tea her nana drank created a lump in her throat.

"Like you're erasing her," Camael finished when it was clear she wasn't going to. His voice was gentler than a male his size had any right to manage.

"Yeah." Amelia turned to face him. She found understanding in those ancient eyes. "Stupid, right? She's been gone for over a year, but I still feel like she's going to walk in and start critiquing my spell technique."

"Not stupid." He moved closer. He was close enough that she had to tip her head back to maintain eye contact. His heat seeped into her bones. "But she'd want you to make this place your own. To build on what she taught you. Not just preserve it."

Well, shit. Who knew an archangel could do therapy? Though standing this close to him was definitely not helping her think clearly about interior decoration or anything else. She nodded without responding as she continued across the room.

The attic stairs were hidden behind a bookcase that only opened if you knew the right spell. She'd watched her nana countless times but had never been told how to get in. Going on instinct, Amelia's hands moved through the familiar gestures. She infused the magic with both light and shadow. The response was immediate and dramatic.

The bookcase practically leaped aside as ancient wards recognized her awakened power. The stairwell beyond was dark, although she could still see the protective sigils that lined its walls. They were written in magic and carved into the wood.

"Well, that's new," she muttered as she studied the symbols.

"Those markings are like the ones in the Archives," Camael observed.

Her fingers hovered over symbols that predated written history. "How many generations of my family knew about this? How long have we been guarding these secrets?"

"They've been guarding them since the beginning," Camael responded as she continued up the stairs.

The attic was thick with dust and old magic. Afternoon light filtered through a single round window. It painted the space in shades of amber. Boxes and trunks were stacked up carefully. Amelia cocked her head and scanned the room. She recognized they were arranged in magical arrays. The whole room was one giant ward designed to hide something important.

She was drawn to a particular corner. Magical energies were concentrated there. Walking over, she discovered a wooden trunk. It was covered in dust and humming with power. The lock was a complex piece of spellwork that would have given most witches fits. For Amelia, it practically sang to her blood.

Excited, she unlocked it and flipped the lid. There were numerous things inside. But only one that she instinctively reached for. It was an ornate box covered in symbols that moved like quicksilver. Power radiated from it in waves that made her magical core vibrate in recognition.

"I've never seen this, yet it feels familiar," she muttered as she traced the intricate patterns. The box wasn't alone. Nearby lay a crystal that seemed to contain actual starlight and there was a dagger displaying many runes. There was also a book bound in some sort of material that defied description.

From his position by the attic window, Camael watched her with those ice-blue eyes. They saw straight through her bullshit. His massive wings had appeared at some point and were half-spread. Their shadows danced across the dusty floorboards. The archangel hadn't said a word since she'd started examining her finds. His presence filled the space like a storm about to break.

"You gonna hover there all night? Or help me figure out what we're dealing with?" She went back to her examination of the smaller box's magical lock.

His boots made no sound as he crossed to her. "Those symbols," he rumbled as he leaned close to her. "They're from before the First War. Given what we know, my guess is that they're from when light and shadow still danced together."

"Like what we saw in the Archives." The memory of that celestial library still gave her chills. The kind that came with discovering you were part of something bigger than yourself. "My family has been guarding these for generations. The wards on them are..." she trailed off as power surged through the room.

The crystal had begun to glow when he got close to her. Light spilled from its faceted surface in waves that painted the walls with moving symbols. "Oh, pretty." Amelia reached for it instinctively.

Camael's hand caught her wrist. "Careful. Artifacts that old tend to have minds of their own."

The crystal was singing to something in her blood, and she couldn't stop herself. Something in her recognized its call. Power surged through her, making her gasp as new awareness bloomed in her mind. Suddenly, she could see the threads of energy that connected everything in the room. They were beautiful... and terrifying .

"Shit," she breathed as the crystal's light wrapped around her like a lover's embrace.

"Is this what you see all the time?"

Camael's grip on her wrist gentled. "You're seeing the true nature of things. I bet it's awakening even more of what has been dormant in your blood."

Knowledge poured into her mind like water from a broken dam. She saw how energy flowed through the world. It felt like centuries of magical theory were downloaded straight into her consciousness. Her knees buckled as the information overload hit. Camael caught her against his chest. One arm wrapped around her waist while the other still held her wrist. The contact sent sparks of awareness through her that had nothing to do with magical awakening and everything to do with the way his body felt against hers.

"Easy," he murmured. His breath stirred her hair. "Let it settle. Don't fight it."

"Easy for you to say." Her voice came out shakier than she liked. "You're not the one getting PowerPoint presentations beamed directly into your brain."

His chest rumbled with what might have been a laugh. "No, but I remember what it's like when power first truly awakens. When you realize the universe is bigger and stranger than you ever had imagined."

"And here I thought finding out about my family was the weird part of my week." She managed to steady herself. However, she didn't step away from his support. The warmth of his body was too comforting to give up just yet.

The crystal's light faded while the knowledge it had gifted remained. Amelia's mind raced with possibilities. "These artifacts," she said slowly. "They're the keys to accessing the original power. The stuff that existed before light and shadow split. I'm not actually the key."

"They're tools," he corrected as he finally released her wrist. She was giddy when he kept his other arm around her waist. "Left by your ancestors to help their descendants remember the old ways."

The box chose that moment to click open. Inside lay a medallion that seemed to be made of frozen twilight. The metal was neither gold nor silver. It was something that existed between states of matter.

"The Twilight Key," Camael breathed, recognition flaring in his ancient eyes. "I thought it was lost during the First War."

"Let me guess. This is another family heirloom that could reshape reality?" Amelia reached for the medallion but stopped just short of touching it. The power radiating from it made her magical core hum like a tuning fork.

"It's mentioned in the oldest texts. It was a tool forged by the First Weavers to help maintain the balance between realms." He shifted restlessly, stirring dust motes in the afternoon light. "It was supposedly destroyed when Lucifer fell."

"Looks pretty intact to me." She finally gathered her courage and picked up the medallion. Power surged through her the instant her fingers touched its surface. It was different from the crystal's awakening energy. This was pure potential, waiting to be shaped by her will.

Images flashed through her mind of Lucifer gathering ancient artifacts and preparing rituals that would tear holes in the veil. She saw creatures stirring in the depths between worlds. They were drawn by the corruption he was spreading. And she saw how her newfound powers could stop him.

"In addition to waking the Oldest Ones," she gasped as the vision faded. "Lucifer is trying to corrupt the original power itself. He wants to turn it dark before light and

shadow can find balance again."

"That's not surprising. We all should have assumed that," Camael replied before saying something in Enochian. "Show me. "

Without hesitation, Amelia reached up and pressed the medallion to his chest, right over his heart. The contact sent power surging between them like a live wire. His wings flared as wide as they could in the cramped attic. The artifact showed him what it had allowed her to see. His ice-blue eyes began glowing with celestial fire.

"Son of a bitch," he growled. The words carried enough raw fury to make the windows rattle. He looked ready to go nuclear. Given what they'd just seen, Amelia couldn't blame him. "That arrogant piece of shit is playing with forces that could unmake everything. Not just Earth or Heaven - everything."

"Not if I have anything to say about it." Amelia turned back to the trunk and reached for the ancient book. Its cover was warm under her fingers. "Time to see what other surprises my ancestors left behind."

"We should get these back to the mansion," Camael interjected as he started gathering the artifacts. "My wards will help protect them while you learn to use them."

"Your wards plus mine." Amelia gathered the crystal, which hummed in her grip like a happy cat. The thing practically purred as she wrapped it in layers of protective magic. "Something tells me we're going to need all the protection we can get."

"We take them straight back," Camael ordered as he moved with that lethal grace of his. "No stops."

Amelia hurried to catch up. He was out the front door by the time she got downstairs. Securing the attic was just as important as getting out of there. She had no idea what

else was up there.

The drive back was a special kind of torture. Being trapped in that muscle car with an archangel was not exactly a relaxing Sunday cruise. Every intersection had Amelia's heart in her throat. She expected demon attacks or worse. The artifacts were broadcasting their presence on all magical frequencies. It was like having a supernatural neon sign saying 'come and get it'.

Camael handled the Challenger like he'd been born behind its wheel. He took corners fast enough to make her grateful for the seat belt. His massive hands gripped the steering wheel tight enough to leave impressions. All the while, those ice-blue eyes of his didn't stop scanning for threats. The male was in full warrior mode, ready to unleash violence on anything that looked at them wrong.

The mansion's gates opened automatically as they approached. Rami met them at the door. He took one look at their cargo and cursed. "I'll alert the others," he said as he reached for his phone. "Get those things behind our strongest wards before every supernatural nasty in the city comes knocking."

Once they were safely behind the mansion's reinforced walls, the real work began. The next few hours were a crash course in powers that would have made Harvard's magical theory department weep with envy. Camael guided her through exercises in control while she explored her expanding abilities. The archangel was a surprisingly patient teacher. Even when her attempts at channeling pure energy nearly set the curtains on fire.

"Again," he instructed after she failed to properly merge light and shadow for the tenth time. "You're still treating them as separate forces. They're two halves of the same whole."

"Easy for you to say." Sweat beaded on her forehead as she gathered power once

more. The artifacts arrayed on the massive dining room table pulsed in time with her efforts. "You've had millennia to figure this stuff out."

His hands settled on her shoulders from behind while the other angels stood around watching. They were there to help Camael keep a lid on her practice. No one wanted the mansion to blow up.

"Stop thinking so much," Camael suggested. "Feel the connection. Find the balance point where twilight exists."

Amelia leaned back against that massive chest of his, letting his power flow into her like divine lightning. The instant she stopped fighting it, everything clicked. Light and shadow wrapped around her hands. They danced together like they'd never been apart.

"That's it," Camael growled. His voice vibrated through her body like a bass line. The male's power was everywhere. It steadied her as she worked magic that shouldn't exist.

The dagger called to her from the table. Its quicksilver runes practically begged to be used. When she wrapped her fingers around the hilt, a curse flew from her lips. It turned out this wasn't just some pretty letter opener. The weapon could cut windows in any veil. That would be bad in Lucifer's hands.

Taking a deep breath that did nothing to steady her nerves. She channeled both energies through the blade. Reality split open like wet paper and showed them exactly what they didn't want to see. Lucifer's corruption was spreading through the city faster than gossip at a church social.

"You're getting better at this," Camael observed as she let the window close. His ice-blue eyes were fixed on where the tear had been. He looked ready to go to war.

Doubt hit her harder than a demon's sucker punch as she looked at the artifacts scattered across the table. "What if-" she started. Camael was there before she could finish that sentence and spiral out of control.

His massive hand tilted her face up to his. "You were born for this," he rumbled. His thumb brushed her cheek in a way that made her heart skip beats. "These artifacts chose you. And so did I."

Before she could process that bombshell, vile energy slammed through the room like a supernatural freight train. Every artifact on the table started screaming warnings at her magical senses which automatically reached out to find the source of the disturbance. "The French Quarter," she barked out. "Lucifer's crew is making their play."

Camael's wings snapped out, and his Sword of Light materialized. "Time to crash their party." He turned to Rami and said, "It's a good thing you haven't gone to NYC yet. I have a feeling we're going to need you for this."

Rami nodded as Amelia strapped on the artifacts like she was gearing up for war. Because that's exactly what this was. Here she was, about to face down the Prince of Lies with some family heirlooms, an archangel who looked at her like she hung the stars, and his team of misfits. It would have to be enough.

"Ready to raise some hell?" she asked, taking his offered hand.

His answering smile could've cut glass. "I was born ready."

She clung to him as he teleported them across town. She was leaving the safety of their home to face whatever darkness waited in the French Quarter. Some things were worth risking everything for. Balance, it turned out, was one of them.

CHAPTER 5

The French Quarter didn't give a shit about Lucifer's plans. Camael figured that out real quick as he followed Amelia. They wove through streets that had seen three hundred years of history and were about to get a fresh coat of demon blood. The female moved like she was born for war. Her power crackled around her in waves that made his warrior's soul sit up and beg.

The night air was thick with corruption, booze, and tourist sweat. Music from Bourbon Street's endless party mixed with screams that weren't coming from drunk college kids. The usual scents of pralines and gumbo had been replaced by sulfur. Also, there was something that smelled like death had crawled up from the bayou and decided to throw a block party.

A familiar presence hit Camael's senses seconds before several figures materialized on the corner ahead of them. Izzy moved with the lethal grace of vampire royalty. Her black hair whipped around a face that carried her father's sapphire blue eyes and her mother's deadly beauty. The Dark Warriors flanked her like living shadows. Aison's massive form rippled with barely contained shifter energy. Slate's vampire speed left afterimages in the humid air. And Luke's sorcerer magic crackled blue-white around his hands while Micah swirled his blades.

"Heard you could use some backup," Izzy called out, her fangs flashing in a warrior's smile.

"Your timing's perfect, Cupcake," Rami called out. His eyes lit up at the sight of her even as he scanned the rooflines. The male had come a long way and forged one of

the deepest bonds Camael had ever seen with the princess. He had to keep Izzy alive and act as her Guardian Angel to earn his AOR wings. "Lucifer might be making his move."

"That would explain why we got calls about increased demonic presence," Izzy replied as she fell into step with Rami.

"You feel that?" Amelia called over her shoulder. Her dark hair whipped in the supernatural wind that had kicked up. Power danced around her hands like she was holding lightning.

Yeah, he felt it. The evil in the air was thicker than a po'boy and twice as messy. Lucifer's corruption was spreading through the Quarter like cancer. It was turning the usual tourist trap vibe into something that would give Stephen King nightmares.

"Boss, we've got problems on Bourbon. Big ones. Word is they aren't your brother's demons," Cass called out.

"Define big," Camael demanded as he scanned the rooflines. Movement caught his eye. Something with too many limbs was using Cafe du Monde's awning like a jungle gym.

Beside him, Aison's massive form rippled. Muscles bunched as he prepared to shift. The Pacific Islander's dark eyes tracked the movement above. His warrior's instincts were likely already calculating trajectories .

"Remember that thing in Detroit? The one that ate half a SWAT team?" Cass asked.

Camael had seen pictures. "Yeah."

"This is twice as ugly. And it has friends. Lots of them." A crash echoed through the

line, followed by creative cursing in three dead languages. "Make that Dante's Inferno with backup dancers."

Camael cursed. They were spread thin enough to make cellophane jealous. They'd take these creatures out. Because that's the thing about being Heaven's most feared fighting force... they knew you didn't get to pick your battles. Sometimes, the battles picked you, grabbed you by the celestial short hairs, and dragged you face-first into the crazy.

"Rally at Jackson Square," Camael ordered. His wings itched to manifest as more screams split the night. Human screams. Terrified screams. The kind that said someone had just seen something their brain couldn't process without a lot of therapy. "And somebody get eyes on whatever the hell is happening on Bourbon."

"Already on it." Jo replied as she gestured to her right. "Mal and Zach are working their way down from Canal."

Malachi looked like he was about to take off and sighed. "Thank the goddess. The bastards aren't trying to take out Pat O'Brien's. Like we'd let them destroy the home of the Hurricane."

"Priorities, Mal," Rami cut in as he moved to cover Izzy's flank. The vampire princess was dealing death with a grace that made battle look like dancing.

"Hey, some institutions are sacred," the Dark Warrior countered.

Luke shook his head. "We need to send a unit to Esplanade. The demons took out the Praline Connection. I just got a message that looks like a drunk bulldozer operator got loose in the building. "

"Az, Jo. Head over and see what you can do," Camael ordered as he sliced through a

massive pus demon. The thing smelled awful when burned.

The streets around them had emptied faster than a church during a Vegas weekend. Smart humans. They knew when to run. Even if they didn't know what they were running from. The ones who hadn't cleared out were about to get front row seats to a supernatural throwdown that would rewrite French Quarter ghost tours for the next century. That would be after Camael did some serious work altering memories. He wouldn't be able to erase them completely. Some shit was embedded too deeply.

Slate's vampire speed became a blur as he cleared civilians from the danger zone. Luke's sorcery created barriers of blue-white energy to funnel the humans toward safety. Aison completed his shift. His massive black wolf form took up position beside Izzy.

A group of tourists huddled in a doorway. They had their phones out and were filming. Camael's curse could've peeled paint. "Seriously?" Amelia's power flared as she threw up a shield. It would obscure everything from their vantage point. "They're posting this shit to TikTok?"

"Social media is going to be the death of humanity," Camael muttered as he grabbed the tourists and shoved them toward Royal Street. "Get the hell out of here! Now!"

"But dude, is this like a movie shoot or something?" One of them actually tried to get a selfie with a demon in the background.

"Yeah, and you didn't sign the release forms. Move!" Camael altered the memory to make them think a drunk was chasing them and sent out a pulse to fry their phones.

His Sword of Light blazed to life in his grip as the first wave of demons hit them fully. These weren't your garden variety demons, either. These were old-school nasty. The kind that gave others nightmares. They slithered out of the sewers.

The Dark Warriors hit them in perfect formation. Aison's massive wolf form tore through demon flesh while Slate's vampire strength let him literally pull the creatures apart. Luke's sorcery created killing fields of arcane energy that turned demons to ash. And through it all, Izzy moved like a deadly arrow. Her father's royal vampire blood made her nearly invisible to even supernatural eyes, she was so fast.

"Well, shit," Amelia breathed beside him. Her hands were already glowing with that hybrid magic of hers. Light and shadow danced between her fingers like they'd never been separated. "I'm guessing these aren't tourists."

"What gave it away?" Camael drawled as he separated a demon's head from its shoulders. Black ichor sprayed across historic brick. The thing had the nerve to try growing a new head. He removed that one too. "The extra eyes or the tentacles?"

Her laugh was pure adrenaline and attitude. And damn if that didn't make him want to kiss her. "The lack of cameras, actually. Tourists would be Instagramming this shit."

"Incoming on your six!" Cassiel shouted from behind them.

Camael instantly spun. His blade swung through the air as he bisected a demon resembling a cross between a praying mantis and a Great White shark. The thing's death scream shattered windows up and down the block. "These assholes are getting creative," he growled as three more took its place.

"You ain't seen nothing yet." Mal's voice carried over the sound of combat. "The ones up here? They're smarter than they look. They're learning from each hit."

Rami moved to cover Izzy's back as a particularly nasty demon tried to flank her. His blade took the thing's head while her power turned two more to ash. Their fighting styles complemented each other like they'd been training together for centuries. The

creature that came up from behind dodged both their efforts and managed to slice open Rami's leg. Mal wasn't kidding. Demons who could think on their feet were about as welcome as holy water in Hell.

The fight carried them down Royal Street. Historic buildings watched with dead eyes as celestial steel met demon flesh. Spanish ironwork and French architecture became collateral damage. It was a war most humans wouldn't believe, even if you showed them video evidence.

Camael moved like the warrior he was. Each strike was precise and lethal, leaving little for them to learn from. His blade left trails of divine fire in its wake. Three demons rushed him from different directions. He took the first one apart at the joints, pivoted to remove the second one's head, then ran the third through before it could fully manifest its extra limbs.

Beside him, Amelia was poetry in motion. Her magic carved paths through demon ranks like they were made of smoke. Light and shadow worked in perfect harmony as she proved why she was more than just another witch. A particularly ugly bastard tried to flank her. It looked like someone had skinned a dragon and used the hide to make a suit for a creature that had too many bones. Camael's blade found its throat before it could strike.

"I had that one," she said as she turned a different demon into cosmic confetti.

"I know." He smirked as he put down two more. "Just admiring the view."

But for every one they put down, three more took its place. The corruption in the air was thicker now and made it hard to breathe. Even Camael's celestial lungs struggled with the toxic mix of demon magic and ancient evil.

"We've lost contact with Mal and Zach," Rami reported. His voice was tight with

concern. "Last known position was Bourbon and St. Ann."

Son of a bitch. Camael's wings manifested as his power leaked out. The temperature around them dropped twenty degrees. "What's the status on Jo and Az?"

"Holding the line on Decatur, but barely. These things are pains in the ass."

A scream from the direction of Bourbon Street cut through the night like a knife. It wasn't human. It wasn't demon, either. It was something that made Camael's ancient blood run cold.

"Move!" He grabbed Amelia and launched them both into the air as the building beside them exploded. Debris rained down like deadly confetti. His wings caught an updraft, carrying them above the chaos.

Below them, Izzy and the Dark Warriors moved as one unit. Aison's wolf form provided cover while Slate used his vampire speed to evacuate civilians from the blast radius. Luke's protective shields sparkled like starlight, deflecting the worst of the debris.

The view from above was enough to make a lesser being pray. Darkness writhed through the streets like living ink. Demons climbed buildings with impossible grace, using historic balconies like jungle gyms from hell. The French Quarter had become a war zone that would give Heaven's generals PTSD.

Camael squinted when he saw movement in the distance. Something massive was moving through the Quarter, leaving destruction in its wake. Each step it took made the ground shake. And cars bounced like toys.

"Holy mother of magic." Amelia's curse carried over the wind. "What the hell is that?"

Before Camael could answer, a burst of red caught his eye. Three streaks of crimson cut through the night sky like bloody comets. For a second, he thought it was some new demonic fuckery. Then he recognized the wings.

"About damn time," he muttered as three angels descended into the fray. Their wings were the color of fresh blood, marking them as members of Heaven's elite warriors.

Araton smirked at Camael and said, "We heard you could use some help."

Camael shook his head and dropped back to the ground. Amelia immediately resumed fighting but was still able to ask, "Who are they? They aren't yours."

"Michael sent backup," Camael explained as they landed. "Meet Heaven's most coordinated killing machine."

"Triplets?" Amelia's eyebrows shot up. "I've never seen angels with red wings."

"They're Michael's warriors." Camael engaged another demon. His blade cut through the air.

Rami raced by just then, calling out to Izzy. "Get back to Les Auger," he told her. His voice carried an edge of concern that had nothing to do with battle. "Behind the wards. This is about to get uglier."

Izzy's blue eyes met his and carried promises that had nothing to do with war. "Try not to get yourself killed. We'll take care of the stragglers on our way." She signaled to the other Dark Warriors. They fell back in perfect formation, covering her retreat.

The triplets hit the ground like divine wrecking balls. Araton moved like liquid violence. His celestial blade carved through demon ranks with surgical precision. Every strike was calculated, efficient, and absolutely lethal.

"Clear the perimeter!" his voice carried like a commander's. "Standard formation delta!"

Ayil was pure grace in motion. He danced through the fight like it was choreographed. Where his brother was all precision, Ayil was artistry. His blade spun and twirled and left trails of crimson energy that turned demons to ash.

"I've got movement on the rooflines," he called out. "They're trying to set up crossfire!"

And Abraxos fought like he had a personal grudge against gravity. He went vertical, running up walls and using balconies like springboards. His fighting style was pure improvisation. He made it impossible for the demons to predict his moves.

The battle shifted as the triplet's presence changed the dynamic. What had been a desperate holding action became something else. Something with actual strategy. The demons found themselves caught between the AOR's raw power and the triplet's synchronized assault.

"The east side is secure!" Araton's voice cut through the chaos. His blade left trails of fire as he cleared Decatur Street.

"The west side needs backup," Ayil responded. He moved like a deadly dance through a group of demons that looked like someone had tried to mate porcupines with spiders. "They're trying to circle around through Pirates Alley."

"I've got the high ground," Abraxos called from his position on a balcony. He launched himself into a group of flying demons. His blade carved elegant arcs through corrupted flesh.

They pushed toward Jackson Square, where the darkness seemed thickest. The usual

tourist hub had become ground zero for supernatural warfare. St. Louis Cathedral loomed over the battlefield like a silent witness to the carnage. A crash from his left drew Camael's attention.

A woman burst out of a shop. She was clutching books to her chest like shields. Her dark hair was wild, and her eyes were wide with terror. But she moved with purpose, trying to reach a store across the street. The sign above it read "Crescent City Arcane" .

Abraxos was there before anyone else could move. The male materialized between the woman and an approaching demon. His red wings spread wide. They created a barrier of divine protection. Camael swore something passed between the two, but he couldn't be sure the look actually carried more weight than a neutron star. It was chaotic around them.

Amelia hesitated and looked over when Abraxos growled, "Inside," to the woman. His voice carried that don't-argue-with-me tone that all warriors had mastered. "Now."

"My store," she protested. "The wards-"

"Will hold," he cut her off as another explosion rocked the Quarter. "Move!"

The woman had to be Sarah, the owner of the occult bookstore Camael had read about before setting up shop in the area. Camael caught sight of her as she ran for cover. He noted that Abraxos watched her go. Something flickered in the male's ancient eyes that Camael recognized all too well. That was a problem for another night. Right now, they had a city to protect and a Prince of Lies to find and stop.

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CHAPTER 6

The mansion's training room had seen better days. Hell, it had seen better hours. Amelia surveyed the destruction around her as she caught her breath. Scorch marks decorated the reinforced walls where her hybrid magic had gone wide. The expensive training mats were toast. Literally. Some were still smoking from her last attempt at merging light and shadow energy.

"Again." Camael's deep voice rolled through the space like thunder. The archangel stood behind her. He was close enough that his heat seeped into her bones. His massive frame was a solid wall of angelic warrior. And his presence did things to her concentration that had nothing to do with magic.

"I'm pretty sure your insurance doesn't cover 'witch loses control of ancient powers'," she muttered as she gathered energy once more. Light danced in her right palm while shadow swirled in her left. The two forces fought like cats in a bag and refused to merge.

"You're still treating them as separate entities." His hands settled on her shoulders. Holy mother of magic. That did not help her focus. "They're two halves of the same whole. Like dawn and dusk."

"Poetic." She closed her eyes and leaned back against him. "But a wrecking ball and a building don't engage in mutual destruction when they meet."

The Twilight Key hung heavily around her neck. Its metal was both warm and cool against her skin. The artifact pulsed with each attempt at merging the energies.

Almost like it was keeping score of her failures. Some family heirloom it was turning out to be.

"You're thinking too much." His breath stirred her hair as he spoke. One of his hands slid down her arm to cover her right hand. Divine power surged between them at the contact. "Feel the balance point. The place where light bleeds into shadow."

The Key chose that moment to warm against her skin. It was quickly followed by images flooding her mind. They were ancient memories of her ancestors wielding these same powers. Camael was right. They didn't force the energies together. They let them dance and find their harmony like old lovers reuniting.

"Oh," she breathed as understanding clicked. Her hands moved through the air. She drew patterns she'd never been taught. It was knowledge that had been passed down in her blood, but she didn't have access to it before now. Light and shadow responded. They wove together in a display that painted the training room in shades of twilight.

"That's it." Camael's voice dropped to a place that made her shiver. His power wrapped around her like a blanket as she worked magic she never knew existed. "Now, hold it."

She managed to maintain the merged energy for almost a minute before it destabilized. The resulting backlash sent them both stumbling. Camael's arms wrapped around her waist. He kept her upright as the power dissipated .

"Better," he rumbled. He didn't immediately release her. And she didn't try to pull away. "You're learning to trust your instincts."

"The Key helps." She touched the artifact, which hummed under her fingers. "It's like having a link to the supernatural instruction manual hardwired into my brain."

His chest thundered against her back. "Your ancestors left you more than just tools. They left you their knowledge."

Before she could respond, the Key pulsed with urgent energy. New images crashed through her mind. Scenes of battles fought with these same powers. She saw her ancestors defending the barriers between worlds. They used light and shadow in ways that made her current efforts look like parlor tricks.

"Shit," she gasped as the vision released her. Her knees buckled, but she didn't fall. Camael's grip kept her steady. "That was... intense."

"What did you see?" His voice carried equal parts concern and curiosity.

"Fighting techniques. Ways to use both energies in combat. It was severe..." She trailed off as the Key warmed again. Power gathered around her hands without conscious thought. "Step back."

To his credit, Camael immediately gave her space. Keeping the images in mind, she moved through forms that felt as natural as breathing. It was a wild experience, considering she'd never practiced them. Light and shadow responded to each gesture. They formed weapons and shields that shouldn't exist.

A slow whistle from the doorway broke her concentration. "Now that's something you don't see every day," Rami observed. He was leaning against the frame with his arms crossed. He looked like violence taking a coffee break. There was talk of him putting off a trip to New York. She had no idea what that meant and hadn't bothered asking. She wanted the warrior to stay there. They would need his help. She was afraid she wouldn't be enough. In each of her visions, her ancestors were never alone.

"How long have you been there?" Amelia demanded as she let the energy dissipate.

"Long enough to see you channel some serious mojo." He pushed off from the door and entered the room. "The others are gathering upstairs. We need to talk about what's happening now in the Quarter."

While she'd been playing magical dress-up with powers that could possibly save the day, Lucifer wasn't exactly sitting on his ass with a mint julep. The Prince of Lies had switched up his game plan faster than a casino dealer with something to hide. No more demon hordes doing the supernatural equivalent of a Mardi Gras murder parade.

The bastard was going subtle, and that shit was scarier than a tax audit in May. The corruption was seeping through the Big Easy like poison in the bayou. Now, he was using the kind of evil that didn't announce itself with fanfare and fireworks. It was more like the type that smiled while it slipped arsenic into your coffee.

The intel flooding in from their network painted a picture uglier than sin. The Dark Warriors were reporting surges of power that made their supernatural radar go haywire. The Rowan sisters had their hands full with wards that kept shifting like quicksand. And the vampire community? They were seeing things that made thousand-year-old bloodsuckers check their locks twice at dawn.

"I'll be right up," Camael told his second-in-command when he was finished giving his report. His ice-blue eyes remained fixed on Amelia. "We need to finish here first."

Rami nodded and disappeared upstairs, leaving them alone again. The tension in the room thickened until Amelia could barely breathe. Or maybe that was just the effect Camael had on her when he looked at her like that.

Camael moved like a storm about to break. He was all lethal grace and barely contained power. "That Key around your neck?" His voice dropped to a place that made her bones vibrate. "The visions it's feeding into your brain aren't just some

cosmic highlight reel. This is preparation for a war that's been brewing since before time learned to crawl."

"Tell that to my migraine." Amelia's fingers found the artifact. Holy hell, power was surging between the two of them like a live wire. "Every time I think I've got a handle on this unexpected inheritance, it downloads another batch of greatest hits straight into my cerebral cortex."

His massive hand covered hers where she gripped the Key. The contact sent awareness shooting through her. It had jack shit to do with magic and everything to do with how much she wanted to shove him to the ground and have her way with him. "You're wielding power that hasn't been seen since the universe was in diapers." The words rumbled through his chest as he stepped closer. Close enough that she had to crane her neck to maintain eye contact. "The fact that you haven't reduced the entire planet to its component atoms is a fucking miracle."

The air between them thickened until breathing became optional. His ice-blue eyes locked onto hers with an intensity that could've melted steel. Time stretched like taffy as he lowered his head toward hers. Her breath caught in her throat as she prayed that he didn't stop.

The kiss, when it finally happened, was like getting hit by divine lightning. His lips claimed hers with a hunger that had been building since day one. One of his hands tangled in her hair while the other pulled her flush against him. Power surged between them, making the Key pulse against her chest like a second heartbeat .

Because timing was a bitch with a sick sense of humor, alarms screamed through the mansion like banshees having a party. To her dismay, he pulled away from her and went alert. She should have too, but she wasn't a trained warrior. And he did things to her that left her dazed and aroused. She managed to snap to when she noted the wards lit up brighter than Vegas on New Year's. They were straining against multiple

impacts that felt like supernatural battering rams.

"Incoming!" Jo's voice carried the kind of urgency that meant someone was about to have a really bad day. "The outer wards are failing faster than Raphael's jaw when Kara came home!"

Camael and Amelia moved as one. They raced for the main floor. The scene that greeted them would've given horror directors nightmares. Demons were pouring through gaps in their defenses like water through a sieve. They looked like someone had grabbed monsters from humanity's darkest nightmares and cranked the horror up to eleven.

We're talking bodies that rippled with muscle beneath skin that looked like burned leather. They sported enough teeth to make a great white shark file a copyright claim. Their eyes glowed with the kind of ancient evil that made even Lucifer check under his bed at night. To Amelia these sumbitches seemed like the apex predators of Hell. She bet they made lesser demons curl up in the fetal position and cry for their demon mommies.

Amelia burst into the foyer with Camael on her six. They arrived just in time to see Jo take a demon's head clean off. The female angel moved like she was starring in her own action movie. Her blade carved through a creature that had about six too many arms. Az was at her back. His wings spread wide as he drove his sword through what might have been a face. The thing had sharp teeth and piercing eyes.

Up on the grand staircase, Mal was putting on a clinic in creative dismemberment. His blade took one demon apart while Zach's follow-through turned another into one of hell's favorite jigsaw puzzles. The marble steps were already slick with black ichor that smoked where it hit the floor.

Amelia's arm flew up when a flash of crimson lit up the space like someone had

thrown blood on the walls. She had magic crackling on her palms and was about to toss it when she saw it was the triplets that had joined them in the French Quarter earlier. They materialized in formation. Holy mother of magic, they know how to make an entrance. Amelia threw the magic at a demon to her right and watched the three warrior angels for a second.

Araton shot straight up. His red wings carried him to the chandelier, where he engaged something that looked like a pterodactyl had gotten busy with a sloth. His blade struck faster than her eyes could track. Chunks of demon rained down like the world's worst confetti.

Ten feet to her left, Ayil spun through three demons like a divine Cuisinart. His sword left trails of fire that turned infernal flesh to ash. The male moved like violence given form. Each strike was as precise and lethal as hellfire.

She caught glimpses of Abraxos between exchanging blows with her own dance partner. She faced a demon whose spine kept relocating at the worst possible moments. She dispatched that one in a flash as she tried to mix the two powers. There was another right behind it, taking its place. This one had mandibles where its chest should be. And it had decided she looked like lunch. Game on, asshole. Light and shadow gathered in her palms as she prepared to show it what his friend had learned. She ducked and rolled out of the hot zone.

"Really?" Rami shouted as he decapitated something with too many eyes. "In our house?"

"Guess they didn't get the invitation to use the doorbell," Amelia fired back. She let her newfound powers flow free and turned three demons to ash.

Camael's curse could've stripped paint as he manifested his wings. "They're after the artifacts," he growled as his Sword of Light blazed to life. "This is a targeted strike."

No shit. The demons were pressing toward the library where they'd stored the other relics she'd brought from her house. Rami and Remi took up position in front of the double doors. They created a living, breathing barrier.

Amelia threw herself into the battle. The massive house seemed smaller as they fought the demons. The mansion's elegant interior was a war zone. Demons crawled across walls and ceilings with impossible grace. The marble floors were slick with ichor as divine steel met corrupted flesh. Amelia did her best to cast cleansing spells so she didn't slip on the shit and break her neck.

"Behind you!" Ayil's warning came just as a particularly nasty piece of work tried to flank Amelia. The thing looked like someone had tried to mate a praying mantis with a Bearded Dragon.

She spun, channeling power through the Key. Light and shadow combined into a blade of pure twilight energy that cut through the demon like it was made of smoke. "Thanks for the heads up!"

"Anytime, witch." The angel's grin was fierce as he bisected another demon.

The fight carried them through the mansion's halls. Every room became a battlefield as they pushed the demons back. Expensive furniture became improvised weapons. Beautiful works of art suffered collateral damage. It was all worth it as they slowly began to turn the tide.

"The library's secure!" Az called out from somewhere ahead. "But we've got problems on the perimeter! "

"Define problems," Camael demanded as he separated a demon's head from its shoulders.

A crash from outside answered that question. Something massive was moving through the grounds. Each step it took made the windows rattle and the marble floors vibrate beneath their feet. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me," Rami muttered as he looked out a window. "Boss, remember that thing from Detroit?"

"Yeah."

"Its big brother just showed up. And it brought friends."

The fight spilled onto the grounds of their rented Marigny mansion like Hell's version of a block party. Amelia's hands moved through the air as she continued weaving light and shadow. This time she directed it into a massive dome that covered their designer landscaping faster than a gossip could spread news in church. No need to give their wealthy neighbors Instagram material or reasons to call their therapists.

Behind her, the mansion's historic doors hung off their hinges. The imported marble steps were decorated in demon parts that were already dissolving into black goo. But that shit was nothing compared to what came crashing through their perimeter wards. "Sweet mother of fuck." The curse slipped out before she could catch it.

The thing that emerged from the darkness looked like someone had grabbed parts from every apex predator in existence and thrown them in a blender. They were now facing thirty feet of muscle wrapped in armor plating that would make a tank jealous. Its head was a nightmare of horns and teeth, with eyes that glowed like pools of lava.

"Now that's just excessive," Rami called out as he dodged a swipe from one of its six arms. Each limb ended in claws that could've gutted a whale. "And our lease definitely doesn't cover this kind of damage. "

The beast's roar shook the ground hard enough to make her teeth rattle. It was the kind of sound that made French Quarter tour guides wake up screaming. The thing

brought one massive foot down. When it lifted it again, Amelia swallowed in awe of the crater left in the hundred-thousand-dollar landscaping. It would've made the property manager go into cardiac arrest.

She sucked in a breath when she saw Camael launch into the air. His Sword of Light carved a path across the creature's armored hide. He managed to leave trails of divine fire. The creature's response? It tried to eat him. It opened a mouth full of enough teeth to make a shredder jealous. It attempted to turn Heaven's most badass archangel into a snack.

"Not happening," Amelia muttered as she gathered twilight energy into her hands. She let it build for a second before releasing it in a wave that made the air ripple. The blast caught the thing in the chest and forced it back three steps. Unfortunately, that put it in the fancy fountain. With her luck, it was imported from Italy and that was thousand-year-old stone that crumbled like it was made of sugar.

She was busy trying to think of a spell to fix the damage when the triplets moved in like they shared a single mind. Araton and Abraxos went for its legs, while Ayil targeted the joints where its arms met its body. Their red wings left trails in the air as they struck with coordinated precision.

"The head!" Jo shouted as she and Az created a distraction on its left flank. "Its armor is weakest at the base of the skull!"

Mal and Zach were already moving. They used the creature's arm as a ramp and raced up it toward the head like they were competing in the world's most dangerous parkour contest. Their blades struck simultaneously. Both found the weak spot Jo had spotted.

But it was Camael who delivered the killing blow. The archangel dropped from above. His Sword of Light blazed brighter than a supernova as he drove it straight

through the creature's skull and out the other side.

The thing's death scream could've shattered windows in the next parish if Amelia's dome hadn't contained it. It went down like a collapsing building. Its massive body dissolved into ichor that ate holes in their designer grass and probably their rental agreement.

"Well," Jo managed as she surveyed the carnage. "I'm guessing Michael and Raphael aren't going to be happy about needing to bring in troops to remodel."

Abraxos landed silently in front of Crescent City Arcane. The bookstore's windows were dark, but he could sense movement inside. More importantly, he could feel the pulse of power coming from within. The place housed texts that made his angelic senses hum with recognition.

The female who owned it, Sarah, was more than just a human occult shopkeeper. He'd seen that during the battle in the Quarter. The way she'd moved. The books she'd protected. She knew things. Important things.

The wards around the building recognized him from earlier. They parted like curtains as he approached the door. The bell above it chimed softly as he entered and announced his presence in the empty shop.

"We're closed!" Sarah's voice carried from the back room. "Unless you're here about earlier, in which case I still have questions."

"I might have answers." He moved through the stacks with predatory grace. He followed her voice and the sweet and salty scent of the beach. He'd barely caught a hint of her natural perfume during the battle.

He wasn't prepared when she emerged from behind a shelf. His breath caught, and

his hormones went haywire. Even disheveled from the chaos, she was stunning. Her dark hair was pulled back in a messy bun, and her green eyes held intelligence that called to something in his ancient soul.

"The angel with red wings," she said to him as she crossed her arms. "I didn't get a chance to thank you for earlier."

"Abraxos," he supplied, though she hadn't asked. "And you're Sarah Morgan. The witch who maintains the Quarter's oldest occult library."

Her eyebrow rose. "You've done your homework. Although, I'm not really a witch. I'm the family disappointment. I don't have powers like my mother and grandmother."

"Knowledge is power." He gestured to the shelves around them. "And you have quite a collection of it."

"Is that why you're here?" She moved closer. Damn, if her nearness didn't do things to his concentration. "The books?"

Yes. No. Maybe. The truth was more complicated than that. He wasn't ready to examine it too closely. "Some of these texts are older than human civilization," he said instead. "They need protection, especially now."

"Hence the wards." She tilted her head, studying him with those sharp eyes. "That's not really why you came back, is it?"

No, it wasn't. Before he could respond, the Quarter lit up like Satan's Christmas tree. The Prince of Lies was pulling some next-level fuckery. He was continuing to thread his poison through the city's spiritual DNA like a virus rewriting its host. Where demons and brute force had failed him, this new play was pure psychological

warfare. He was trying to change the locks from the inside while also preparing the way for something older than sin itself to waltz right in and make itself at home.

Sarah cursed as she moved to check her wards. "It's getting worse," she muttered. "The darkness is finding new paths. Evil is going to ruin my store. "

"Show me." He regretted how the words came out more command than a request, but he couldn't take it back.

Without a word, she led him to a back room where maps covered one wall. Magical markers showed the spread of Lucifer's influence through the city. The pattern was changing. Becoming more organic and insidious.

"He's learning," she said as she traced one particularly dark line. "And finding ways around our defenses that we didn't think possible."

Abraxos moved closer. He was drawn by both the tactical information and her presence. "The Prince of Lies is adapting his strategy. The question is, why? What is his aim this time?" He had a feeling Sarah's books might hold some answers. Just like he had a feeling this wouldn't be his last visit to Crescent City Arcane.

Sarah lifted her shoulders. "Don't ask me. I'm nothing more than a simple shopkeeper straddling the line between the Tehrex Realm and the human world." The female was anything but simple.

"Sounds like we'd better look through the texts you have and see if we can find answers." His voice came out rougher than he intended. Like his throat couldn't quite handle being this close to her. "Something tells me your library's got secrets that would make Heaven's archivists weep with joy."

Sarah's green eyes met his. The intelligence in that gaze hit him harder than celestial

steel. It made him think dangerous thoughts about things that had nothing to do with ancient languages or saving the world. He told himself he had to focus on his duty. Heaven's most elite warriors didn't get distracted by females with brilliant minds and the kind of beauty that made his ancient soul sit up and beg. But as she led him deeper into her shop's mysteries? He knew he was lying to himself. Truth was a bitch that way.

CHAPTER 7

Camael took his time walking through the mansion's east wing as he made his way to the training room. His boots were silent on the marble floors, and his shoulders were tight with tension that had nothing to do with the upcoming session. The mansion was quiet except for the faint sounds of the other AORs going about their duties. He could hear Rami and Malachi discussing how to remove demon ichor from marble. They were arguing about the use of something pink. Camael didn't have the patience for that shit.

His mind kept circling back to Amelia's progress with the artifacts. Every hour, she grew stronger and more confident with powers she discovered less than seventy-two hours before. The way she wove light and shadow together was stunning. It called to something in him that he'd been fighting since the moment they met.

The training room door was open, and late afternoon sunlight spilled across the reinforced floors. Amelia was already there. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail as she worked through basic forms. The Key hung around her neck and pulsed with power.

She sensed him before he spoke. Her green eyes met his in the mirror that lined one wall. "You're late, Archangel."

"A commander's work is never done." He shrugged out of his leather jacket and dropped it in the doorway. The way her eyes traveled over his black t-shirt threatened to distract him. Shaking his head, he said, "Show me what you've been practicing."

Instead of responding, she let power gather in her hands. Light danced in her right palm while shadow swirled in her left. The two forces twined together with growing confidence. They painted the room in shades of twilight.

"Better," he rumbled as he moved behind her. "But you're still holding back. These powers are part of you. Stop treating them like they might bite."

Her laugh carried an edge of frustration. "Says the male who was born to channel divine energy. Some of us are still learning to juggle forces that shouldn't mix."

"Then let me help." He stepped closer. He was close enough that his chest brushed her back. His hands settled on her shoulders. His thumbs automatically pressed into tension-tight muscles. "Close your eyes. Feel how the energies want to move."

The contact sent awareness shooting through him that had nothing to do with training and everything to do with how right she felt against him. Her breath caught as he let his power flow into her. It steadied her connection to both light and shadow.

"That's it," he murmured as she began to move. Her hands traced patterns in the air that grew more complex with each pass. Light and shadow responded. They wove together like they'd never been separated.

The Key around her neck blazed to life and added its ancient power to the mix. The resulting surge lit up the training room like someone had captured twilight in a bottle. Camael's wings manifested without conscious thought. They spread wide as her magic called to his very essence.

"Holy hell," she breathed as the energies stabilized into something new. Something that hadn't existed since before time learned to crawl. "Is this what it's supposed to feel like?"

"Yes." His voice dropped to a place that made windows rattle. Having her in his arms and channeling power that complemented his own was doing things to him. His lack of control should have terrified him. Instead, it felt right. Inevitable.

She turned in his grip. Those green eyes of hers were dark with possibilities that had nothing to do with training. Her hands settled on his chest, and the power still dancing around her fingers sent electricity straight to his core. "Camael." His name on her lips was both question and answer.

In response, he lowered his head and claimed her lips. The kiss felt like divine lightning meeting mortal flame. His hands tangled in her hair as he claimed her mouth with all the hunger he'd been holding back. She met him with equal passion. She rose on her toes to press closer.

Power surged between them and made the Key pulse against her chest like a second heartbeat. His wings curled forward, creating a cocoon of white feathers that shut out the world. Everything narrowed down to the feel of her in his arms. The taste of her on his tongue. And the way their energies danced together like they'd been made for this moment.

Her hands slid up his chest to lock behind his neck. She pulled him deeper into the kiss. He growled low in his throat as desire shot through him hot enough to rival hellfire. This female made him forget he was one of Heaven's deadliest archangels. She made him feel things he never dreamed he would.

Her legs wrapped around his waist as he lifted her effortlessly. Their bodies were pressed together. The room around them faded. The mansion walls were replaced by the heat building between them. She gripped his shoulders. Her nails dug into his skin through his shirt as she pressed her body closer.

"Amelia." His voice was wrecked and shredded like his control. He forced himself to

put space between their mouths. Though his hands refused to release her. The male in him needed to know. Was this just battle adrenaline or magical fusion? Or was she genuinely afire for him the way he'd been burning for her. His eyes locked onto hers, searching for any hesitation. "You sure about this?"

Her fingers twisted in his shirt. The fierce certainty in those green eyes of hers hit him harder than celestial steel. That slow smile of hers? It was pure female confidence. The kind that could bring an archangel to his knees.

"You and me?" she breathed against his mouth. "Makes all this Key stuff feel like a backup plan."

Holy hell. Those words reached straight past his warrior's armor and grabbed hold of something he hadn't known he could feel. The truth of them sang through his blood like divine fire. A growl rumbled low in his throat as he captured her mouth again.

This time, with a hunger that left no room for doubt. He pressed her against the wall. The cool surface was a sharp contrast to the heat of their bodies. His hands slid beneath the hem of her damp training top. He paused briefly before tugging it over her head and discarding it on the floor.

Her hands roamed up his back, pulling his shirt with them. Her touch ignited a fire under his skin as he tugged the fabric over his head. When her lips trailed down to his chest, pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses to his skin, Camael's control slipped further.

His palms found her hips, then slid lower to grab handfuls of her ass. The friction of her core grinding against him sent jolts of pleasure through his body. "Amelia," he rasped. His forehead rested against hers for a brief moment of clarity. "If you want me to stop, say so now."

She pulled back just enough to meet his gaze. A sly smile tugged at her lips. "You

talk too much.” She reached back and unclasped her bra then let it fall to the ground.

With a growl of approval, he lifted her higher. His lips trailed down to press kisses along the swell of her breasts. Her breath hitched. Her moans became soft and pleading as his mouth closed around one nipple. He teased it with his tongue.

Her legs fell away from his waist. He took the opportunity to slide her pants and underwear down, inch by agonizing inch. His cock jerked in his pants when they fell in a damp heap on the floor. He lifted her and grabbed her butt. She squirmed beneath his touch. Her hands fisted in his hair as she arched into him.

“Do you need something?” he asked in a tease as his fingers trailed between her thighs.

“You wicked angel,” she groaned. “I need you to rub my clit and fuck me.”

Camael’s lips quirked into a faint smile as he shucked his boots and jeans in record time. “How’s this?” he asked as he aligned his body with hers.

She lifted one leg, making him press the tip of his shaft against her slick entrance. Her gasp sent a jolt of satisfaction through him and shredded any remaining reticence. “Yes,” she hissed. “Make me forget for fifteen minutes.”

The raw vulnerability in her voice gave him pause. He knew exactly what she meant. He needed the same thing. To forget the weight of their mission and the world-changing powers growing inside of her.

“I’ll do more than that,” he vowed.

Her arms wrapped around his neck as she bit down gently on his bottom lip. Her hips rocked against him in a silent demand. He growled and lifted her until their bodies

were aligned. He wanted to prepare her more, but her slick entrance told him she could take him now. Next time, he would taste her first. He slid inside her inch by inch until he was fully seated. For a brief moment, he stilled, the sensation of her surrounding him was overwhelming. It was home. That was the first word that came to mind. It was unexpected clarity amidst the chaos. She felt like home.

Her moan broke him from his thoughts, and he began to move. He was slow and deliberate at first. But her cries of pleasure spurred him on, and his pace quickened as he pressed her harder against the wall. Her hands slid to his back. A hoarse cry tore from his throat when her fingers brushed the joint where his wings met his back.

The sensation was unlike anything he'd felt before. It sent shocks of pleasure racing through him. He thrust harder. His lips found hers again as he poured everything into the kiss. Their tongues slid together as he moved in and out of her. He floated in pleasure for what felt like an eternity and then her body tightened around him. She broke away from his mouth and threw her head back. Her cries built in volume as he reached down to circle her clit with his thumb. "Come for me," he commanded in a rough and desperate voice.

Amelia shattered in his arms. Her body clenched around him as she cried out his name. The sensation pushed him over the edge. His release tore through him with a force that left him trembling.

He rested his forehead against her shoulder. His breaths were coming in ragged gasps as they both came down from the high. Lowering her gently to the floor, he brushed a kiss against her temple. "That was..." she started in a breathless voice but her words trailed off when the Key screamed a warning against her skin.

Evil energy pulsed through the city's spiritual foundation. Camael felt it in his bones. Lucifer was spreading his particular brand of corruption through New Orleans. "He's tainting the ley lines like poison in the water," Amelia said in answer of his unasked

question.

"Son of a bitch," he growled as he forced himself to focus on the threat rather than how badly he wanted to lay her down and love her properly. "Lucifer's becoming a pain in my ass." He picked up her clothing and handed it to her before stuffing his legs into his jeans.

The second she was done getting dressed, Amelia was moving. Her power was gathering around her hands as she headed for the stairs. "We can't let him infect all of the ley line nexus points. The city will be lost if he manages that."

"Thank God you know what you're doing. We'd have been picking our asses and making futile guesses until the city fell," Camael told her honestly.

They raced through the mansion, alerting the others as they went. The AORs mobilized with practiced efficiency. Their weapons materialized as they gathered in the foyer. Outside, the sun was setting over New Orleans. The sky was ominously painted shades of blood and gold.

"The Garden District is ground zero," Rami reported as he looked up from his phone. "Izzy thinks the bastard's using the old money mansions as anchor points for his spell work."

"He must be using the ones closest to the nexus points there," Amelia interjected.

"Of course he is," Mal muttered as he checked his blade. "Anyone else miss the days when demons just wanted to eat souls? "

Jo chuckled and nodded in agreement. "Those were the simple days."

Camael's Sword of Light blazed to life in his grip as he issued orders. His power

saturated the air and turned it sub-zero as he faced his warriors. "Listen up." His voice carried enough don't-fuck-with-me authority to make Hell itself take notes. "We've got multiple nexus points about to go nuclear with Lucifer's corruption. Every one of these bastards needs lockdown and they need it yesterday."

"There are seven." Amelia's power crackled around her as she cut in. The Key at her throat was pulsing like a warning beacon. "Commander's Palace, Lafayette Cemetery Number One, the Buckner Mansion, St. Louis Cathedral, Gallier House, Hermann-Grima House, and the Beauregard-Keyes House."

The witch's intel hit harder than a sledgehammer to stained glass. Seven points meant spreading his warriors thin as hell. Thankfully, this wasn't a democracy because time was giving them the middle finger.

"Partner up and move out." His voice carried enough don't-even-think-about-arguing to make lesser beings piss themselves. His hard gaze swept his crew and the triplets. "The witch and I are taking Buckner. About time we showed Lucifer what happens when he brings this shit to my witch's city."

They launched skyward like Heaven's most lethal strike force. Their wings cut through night air thick with power that had been locked away for longer than Camael could remember. Below them, St. Charles Avenue's historic mansions were getting a makeover straight from Hell's decorator. Darkness writhed through old money real estate like living ink. It turned Southern charm into supernatural nightmare fuel.

The first "oh shit" moment hit them at First Street. Some piece of demonic artwork was treating a centuries-old oak like its personal charge port. The bastard looked like someone had grabbed raw flesh, given it teeth, and told it to go play in the sandbox.

The thing was mainlining evil straight into one of the Garden District's oldest trees. The massive oak's branches were already going black. The wood was rotting faster

than a demon's morals.

"You seeing this shit?" Amelia's voice carried over the wind. Her power was crackling around her hands like bottled lightning.

Yeah, he was seeing it. And his warrior's instincts were screaming that this clusterfuck wasn't random. This was a tactical play designed to split their forces even further apart.

Lucifer was making sure they'd be too busy playing whack-a-demon to stop his endgame at Buckner. Camael didn't hesitate. His blade carved through corrupted flesh while Amelia's hybrid magic disrupted the spell work. The tree's branches creaked as health returned to them.

There wasn't time to celebrate. More demons were emerging from the gathering darkness. They were being drawn by Lucifer's call like moths to hellfire. They fought their way down the mansion-lined streets. Each property became its own battlefield. Pristine lawns were turned into war zones as celestial steel met demon flesh. Camael could have wept when the Dark Warriors joined the efforts. The historic architecture had suffered enough collateral damage.

"This shit is spreading faster than we can contain it!" Rami's voice carried over the sounds of combat. He was three houses down and dealing with something that had too many teeth and a bad attitude.

Camael cursed as he registered the truth in those words. The ley lines were lighting up his supernatural radar like demonic Christmas trees. Each one pumped Lucifer's poison deeper into the city's foundations.

"We need to reach the master nexus!" Amelia called out as she turned two demons to ash. "It's under the Buckner Mansion!"

“We’re heading there now,” he told his men. “You tackle yours after this.” He held Amelia tighter and took off for their target. It wasn’t far.

The Buckner Mansion was the Garden District's crown jewel. It was a structure that had seen more history than most countries. Its white columns rose against the darkening sky like bones. Power rolled off it in waves that confused Camael. It was like it couldn’t decide which way to go.

He landed and set Amelia down. They fought their way up First Street, each step bringing them closer to the mansion. The corrupted ley lines turned the manicured gardens into something from Dante's sketchbook. Flowers twisted into shapes that shouldn't exist. The air was thick with evil that made it hard to breathe. Amelia was casting spells and throwing them into the ground, trying to clear the evil from the energy pathways.

"Incoming!" Jo's warning came seconds before something massive crashed through a row of crepe myrtles. The creature looked like someone had grabbed parts of bigfoot and a sperm whale, then welded them together with hellfire.

"I've got this!" Mal called out as he engaged the beast. His blade left trails of fire through the air. "Get to the nexus!"

Camael wanted to stay and help, but there wasn't time. Lucifer’s power was spreading with every second they delayed. They reached the Buckner Mansion's gates just as the sun disappeared completely. Night fell like a hammer. It brought with it demons that moved with hungry purpose. The historic home's white columns were now streaked with darkness that writhed like living ink .

"The nexus is in the basement," Amelia said as she channeled power through the Key. "Apparently, Lucifer's got a thing for dramatic real estate."

"Jo, Az - secure the perimeter!" Camael ordered as they approached the front steps. "Rami, you're with us. The rest of you keep these bastards off our backs while we deal with whatever's waiting inside."

The mansion's double doors exploded inward like they'd been hit with a supernatural battering ram. The sound of splintering wood echoed through the night like a gunshot. Camael shot the witch a look that could've melted steel. One dark eyebrow lifted toward his hairline. "Really, Amelia?"

Her smirk? Pure attitude with a side of 'yeah, I just did that'. She shrugged those shoulders of hers while her green eyes danced with enough mischief to make a demon blush. "What can I say? If we're gonna crash Lucifer's party, might as well make an entrance that doesn't suck." That right there was why she got to him. The female had enough brass to match her power, and neither one gave a shit about proper protocol.

"Next time," he growled as he fought back a smile that would've ruined his warrior cred, "try not to announce our arrival to every ugly in a five-mile radius."

Inside, the grand foyer had become something out of a horror movie. Shadows danced across walls that had witnessed centuries of history. They moved through the house like the warriors they were. They followed the pull of evil energy toward the basement stairs. Each step down felt like descending into Hell itself. The Prince of Lies' power was strongest there. It pulsed through the foundation like a diseased heartbeat.

"Well, well." The voice that greeted them made Camael's wings bristle. "The prodigal brother comes to call." Crocell emerged from the shadows like she'd been born from them .

Camael stepped in front of Amelia to shield her from Crocell. "I'm here to end this, sister."

The fallen angel's wings were something straight out of Hell's trophy room. Electric blue feathers. The kind that would make a peacock jealous, covered leathery flesh that looked like it had been dipped in sapphire poison. And those wing tips? They weren't playing. Each one ended in a curved talon sharp enough to gut a rhinoceros.

This bitch was built for maximum carnage. Those razor claws on her wings could slice you into bite-sized pieces. While her fingernails - more like surgical steel scalpels - turned your insides into your outsides faster than you could say 'holy shit'. The whole package was a walking advertisement for why falling from grace was bad for your complexion. And worse for anyone who got within striking distance.

Those eyes of hers? Pure crazy town where the population was one fallen angel and hundreds of her minions. She had the kind of madness that made Lucifer look like he was running a mental health seminar. When she smiled, it was all fang and no fun.

Crocell ignored him and closed the distance while focusing on Amelia, who was trying to get around him. "What are you hiding?" Her voice scraped through the air like nails on Hell's chalkboard. "The big bad archangel brought his pet witch to play." That laugh of hers could've stripped paint. "How absolutely precious."

"The only thing sweet about this is going to be watching you burn," Amelia snarled as she gathered power in her hands. Light and shadow wove together into something that made even Crocell take a step back.

The fallen angel's laugh sliced through the sanctuary like liquid obsidian. "You think your parlor tricks can stop what's coming? Lucifer is going to win this, you idiots. He's using the ley lines to finish waking the Oldest Ones. "

Understanding hit Camael like a physical blow. "He's using the city's power grid to fuel their awakening."

"Give the angel a prize!" Crocell spread her corrupted wings wide. "And there's nothing you can do to stop it. The process has already begun."

Camael wasn't looking at her anymore. His eyes were fixed on Amelia. She had moved to the center of the basement. The Key around her neck was blazing with power that made the air vibrate. "Want to bet?" Amelia countered. Her voice carried ancient weight as she drove both hands into the floor. Light and shadow exploded from her palms and then raced through the ley lines faster than thought.

The power surge lit up the spiritual landscape like a nuclear bomb. Camael felt it sweep through the city. It cleansed a lot of what Lucifer had corrupted and reinforced barriers. Crocell's scream of rage turned to fear as the magic reached for her.

"This isn't over!" she snarled before disappearing in a burst of dark energy.

Camael caught Amelia as her knees buckled. The display of power had taken its toll. He was ready to call one of the healers when her clear, determined eyes met his. "Did it work?"

He reached out with his celestial senses, checking the ley lines that ran beneath the city. Where there had been corruption, there was now balance. Light and shadow were working together like they were meant to.

"It worked." He pulled her closer, uncaring of their audience. "You did it."

"We did it," she corrected before pressing her lips to his.

The kiss was shorter than their first but carried just as much heat. When they broke apart, Rami was pointedly studying the ceiling while trying to hide a grin. "If you two are done with the celebration, we should probably help the others," he suggested. "Unless you want to explain to Michael why we let the Garden District get

redecorated in Early American Hellscape."

Outside, the sounds of battle were already fading as the demons retreated. Without Lucifer's power to draw from, they were falling back to whatever holes they'd crawled out of. Camael kept his arm around Amelia as they climbed the basement stairs.

The mansion's elegant interior was a mess of supernatural combat damage. Izzy and the other Dark Warriors approached Rami and began discussing the repairs they would help with. New Orleans' spiritual foundation was secure. For now.

This was just the beginning. Lucifer wouldn't stop until he achieved his goals or they put him down for good. The real war was still coming. He looked down at the female in his arms. This witch had stopped the Prince of Lies and somehow worked her way past every defense Camael had built. She met his gaze with that fierce determination that had drawn him from the start.

Yeah, the real war was coming. But for the first time in his endless existence, Camael was actually looking forward to it. Because this time? This time, he wasn't just fighting for Heaven or duty. This time, he was fighting for her.

CHAPTER 8

A melia stared into her coffee cup like it might hold answers to the universe's biggest questions. The mansion's kitchen was quiet this early. Most of the angels were still doing their pre-dawn patrols or repair work in the French Quarter. Last night's victory over Lucifer's corruption should have left her feeling triumphant. Instead, her nerves were doing the supernatural equivalent of break dancing. Something was off, and she couldn't put her finger on it. It tickled at her magical senses like an itch she couldn't scratch.

"You're thinking too hard." Camael's deep voice rolled through the kitchen like thunder as he entered. The archangel moved with that lethal grace that did things to her concentration. His black t-shirt stretched across shoulders built for war. Those ice-blue eyes of his saw straight through her bullshit.

Her cheeks heated when she thought about what they'd done before falling asleep last night. The angel was a sexual powerhouse. "Maybe not hard enough," she muttered as she reached for the coffee pot to keep from diving too deep into those memories.

Her hand froze halfway there as power slammed through her magical awareness like a freight train. The Key around her neck went from room temperature to nuclear in two seconds flat. "Fuck me running." The curse slipped out as her senses crawled. The ley lines beneath the city were lighting up her supernatural radar like the Fourth of July. It wasn't the brute force Lucifer used last night. This was something subtler. Sneakier.

Camael's wings manifested as he reached for her. His phone rang at the same time.

Amelia saw Izzy's face on the screen before he answered on speaker phone. "Talk to me."

"We've got problems all over town, but the concentration seems to be in the Quarter." The vampire princess's voice carried the kind of urgency that meant someone was about to have a really bad day. "The Dark Warriors are encountering demons left and right who are carrying relics. And they're scurrying underground."

Well, shit. That explained the weird vibes Amelia was getting. Her witch senses weren't just being paranoid. They were picking up Lucifer's newest attempt at fucking with her city.

Rami materialized in the doorway like he'd been summoned by Izzy's presence. His expression said he'd caught enough of the conversation to know they were about to have an interesting morning. "I'll alert the others."

"Do it on the way out." Camael's voice dropped to that place that made windows rattle. And her insides sit up and beg. "We move now. Whatever this is, we need to keep it from spreading."

The Angels of Retribution moved like a well-oiled machine as they headed for the mansion's east wing launch point. Camael issued rapid-fire orders while they moved. His massive frame led the charge through marble hallways that had seen more battle prep than some military bases.

"Jo, get eyes in the sky before we land. I want to know what we're walking into." His wings rustled with barely contained energy. "Mal, coordinate with Izzy's crew. Make sure the Dark Warriors know where to cover."

Rami's fingers flew over his phone as he kept pace, firing off texts faster than demon lords running from holy water. "The Dark Warriors who are capable of being out

during the day are already moving into position," he reported without breaking stride. "Zander sent more men through the portal from Seattle. Izzy's got teams staged around Jackson Square and along most of the streets. The Rowan sisters are out to help keep things hidden as well."

They burst through the mansion's rear doors into the pre-dawn air. Wings snapped out in a display that made Amelia's breath catch. The angels launched skyward in perfect formation. Amelia was in awe of their ability to cloak themselves without more than a thought as they headed for the Quarter. She would kill to be that powerful.

They hit the French Quarter like Heaven's most elite strike force had a grudge against evil. The morning sun painted Jackson Square in shades of gold. The early hour didn't stop the tourists. They were already out in force. They were snapping photos of the Cathedral while completely oblivious to the supernatural throwdown about to go down. Amelia began casting aversion spells so the humans didn't pay the supernaturals any attention.

Izzy waited for them beneath the sheltering overhang of Cafe Envie. She was smart enough to keep her vampire ass out of the strengthening sunlight. The female was all lethal grace and royal bearing as she emerged from the shadows. Her father's sapphire eyes missed nothing as she took in their battle-ready crew .

"About time you showed up," she drawled. Her fangs flashed as she lifted one corner of her mouth in disgust and gestured to a nearby storm drain. "The energy coming from down there isn't much right now. However, there is something making my vampire senses do the cha-cha."

Taking a position that kept her safely in the shade, she continued, "Luke tried mapping it magically, but something's cock-blocking his tracking spells. Whatever's down there doesn't want to be found."

"While you guys tackle the streets, I'm going to head underground to do some recon," she continued as she checked her weapons. "There's less chance of becoming an extra crispy vampire, and I can try to find what's niggling at me. I'll keep in touch through Rami."

"Be careful, Cupcake," Rami told her with a fond smile.

She rolled her eyes, but returned the smile. Her movements were pure predator as she adjusted her leather jacket. The thing probably cost more than some cars. From what was known about the princess, she was deadly gorgeous with a side of designer labels. Most assumed she got that from her mother and had been surprised to hear it came from her aunt.

After Izzy left, they swept through the French Quarter's historic streets. Amelia's boots clicked against centuries-old cobblestones while magic crackled around her hands. The Key at her throat pulsed with each step. The signal was scattered. It was like trying to find a radio station during a supernatural thunderstorm.

"Anything?" Camael's deep voice rolled through the air as they checked another block. The archangel moved like violence waiting for an excuse to happen. Those ice-blue eyes of his never stopped scanning for threats.

"It's like trying to track smoke," she muttered. She couldn't tamp down her frustration as they passed Lafitte's. The ancient bar's walls held more history than some countries. Right now, she didn't give a shit about the tourist attraction. "The energy's everywhere and nowhere."

After another half hour of grid searching that got them jack shit with a side of squat, Amelia had enough. She stopped dead in the middle of Governor Nicholls Street. Ignoring the curious looks from tourists nursing their go-cup hurricanes, she tugged the Key from beneath her top and cast another aversion spell.

"Screw this," she announced. The artifact hummed against her palm like it had been waiting for her to get with the program. "Time to do this the old-fashioned way."

Power gathered around her hands as she channeled both light and shadow through the ancient metal. The spell that followed would have made the Rowan sisters take notice. The Key blazed to life like someone had caught twilight in a bottle and told it to point them in the right direction.

"Son of a bitch," she breathed as the energy crystallized into a clear signal. It wasn't leading them to some fancy historic building or tourist trap. Instead, it pulled her toward a storm drain that looked older than sin. "He's using the old tunnels. The network runs beneath the entire Quarter. Some of them pre-date the city itself."

"It's the perfect place to hide actions that you don't want to be discovered until it's too late," Rami observed as he checked his blade.

Amelia cut her eyes to the clueless humans strolling by, their civilian asses locked and loaded with smartphones, capturing bullshit tourist pics of old-as-dirt architecture while being straight-up blind to the shitstorm that was about to explode. True fact. The battle brewing in their midst was the kind of violent spectacle that would've made their fragile human brains short-circuit, but they just kept right on with their worthless photo op, completely deaf and dumb to the predators circling each other mere feet away.

"We're going to need some serious magical cover for this. Unless we want to end up as the French Quarter's newest viral TikTok sensation."

"I've got the humans," Camael rumbled as he moved closer. His massive frame radiated the kind of power that made her hormones sit up and take notice. "You focus on masking our entry point."

Their powers merged like they'd been doing this dance for centuries instead of days. His divine energy created a zone of supernatural don't-look-here while she wove light and shadow into a veil that would make most cloaking spells look like amateur hour.

The manhole cover didn't stand a chance against angelic strength once their own cover was secure. It came up with a screech of protesting metal that their spells muffled. The shaft below was darker than a demon's soul and promised to smell worse than Bourbon Street after Mardi Gras.

"Ladies first?" Rami offered with a warrior's grin as he held the heavy metal disk.

"Such a gentleman," Amelia drawled before she started down the ancient ladder. "Just remember to seal this shit up tight behind us. Last thing we need is some drunk tourist deciding to go urban exploring in Hell's favorite subway system."

"Ladies first?" Izzy's voice rang out as Amelia dropped into the darkness without hesitation.

Amelia's hand flew to her chest as she hit the tunnel floor. Her heart did the supernatural equivalent of a gymnastics routine. "Holy mother of magic!" She spun toward the vampire princess's voice. "Way to give a witch a heart attack. I didn't expect to encounter you so soon."

"Make some noise next time. Preferably before I accidentally turn you into supernatural confetti," Amelia continued. Her magic crackled defensively around her fingers before she got it under control. The Key at her throat pulsed with answering power like it was equally startled by the vampire's sudden appearance.

"Please." Izzy's sapphire eyes glowed in the darkness as she flashed those perfect white fangs in a predator's smile. "Like you could catch me even if you tried. Vampire speed, remember?" She gestured to the tunnel she'd emerged from. "We

heard you guys talking and decided to follow you so we could join the party."

"The more the merrier," Amelia agreed as the Dark Warriors emerged from the darkness like they'd been born from it.

Aison's massive form rippled with barely contained shifter energy as he took point. His muscles bunched beneath a shirt that was as tight as Camael's. The Pacific Islander moved like a predator despite his size. Every step promised violence to anything stupid enough to get in their way.

Slate was darkness given form as he slid closer to Izzy. His movements were so fluid they barely registered to human eyes. Behind him, Luke's sorcerer magic crackled blue-white around his hands and provided additional illumination that painted the ancient walls.

Her eyes went to the ladder as the angels descended the ladder one by one. Their wings were still hidden. Amelia craned her neck and looked up right as Camael dropped through the opening. He tucked his arms tight to his sides in the confined space. He gave her a smoldering look that made her wish they were alone. There was something seriously wrong with her. She'd become a mindless fool over a male.

Rather than think about that, she gestured to one of the dark tunnels. "Follow me." She held up the still-glowing Key. The artifact pulsed with twilight energy that made the tunnel walls dance with shadows. "The tracking spell's got a lock on whatever Lucifer's cooking up down here."

Camael was right next to her as she moved forward with purpose. She let the Key guide her through the labyrinth. Its power lit their path like someone had captured faded starlight in a bottle. She was able to use it as a supernatural flashlight. The light caught movement in the shadows.

The combined presence of Heaven's elite and the Dark Warriors should have been enough to make any demon think twice. Should have been. The first ugly bastard emerged from a side tunnel like it had been waiting for them. The thing looked like someone had tried to mate an alligator with a scorpion, and then given it anger management issues. Its multiple eyes gleamed with hellfire as it launched itself at their group.

It wasn't going to be easy to fight in the confined space. Rami's blade sang through the air and separated its head from its shoulders before it could reach them. Black ichor splattered across century-old brick like the world's worst abstract art installation.

"Lucifer's got the tunnels guarded," he observed as he flicked demon goo off his blade.

"Ya think?" Amelia's sarcasm was automatic as she channeled power through the Key. Light and shadow combined into something that turned two more demons into supernatural chum. The display of power had Slate whistling low while Aison's approving growl echoed through the tunnel.

"Save some for the rest of us," Izzy called out as she moved deeper into the darkness. "Some of us need the workout."

Amelia chuckled as they pushed deeper into the maze. Each junction brought new challenges as Lucifer's power spread through the ley lines like cancer. The energy was different from last night's assault. It was subtler and harder to track. Instead of trying to overwhelm the city's spiritual foundation all at once, he was trying to change it from within. Their progress was slow going because Amelia and Luke removed the seeds as they went so it couldn't spread.

After what seemed like hours, Camael stopped and said, "We need to split up. We

can cover more ground before this shit gets too deep to clean out." He waved to the various spokes of the intersection.

Amelia wanted to protest, but he was right. The corruption was spreading faster than they could track it. "I can sense the affected areas," she said as she pulled out her phone and mapped what she was feeling. "There are three major concentrations. One beneath Jackson Square, another under Bourbon Street, and the third beneath the river side of the Quarter."

"Izzy, take your crew and handle Bourbon," Camael ordered. "Rami, you're with them. Jo, Az, Remi, and Malachi can tackle the riverside. Samil and Zach will go with Amelia and me to Jackson Square."

The teams split off like the well-oiled machine they were. Amelia followed Camael through tunnels that got progressively older and creepier. The brick walls pre-dated the Louisiana Purchase. Her heartbeat kicked up the further they went. She jumped at every movement waiting for the next attack.

She didn't have to wait long. The demons that emerged from the depths were walking evidence that Hell had an R&D department with a serious imagination. The first one looked like it had been carved from volcanic glass. Its form caught and distorted light. Each step it took left smoking footprints of molten stone. The air around it wavered with heat that could melt steel. But the worst part? The damn thing sang. It had a deep resonating tone that made her bones vibrate and her brain rattle in her skull.

Behind it came something that had apparently decided organic matter was for amateurs. Its body was made up of impossible angles and intersecting planes. It shouldn't have even been able to move. Looking at it was like trying to solve a quantum physics equation while drunk. Amelia threw a spell at it, but it managed to dodge it.

She switched gears and used her hybrid magic. She carved paths through their ranks while the angels' blades sang songs of destruction. Her power covered their blind spots. It should have been easy to see everything in the tunnels, but it wasn't.

For every demon they put down, another appeared. It was like trying to bail out the Titanic with a teacup. And Lucifer's power was spreading. The nature of magic in the city was changing. Where there had been balance, there was now malevolence.

"I don't know how to find all the infected areas in time," she admitted as they reached yet another junction. "There could be hundreds of minor contact points we can't detect until they've spread enough to merge."

"Like cancer," Camael growled as he separated a demon's head from its shoulders. "It only takes a few cells to start, but once they multiply..."

"Game over." The words tasted like ash in her mouth as understanding hit her. "We're playing whack-a-demon while Lucifer's poison spreads through the city's spiritual DNA."

Abraxos landed on Crescent City Arcane's roof like violence given form. The bookstore's wards hummed beneath his feet as he scanned the streets. Something was wrong with the magical currents that ran beneath the Quarter. They felt sick when they shouldn't. Amelia had stopped Lucifer from infecting the nexus points last night.

Movement caught his eye as Sarah emerged from the shop's back door. The female moved with purpose. Her dark hair was pulled back as she took a bag of trash to the dumpster. The intelligence in those gorgeous eyes of hers hit him harder than celestial steel as she spotted him.

"Your timing's perfect," she called up. "Something's trying to corrupt the ley line beneath the store. It's different from last night."

He dropped to street level with practiced grace. His red wings filled the narrow alley before he tucked them away. "How long ago did it start?"

"About ten minutes ago." She led him inside, where books lined shelves in organized chaos. "The wards are holding, but whatever this is, it's not normal demon activity."

Abraxos pulled out his phone, wondering if he shouldn't have ignored the last messages. A curse lingered on his lips as he looked up at Sarah. "Lucifer's trying a new approach," he explained as he followed her through the stacks. His senses were already mapping the power flows beneath their feet. "He's going subtle instead of using brute force."

A crash from the street made them both spin toward the front windows. Three demons that looked like overgrown lizards were approaching the store. Their bodies jerked as they tested the wards.

"Friends of yours?" Sarah asked. Her voice carried an edge of steel as she moved to reinforce her protections.

"More like distant relatives I try not to claim at family reunions." His blade materialized in his grip as the first demon breached the store's threshold. "Get behind me and run to safety when you get the chance."

Sarah backed away, but her chin lifted with that stubborn pride that drew him like a moth to flame. "This is my store. I'm not abandoning it."

The fight that followed would have made excellent footage for supernatural security cameras. Abraxos moved like the warrior he was. His blade carved paths through demon flesh while Sarah remained safe behind a shelf of ancient texts.

"On your left!" Her warning cut through the chaos just as one of those bastards tried

to flank him. Her voice was a balm to his ragged nerves.

His blade found its mark. He was too distracted by Sarah because a demon slipped past his guard. The thing moved with impossible speed and headed straight for Sarah. Abraxos felt his heart stop as those claws reached for her.

"Sarah!" He moved faster than he ever had. His red wings propelled him across the space. His blade took the demon's head clean off, but not before those claws had torn through the sleeve of her shirt. It left furrows in her arm. The sight of her blood, even just that small amount, made his vision go red. He took out the remaining demons in less time than it took for her to suck in a pained breath.

The demon's remains hadn't finished dissolving before he had her in his arms. He checked the scratch. It was shallow, thank the heavens. The fact that they'd drawn her blood at all made his warrior's soul howl for vengeance.

"I'm fine," she insisted, though he could feel her trembling slightly. "It's just a scratch."

"That's it." His voice dropped low as he kept her pressed against him. "You're coming back to the mansion with me. Now."

"But the store-"

"Will still be here," he cut her off. "But you won't be if one of those things gets lucky. I can't be here all the time. We have to stop Lucifer. The mansion has the strongest wards in the city. I'm not asking, Sarah. It's my job to keep you safe."

She must have seen something in his eyes because she didn't argue further. "At least let me grab my stuff first."

His answering smile was pure predator. "Two minutes. Then we're gone, whether you've got your favorite book or not."

The moment stretched between them. It was heavy with possibilities and things unsaid. The scent of her blood kept him focused. He'd lost too many people he cared about to demon claws. He wasn't about to add her to that list.

CHAPTER 9

The sun hadn't quite cleared the horizon when Camael felt the first pulse hit his supernatural radar. The mansion's war room was crowded as his Angels of Retribution gathered around maps of the city. Coffee cups littered every surface while they tracked demonic movements that were starting to look like a coordinated assault rather than their usual random chaos.

"This isn't their usual clusterfuck," Rami observed as Izzy marked another incursion point on the map. His fingers traced the locations. "They're setting up a tactical grid. Lucifer has these bastards actually using a strategy."

"Since when do these hellspawn bastards understand strategy?" Malachi demanded from his position by the window. His wings twitched with barely contained energy. "Far as I know, demons operate on pure fucking chaos. Attack first, think never. That's their motto."

"Since Lucifer decided to play chess instead of checkers," Az cut in. His normally jovial expression was replaced by the kind of focus that made demon lords nervous. "The Prince of Lies is running this shit show personally. And trust me, that sonofabitch didn't spend millennia frozen in Hell's favorite ice cube tray playing solitaire. He's been planning this since before most of us learned to fly."

Camael nodded and changed the discussion before it became a bitch session. He had no patience to listen to any whining. "Look at these formation patterns. They're setting up kill boxes," he observed.

Before anyone could respond, power slammed through the mansion's wards like a supernatural battering ram. The magical sensors Amelia and the Rowan sisters had cast over their setup lit up brighter than a supernova in an empty void. Multiple attack points flared to life across the city map like someone had thrown blood on the tactical display.

"Son of a bitch." The curse ripped from Camael's throat as understanding hit him hard. His ice-blue eyes narrowed on the tactical display as pieces clicked into place with brutal clarity. "The Prince of Lies is running a divide and conquer play."

That's exactly what this was. A carefully orchestrated assault designed to stretch one of Heaven's most elite fighting forces thinner than cellophane. Lucifer knew Camael would have to split his warriors between attack sites. It was fucking textbook military strategy. The kind you learned commanding celestial armies, not running demon hordes.

Amelia chose that moment to burst through the double doors, taking his breath away and distracting him. The Twilight Key blazed at her throat. It threw off enough power to make the chandelier crystals sing. Magic crackled around her hands in a display that would've made Heaven's generals take notes. She moved to the tactical display with the kind of lethal grace that did things to his concentration.

"They're making a move." Those green eyes of hers swept the map like she was memorizing enemy positions. She let out a low whistle. "And this shit's coordinated."

"Yeah." Camael's wings manifested as fury leaked through his careful control. "These bastards are hitting seven sites simultaneously. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if they're running special ops tactics that would fit in Michael's playbook." His jaw clenched hard enough to crack granite.

Amelia cocked her head to the side. "Is this Lucifer? Or has someone been studying

Heaven's battle plans?"

"Lucifer knows Michael's plays like the back of his hand. And he's had a lot of time to brood and think about things," Camael replied at the same time the triplets materialized in the doorway like they'd been summoned by the threat of violence.

Their red wings filled the space with deadly grace. Without a word, they moved to join the rest in the war room. Their ancient eyes missed nothing as they analyzed the threat matrix. Araton tapped a spot on the map. "The Warehouse District is crawling with hostiles," he reported. "They're using the abandoned buildings as staging areas. My brothers and I counted at least three hundred of the uglies setting up shop."

"They've also fixated on an Arcane bookstore in the Quarter," Abraxos relayed.

"That's not the worst of it," Ayil added. "These bastards are organized. They're moving with military precision."

"Incoming from St. Louis Cathedral." Jo's curse interrupted the conversation as her fingers flew across tactical displays. "And this ain't your standard demonic fuckery. We're getting readings that are making our most sophisticated tracking spells short-circuit."

"Perfect." Zach's voice dripped enough sarcasm to drown a demon lord. His blade sang through the air as he tested its edge. "Guess the good old days of chasing soul-suckers down Bourbon are officially over."

They couldn't let this get any more out of control while he looked for a way to keep the troops together. Innocents would die. "Araton, take your brothers and lock down the Warehouse District," Camael instructed as he got down to business. "Those tunnels beneath the buildings are a ready-made demon highway straight into our backyard. Jo, Az - establish overwatch by the river in the Quarter. The rest of us will

coordinate with the Dark Warriors to cover the rest. Move like you mean it."

"The Cathedral?" Amelia's power crackled around her hands as she shrugged into her warded leather jacket. It was covered in enough protective sigils to give Hell's R&D department nightmares.

"That's yours." He told her. He worried for her safety, but the commander in him knew she was their best shot. "Take a team. If we lose that foundation, the whole city's spiritual infrastructure comes down like a house of cards."

"I'd like Cassiel with me." She checked her magical arsenal with practiced efficiency. "His visions might give us an edge before shit goes sideways."

"Done. Take Remi for muscle." His ice-blue eyes swept their gathered forces. "This is an all-out offensive, people. These bastards aren't here to window shop."

The Angels of Retribution kitted themselves out in record time. Black armor shot through with Heaven's power replaced jeans and t-shirts. The air crackled with barely contained violence as they prepared for war. Camael grabbed Amelia's hand and led the way through the French doors. They'd cleared the patio furniture to give them a launch site.

"Keep the property damage to a minimum this time," Rami called after the triplets as they launched skyward. Their red wings cut through the darkness like bloody comets. "I'm tired of fixing 'ventilation holes'. The Preservation Society is going to notice one of these days."

"Like you can talk," Abraxos fired back before they disappeared into the gathering storm. Their synchronized assault would turn anything in their path into an oil slick.

The AORs deployed across New Orleans like divine vengeance with a plan. Camael

tracked their movements through the bonds he had with each of them as he made his way across town. His warriors carved paths through streets older than some countries. He trusted they were cleaning up as they went. They didn't have time to go back and ensure they left nothing for humans to find.

The Dark Warriors had split up to fortify key positions. Camael caught sight of Aison's massive wolf guarding Café du Monde's strategic corner. Slate materialized between attack waves across Jackson Square. His vampire speed turned him into deadly precision as he eliminated threats faster than human eyes could track.

Camael landed on Royal Street. He didn't have time to get his bearings when the first assault hit like a tactical nuke. Class Five demons - the kind that didn't think for themselves - emerged from the alleys. Taking them out should be easy.

Camael's Sword of Light sang through the night as he engaged. His blade sliced through ranks that moved with military coordination. That should have been impossible with these demons. Their brains weren't big enough to teach them something so detailed. Yet, each strike was calculated. Every one of their movements was purposeful. He recognized combat formations that came from Michael's advanced training manual.

"These bastards are running Special Forces plays!" Mal's curse carried over the comms and over the sound of his blade separating a Throne-class demon .

"Then we need to show them why they can't just copy a fucking manual!" Jo shouted over the comms.

Camael didn't respond. He'd divided his focus between immediate threats around him and the Cathedral where Amelia led her team. He spun and cut a sheti demon in half. During his rotation, he caught sight of the church where Amelia was going. Its presence dominated the Quarter's skyline. Camael could feel the power vibrating

from its ancient stones. He couldn't worry about Amelia because a gharax demon chose that moment to test his concentration.

The creature had a crystalline bone structure and molecular acid for blood. It moved like it was a ballet dancer. It dodged Camael's first strike. He was forced to drop to the ground when it swiped an arm through the air. The creature's modified anatomy designed specifically for taking down winged opponents. Camael wasn't about to let it win and renewed his efforts. They danced around one another until he got lucky and his blade cut through the demon's center. Its death scream redecorated Decatur Street with shattered glass.

"Boss!" Rami's voice carried raw urgency through the comms. "The situation is critical on Bourbon!"

"Define critical." Camael launched skyward. His wings caught updrafts that gave him a tactical advantage.

"Remember that clusterfuck in Prague? The one that leveled three blocks of the Old Town?" Raw tension threaded through Rami's voice. "That thing's bigger cousin just crashed our party. And it brought enough friends to start its own demon social club."

Camael headed that way. A grim site unfolded below him. The French Quarter had transformed into ground zero for supernatural warfare. These bastards used century-old wrought iron like they'd studied parkour in Hell's elite training program .

"They're stepping around every countermeasure we planted with tactical precision," Az reported in a voice tight with controlled fury.

A psychic scream from the Cathedral's direction yanked his attention in the opposite direction. Amelia's team had clearly engaged something that made his ancient blood run cold. "Call in the Dark Warriors, Rami. I'm needed elsewhere," Camael ordered

as he turned around. His blood ran cold when he saw the Leviathan-class demon. It towered three stories high, and its armored carapace reflected streetlights like polished obsidian.

"Little help here!" Cassiel's voice carried over the comm as he engaged the beast. The monster was capable of shrugging off divine steel like it was facing down a paper cut.

"I'm almost there," Camael replied. "Hold that line!"

Elite shock troops materialized between him and his target. Their weapons pulsed with demonic energy that sang with a familiar resonance. The fight that followed redefined celestial warfare. Camael hit those shock troops like wrath personified. His blade sang death's favorite aria as he carved through ranks that moved with battlefield precision. His need to get to Amelia made him twice as deadly. The troops didn't stand a chance.

"These bastards are really pissing me off," Rami observed as he joined the fray. His sword took a demon's head while Camael's follow-through turned its partner into a pile of parts.

"You and me both," Camael growled. "There is no doubt they're running plays straight out of Michael's private collection."

"Woah." Rami's expression could've frozen hellfire as he held up a weapon one of the troops had dropped. The blade was pure celestial steel. It held some of Lucifer's corruption but also divine energy. "This isn't scavenged hardware. "

"A warrior's blade?" Camael examined the weapon.

"Check the maker's mark." Rami turned the weapon so he could see more.

Camael was shocked to see the sigil etched into the blade's base. The signature belonged to Heaven's master artificer. He crafted weapons for the Archangel Council themselves. "Motherfucker." The curse flew from his mouth. "We've got more than a leak upstairs. We've got a full-blown traitor."

"This is fresh work." Rami's gesture encompassed the blade's pristine craftsmanship. "Someone's running an active supply line straight to the enemy."

Power surged through the Quarter like a metaphysical tsunami. It was light and shadow combined. His heart skipped as he noticed Amelia's hybrid magic lighting up the landscape. He hoped she had kicked the Leviathan's ass. And was reinforcing the Cathedral's defenses.

"The spy can wait." Camael launched skyward with enough force to crater centuries-old pavement. His wings cut through humid air as he vectored toward his witch.

The scene that greeted him made his ancient blood run cold. Amelia stood on the church steps with light and shadow dancing around her hands as she faced down two Leviathan-class demons. The Key at her throat glowed like captured twilight while Remi and Cassiel fought back-to-back behind her. Their blades were streaked black with ichor as they held a perimeter against what looked like two dozen hellhounds.

Camael didn't hesitate. He hit the enemy ranks full force. His Sword of Light carved through demon flesh faster than thought. The first two fell before they registered his presence. The third managed to get its blade up in time to catch his strike, but Camael's follow-through separated its head from its shoulders .

"About time you joined the party." Amelia's power surged as she turned one of the Leviathans into black goo. Sweat darkened her hair, and her chest was heaving. Yet, her aim was dead-on as she targeted the weak spots in demonic armor.

"Traffic was hell." He moved to cover her six. His wings created a barrier of protection between her and incoming threats. Together, they carved a path through ranks that had studied advanced combat forms. His blade sang Death's favorite song while her magic made them wish they'd stayed home.

The battle stretched until the sky began to lighten. By the time dawn painted the cathedral spires in shades of gold and crimson, they'd vanquished the enemy. Camael surveyed the area, ensuring there was nothing but scorch marks. The church's walls bore scars from the fight, but its foundations stood firm. His warriors gathered around them. Their weapons were still at ready despite the victory.

"Time to do some spring-cleaning upstairs," Rami said as he turned the blade in his hands.

"Priority one is containment. We have to stop Lucifer." Camael's ice-blue eyes swept their gathered forces. "Luke, if there are areas not already cleaned, erase any evidence before the Quarter wakes up and starts their ghost tours."

"We're already coordinating cleanup with the Rowan sisters and the local coven," the sorcerer replied.

"We can leave that to the Dark Warriors." Jo shook her head. "Our security protocols need a complete overhaul."

"And we need to figure out who's running a celestial arms bazaar for the other side," Mal added.

Amelia moved to Camael's side like she belonged there. Power still danced around her hands as she glared at the spot where one of the Leviathans fell. "Someone with high-level access just armed our enemies with weapons crafted to kill angels," she snarled. "The game just changed."

"Yeah." His wings shifted with barely contained violence as he pulled her closer. "Something tells me this was just a test." Above them, the New Orleans sun continued rising. The city was waking up, completely unaware that their streets had just hosted a preview of the war to come.

CHAPTER 10

The mansion's dining room had transformed into a war council that would've made Heaven's generals proud. The maps and tactical displays now fought for space with takeout containers on the massive table. The scent of Vietnamese food from Lily's – and there was enough phở and bánh mì to feed three armies – mixed with power that crackled through the air like bottled lightning.

Amelia stabbed her chopsticks into her bowl with more force than necessary as she studied the latest intelligence reports. Her muscles ached from the morning's battle. She wanted to crawl into bed and sleep for twelve hours, but food and strategy took priority over rest. Time wasn't exactly on their side.

"Pass the spring rolls," Malachi called out from across the table. "And someone explain to me how these bastards knew exactly where our defensive lines were set up. Who is giving them information and weapons?" He scowled into his food, showing how pissed off he was.

"Here." Jo tossed him the container with deadly accuracy. "Focus. We've got bigger problems than a potential leak upstairs. Lucifer's evil is spreading faster than kudzu in the summer."

The Angels of Retribution were gathered with the Dark Warriors and the Rowan sisters. Amelia still couldn't believe she'd been working with the infamous trio of High Priestesses who were leading the witches. The angels' wings were hidden, but power rolled off them in waves that made the crystal chandeliers dance. Rami was coordinating reports while simultaneously trying to convince Izzy to eat something.

The vampire princess had claimed one end of the space with her Dark Warriors and was as angry as everyone else.

"The numbers don't lie," Izzy said as she gestured to her tablet. "We've got confirmed sightings of Class Three demons in areas that should be clean. They're using the sewers to bypass our perimeter checks."

Pema moved her phone aside as she studied the display. The oldest sister was all business, which explained how she'd kept the witches together through multiple apocalyptic events. Her mate Ronan's huge frame stayed close. His presence grounded her power in ways that made their bond radiate.

"These attack patterns are too precise," she observed while stealing a spring roll from her mate's plate.

Next to her, Isis stabbed her chopsticks into her bánh mì like she was practicing for demon hunting. The ground trembled when those green eyes of hers locked onto enemy positions. The female had never met a problem she couldn't solve with precisely applied violence. Her mate Braeden's hand on her thigh kept that volcanic temper from redecorating the mansion's expensive interior.

And then there was Suvi, who managed to make tactical planning look like a Milan fashion shoot. The youngest sister balanced her designer heels on the chair rungs while she demolished her phone. The female might be dressed for a Vogue cover, but she packed enough magical juice to take out the city. Her mate Cane kept one arm draped across her shoulders. He anchored all that power behind the pretty exterior.

"The infection's spreading faster than we can track it," Suvi reported as she traced energy patterns on one of the maps. Her fingers left trails of silvery magic that mapped Lucifer's progress. "Traditional containment isn't working. He's managed to blow past all of our spells. Look at these progression rates."

"Because Lucifer's playing a different game," Pema interjected. "He's changing the basic nature of the ley lines and is able to get around our enchantments. We're basically watching someone rewrite the city's magical DNA in real time."

"Can we counter it?" Braeden asked. "There has to be a way to stop the spread."

Amelia set down her chopsticks as an idea came to her. "His power is acting like a virus rewriting its host's DNA." "We need to do more than just contain it. We need to inoculate the whole system."

"What if we created our own seeds?" Suvi's voice carried excitement as she built on the idea. "Something that could spread through the network and counter his corruption before it takes root?"

"It would need to carry both light and shadow energy," Isis observed as she leaned forward. "Otherwise, it won't be able to affect the deeper currents where the old power runs."

"The question is," Ronan cut in, "how do we deliver it? The network's massive, and we'd need multiple injection points to ensure coverage."

From her position near the warrior angels, Sarah looked up from an ancient text she'd brought from her shop. "I might have something that could help." The bookstore owner's green eyes lit up with scholarly excitement. "There are references in the older grimoires to relics that were used to maintain balance in the ley lines. Your idea just now made me think of them like spiritual antibodies."

"Show me," Amelia said, moving to look over Sarah's shoulder. The text was written in Latin. "This could work. The Twilight Key could act as a template. We could use it to create seeds that carry the original harmony."

"It's not just about creating the seeds," Cassiel interjected, his seer marks glowing as visions danced behind his eyes. "The timing has to be perfect. The stars remember when balance was first established. They must align again for this to work."

"That's not vague or anything," Isis retorted. "I hate decrypting prophecies."

"It's not a prophecy, but we do need to know what he's talking about," Amelia replied.

The planning session that followed went over everything they'd learned until that point. They mapped injection points while the Rowan sisters worked out spell matrices that could deliver their magical vaccine. Meanwhile, Amelia tried to figure out when the right time would be. This was up to her and the other witches. Unlike the Rowan sisters, she wasn't used to this much pressure.

"If we hit these nexus points simultaneously," Pema said, marking locations on the map, "we can create a cascade effect that will carry the cure through the entire network."

"Then that's what we will do. We'll need teams at each location," Camael pointed out. "And enough firepower to hold off whatever Lucifer sends to stop us."

Hours passed as they refined their strategy. The New Orleans night pressed against windows warded heavily enough to make Michael proud. Amelia found herself yawning despite the three cups of coffee she'd mainlined. The day's battles were catching up with her faster than a demon chasing a soul.

"We need a break." Camael's deep voice rolled through the room like thunder as he materialized beside her chair. "Everyone needs rest before we go any further."

Amelia started to protest, but another yawn betrayed her. "We still need to-"

"Those who don't need the sleep can handle the details," he cut her off as he pulled her to her feet. His massive frame radiated heat that made her want to curl into him like a cat seeking warmth. "You're no good to anyone if you collapse."

She nodded and told the others she would be back after a brief rest. Camael's presence beside her was both steadying and electrifying as she made her way to his room. Amelia was already taking off her shoes as he closed the door.

His ice-blue eyes never left her face as he tended to scrapes and bruises from the day's fight. Each touch carried equal parts concern and possession. "I'm fine," she insisted, though her voice was rougher than she'd intended. "Just tired."

"You channeled more power today than most beings see in a lifetime," he rumbled as he finished his inspection. "Sleep. We've got the watch."

Sleep was suddenly the last thing on her mind as she met his gaze. "I don't think I can sleep, yet," she replied as she allowed her desire to come forward in her gaze.

The air between them thickened until breathing became optional. Without a word, Camael sat on the edge of the bed while she began peeling off her shirt. She tossed it onto the nearby chair. "Let me help," he offered as he rose from the bed and crossed the small distance between them.

Amelia raised an eyebrow but didn't object as he placed his hands on her hips and tugged her jeans down. "I can undress myself, you know. "

"I'm aware," he said with a smirk. He guided her foot out of the denim before repeating the motion with the other. "But you looked like you might topple over. Consider it a safety measure."

She huffed a laugh and found herself clad in nothing but her bra and underwear.

“You’re awfully helpful for someone who took out a demon horde.”

“That’s what I do.” He took her hand and gently pulled her into his lap as he sat back on the edge of the bed. She didn’t resist and straddled his lap.

“I want to explore your delectable body and make you cry out my name,” he told her before he pressed a kiss to the side of her jaw, making her shudder.

She tilted her head, giving him more access. “Sounds better than sleep to me. As unexpected as this is, I can’t deny the heat between us.”

“I’ll be honest. This is not how I pictured the night going. But I’m not complaining,” he countered as he ran his hands up her back.

Her comeback faltered as he stood and then laid her across the mattress. He straightened and removed his shirt. Having his eyes on her body heightened her arousal. She arched her back and groaned when she caught sight of the bulge in his pants.

Wanting to tease him into action, she reached behind her back and unclasped her bra to reveal her breasts. “God, you’re perfect. I’ve never seen a more beautiful female.” She yelped when Camael followed the compliment by reaching down and slipping his fingers under the waistband of her panties. She lifted her hips so he could pull them down.

Feeling feminine in a way she’d never had, Amelia threw her hands above her head and watched him undress. It was difficult to resist covering her body. Uncertainty made her want to hide. She was rewarded for not covering up when he tweaked her nipples. Moaning, she cupped both breasts and became lost in the feel of his hands.

It was easy to let her desire take over. Pleasure drove her, and she slid her hands

down her abdomen. Camael caught them in an implacable grasp. "Let me," he told her.

Nodding, she returned her hands above her head and gripped the pillow. The move pushed her breasts out, drawing his attention. His hands were everywhere at once. Their mouths crashed together and their tongues slid together. Things quickly became urgent. He eased one hand between her legs while propping himself up with the other. One of his long fingers grazed her slick slit, making her lift her hips for more. It was embarrassing how with one touch she was putty in the palm of his hand.

"You like that?" He punctuated his question by slowly tracing a circle around her quivering flesh.

"You handle my body far better than you did your sword." Her hips lifted, seeking firmer pressure. The light, teasing strokes were driving her insane with need.

A moan left her mouth as he leaned over her and licked her nipple. His wings popped out at the same moment his finger delved inside her. "Oh, Gods, yesss," she hissed. He looked up from her breast and gave her a sexy half smile that she swore made her have a small climax. Camael's smile alone was a deadly weapon. The sight of him hovering above her breast and smiling was erotic as hell.

He kept his eyes on her and gently bit down on her nipple. It was shocking and felt so damn good. The things this male made her feel were nothing short of magical. Her core tightened around his finger. Her nipples ached as he sucked them, but he didn't let go. She began to buck and twist to get away or increase the pressure. Each nibble he bestowed on her taut tips zinged straight from her breast to her core, which he hadn't stopped teasing .

Camael laid his body over her, and his thick arousal was hot and heavy and kicking against her leg. She shifted her hips and spread her thighs. "You're driving me

crazy,” she murmured.

He chuckled. “I know what you need,” he said before removing his finger and pinching her clit.

“Gods, yes. Please don’t stop. I need more,” Amelia begged and writhed.

Camael remained on top of her. His lips stayed close to her mouth, but he never kissed her. His fingers played over her flesh, and she went wild when she finally flew over the edge.

Her hips bucked, and her leg brushed against his cock. His shaft leaped in a silent plea for more. She obliged by pushing against him. He removed his fingers and replaced them with his cock. He never stopped moving once he was seated to the hilt. Her climax began to build again as his shaft hit that spot inside that made her crazy. Her eyes slipped closed as she lifted her hips to meet his thrusts.

Her hands fisted in his hair and she bit down on his shoulder. She was certain she was going to blow apart. Her climax tore through her before she was ready. He was right behind her. She felt him tense and then grunt. His hot semen filled her as she milked him. Her back collapsed a few seconds later. Panting, Amelia kissed Camael’s lips and pulled away to smile up at him. “Holy shit. That was un-freaking-real.”

Camael chuckled. “You’re right. That was incredible.”

The peace was shattered by alarms that screamed through the mansion like banshees having a party. “Son of a bitch,” she breathed as she grabbed for clothes. “They have really shitty timing.”

“At least it wasn’t a few minutes ago,” he countered as he slipped his jeans on and reached for his phone. “Rami, report!”

"We've got hostiles at five locations," his second-in-command responded. "Armstrong Park's getting hammered, and we've got Class Five demons crawling all over the Elms Mansion. The Garden District's lit up like - fuck me, three more signatures just popped up at Gallier Hall and the Pharmacy Museum. And now these bastards are swarming Sarah's store like they've got a personal invitation!"

Amelia's heart stopped as she processed that last bit. "The bookstore sits on a major junction. If they corrupt that..."

"We lose a quarter of our defensive grid," Camael finished as he shrugged into his jacket. "Move out!"

They burst into the hallway to find organized chaos as the Angels of Retribution mobilized. Wings snapped out as weapons materialized. The Dark Warriors were already heading for their assigned positions while the Rowan sisters began weaving protection spells.

"Abraxos, take point at the bookstore," Camael ordered as they reached the patio. "Keep that junction secure at all costs." The warrior was already in the air. His red wings were carrying him into the night before Camael finished speaking. Everyone knew he wouldn't have gone anywhere else.

Abraxos landed outside Crescent City Arcane with enough force to crack the sidewalk. His heart nearly stopped when he saw lights on inside the store. Sarah was supposed to be safely tucked away in the mansion. Not in the middle of a demon assault.

His momentary distraction cost him. Something with too many teeth and not enough skin caught him across the back with claws that felt like they'd been forged in hellfire. Pain exploded through his wing as black ichor dripped into his wound.

"Fucking hell!" He spun and separated the demon's head from its shoulders with enough force to send it flying halfway down the block. The thing's body hadn't finished dissolving before he was bursting through the shop's door. He was ready to read Sarah the riot act for being so reckless.

He found her behind the counter and surrounded by artifacts that hummed with power. Her dark hair was pulled back in a messy bun. "Before you start yelling," she said without looking up from her work, "the wards were breached. I felt it while you were all talking strategy. If I hadn't come back, the junction would already be corrupted."

"That's what backup is for!" He moved closer. His wings filled the space with deadly grace despite his injury. "You should have called for help instead of rushing in alone!"

"There wasn't time." She finally looked up. Those green eyes of hers hit him in the gut. "And I'm not exactly helpless, warrior. These artifacts aren't just for show."

As if to prove her point, she raised one hand and channeled power through what looked like an Egyptian ankh. The blast of energy that followed turned three demons outside her window into ash faster than he could blink.

"Impressive," he admitted as he moved to cover her flank. "But next time, wait for me. Please."

The 'please' seemed to catch her off guard. Her expression softened as she really looked at him. "You're hurt."

"It's nothing." He tried to wave off her concern, but she was already moving around the counter.

"Let me see." Her tone brooked no argument as she examined his injured wing. "This needs attention before you lose too much blood."

"We don't have time for-" His words cut off in a hiss as she pressed something cool against the wound .

"That will staunch the blood and give your healing a kick in the pants." Satisfaction was evident in her voice. "Now you can go back to being overprotective without bleeding all over my floor."

The demons chose that moment to hit them en masse. Mal and Jo landed outside. Their wings spread wide as they took defensive positions and created a barrier of celestial steel between the incoming horde and Sarah's shop. Abraxos went out the door to join them.

Abraxos was aware of Sarah moving through her store with silent urgency. She gathered ancient relics that hummed with power. The female was smart enough to know she was out of her league in a supernatural throwdown. She used the resources available to her to help them keep the demons out.

Abraxos carved through demon ranks like a Cuisinart while Mal unleashed enough destruction to make Michael proud. Jo's blade burned through flesh as she covered their right flank. The three angels moved with synchronized precision born from centuries of combat.

A Throne-class demon with more teeth than sense tried breaching the shop's threshold. Abraxos separated its head from its shoulders while Mal's follow-through made its backup dancers regret coming along for the ride. Their blades left trails of divine fire that painted the night in shades of retribution.

"Use those artifacts to secure the juncture!" Abraxos barked at Sarah without taking

his eyes off the incoming threats. His red wings spread wider as another wave approached. The female didn't argue. She just disappeared deeper into her shop like a shadow with a doctorate in self-preservation.

CHAPTER 11

Dawn was still hours away when Camael watched Amelia and the Rowan sisters gather in the mansion's kitchen. His massive frame filled the doorway as he tracked their movements with ice-blue eyes that missed nothing. The females had transformed his high-end cooking space into something that looked like Heaven's most exclusive spell lab. Moonlight filtered through the stained glass window above the sink, painting the marble countertops in shades of midnight blue and blood red.

The warrior in him recognized a tactical operation when he saw one. But the male in him? That part couldn't take his eyes off Amelia as she moved with deadly purpose. The memory of her in his bed earlier helped temper his frustration. Rami delivered yet another report confirming increased demon activity. He focused on their continued use of the stolen celestial arsenal.

"You sure about this?" His voice rolled through the space like thunder. Every warrior's instinct he possessed screamed at him to grab her and get her somewhere safe. But he knew better. This female wasn't meant to be protected - she was meant to be unleashed.

"We don't have a choice." Amelia's shrug didn't hide the tension in her shoulders. "Lucifer's corruption is spreading faster than we can contain it. The seeds are our best shot at cleansing the network. There are too many miles for us to get to all the sections."

"Trust your mate, archangel," Pema advised with a look that could've stripped paint. "She was born to wield this power."

Mate. That word hit him harder than Michael during training. They hadn't even discussed what this thing between them was yet. Sure, they'd shared some explosive moments and even more explosive nights, but putting a label on it? That hadn't exactly been priority while dealing with Lucifer's latest attempts at taking over the world.

His eyes locked onto Amelia, and everything in him recognized the truth in Pema's words. The possessive need to claim her, protect her, fight beside her - it all made sudden, perfect sense. And the way she looked back at him? Yeah, she felt it too. The slight curve of her lips told him everything he needed to know.

A warrior angel and a witch. The universe had one twisted sense of humor. But watching her prepare to unleash power that would make Heaven take notice? This was right. This was meant to be. Even if the timing was about as perfect as demon table manners.

He forced himself to focus as Pema moved with practiced grace to complete the ritual circle around the island. The crushed herbs and opaline powder formed patterns his tactical mind automatically analyzed for weak points. There were none.

"The moon's almost in position," Amelia announced as she spread moissanite across the island's surface .

"We'll have a fifteen-minute window to create the seeds," she continued, "and then we can get them to the injection points."

"No pressure," Isis muttered as she took her position. The power crackling around her hands reminded him of lightning before a strike. "Just trying to save the city's spiritual foundation while demons with stolen angel weapons are gunning for us."

"Focus." Suvi's voice carried the kind of authority that would've made Michael proud.

The youngest Rowan sister claimed her spot with deadly grace.

Rami materialized behind him, all business despite the chaos they were about to unleash. "The Dark Warriors are in position. They've got teams ready to escort each witch to their assigned nexus points."

"And we just got confirmation of major demon activity at the port," Jo added as she appeared. Her wings were already mantled for battle. "Something big just came in by sea. The magical signature is off the charts."

"One crisis at a time." The growl in his voice made the windows rattle. "First, we get these seeds planted. Then we deal with whatever Lucifer's shipping operation is bringing to town."

Power surged through the kitchen like someone had plugged the place into Heaven's generators. The Key at Amelia's throat blazed to life, and holy hell, watching her channel both light and shadow did things to his control that had nothing to do with battle strategy. Her hands moved through the air with lethal precision as she pulled power through the artifact. The moissanite responded to her will, transforming from simple crystals into something that would've made Heaven's weapon masters weep with envy.

The Rowan sisters' power joined hers in a display that had his warrior's senses on high alert. Pema's energy anchored the working while Isis's raw force made the air crackle. Suvi completed their circuit with magic that sang of ancient bloodlines.

"Holy shit," Isis breathed as perfect spheres of power took shape. "Are they supposed to do that?"

The crystals defied gravity, rising from the circle like they'd been trained for aerial maneuvers. Each one was a perfect fusion of light and shadow - deadly beautiful.

Like the witch who'd created them.

Sweat darkened Amelia's hair as she completed the transformation. The final burst of power knocked several pictures off the walls, but he barely noticed. His entire focus was on her as she divided the seeds between his warriors.

"That's some serious mojo," Malachi observed from his position by the door. "Let's just hope it works."

"It'll work." Amelia's certainty hit him right in the gut. Even exhausted, she radiated the kind of power that made his ancient blood sing.

"That's where we come in." His Sword of Light materialized as he addressed his gathered warriors. Time to do what they did best. "Each witch gets an escort team. No demon gets within striking distance of those seeds." His ice-blue eyes swept his assembled forces. "Move out."

Minutes later, he had Amelia in his arms as they flew toward their first injection point. Her warmth against him was both distraction and motivation. Araton's voice crackled through their comms.

"We've got incoming at the port! Multiple containers giving off corrupted energy signatures. These artifacts have been modified for maximum damage."

"The seeds take priority," he ordered as they landed near Jackson Square. "Get the cleansing ritual started. We'll deal with the port situation once the ley lines are secured."

He watched with barely contained pride as Amelia worked her magic, sending the seed into the ley line with practiced ease. The network opened to her like it recognized its rightful queen. As he spread word through their tactical channels about

her technique, he knew one thing for certain. This female was born for this. And he was born to fight beside her.

Once she was done implanting her six seeds, Camael told his witch he would see her soon and left her with Remi and Malachi. He headed to the Port of New Orleans to make sure they weren't about to be overrun. It stretched before them like a maze of steel and secrets. Shipping containers rose against the lightening sky in towers that would make Babel jealous. The brackish water lapped at concrete walls older than some countries. And gulls screamed overhead like they knew the kind of shit that was about to go down.

"This place gives me the creeps," Rami muttered as he fell into step beside him. His second-in-command's wings were half-spread and ready for trouble. "These artifacts have been put through Hell's favorite blender."

"That's exactly what Lucifer did." Camael's ice-blue eyes never stopped scanning for threats as they moved deeper into the container yard. "He's gathering anything with even a trace of power and using it to spread his influence through the city."

"Status report," he growled into his comm as they reached another junction. The salt air carried traces of demon magic that made his sword hand itch to get to work.

"The witches are in position," Rami reported while checking his tactical display. "All witches have the seeds ready. They're just waiting on your signal to begin the cleansing ritual."

"The Rowans are reporting increased demon activity around their positions," Jo's voice cut in from her aerial patrol route. "These bastards know we're up to something."
"

"Of course they do." Malachi's curse carried across the tactical channel. He was

securing the western approach with Az, their wings tucked tight as they moved between containers. "We've got a leak upstairs bigger than Heaven's fountain."

Camael's jaw clenched as he thought about the hours of preparation that had led to this moment. His witch and her crew had created seeds using the Twilight Key that would purge Lucifer's corruption from the ley lines. But timing was everything. One wrong move and they'd lose their shot at saving the city's spiritual foundation.

"Ayil, status report," he barked into the comm.

"In position at the container terminal," the warrior responded. His voice carried the kind of tension that meant trouble was brewing. "I'm picking up Lucifer's energy signature. We've got at least three hot spots that need immediate attention."

"Confirmed." Araton's voice crackled through. He was working his way through the eastern sector, using the pre-dawn shadows for cover. "Whatever's in these containers, it's not your standard demonic contraband. "

"Define contraband," Camael demanded as he launched himself toward Ayil's position.

"Like someone took Heaven's artifacts and put them through Hell's favorite meat grinder," Abraxos cut in. The warrior had taken point near the river, his red wings allowing him to blend with the sunrise. "The power signatures are corrupted but organized. These aren't random acts of evil. This is a coordinated effort."

"Anyone else wondering how these bastards learned our containment protocols?" Az asked over the comm. "Because they've positioned these containers exactly where we'd have the hardest time reaching them."

"They didn't just learn our protocols," Rami observed as he joined Camael on his

approach to Ayil's position. "They're using our equipment. The magical signatures I'm picking up? Pure Heaven, but twisted."

"Araton, what's your read on the eastern sector?" Camael demanded.

"Three heavily guarded containers putting out enough dark energy to make a demon lord weep," came the response. "They've got them arranged in a perfect ritual triangle. Someone's been studying our tactical manuals."

"Hold positions," Camael ordered as he landed beside Ayil. The male's red wings were mantled for battle as he gestured to the container before them. "What are we looking at?"

"Bad news with a side of apocalypse," Ayil replied without taking his eyes off the target. "They're modifying the artifacts and turning them into weapons that could corrupt the entire city's magical foundation."

"Abraxos, how's the river looking?"

"Like someone invited Hell's R&D department to set up shop," the warrior reported. "I'm counting at least five more containers that feel wrong. They're using the water to amplify the corruption somehow."

The first wave of demons hit the port like Hell had decided to throw a block party. These weren't the usual ugly bastards Camael was used to putting down. No, these sumbitches smelled and looked like death.

The one that came straight for him had skin like volcanic glass and moved like it had downloaded Jackie Chan's greatest moves. Its crystalline limbs reflected the pre-dawn light in patterns that would've given Picasso nightmares. Behind it came things that made him question whether reality had decided to take a vacation.

"We need to start NOW!" Amelia's voice carried over the comms with enough panic to make his warrior's heart stop. "The ley lines are mutating. They're turning inside out! If we wait any longer, there won't be anything left to save!"

A howl split the air as more demons emerged from between containers. Three of them went for Rami while another four circled Az like they were running combat drills. "Do it!" Camael ordered as he took a demon's head clean off. Black ichor painted ancient concrete in patterns that smoked on contact.

He felt it the instant the witches began their ritual. Power surged through the port like someone had plugged the city into a magical generator and cranked that shit to eleven. Even the demons felt it. They began to fight in earnest. His blade was already moving, taking a demon's head clean off while his soul recognized Amelia's magic singing through the ley lines.

Three uglies tried to flank him, thinking they had an advantage. Wrong move. His Sword of Light carved through the first one's center mass. He split it like a demonic pinata. The second one caught his blade through what passed for a throat. Black ichor painted the concrete in patterns that smoked on contact. The third one? That sumbitch learned why you don't rush an archangel when he was already pissed off. Camael's wings snapped out as he spun. He used the momentum to drive his blade straight through its skull.

The port had turned into a battleground. Demons were everywhere, crawling over containers. They moved with military precision that made his ancient blood boil. He was busy slicing through carotid arteries when he heard a scream. It cut through the battle noise and straight into his soul. Amelia's pain carried over the comms with enough raw agony to make his vision go red. Everything in him recognized that sound. His mate was in agony, and he was too far away to help.

Two more demons made the mistake of getting between him and the direction of that

scream. His blade separated the first one's spine from its body before the thing could even register the attack. The second one tried to block with a stolen weapon. Bad choice. Camael's follow-through turned it into a flaming bag of ass. The entire time his power leaked out in waves cold enough to freeze hellfire.

Nothing else mattered. Not the battle raging around him, not the corrupted artifacts. Not even the fact that someone in Heaven was arming these bastards. His witch was in pain, and that shit wasn't going to stand. "The ley lines are fighting back!" Her voice was tight with the kind of suffering that made his instincts go nuclear. "Something's wrong - AHHHH!"

"Amelia!" The roar ripped from his throat as he launched skyward. His wings cut through humid air fast enough to leave sonic booms in his wake.

He found her on her knees near Jackson Square. Blood ran from her nose and side while power crackled around her in waves that would've killed a lesser being. "What happened?" he asked as he landed beside her hard enough to crack the cobblestones.

"Lucifer-" She broke off with another cry of pain that hit him harder than celestial steel. "He's fighting back. He knows what we're trying to do. He's trying to force the ley lines to reject the seeds."

"You're bleeding," he said as he reached for her side.

She shook her head. "Remi got the demon that did that. I need to focus on the seeds."

Camael clamped his lips shut. He didn't like this. Her skin was too pale. Holy hell, was that blood coming from her eyes now? The power backlash was literally tearing her apart while she fought to complete the ritual. His gut twisted into a giant knot. His witch was willing to sacrifice herself to save the city's spiritual foundation .

"Like hell," he growled as he pressed his hands to her shoulders. Divine energy poured from him into her. He gave her all the strength he could. "You're not doing this alone."

Her green eyes met his, and damn if she didn't manage a smile despite the pain twisting her features. "Together then?"

"Always." He let more of his power flow into her as she reached for the ley lines again.

The fight that followed wasn't physical, but it left scars deeper than any blade. They wrestled with corruption that fought back like a demon at an exorcism. He was in awe of her and how hard she worked. Most would have given up already. He exhaled when the final seed took root. The resulting explosion of power knocked them both flat. Amelia lay in his arms, bleeding but alive as her cleansing energy raced through New Orleans' spiritual foundation.

"Next time," she managed between ragged breaths, "remind me to pack some ibuprofen."

His laugh probably scared any demons still in the vicinity, but he couldn't help it. This female could stare into the abyss and crack jokes. No wonder she had his heart in a stranglehold. "Next time," he rumbled as he gathered her closer, "we do this my way."

"Your way usually involves smiting first and asking questions never."

"Exactly." He pressed his lips to her temple, tasting blood and power and victory. "Much simpler."

Dawn painted the city in shades of gold and crimson as his warriors secured the area.

They'd won this round, but Camael knew the war was far from over. Right now though? Right now, all that mattered was the witch in his arms and the fact that she was still breathing. The rest - Lucifer, the traitor in Heaven, all of it - could wait until she was healed.

CHAPTER 12

A melia's entire body throbbed as Camael carried her through the mansion's ornate front doors. The marble floors beneath his boots were still scarred from their previous battles. She tried to focus on that rather than the fact that every step sent fresh waves of agony through her. The corrupted ley lines had fought back harder than anyone expected. Thankfully, she'd been the only one to pay the price, so they weren't down any more witches.

Her blood had dried on her clothes, leaving dark stains that would never wash out. That should be the least of her worries, but it was her favorite top. "Put me down," she insisted as they reached the foyer. The chandelier above cast dancing shadows across his face as he frowned down at her. "I can walk."

His ice-blue eyes narrowed. "You can barely stand." His massive frame radiated tension. Was it horrible that she got a little thrill over the thought of him turning into an alpha male wanting to protect and care for his mate? Not that they were mated. It seemed too early for that, but she couldn't deny she saw him as hers .

"Then I'll lean on something." She needed to move under her own power, to prove to herself that she wasn't as broken as she felt. Her hands gripped his shoulders as she tried to steady herself. "The dining room. We need to check the tracking spells."

"Stubborn witch," he muttered. There was something like pride in his voice as he set her on her feet with infinite care. His massive frame stayed close as she took her first wobbly steps.

"I learned from the best," she fired back, managing a weak smile despite the pain that made her want to curl into a ball and cry. Neither was an option. Not when Lucifer was still out there, plotting whatever horror show he had planned next.

The mansion buzzed with activity as the Angels of Retribution regrouped. Rami was coordinating with the Dark Warriors. His phone was grafted to his ear as he issued rapid-fire orders. She saw Jo and Az through the window. They had to be securing the perimeter.

She paused in the dining room where the Rowan sisters had taken over their tactical command center. Pema looked up and scanned Amelia from head to toe as she leaned heavily on the doorframe. "I was about to tell you that the seeds are holding but something was wrong with the cemeteries. The energy's chaotic readings don't seem as important given how you look. What do you need? You don't look good."

Amelia's head bobbed in a weak nod, but Camael wasn't having any of that shit. "You are not okay," he growled. "The ley lines nearly shredded her. She needs real healing."

"I'll call for help." Pema had pulled out her phone. Her fingers flew over the screen. "Jace, we need you at the mansion. Now. It's Amelia." She listened for a moment. "Yeah, Luke can set up the portal. No, it can't wait... Because she tried to take on corrupted ley lines by herself." She rolled her eyes at whatever he said. "Just get your ass here."

"I'm fine," Amelia protested weakly. "We don't need to bother-"

"Shut it," Camael ordered. His ice-blue eyes blazed when they looked at her. "You're about ten seconds from collapse."

Before she could get another word out, Luke materialized beside them like a shadow

coming to life. The sorcerer's expression was pure don't-fuck-with-me. "Clear the space. This shit's about to get real."

With a twist of his wrist, his seven-foot staff appeared in his grip. The alder wood hummed with enough stored power to make her skin tingle. Ancient runes carved into its surface began to glow as he channeled energy through the weapon. "Time to open a door," he muttered. His hands danced through the air gracefully. Power crackled around the staff's tip. It threw off sparks that painted the marble floors with patterns that made her think of the Aurora Borealis.

"The wards are going to fight this," he warned. "Amelia, can you tell them to play nice?"

"No problem," she said at the same time Camael growled. Before he could stop her, she reached out with what little power she had left and touched the mansion's protective barriers. The wards hummed in response and accepted Luke's magic as he established the connection.

The portal bloomed in the center of the room like someone had captured the northern lights and taught them to dance. Waves of emerald and violet energy rippled through the air. They painted the walls with otherworldly light.

"Show-off," Pema muttered at Luke's dramatic display.

"Hey, if you've got it, flaunt it," he fired back with a grin.

The scent of sage and sweetgrass filled the space as Jace stepped through. The Native American sorcerer's long black hair was pulled back in a tight braid that hung down the middle of his back. His dark eyes took in the scene. They landed first on Amelia, then moved to Camael's protective stance beside her.

"What did you do this time?" he asked as he moved toward them. "And why is there an archangel hovering like you're about to break?"

"Long story," Amelia managed. "My citywide spell to cleanse the corrupted ley lines didn't go off as planned. Lucifer fought back"

"Jesus Christ on a cracker." Jace shook his head. "You couldn't start with something simple? Maybe a nice protection ward or two?"

"You know me," she tried for a smile. "Go big or go home."

"Going home in a body bag isn't the goal here." He pressed his hands to her temples. "This is going to hurt at first. Try not to punch me."

"You don't have to worry about me," she replied. "I make no promises about him, though." She jerked her thumb to Camael who had his hands fisted at his sides.

Jace shared a knowing look with her archangel. "Just let me work." Healing energy flowed from his palms. His warmth seeped into her battered system. She sucked in a breath when her discomfort tripled. "Holy shit, woman. The ley lines didn't just rough you up. They tried to turn you inside out."

Camael's wings popped out of his back, and his weapon appeared in his hand. "Can you fix it?"

"Can I fix it, he asks," Jace muttered. "Like I haven't been patching up supernatural warriors for centuries. Yes, I can fix it. But she needs to learn the word 'restraint' before she tries something like this again."

"I'll work on that," Amelia promised as strength began returning to her limbs .

"Sure, you will. Right after Hell freezes over and demons start doing community service." When Jace finally stepped back, satisfaction glinted in his eyes. "That should do it. Try not to let the ley lines use you as a chew toy next time. And you-" he pointed at Camael, "keep a better eye on your witch. She's got more power than sense."

"Thank you," Camael said. Amelia did a double take when she heard the genuine gratitude in his voice.

"That's what I'm here for. In fact, I'm going to stick around until this is resolved. Zander and a few others, including my mate, will be joining us later at Les Auger," Jace replied.

"Are Mom and Dad bringing Cian? What about Liam? They won't be safe here," Izzy interjected as she got up and crossed to Jace. She stuck to the far wall, well away from the sun shining through the window.

Jace placed a hand on her shoulder. "No, Cian and Liam are both staying with Breslin and Rhett. Your mom and Aunt Cailyn will go back and forth. The boys tend to push the boundaries when their mothers aren't around."

"Our kids are giving Bhric and Alex a run for their money. Your parents will be lucky if Zeum is still standing when they get back." Isis gestured to their tactical display where red lines pulsed like infected veins. "Now that we're sure the kids are as safe as possible and the medical drama is over, Lucifer's power is trying to find new paths. It's targeting places where the veil between worlds is thinnest."

"Shit," Amelia cursed and walked over to the table. She cocked her head and studied what was happening. "The Cities of the Dead. He's going after the ancestral power stored in the tombs."

"Of course he is," Suvi muttered as she adjusted one of their tracking crystals. "Trying to corrupt the living wasn't enough of a challenge. "

Amelia made her way to her grandmother's trunk. Camael had dropped it in the corner of the room when they'd returned from her house with it days ago. The artifacts they'd retrieved hummed with recognition as she approached. The crystal that had awakened her powers sang to her blood while the ancient book's pages rustled without wind.

"What are you thinking?" Suvi asked as she joined her by the trunk. The youngest Rowan sister's designer heels clicked against the marble as she moved. Amelia didn't understand how she walked in those death traps.

"These were with the Key," Amelia replied as she lifted the crystal. Its surface was warm against her palm, and it felt like it had been waiting for her. "They're important to understanding how the original power worked. How it was meant to work."

The crystal warmed in her grip as the same images flooded her mind of how light and shadow had danced together before the separation. She shut out the chatter around her and listened to what she needed to do. All she was getting was that it wasn't about forcing them to merge. It was about letting them remember their natural harmony. Like lovers reuniting after a long absence. They needed only to recognize each other again.

A crash outside made the mansion's windows rattle. Something that sounded distinctly like moaning followed. Before anyone could investigate, Rami burst through the doors, his phone in hand and his wings half-spread with tension. "We've got major activity all over the city," he reported, his voice tight. "Dark Warriors are tracking multiple supernatural signatures converging on St. Louis Cemetery No. 1. Az and Jo just called in. Lafayette Cemetery and St. Louis No. 2 are being hit simultaneously."

"Why hit one ancient burial ground when you can go for the whole set?" Malachi said as he materialized in the doorway. Demon blood still smoked on his blade. "The dead are walking. And they ain't looking for brunch."

Camael's massive frame radiated tension as another crash echoed from outside. His white wings manifested and filled the space with deadly grace. "Report from the ground teams."

"Dark Warriors have eyes on all three locations," Rami confirmed as he checked messages on his phone. "Aison's pack is running interference at Lafayette while our aerial units maintain surveillance."

Amelia's hands shook as she reached for the crystal again. "He's corrupting the dead. Their spirits are pure power. They're neither light nor shadow. If he turns them..."

"The whole city becomes his playground," Isis finished grimly. "We need to move. Now."

"You should sit this one out," Camael told Amelia. His massive frame vibrated with protective instincts.

"Not going to happen, big guy." She met his gaze with steel in her own. "This is what I was born for. It's why I've been tortured the past few days. What my ancestors prepared me for. And if you think I'm sitting this one out, you clearly haven't been paying attention."

His curse would have made a sailor blush, but he didn't try to stop her as she checked her magical arsenal. The crystal went into one pocket while the Key remained at her throat. "I'll coordinate from here," Izzy offered from her position by the tactical displays. The vampire princess's sapphire eyes tracked movement on the screens with lethal focus. "The Dark Warriors are already in position. I can direct them where you

need them."

Camael nodded sharply before turning to his crew. "Move out. Formation Delta." His wings spread wide as his Sword of Light blazed to life.

The Rowan sisters, their mates, and the remaining Dark Warriors went to their vehicles. The angels hit the mansion's courtyard and didn't hesitate. Wings snapped out in perfect formation as weapons materialized. The pre-dawn air crackled with power as the Angels of Retribution launched skyward. Camael's massive arm wrapped around Amelia's waist as he lifted her into the sky. The city spread out beneath them. Its streets empty except for things that shouldn't be walking. Three minutes of flight that made her stomach rebel, and they were there.

They hit St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 under Camael's cloak. The Cities of the Dead had become exactly that. The spirits of the deceased were being twisted by Lucifer's power into weapons against the living. Amelia moved through the ancient tombs with the crystal in one hand and the Key around her neck.

The first wave of corrupted spirits manifested like someone had given darkness a physical form. They moved through centuries-old stone with impossible grace. Their essence was twisted by Lucifer's power into something that would have given him nightmares.

But Amelia saw them differently now. The crystal revealed their true nature - neither light nor shadow but pure potential. She didn't try to fight them with either force. Instead, she reached for the harmony she'd been hearing during each of the visions. Power surged through her as she coaxed the energies to dance together. She allowed it to happen naturally.

"Holy shit," Remi breathed as he watched her work. His blade hung forgotten at his side. "She's reminding them what they used to be."

"Now that's some serious mojo," Malachi added as he took out a demon trying to flank them. "Think you can teach that trick to the rest of us?"

Amelia shook her head while remaining focused on her work. Camael moved like her shadow. His Sword of Light kept physical threats at bay while she dealt with the spiritual ones. The Angels of Retribution spread through the cemetery in perfect formation. This wasn't a battle they could win with celestial steel alone.

A particularly nasty spirit manifested between the Dupree family crypt and the restored tomb of Marie Laveau. It moved like oil on water and carried traces of power that made Amelia's magical core shiver in recognition. "Now that's interesting," the thing said in a voice that sounded like gravel in a blender. "The Key-bearer thinks she understands the old ways."

"I understand enough," Amelia countered as she gathered power that felt more natural with each passing moment. The crystal in her hand pulsed like a second heartbeat. "You're not behind these spirits. You're trying to awaken something. Something that should stay buried."

The thing's laugh could have stripped paint. "Very good, little witch. But you're too late. The Prince of Lies nearly has enough power to punch holes in the barriers between worlds."

"He can try, but he won't succeed," Amelia replied through gritted teeth as she tried to send the thing back to its resting place.

"Ah, that's where you're wrong. There's nothing you can do to stop it." The spirit lunged for her with tendrils of pure evil.

Amelia didn't try to fight it with light or shadow. Instead, she reached for the harmony she now understood had always existed. The crystal in her hand blazed with

power as she touched the spirit's essence with the energy. Its scream echoed across dimensions as the corruption burned away from it. The spirit's eyes went wide and then softened in understanding. It showed Amelia exactly what Lucifer had planned before it dissipated.

As she expected, the plan was loaded with demonic horrors. Barriers between worlds shattered like glass. Creatures that had been locked away crawled through the cracks. And the world began to unravel as it lost the threads that held it together.

Amelia gathered her power and faced the corrupted zombies. The Key at her throat blazed with ancient energy as she reached for something deeper than battle magic. She touched their essences with peace. With rest. With the quiet that should have been theirs. One by one, they stilled. They faded and turned to ash as they returned to their eternal slumber. The last one dissolved with a sigh that sounded almost grateful.

"We need to regroup," she said, turning to Camael. Her legs felt like overcooked pasta. Exhaustion hit her hard. She stayed upright through sheer stubbornness. "This was just a test run. He's going to keep doing shit like this unless we find him and stop him."

"Back to the mansion," Camael ordered as he gathered her close. "We need a new strategy."

They landed a few minutes later and headed for the war room. Izzy was eating some gumbo while the tactical displays lit up three screens behind her. "That was quick," she told them around a mouthful.

"The zombies were easy for Amelia to deal with, and there weren't many demons. He's keeping us busy, so we can't get ahead of him," Rami said as he cleaned demon goo off his blade. "We need to figure out where he's holing up."

"We need to track his energy signature," Amelia corrected as she spread her grandmother's maps across the table. "He's using massive amounts of power to wake the dead. That has to leave a trail we can follow. "

"The Dark Warriors have been monitoring supernatural hotspots," Izzy reported without looking up from her screens. "There's a pattern to his movements, but it's like he's deliberately leaving false trails."

"What if we're thinking about this wrong?" Malachi suggested as he studied the map. "Instead of chasing where he's been, we predict where he's going. There have to be places in the city with more spiritual juice than others."

"Places where the power runs deeper," Amelia agreed as her mind raced. "Ancient crossroads, convergence points..." She pulled out her grandmother's journal. "Nana mapped all the major locations in New Orleans. If we overlay that with recent activity..."

"We can triangulate his most likely targets," Camael finished. His ice-blue eyes blazed with battle light. "And set up an ambush."

"It's going to take serious coordination," Rami warned. "We'll need eyes on every possible location."

"Then it's a good thing we've got the best tactical team in the Tehrex Realm," Izzy said with a predator's smile. "Let's make this bastard regret ever setting foot in our realm."

CHAPTER 13

The tactical map in the mansion's war room pulsed with activity as they plotted potential locations for Lucifer's next move. Camael watched Amelia trace energy patterns across the city grid while his Angels of Retribution gathered intel. The witch's power crackled around her fingers as she worked. Damn if that didn't do things to his concentration.

"If these convergence points form a pattern, I can't see it," she muttered, marking another location with one of the Rowan sisters' enchanted crystals. "I can't tell if he's just hitting random targets. We know his end goal, but all of the rest of this seems frivolous."

"So, there's no way to predict where he's going to hit next?" Rami asked.

Before anyone could respond, power slammed through Camael's brain like a battering ram. The energy signature was from the Archangel Council. And they were panicked. His ancient blood ran cold. "Something's wrong upstairs," he growled. "The celestial realm is under attack. "

"What?" Malachi's wings snapped out as he moved closer. "How is that even possible? Heaven's defenses-"

"Are being breached from within." The words tasted like ash in Camael's mouth as the information came through in pieces. "Is the traitor we've been hunting making their move?"

Amelia's head snapped up from her work. "Go," she said without hesitation. "We've got things covered here."

His protective instincts warred with his duty as he met those green eyes of hers. Every fiber of his being screamed at him to stay with his witch. To keep her safe. But Heaven itself was under assault. He couldn't ignore that.

"The Dark Warriors will maintain patrols and handle shit here," Izzy promised. The vampire princess's sapphire eyes missed nothing as she assessed the situation. "Between us, the Rowan sisters, and Jace, she'll be well protected."

Camael's jaw clenched as he made the call. "Remi, Jo, and Malachi, I want you to maintain defensive positions here. If this is coordinated with Lucifer's moves in the city, we can't afford to leave any gaps."

"The triplets should come too," Rami suggested as he checked his blade. "If things are as bad as that energy pulse suggests, they'll be needed."

Looking at Amelia one last time, Camael crossed to her in three long strides. His massive frame towered over her as he cupped her face in his hands. "Stay safe," he growled before claiming her lips in a kiss that carried equal parts possession and promise.

"You too, Archangel," she breathed when they broke apart. "Try not to start an apocalypse without me."

His laugh surprised him. There was nothing funny about their situation, but this female could face down anything with attitude to spare. "Keep the city in one piece until I get back. "

With a final nod to the others, Camael walked outside and launched skyward. His

wings cut through reality as he opened a path to the celestial realm. His warriors and the triplets followed in perfect formation as they breached the barriers between worlds.

They emerged into what looked like a celestial civil war. Wings of various colors filled Heaven's pristine streets as angels clashed with angels. At first glance, it was impossible to tell friend from foe. They all wore the same armor and wielded similar weapons. They also moved with the deadly grace of an angel. It didn't take Camael long to see that something was off about the way some of them fought.

Camael's ancient instincts screamed warnings as he watched supposedly loyal soldiers using tactics that had been forbidden since the First War. They were using killing strikes designed to inflict maximum damage. To destroy, not subdue.

Zakara came racing toward Rami with her purple wings flowing behind her. "They destroyed my bakery!"

"Fucking assholes," Rami cursed. "We will rebuild. But first, let's make them pay." The warrior pulled his mate to his side.

"Hold," he ordered his men as they all prepared to join the fray. His ice-blue eyes narrowed as he studied the battlefield. "Watch their wing movements."

Understanding dawned in Az's expression as he observed what Camael had noticed. "Those siding with Lucifer are different. Their movements are jerky and harsh. They're fighting their nature. And darkness is writhing beneath their pristine feathers." It was visible only when they twisted in certain ways.

"Sweet mother of mercy," Araton breathed as they watched. "Matthias has gone dark."

"Not just Matthias," Camael growled as he recognized more faces. Angels he'd fought beside, trained with, and trusted. Their movements were efficient but cruel. Their strikes were meant to maim rather than disable. "Look at their eyes when they turn this way. The corruption shows there first."

The fallen angels pivoted in their direction, and the others caught sight of the shadows in their eyes. The clearness of celestial grace was threaded through with darkness that moved like living ink. "Remember," Camael instructed his warriors as they prepared to engage, "these were once our brothers and sisters. They've chosen their side. Show mercy where you can. But don't hesitate if it comes down to them or you. They're not pulling their strikes."

"The corruption's spreading through the residential district," Abraxos reported. "They're targeting the younger angels first."

"The nurseries," Ayil added with a grim expression. "We need to get the fledglings out before that darkness reaches them."

Camael scanned the area for Michael before he issued orders. When he didn't see the other archangel, he focused on the triplets. "You three, evacuate the young ones. Get them to Earth. The Dark Warriors can watch over them temporarily. The rest of you are with me. We need to find and kick these assholes out of Heaven."

They split up with practiced efficiency. Each warrior knew their role. The triplets' red wings became blurs of motion as they carved paths through waves of corrupted angels. Their synchronized fighting style took out anything in their path on their way to the nurseries.

Camael and his men hit Heaven's administrative district with a vengeance. Their blades sliced through flesh as they engaged former brothers and sisters who'd given themselves to darkness. Each strike felt like betrayal. It hurt Camael's heart to see so

many taking Lucifer's side once again. But he didn't hesitate. Not when the very foundations of Heaven were at risk.

"The corruption's strongest near the Archives," Rami called out as they fought their way through another wave. His blade took a corrupted angel's head while Camael's follow-through turned its partner into ash.

Camael's breath caught. "The First Records. If someone got their hands on those..."

"They could rewrite the basic laws of existence," a familiar voice finished for him. The words dripped with enough smug satisfaction to make Camael see red. He spun to find Jeremiel emerging from the Archives' entrance. The archangel's white wings were shot through with darkness. His eyes swirled with malevolence, making Camael's stomach turn.

"You," he growled as his brother's betrayal hit him like a wrecking ball. "You've been feeding intel and weapons to Lucifer this whole time."

Jeremiel's laugh could have frozen hellfire. "Someone had to help him level the playing field. The old order is dying, brother. It's time for something new. Something pure."

"Pure?" Rami's blade sang through the air as he engaged a corrupted guard. "You call this abomination pure?"

"This is just the opening act, brother." Jeremiel spread those corrupted wings, and holy hell, wasn't that a sight? Darkness dripped from feathers that used to shine brighter than Heaven's spires. His smile was pure nightmare fuel as he added, "When those barriers crash? That's when the real party starts. No more playing by the rules. No more good versus evil bullshit holding us back. Just pure. Raw. Freedom."

The fight that followed redefined Camael's whole concept of celestial warfare. And considering he'd been doing this shit since before time learned to crawl? That was saying something. Jeremiel came at him like demonic possession in angel form. The male had always been a skilled warrior. You didn't make archangel by collecting celestial participation trophies. But this? This was some next-level combat that belonged in Hell's highlight reel.

Their blades met with enough force to make Heaven's foundations do the cha-cha. Divine steel screamed against corrupted metal while power exploded outward in waves. Camael blocked a strike that would've taken his head off, then countered with a move they'd practiced together for millennia.

"Brother, stop this!" He tried reaching the warrior he'd known since Creation as they took the fight vertical. "This isn't you. Lucifer is twisting everything you were meant to be."

Jeremiel was beyond words. His blade never stopped as they twisted through ancient spires. Each clash of their weapons sent out pulses of energy that turned pristine marble into gravel. Their wings carried them higher and faster. They were locked in a deadly dance of steel and grace that rewrote the rules of angelic combat.

Camael realized something seriously wrong was happening every time their blades connected. The corruption flowing through Jeremiel's essence? That shit was contagious. It reached for Camael through each point of contact. The evil was trying to download itself into his grace. It whispered promises that made his warrior's soul want to hurl. It was trying to turn his divine light into the same twisted horror show that had eaten his brother's spirit.

Fighting your own flesh and blood was hard enough without evil trying to give you a spiritual STD through blade-to-blade contact. Camael had no way to fight this. This was about fundamental forces. Light and shadow. Creation and destruction. They

needed someone who could work with both energies. They needed Amelia.

"Hold the line!" he barked at Rami as he launched himself toward Earth. His wings cut through reality faster than thought as he raced to collect his witch.

He found her exactly where he'd left her, at the mansion with the Dark Warriors. She spun toward him the instant he materialized. "I need you," he said without preamble. "Heaven's burning, and you're the only one who can stop it."

To her credit, she didn't hesitate. "Then let's go save paradise."

The return trip would have killed a lesser being. His witch held onto him with steel in her spine and fire in her eyes. They emerged into a Heaven that was barely recognizable. The corruption had spread further. The pristine architecture was turning black. Rami and his mate were helping hold the line at the Archives. Their blades left trails of divine fire as he fought alongside Michael himself.

"Focus on those Archives!" Camael barked as he set his female down. His Sword of Light was already singing through the air, taking out a corrupted angel trying to flank them. "The infection's anchored in there. You shut that shit down, and we've got a shot at saving this place."

Watching Amelia work her mojo was better than premium angel porn. The Key at her throat lit up brighter than a supernova as she hit those Archive steps at full speed. Her power crackled around her like she was mainlining pure adrenaline. Her hands moved through the air with lethal grace while she worked magic that was beyond Camael's understanding.

He kept the ugly stuff off her six. His blade carved through anything stupid enough to try interrupting her workflow. Two angels who'd clearly drunk Lucifer's Kool-Aid tried rushing her left flank. His sword separated their heads from their shoulders

faster than you could say 'divine retribution'. Their bodies hadn't even hit Heaven's marble before three more took their place.

"Keep going, witch!" he called out as he engaged the new threats.

Pride swamped Camael. His witch was something else. While he was playing celestial bouncer, his female was making Heaven's most sacred texts her bitch. The power pouring off her would've made lesser beings spontaneously combust. Literally. She worked it like she'd been born to rewrite Lucifer's vile operating system.

Nobody got within twenty feet of her without going through him first. And considering his kill count was already high enough to give Heaven's accountants a coronary? That was saying something. Her power spread through Heaven's streets like a cleansing wave. The darkness writhed and fought. But it couldn't stand against her power.

Jeremiel's scream of pure rage cut through the celestial throwdown like a demon at a prayer meeting. His wings spread wide. Corruption dripped from them like toxic rain as he watched his carefully crafted plan circle the cosmic drain.

"What have you done, you pathetic witch?" The words came out in a snarl that would've made Hell's finest flinch. Instead of attacking like the suicidal idiot Camael expected, his brother's expression shifted to something way more dangerous. Calculation.

His eyes narrowed as he took in the scene. The smart bastard was doing the math and realizing his odds had just gone from bad to 'holy shit, we're screwed'. "This isn't over, brother." Jeremiel's laugh could've stripped paint as he backed away, his wings mantling for flight. "You think your little witch can fix what's already been broken? The darkness has spread further than you know. Further than even Heaven can reach."

"Running away?" Camael taunted. His Sword of Light was ready for whatever play his brother might make. "That's not very archangel of you."

"Oh, I'm not running." That smile promised more trouble than a demon with daddy issues. "I'm just choosing a better battlefield. When we meet again? Your witch won't be able to save you." Jeremiel disappeared in a burst of power that left traces of evil in the air like a bad perfume.

"Amelia!" Camael barked out as he carved through another wave of ugly. "Force these angels toward the central courtyard. We need them contained, not destroyed."

His witch didn't miss a beat. Her power shifted, and she began herding the corrupted angels like the world's most badass supernatural sheepdog. Her moves were precise and lethal as she drove them exactly where they needed to go. "Form the circle!" Camael ordered his fellow archangels. His blade kept any smart-ass angels from breaking ranks. "We're going to give these boys a chance at redemption whether they want it or not."

Michael materialized beside him. He was ready to smite them all. The betrayal was crushing him "A containment sphere? That's your play?"

"It's better than killing our own. None of them made this choice. Jeremiel turned his choice into a virus that spread like wildfire." Camael's wings spread wide as he directed the loyalist forces. "Do you really want to add mass casualties to that stack?" He gestured to the dead all around them.

Michael shook his head and got to work. They created the circle, which allowed Amelia to form the containment. The entire thing went down faster than an alcoholic's New Year's resolution. Corrupted angels found themselves trapped in a bubble .

"These are your problem now," Camael told the assembled archangels as the last of the fallen were secured. He was already moving toward Amelia. She looked ready to face-plant into Heaven's marble. "I've got bigger fish to fry."

"Meaning?" Michael's voice carried enough don't-fuck-with-me authority to make lesser beings spontaneously combust.

"Meaning Jeremiel and Lucifer are still out there," Camael fired back as he gathered his witch close. "And somebody's got to put those sons of bitches back in their boxes. I'm going to finish this." The unspoken "try to stop me" hung in the air like a dare. Even Michael knew better than to argue when Camael had that look in his eyes.

CHAPTER 14

N ight had fallen by the time they returned to the mansion, which was filled with displaced angels. The east wing's marble floors were crowded with makeshift sleeping arrangements. Fear rolled off the fledglings in waves that made Amelia's heart ache. These young ones had never known anything but Heaven's perfect order. Now they huddled in small groups with their wings trembling as they processed the attack on their home.

"Here." She handed a cup of hot chocolate to one of the smallest angels. It was a female who couldn't have been more than a century old. "It helps with the shaking."

"Thank you." The fledgling's wings rustled as she accepted the drink. "Is... is Heaven going to be okay?"

"Of course it is." Amelia infused her voice with a confidence she didn't entirely feel. "The other archangels are already working to repair the damage. You'll be home before you know it."

"We need a better solution," Izzy muttered as she ran a hand through her hair. The Dark Warriors had transformed three entire floors into emergency celestial housing. Their resources were stretching thinner by the hour. "These kids need more than just beds and hot chocolate."

"They need stability," Rami agreed as he wrapped an arm around his charge's shoulders. "And right now, that's in short supply."

"Between Heaven's foundations being shaken and Lucifer running loose down here?" Amelia shook her head. "Stability feels like a distant dream." She gave him a smile and made her way to the makeshift command center. The mansion's dining room was too crowded with angels to serve as their war room anymore.

Her muscles still ached from channeling so much power in Heaven. Their victory had come at a cost. Many had been lost, and Heaven's foundations had been shaken. And they now had an archangel on the loose. Who knew what chaos he would add to the mix.

Sarah looked up from an ancient text as Amelia entered. The bookstore owner's green eyes were rimmed with exhaustion, but her fingers never stopped turning pages. Abraxos hovered nearby. His back was stiff with tension as he stood guard. The warrior hadn't left her side since she'd started digging into her texts.

"I found something," Sarah announced without preamble. "But you're not going to like it."

The wards lit up like a Christmas tree on crack and stopped whatever else she was going to say. Magic slammed through the mansion's defenses with enough force to make the younger angels start screaming. Shit. Perfect timing for Heaven's most wanted to make his move.

"The Dark Warriors are reporting demon activity across the grid," Izzy said as she entered and went to the computer. Her fingers flew over the keyboard, her vampiric speed making them blur. "It's everywhere."

Amelia studied the pattern of activity, cursing under her breath. "The river. He's using the fucking Mississippi as his conduit."

"Rivers have always been doorways." Sarah's voice was grim as she clutched an

ancient text. Abraxos loomed behind her like a wall of lethal intent. His massive frame was coiled tight. "The Mississippi's power... its spiritual significance..."

"Makes it one hell of a gateway." Amelia felt the Key at her throat start to burn as something massive stirred beneath the city. The French Quarter's historic streets trembled as shit began to crack. Time to rock and roll.

She grabbed her grandmother's spell book. Its pages whispered secrets. " Sarah, bring everything. We're gonna need it all ."

"The command center's mine." Izzy pulled up satellite feeds. "Warriors are moving into position."

The library doors exploded inward as Camael arrived in all his avenging angel glory. His ice-blue eyes locked onto Amelia. His white wings were spread wide enough to fill the doorway. "Lucifer's forces are converging."

"No shit, angel." She checked her arsenal. Each artifact from her grandmother's collection hummed with recognition. "Sarah found something that she's going to share later. Right now, we need to hit the riverfront."

"Let's go," Camael said as he turned to go. Amelia hit the mansion's courtyard at a dead run. Her combat boots struck the pavers. In front of her, Camael's massive wings created shadows that danced across the wrought iron and brick like living things. The angel moved like sex and violence wrapped in a muscled package.

"Air or ground?" he demanded in a voice as rough as gravel.

"Air." She didn't break stride. "The faster we get there, the faster we can stop this shit show."

The angel's arms locked around her waist like steel bands. One powerful thrust of those midnight wings, and they were airborne. Before she could blink, the French Quarter sprawled beneath them like a war zone waiting to happen. The first sign of trouble came at Jackson Square.

A pack of lesser demons had cornered some tourists. They were all claws, fangs, and bad intentions. The Dark Warriors hit them like a SWAT team from hell. Black leather and sharp weapons made short work of the ugly bastards.

"This is just the appetizer," Amelia muttered as they soared over Decatur Street. "The main course is gonna be worse." She wasn't wrong.

Canal Street had become ground zero for supernatural warfare. Angels carved through demon ranks with flaming swords while Dark Warriors created kill zones with brutal efficiency. The Rowan sisters had set up on opposite corners. Their magic kept the humans inside and turned entire city blocks into demon purification zones. Their mates moved like shadows around them as they eliminated anything that got too close to their females.

Blood, ichor, and magic painted the pavement in abstract patterns of violence. The smell of sulfur and ozone hung thick in the air. It was punctuated by screams that were both human and decidedly not. "There!" Amelia pointed toward the riverfront as something massive shifted beneath the surface of the Mississippi. "I'm getting a real bad feeling about this."

Camael banked hard. His wings cut through the night as they approached the water's edge. The malevolence hit her like a physical blow. It made her magical core recoil in protest.

The Mississippi had gone darker than a demon's soul. Its waters moved with unnatural purpose. Things breached the surface that belonged in the deepest pit of

Hell. They were twisted masses of eyes, teeth, and tentacles that made regular demons look like therapy pets.

"Well, shit." She checked her arsenal as Camael set them down near the water's edge. "Lucifer decided to bring out the collector's edition nasties."

Sarah's voice startled Amelia. Her head swiveled, and she saw the female safely behind Abraxos, her angelic shield. "I didn't get to tell you that he's trying to restore pre-Creation chaos."

"Good to know," Amelia called out as a wave of hellspawn hit them. Camael's Sword of Light carved through their ranks while his Angels of Retribution fought with desperate precision. Unfortunately, the corrupted river kept birthing more.

The thing that erupted from the Mississippi's depths next made Amelia's magical core do a hard reboot. Picture a great white shark after a nuclear accident and an orgy with a giant squid and Cthulhu's uglier cousin. Its primary body stretched longer than a city bus. It was covered in overlapping plates that looked like rotting iron mixed with decomposing flesh. Dozens of eyes blinked where a face should've been. Four massive tentacles, each studded with hooked barbs that dripped black ichor, whipped through the air while a forest of smaller ones writhed beneath.

A maw big enough to swallow a Hummer opened beneath those eyes. It was lined with row after circular row of teeth. They were all spinning in opposite directions like the world's most fucked-up garbage disposal. The stench coming off it was worse than the Quarter during Mardi Gras.

But the true horror was the way it moved. It was too fast and smart. Its attack on Sarah was precision-targeted chess while everyone else was playing checkers. Those tentacles came at her like guided missiles. They forced Abraxos into defensive positions while smaller demons – ones that looked like demented piranhas with way

too many legs - shot past him toward her books.

"They're trying to destroy the knowledge!" Sarah's cry galvanized Amelia into action.

Power exploded from her hands as she channeled both light and shadow through her grandmother's crystal. The demons went up like flash paper. The cost of using so much was immediate. Blood ran from her nose like a faucet.

She couldn't stop. She had to drive that thing back. Unleashing that power nearly broke her. Light and shadow poured through her like rivers of pure force. It took a major effort to remind the powers of their natural harmony. To her utter relief, the Mississippi began to clear as ancient power burned away Lucifer's influence. Demons caught in the wave transformed as their darkness found balance with light.

The last thing Amelia saw before consciousness fled was Camael's face. Pride and fear warred in those ice-blue eyes as she channeled power that should have burned her to ash. Then darkness took her, and she knew no more.

CHAPTER 15

The moonless sky swallowed all light as Camael raced across New Orleans with his unconscious witch in his arms. His warrior's instincts were screaming as blood continued to drip from her nose. It was staining his battle-worn shirt and tearing at his heart. Every second counted. Her breathing was shallow, and her skin had gone clammy. Using that much power had nearly burned her out from the inside.

Behind him, explosions lit up the riverfront as his Angels of Retribution finished what Amelia had started. Her hybrid magic had carved through the opposition like a tsunami through a coastal village, decimating Lucifer's forces. She had fundamentally changed something in the magic around the Mississippi. The river's waters now sang with a harmony he hadn't heard for far longer than he could recall. But none of that mattered if his witch didn't survive.

His wings cut through humid air fast enough to create sonic booms as he vectored toward the mansion. Rami's voice crackled through his earpiece as he coordinated the cleanup efforts. The male was handling shit like the professional he was. It left Camael free to focus on getting Amelia help.

"Jace!" The roar ripped from his throat the instant his boots hit the mansion's east lawn. The grass was still scorched from their previous battles. "Get your ass out here NOW!"

The Native American healer materialized in the doorway like he'd been waiting. One look at Amelia's limp form and his expression went granite-hard. "Get her inside. My gear's already set up in the medical room." Setting up a place where he could do his

work was the first thing the healer did after helping Amelia the first time.

Camael didn't waste breath responding. He shouldered past Jace and took the stairs three at a time. The mansion's halls were quiet. Most of the refugee angels had been moved to secure locations run by the Dark Warriors. They'd been traumatized by the attacks on the mansion. No one could deal with calming them while needing to hunt down the assholes responsible. Those that remained were prepared to fight with them. At the moment, Camael didn't like how empty the place felt. It echoed how he would feel if he lost his witch.

Camael's eyes went wide when they caught sight of the state-of-the-art trauma center that was inside the room. None of the emergency equipment and monitoring systems had been in there when they'd left earlier. The stark fluorescent lighting cast harsh shadows over gleaming steel instruments as his boots stomped across the floor. He carried Amelia to the bed at one side. The sharp scent of antiseptic distracted him from the ache in his heart.

"Put her there." Jace gestured to the bed he'd been headed for. Camael tried to tamp down his anxiety when the healer conjured his staff. It was bad if he needed the equivalent of a crash cart. "And then back the fuck up. What I'm about to do isn't exactly standard procedure."

Camael's growl would have made lesser beings piss themselves as he laid Amelia on the bed. "What do you mean, not standard?"

"I mean, she's got more power running through her system than a nuclear reactor. And it's eating her alive." Jace's hands moved through the air as he began weaving healing magic. His staff vibrated and started humming. "The human body wasn't meant to channel the energies she has been. Not like that. I've got to stabilize her before her magic tears her apart."

"Then do it." The words came out more snarl than speech as Camael stalked the length of the medical wing. His massive frame radiated lethal tension while his ice-blue eyes never left Amelia's still form.

Jace's hands moved with practiced precision as he assessed her condition. The healer cursed viciously, making Camael want to smash something. He braced himself for bad news. He could see corruption spreading through her system like black ink through water. "There's necrotic tissue forming," the healer informed him. "The power overload is killing her cells faster than I anticipated."

Jace's alder staff hummed with energy as he reached for a scalpel. "Hold her down," he ordered Camael. "This is going to hurt like a motherfucker, but I've got to cut out the dead tissue before it gets a foothold."

"Like flesh-eating bacteria?" Camael was horrified at the thought.

"Not bacteria," Jace replied in a steady voice despite the grim situation. "This is more like radiation necrosis mixed with supernatural gangrene. The power surge literally cooked her tissue from the inside out. If we don't excise it now, the dead cells will poison her system faster than anything my medical textbooks ever covered. And trust me, I did my first 'residency' during a yellow fever outbreak before modern medicine. I've seen some shit. But this?" He shook his head while prepping the surgical site. "This is next level cellular destruction. Now brace her shoulders. This isn't going to be pretty."

The archangel's hands were gentle as steel as he gripped Amelia's shoulders. His jaw clenched hard enough to crack teeth when Jace made the first incision along her side. Black fluid wept from the wound. His stomach revolted as hard as his heart. The stench of decay, made him want to take her to the forbidden fountain in Heaven. She shouldn't have anything of the sort corrupting her. Camael clamped down on his emotions so he didn't do anything rash. Amelia needed him there for her.

"Motherfucker," Jace muttered as he worked. Sweat darkened his shirt while he carved away tissue that had literally been burned out by too much power. "Her system's in chaos. The overload fried nerve endings, and damaged organ tissue. I'm not sure I will be able to do enough for her. I may need your energy to jump-start her regeneration once I get this rot out."

"Take what you need." Camael's voice was wrecked as he watched Amelia's blood stain Jace's hands.

The healer's staff glowed brighter as he channeled more power through it. He used it to identify compromised tissue. His movements were precise and brutal as he cut away everything that was already dead. When he finally set down the bloody scalpel, his hands were shaking.

"Now comes the hard part." Jace's eyes met Camael's. "I need your divine energy to heal what's left. I'm not sure how my system can handle your shit, but it's her only shot."

"Do it." Camael didn't hesitate as he gripped Jace's shoulders from behind .

Raw power flooded through the contact. Jace's whole body seized as Camael's divine energy used him as a conduit. His curse echoed off the walls as he fought to direct that lethal force to do what he wanted. Minutes stretched into hours as they battled to save her. Jace's face went gray with strain while Camael poured everything he had into the healer. Neither male stopped until Amelia's color improved and the massive crater in her side filled in.

Only then did Jace step back. "She'll live. But I never want to do that shit again."

He heard the words, but Camael didn't release the breath he'd been holding until Amelia's breathing evened out. Color returned to her cheeks as her magical core

found a new equilibrium. The Key at her throat brightened. Its pulse was stronger and steadier.

"She's stable," Jace managed before his knees buckled. Camael caught the healer before he could face-plant. "Get her somewhere quiet to rest. She'll need at least twenty-four hours to recover."

"You need rest, too," he told the other male.

"What I need is a bottle of Jack and about twelve hours of unconsciousness." Jace waved off his concern as he straightened. "My mate will take care of me. You take care of your witch. I'll be fine once my system processes your energy."

Not waiting to be told twice, Camael gathered Amelia in his arms. Her weight was reassuring as he carried her through the mansion's halls to his quarters. The space was sparsely furnished. He hadn't bothered with more than the basics. But the bed was massive and comfortable. That was all that mattered.

He laid her down with infinite care. He took a moment to brush dark hair from her face. Fear clawed at his ancient heart as he remembered how close he'd come to losing her. The thought of continuing without her by his side made something in his chest constrict painfully.

Hours passed as he kept vigil. His ice-blue eyes never left her face while reports flowed in from his warriors. The river was secure. Sarah's texts were safe. Everything was under control between his AORs, the triplets, and the Dark Warriors. For Camael, none of it mattered until those green eyes opened.

When they finally did, his relief nearly brought him to his knees. "Hey there, angel," she managed, her voice rougher than gravel. "Did anybody get the license plate of that truck?"

The laugh that ripped from his throat startled him. He didn't think he could laugh under the circumstances, but his witch was good at lightening the mood. "You nearly died," he told her as he moved to sit beside her on the bed. "What you did with the river... it almost burned you out."

"Did it work?" She struggled to sit up. He was there instantly to help. "Did we stop whatever was coming through?"

"Yeah." His fingers traced her jaw as he stared into eyes he'd feared might never open again. "You didn't just stop it. You changed something fundamental in the river's energy. Even Lucifer will have trouble corrupting it now."

"Good." Her smile was weak but genuine. "Though next time, remind me to pace myself. Pretty sure I overdid it."

"There won't be a next time." He growled as he pulled her into his arms. "You are never doing something that reckless again."

She relaxed against his chest, and her fingers traced patterns on his shirt. "You can't protect me from everything, Archangel. This is what I was born for."

"I know." The admission cost him, but he couldn't deny the truth of it. "Doesn't mean I have to like watching you nearly kill yourself. "

Her hand came up to cup his face. The tenderness in her touch undid him. "I'm still here," she whispered. "Still yours."

The last word broke something in him. With a growl that was pure need, he claimed her mouth. The kiss carried every ounce of fear and desperate relief he'd felt watching her fight for her life. His hands tangled in her hair as he poured everything he couldn't say into the contact.

She met him with equal passion. Her fingers gripped his shoulders as she pressed closer. Power sparked between them. This time, it was purely physical. This wasn't about magic or destiny or saving the world. This was about them.

His hands slid beneath her torn shirt. He needed to feel her alive and warm against him. She arched into his touch with a gasp that made his control fray. "Amelia." Her name was both prayer and curse as he broke the kiss to look at her. "We should stop. You're still recovering-"

"Don't you dare." Her green eyes blazed with something fiercer than magic as she pulled him back down. "I need this. Need you."

That was all it took. With a growl that shook the walls, he claimed her mouth again. Their clothes hit the floor in record time as need burned through any remaining hesitation. His wings manifested of their own accord. They created a cocoon of white feathers that shut out everything but them.

Her hands on his skin sent electricity through his system that had nothing to do with power and everything to do with how right she felt against him. Each touch, each kiss, each shared breath was a reminder that she was alive. That she was his.

She practically climbed him as she wrapped her legs around his waist. Every plan to prepare her fled when he felt her wet core sliding over his erection. Without conscious thought, he slid inside her. It felt like coming home.

Their bodies moved together in a rhythm that drove him crazy. She was right there with him like they'd been doing this dance for centuries instead of days. Her nails raked down his sides as he drove them both higher. The sounds she made nearly undid him as he showed her exactly how much she meant to him.

"I love you." The words slipped out as he felt her start to tighten around him. They'd

been building in his chest since the moment he'd seen her fall at the river. "Don't you ever scare me like that again."

Her cry of completion carried his name and four words that made his ancient heart stop. "I love you, too."

They came together in an explosion of pleasure that stole his breath. He'd never experienced anything like this before in his long life. Camael knew one thing for certain as they lay tangled in the aftermath with her head on his chest and his wings creating a protective shelter. This female was his future. His everything. And Heaven help anyone who tried to take her from him.

"We should probably get up," she murmured after a while, though she made no move to leave his embrace. "Check on how the cleanup's going."

"The others have it handled." He tightened his arms around her, unwilling to let her go just yet. "Right now, all that matters is you getting rest."

She huffed a laugh against his skin. "Is that what we're calling what just happened? Rest?"

"I'm making sure you stay in bed." His smirk probably gave away his intentions. "By whatever means necessary."

Her answering smile was pure sin as she pressed closer. "In that case, Archangel, I think I need a lot more rest." Sparkling green eyes locked onto his, ensnaring him.

A slow, seductive smile curved her lips, and she slid her hands up along the seams where his wings inserted in his back. Her smile turned wicked as she teased him. Her laughter was a melody that sent a rush of heat through him. "Now that you've taken the edge off, we can go slower this time," she told him.

A groan escaped his throat when her nails skimmed across his chest and over his nipples. “Who said my need has abated?” One of his eyebrows lifted. “It’s going to be hard to be gentle.” Her happiness and pleasure would always be his highest priority. She deserved nothing less.

“Who asked you to be gentle? I need more of you. Now,” Amelia demanded. He couldn’t deny his mate what she wanted.

Camael’s mouth went dry as his gaze lowered to her breasts. She was stunning as she lay back on the bed after he’d already fucked her, asking for more. Even rumped from a fight, she was devastatingly sexy. She bent one knee and reached for his erection.

He shifted his pelvis away from her hands, and they landed on his hips. They roamed up his sides. She lifted her head to press her lips to his. Meeting her halfway, he kissed her deeply. The tension inside him was already unbearable again as he hovered over her. He broke away and began kissing a trail down her neck. His lips tingled as he reached her shoulder. Her soft, panting breaths were intoxicating. Unable to hold back, he ran his tongue over her nipple. He teased the hardened peak. That small contact made him painfully hard.

Returning to her mouth, he captured her lips. She arched against him, making her nipples brush his chest. The contact sent a sharp jolt of pleasure through him. Though his instincts urged him to lose control, he forced himself to slow down. She was still recovering, and he couldn’t forget that again.

“This is torture. I need you inside me,” she begged, arching her back .

Her plea unraveled him. Breaking the kiss, he moved down her body. His lips explored every inch. He lavished attention on her nipples, sucking and licking until her breaths came in quick, desperate gasps. When he reached the apex of her thighs,

her scent filled the air and drove him wild. His fingers brushed against her arousal and slid between her folds.

“It might be torture to go slow, but I can’t resist exploring your perfection,” he murmured.

Smiling, she spread her legs. Her wetness glistened in the dim light. That sight obliterated any restraint he had left. “Fuck,” he muttered, unable to look away as he rubbed her clit.

Her hips bucked against his hand, seeking more. Giving in, he pressed harder, his fingers finding her entrance. Her body clenched around him, making him groan. Lowering his head, he pressed a line of kisses to her inner thigh as his thumb circled her sensitive bud. That was all it took for her to cry out his name. Her body shook as her climax took hold.

“Fuck me,” she panted, her voice raw with need.

“Anything you want, love.” Nudging her legs apart, he took in the sight of her. She was fucking perfect. Everything from her bright eyes to the way her arousal shimmered in the light to the inviting curve of her smile stirred his possessive nature.

His cock ached as he ran it along her folds, coating himself in her slick heat. Her hips rose to meet him, her need matching his. “You are my everything,” he whispered. “I want to give you all of me. My Light, my soul, and my heart.”

“Anything, as long as you fuck me,” Amelia urged.

Camael kissed her as he aligned their bodies. With a single, powerful thrust, he filled her a second time in less than an hour. She cried out. Her walls gripped him tightly, and he almost lost himself in the sensation. Like the last time, their movements

became a frenzy of need and passion. His wings spread wide as her hands roamed over the feathers. She clung to him. Her nails raked across his back and she spurred him on.

He lost himself in the feel of her and had to hold back his climax. He wasn't going over without her. He reached between them and started rubbing her clit with precision. In no time, her body convulsed as her orgasm ripped through her. He let go of the tight hold he had on himself and followed her over the edge. Light exploded around them as he poured every ounce of his being into her. Collapsing beside her, he held her close. His heart was nearly pounding out of his chest. He prayed his love and Light would be enough to protect her from the darkness Lucifer was trying to bring to the world.

"I will never get enough of you," he told her honestly.

"Good because I'm not done with you yet," she replied with a wicked glint.

That started round number three. Camael thought he was back in heaven when he tasted his witch for the first time. He lost count of the orgasms. It wasn't until hours later, as dawn painted his room in shades of gold and promise, that Camael finally watched his witch sleep. The sight of her safe in his bed soothed something primal in his soul. Whatever came next - Lucifer, Jeremiel, all of it - they would face it together. Let Heaven and Hell throw whatever they wanted at them. He had his warriors at his back and his witch by his side. That was all he needed. That, and maybe a few more hours of "rest" before they had to face whatever chaos waited outside his door.

CHAPTER 16

A melia woke to find Camael's massive form curled protectively around her. His white wings created a shelter that blocked out the rest of the world. Memories of their night together brought a flush to her cheeks. The archangel had shown her exactly how much she meant to him. Multiple times. Each touch, each kiss had reinforced the bond between them in ways that went beyond physical.

She should have been asleep after the day she'd had, but something was off. Her magical senses screamed warnings even as her body wanted to sink back into his warmth. The Key at her throat pulsed with urgent energy. Its erratic rhythm was like a distressed heartbeat. Something was wrong in the mansion.

Carefully extracting herself from Camael's embrace, she pulled on one of his shirts. The black fabric fell to mid-thigh. It carried his scent. The unique blend of ozone and male made her knees weak. Her bare feet made no sound on the marble floors as she followed the pull of energy.

The east wing was too quiet. The mansion's halls should have been alive with activity. Dark Warriors should have been coordinating patrols. The triplets should have been arguing about battle tactics. And her mate's Angels of Retribution should have been preparing for another day of hunting corrupted grace. Instead, silence pressed against her ears like a physical weight. It was the kind of quiet that made her witch senses scream danger.

"Shit." The curse slipped out as she reached the makeshift dormitory. Empty beds greeted her. Sheets were still rumpled from sleep. There was no sign of a struggle.

The wards hummed just below her magical awareness. They hadn't been breached. They were just gone. At least two dozen fledgling angels had vanished without a trace.

Her phone was already in hand as she dialed Pema's number. The oldest Rowan sister picked up on the first ring. "I was just about to call you," the witch said without preamble. "You feel it too?"

"Yeah. And the fledglings are gone." Amelia's voice was tight as she scanned the room again. "The wards are intact. This had to be an inside job."

"How many are missing?" Pema asked.

"At least twenty-four." Amelia moved between the empty beds, counting quickly. "Maybe more. I need you here. Something about the energy signature is bugging me."

"We're on our way. Don't touch anything." The line went dead as Pema hung up.

Amelia's fingers flew over her phone as she sent rapid-fire texts to the Dark Warriors. She needed to check on the fledglings who were moved from the mansion. Not to mention, they needed eyes on every street and security camera in the city. If those angels were still in New Orleans, she was going to find them.

"What's wrong?" Camael's deep voice rolled through the space like thunder. The archangel filled the doorway. He was battle-ready despite wearing only low-slung jeans. His ice-blue eyes took in the empty room. His expression went granite-hard.

"Someone took the fledglings." She moved to his side, needing his solid presence. "No alarms went off. There's been no disturbance in the wards. They just... walked out."

A growl that would have made lesser beings spontaneously combust rumbled through his chest. "Jeremiel."

The name hit her like a physical blow. Of course. The evil archangel would know how to bypass their security. He'd helped design some of the protocols himself before going to the dark side. The fucking asshole.

"But how did he get them to go willingly?" she wondered aloud. "These kids know better than to trust him by now."

"He can still appear as he once was," Camael replied grimly. "He was Heaven's most trusted teacher."

The implications made her stomach turn. Before she could respond, the Rowan sisters arrived in a whirlwind of power and purpose. Pema took one look at the scene and started casting tracking spells while Isis began a methodical sweep for energy signatures. Suvi pulled out crystals that hummed with stored power.

"The residual energy isn't like what Lucifer has been spreading around town," Isis muttered as she worked. "There's grace underlying this. Although, to my magical senses, it feels like it's been put through a meat grinder."

Amelia joined the efforts and began casting her own spells. It took a few minutes before something pinged her radar. "There." Her voice carried raw fury as she pointed to traces of darkness that clung to one corner. "It's archangel energy. From my visit to the archives, I can say it's Jeremiel's signature. And it's evolved somehow."

Amelia moved to the corner where corrupted energy clung like black ice. Her expanded senses recoiled from the signature. She forced herself to look deeper. The Key at her throat hummed as she probed the twisted grace. Next to her, Camael went rigid.

"An archangel's fall isn't like a regular angel's," Camael growled in a voice rough with anger. "Our grace runs deeper. Our connection to divinity is more fundamental. When one of us turns, the corruption spreads like poison through our entire essence. It strips away what we are piece by piece. Something vile replaces our pure grace."

His Sword of Light manifested in his hand. "Jeremiel is deliberately accelerating the process of his fall. He's using the fledglings' grace as a catalyst to speed his transformation. Their untainted essence is the perfect fuel because it hasn't fully formed yet. It's raw power that he can reshape into whatever perverted form he wants."

Ice-blue eyes blazed with fury. "The euphoria hits first. There's a rush of dark power that feels like freedom. Then comes the hunger. An all-consuming need to consume more and feed the void where divinity used to be. It seems as if Jeremiel's gone beyond that. How far, I can't say."

"Why would he want to deal with a bunch of adolescent angels?" Suvi asked with a frown on her beautiful face.

Understanding hit Amelia like a thunderbolt. "He's trying to create an army that can be easily guided by his corruption." Her voice shook as the implications sank in. "Think about it. If their grace is still developing, they're malleable. Like clay waiting to be shaped."

"Son of a bitch." Isis's curse carried enough venom to kill a demon lord. "He's going to try turning them before their powers fully manifest and could put up a fight. He's hitting them when they're most vulnerable."

"That's why he didn't take the older angels," Pema added. "Their grace is too set, too pure to corrupt easily."

"Precisely. Can you track them?" Camael demanded. His massive frame vibrated with the need to hunt. Amelia was right there with him.

"Maybe." Amelia reached for her expanded magic. She used her merged power to cast a tracking spell. She raced from the room to find out what her spell revealed about where the angels were taken.

Amelia winced when the war room door exploded inward. Apparently, she'd put too much oomph behind her spell opening the panel. She was eager to see where the fledglings had been taken. They'd been traumatized in Heaven by Jeremiel's attempt to take over, and now he'd kidnapped them.

She barely registered the movement from the leather couch as her power coursed through the map beneath her palms. The tracking spell she'd cast in a desperate attempt to locate their missing angels was going to work. Movement in her peripheral vision made her turn. Izzy was sitting up on the couch. The warrior princess's usual grace was slightly off. It had to be the lingering effects of too little sleep. "What's going on?"

"About time you joined us, sleeping beauty." Rami's deep voice rumbled from the entrance. Amelia hadn't seen the Angel of Retribution join them.

Amelia pushed her dark hair back from her face. "The fledgling angels. They're missing." The words tasted bitter on her tongue, and she didn't bother to hide the exhaustion in her voice. "I cast a tracking spell to find them."

"All of them?" Izzy's expression shifted to one of alarm.

"Those that were here," Amelia clarified. "Oh, my goddess."

Camael's head snapped in her direction. "What?"

“They’ve been taken from the other sites as well,” Amelia replied.

Izzy was fully alert and awake when she pulled out her phone. Her fingers flew over the screen as she dialed the first number on her emergency contact list. "We can't assume that. Let me verify what happened there."

Izzy's expression darkened with every call she made. "Over half of the fledgling are missing." Izzy's voice carried the kind of rage that made the air crackle. "Those bastards swept the safe houses while they were dead to the world."

"Shit." Amelia cursed. The map pulsed with spots of ethereal blue light. Each one was a stab to her heart. She jabbed a finger at the markers, anger building in her chest. "That asshole is really pissing me off."

Jo materialized in the room. The female AOR's presence was a lethal whisper in the room. "He's mocking us."

"Son of a bitch." Camael's massive frame tensed. Power rolled off him in waves that made the crystal chandelier above them tremble. His voice carried through the mansion like thunder. "Remi! Rami! Jo! Az! Malachi!" The names of his Angels of Retribution echoed off the walls. "Ayil! Araton! Abraxos!" He was so lost in his anger that Amelia doubted he realized Jo and Rami were already there with them.

The triplets materialized first. They were ready to go to war. Their synchronized movements were both beautiful and unsettling. The rest of the AORs appeared in rapid succession. Their weapons were already drawn, and their wings were mantled for battle. The air grew thick with angelic power. It made it hard for Amelia to breathe.

Camael updated the others on what had happened. "We're getting them back," he growled. His blue eyes blazed with righteous fury. "Now."

Malachi stepped forward. His dark skin gleamed in the witch-light. "The Dark Warriors are gearing up. We can be mobile in three minutes."

"Wait." Amelia's voice cut through the testosterone-laden air like a blade. She had to do something before the male she loved and her friends walked into a situation they couldn't get out of. She planted her hands on the table and met Camael's fierce gaze. "We need to secure the remaining fledglings first. Then we go after Jeremiel. That's how we save them all."

"There's no time—" Camael started.

"There's no point rushing in if he's just going to take more while we're gone," Rami interrupted, earning a sharp look from his commander. "The witch is right."

Az nodded, running a hand through his shock of white-blond hair. "We need an actual location. We can't hope he will go after the angels he hasn't taken."

Camael's jaw clenched, making his muscles tick. His wings rustled with barely contained violence. "I can't find the bastard. We have to do something."

"What do you mean, you can't find him?" Izzy demanded. "He's a freaking archangel. Don't you guys have some sort of divine GPS?"

"Jeremiel's blocking me somehow." Camael's fist came down on the table. The force cracked the wood. "Every time I get close, it's like hitting a wall of static."

Amelia's lips curved in a predatory smile. "Then it's a good thing you have me and the Rowan sisters." She pulled a black velvet bag from her pocket. Her mate needed to remember he wasn't alone anymore. "We have magic to find him."

The Rowan sisters smiled and synced like a well-oiled unit. "And together, we're

unstoppable,” Pema said as she stalked north with that ice princess meets predator attitude. Isis claimed the east, with don't-fuck-with-me energy that she wore like designer perfume. Suvi prowled to the south, her curves a lethal weapon as she moved with feline grace. While Amelia took the west .

"What's the play here?" Ayil asked as his brothers flanked him in mirror positions.

"We try tracking first," Isis suggested. Her red hair glowed like fire in the dim light. "If that fails, we move to scrying."

"And if that doesn't work?" Remi's hand tightened on the hilt of his sword.

Pema's smile was all teeth. "Then we get creative."

Amelia joined hands with them and reached for her power. The magic slammed through their circle like a tsunami. Amelia's power merged with that of the sisters until the room blazed with blue-white light that was hot enough to singe. Static danced over their skin, raising goosebumps and making their hair float like they were underwater.

The Dark Warriors and angels backed the hell up real quick, considering the voltage they were throwing around. Amelia locked onto tracking first. The witches' combined energy swept the city grid like searchlights. The map ignited like Times Square on New Year's and then went black as pitch.

"Son of a bitch." Isis's curse carried all kinds of promises of violence. "Fucker's got himself cloaked tighter than Fort Knox."

Amelia pulled out the feather. Its surface lit up like premium angel bling. "Time for plan B. Let's scry." The thing practically hummed with fresh essence. "Easier to track this poor angel than chase Jeremiel's trail."

"Hellz yeah." Suvi's approval came with that trademark smile of hers.

Amelia locked hands with them again. Power surged as the feather went airborne. It spun like a compass. Pema led the chant. Almost instantly, the feather's celestial glow turned ultraviolet. Its rotation created rings of light that expanded outward like ripples in a pond. Each pulse sent their collective consciousness riding the currents of space and time. Images overlaid the feather. They saw streets, buildings, and faces. Amelia recognized some but nothing pointed to a location.

Just when she was about to give Camael the green light to go on his wild goose chase, the feather's spin went nuclear. Light exploded outward, and St. Louis Cathedral materialized in high-def clarity. Its spires stabbed the night sky like daggers. Inside that holy ground, shadows danced to a vile conductor's symphony. And there at the epicenter? One beautiful, cruel maestro was orchestrating the whole damn show.

Amelia panted and braced her hands on her knees. Sweat ran down her back, and her muscles trembled from the voltage they had channeled. But they had the motherfucker's location locked down tighter than a virgin's chastity belt.

"Got you, you son of a bitch," Izzy breathed.

"The cathedral?" Az shook his head. "That's ballsy to be hiding right under our noses."

"It makes sense," Jo said, checking her weapons. "It's sacred ground with lots of ambient divine energy to mask his presence. Plus, there are tourists coming and going all day. It's the perfect cover for moving prisoners."

Camael's wings snapped open. They were twenty feet of lethal grace. The displacement of air sent papers flying and rattled the windows. He looked at his assembled warriors before locking gazes with Amelia. The look in his eyes made her

grateful he was on their side "Time to end this. Jeremiel dies tonight," he growled.

CHAPTER 17

The pre-dawn air crackled with power as Camael led his Angels of Retribution toward St. Louis Cathedral. His massive wings cut through the darkness while reports flowed in from teams positioned across the city. The Dark Warriors able to be out during the day had secured the perimeter. They'd taken up positions that would give them clear lines of sight on any approach. The Rowan sisters were there and already weaving containment spells to keep the humans away from the area. Their power hummed through the Quarter like a live wire.

His ice-blue eyes locked onto Amelia. She was cradled against his chest as they soared. The Key blazed at her throat like captured lightning. Her hybrid magic channeled both light and shadow like she'd been born to it. Pride and fear went to war in his chest. She was lethal perfection, but every corrupted angel in the Big Easy could track that power signature. And then there was Jace's comment about her body not being built to handle the shit.

"You holding up?" he asked as they banked around Jackson Square. The place was dead empty .

"Flying high." That smile of hers lit up the pre-dawn dark better than stadium floodlights. "Next time though? We schedule this shit for noon. Mama needs her beauty sleep."

His chuckle was cut off when Rami's voice crackled through their comms link. "I've got movement! There are multiple signatures approaching from the north. I think they used to be the fledglings."

"Give me numbers," Camael demanded as he adjusted their flight pattern.

"At least fifteen- no, wait." His pause was filled with tension. "I've confirmed visual on thirty-plus former fledglings. They're warped warriors now. Not kids."

"There's something else," Jo cut in, her voice tight. "It could be Jeremiel."

Camael's blood ran cold as a familiar presence brushed his senses. Even corrupted, he'd know that grace anywhere. "It's him."

His brother's twisted power pulsed from the cathedral steps like a beacon of darkness. The once-pure energy had been transformed into something that reminded him of Lucifer in the early days after his fall. It called to the chaos the demons loved so much.

"Remember the plan," he growled to his warriors as they approached. His wings spread wider and created updrafts that carried his voice. "The priority is extracting any fledglings you find. Do not engage Jeremiel directly. He's mine."

"Like hell," Amelia muttered in his arms. "You're not facing him alone."

"This isn't up for discussion, witch." His voice dropped. "He's my brother. My problem."

"Our problem," she corrected. "Or did you forget that you're no longer alone?"

Her words jolted him and threatened to twist his world view. Before he could delve into those feelings or argue further, the cathedral rose before them. Its spires stretched dark against the lightening sky like accusing fingers. Power rolled off the ancient stones in waves that would have brought lesser beings to their knees. Jeremiel had chosen his ground well. The sacred site's natural energy would amplify whatever

ritual he was attempting.

They landed in Jackson Square and spread out in practiced formation. He set Amelia down and had to bite his tongue from admonishing her to be careful. The Angels of Retribution moved like the elite warriors they were, and he needed to get ahead of them. Amelia joined the Rowan sisters, who had taken up positions that would give them the best coverage for their spells. The Dark Warriors melted into shadows.

Camael's Sword of Light blazed to life in his grip as his brother emerged from the cathedral's shadows. The sight of what Jeremiel had become made his ancient heart ache with lost possibilities. Gone were the pristine white wings that had once rivaled Michael's for beauty. In their place spread appendages of twisted darkness. He was still undergoing his transformation because each feather was leaking corruption like toxic smoke.

"Welcome, brother." Jeremiel's voice scraped through the air like broken glass on a chalkboard. "Come to witness the rebirth of everything?"

"I've come to stop you." Camael moved forward. He was careful to keep himself between his brother and Amelia despite her sound of protest. "Return the fledglings, and I'll make your death quick."

Jeremiel's laugh could have frozen hellfire. "Still so righteous. So sure of your place in the natural order." His black wings spread wider. Holy hell. The darkness writhing through them seemed to eat light itself. "But what if I told you this was always meant to happen? "

"I'd say the fall has rotted your brain along with your grace." Camael's wings mantled as the power built between them. The air grew thick enough to choke on. "Where are the kids, Jeremiel?"

"Safe. Transforming." His brother's smile was pure nightmare fuel. "Their pure grace is the perfect catalyst for what comes next. Did you really think this was just about building an army?"

Understanding hit Camael as pieces clicked into place. "Lucifer. This was his plan all along."

"He understands what needs to be done." Jeremiel gestured. The air behind him rippled like heat waves over asphalt. It tore like wet paper, revealing glimpses of what lay beyond. "The barriers between worlds are weakening. Soon, what existed before will reclaim its domain," he finished.

"You're insane," Camael barked before he attacked.

He launched himself at Jeremiel and was intercepted. His heart ached with every swipe of his sword through the flesh of the innocent fledgling angels. They hadn't chosen to do Jeremiel's bidding. He had no choice but to carve through them. His wings burned white-hot against the pre-dawn sky as he tried to reach Jeremiel who watched with a smirk. Beneath him, bodies dropped like dark meteors. Their crumpled forms leaked their corrupted grace like oil slicks. It was a sickening sight. And had him seeing red. He would have Jeremiel's head for this.

The battlefield around St. Louis Cathedral had become ground zero for this battle. Corrupted angels moved with unnatural speed. Their evil energy warped the very air around them. The cathedral's ancient stones cracked under the force of their clashing powers. Stained glass shattered in kaleidoscope patterns as angels crashed through windows and walls.

"They've got heavy hitters on the north side!" Rami's voice cut through the tactical channel as three corrupted Seraphim descended on his position. Their wings dripped shadow. "I need backup?—"

"On it." Camael banked hard. His blade sung as his flaming steel met flesh. Black grace bled from fatal wounds as more fell. Their dying screams would haunt him for the rest of his days.

Camael winced when one of the dead collided with a Dark Warrior. They fought in tight formation below, making it hard to look out for them. Thankfully, the male popped up and continued fighting before the angel going after him could land a blow.

"Push to the tower!" Amelia's voice carried power as she and the Rowan sisters fought in perfect sync.

Pema took point. Her offensive spells detonated like mystical grenades while Isis and Suvi maintained their shields against waves of malevolent power. Amelia froze corrupted angels mid-flight. Camael could see her tears when their wings shattered like black glass. Isis's power cut through their ranks like invisible blades. The witches moved like they'd been fighting together for centuries. They covered each other's blind spots with lethal efficiency.

His real target moved like poisoned lightning through the melee. Jeremiel's wings had gone midnight black and were trailing toxic smoke. Each beat of those twisted pinions left tears in reality that sealed themselves.

"Brother." The word dripped with false warmth as Jeremiel's blade—once pure celestial steel, now corrupted black—cut through the air where Camael's head had been. "Join us. I don't want to have to kill you."

Their weapons clashed with enough force to shatter every remaining window in the cathedral. Each strike reverberated up through Camael's arms. Jeremiel was far stronger than he should have been this early in his transition. Lucifer must have given him something special.

"You've lost your mind." Camael's counter-strike left trails of white fire as they took their fight skyward. The pre-dawn air crackled, and thunder boomed with each clash of their blades. "Those fledglings were innocent."

"They were necessary." Jeremiel's laugh carried echoes of the void as he launched a combination that would have gutted a lesser angel. His corrupted blade moved faster than thought. Each strike was aimed at vital points. "You still don't see the big picture."

Below them, the battle intensified. Dark Warriors and loyal angels fought back-to-back against waves of Jeremiel's minions. The ground was turning slick with the black goo of spilled grace. The Rowan sisters' magic lit up the battlefield like lightning while Amelia's hybrid power blazed paths through the chaos. Camael watched her race into the church. His heart lurched. He was torn between fighting Jeremiel and going after her.

"The north tower is secure." Amelia's voice carried through the comm link. It was tight with exhaustion and grief. "Nineteen survivors, five... five we were too late for."

That split-second of distraction was all Jeremiel needed. Pain exploded through Camael's left side as Jeremiel's weapon found its mark between his ribs. Black corruption spread into the wound like poison. Camael's power instinctively fought against it. It was pure agony. Jeremiel twisted the blade, sending fresh waves of pain through his system.

"You always did care too much." Jeremiel's voice carried triumph as Camael's wing beats faltered. "That's why you'll lose. That's why you'll watch it all come undone. Next time we meet, brother? Everything unravels."

"Jeremiel!" Camael's roar of rage shook the heavens when Jeremiel took off like a bullet. Camael tried to follow, but the wound in his side slowed him just enough that

the bastard escaped.

Camael landed hard on the cathedral grounds. His wings drooped as he tried to lift his sword. Around him, the aftermath of war painted a grim picture. Bodies of corrupted angels lay where they'd fallen. It was going to take every angel, Dark Warrior, and witch in the city to put the place back together. Thankfully, Pema was already taking charge on that front. That left him to deal with the rest. How many angels had they lost?

"Status report!" He barked as Dark Warriors began working on clean up.

"The fight is done," Rami reported as he gestured to the Rowan sisters. "They've got the survivors contained. But their grace is seriously fucked up."

"We can cleanse them," Amelia said as she made her way to his side. Her eyes widened at the sight of his wound. "Shit, you're injured?—"

"It'll heal." Camael pulled her close despite the pain. He needed her anchoring presence. "Focus on the fledglings. How many can we save?"

"About half of them." Pema's voice was tight with controlled fury. "The others... the corruption had already gone too deep. I'm afraid there's nothing left to save."

Camael shook his head. "We aren't giving up on them just yet. We need to take out Jeremiel before we make that determination." His wings spread wide as he faced his gathered forces. He had to ignore the pain in his side. "There'll be no more reacting. No more playing defense. We find the bastard, and we end this. Today."

CHAPTER 18

Dawn painted New Orleans in shades of blood and gold as Amelia helped the Rowan sisters tend to the rescued fledglings. St. Louis Cathedral's ancient stones still smoked from battle damage. There were deep gouges carved into century-old masonry. Tainted angel blood and celestial steel were hell on architecture. The scent of decaying blood was an unholy mix that made her magical core recoil. She was torn between helping secure the young angels and getting things back where they were before Jeremiel happened. Thankfully, the Dark Warriors were working on repairs while also securing the perimeter.

Amelia's muscles ached from fighting and channeling so much power. She wasn't used to either, and tremors were running through her hands as she worked. The Key at her throat pulsed, and its surface was still warm against her skin. As much as she wanted to crash, there was no time to rest. Not with so many injured angels depending on them. And one evil archangel to hunt down.

"This one's grace is barely holding together," Pema reported as she worked on a young angel whose wings had gone gray with corruption. The oldest Rowan sister's hands glowed from the spell she was using to try to force Jeremiel's virus out of the victims. It wasn't going so well for the eldest Rowan sister, either. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she fought to stabilize the fledgling's essence. "The damage runs deep. He managed to get further in rewriting their DNA than I would have thought, given the short timeframe."

Amelia's brow furrowed as she processed everything they were learning. "It feels like the bastard was experimenting on their fundamental nature. I bet he's been at this for

a long time and was able to perfect his plans. That's why he made a move when he did."

"They all show signs of systematic torture," Isis added from where she was examining another survivor. Her eyes blazed with fury as she traced sigils carved into trembling wings. "Look at these marks. The bastard was carving spells directly into their bodies. I'm not familiar with angelic runes."

"They're perversions of ancient Enochian," Camael interjected. Amelia felt him coming up behind them.

"That's not at all surprising," Amelia muttered as she looked around.

Young angels lay scattered across marble floors. Their violated grace flickered like dying stars. Some had wings caught between light and shadow. Their corrupted feathers were shedding darkness with each trembling movement. Upon closer inspection, almost all of them had profane sigils carved into their flesh.

"This is worse than Prague." Jo's wings rustled with barely contained fury as she paced around them while they worked. "At least there we knew how to stop the problem."

"Prague was demons," Az said as he ran a hand over a fledgling's head. "This? This is family turning on family. That makes it a special kind of fucked up. "

Little Sariel made Amelia's heart clench. The fledgling's condition had worsened since they'd brought her down from the battle upstairs. She was a few decades old. An infant by celestial standards but older than Amelia herself. That kind of time-fuckery made her head hurt.

She knelt beside the angel, choking back rage as she examined those gossamer wings.

Shadow veins spread through them like cancer, corrupting grace that should've blazed pure and bright. Worse were those haunted eyes. Fuck. No being should carry that kind of pain, let alone a child.

"How are you holding up, sweetie?" Gentle. Keep it gentle, Amelia told herself, despite the fury burning in her chest.

Sariel's wings drew tight against her back as she trembled. "It hurts. He said... said the pain would make us stronger. Better. That we were chosen."

"He lied. You always had as much power as you needed. You're still growing into it." Amelia let her hybrid power flow. Light and shadow twined together to ease the little one's suffering. "You're safe now. No one will touch you again. I promise."

"Can you fix us?" Another fledgling crawled closer. His grace flickered dangerously low. "Make us normal again?"

"We're going to try," Amelia promised, though her heart ached. Some wounds went soul-deep. She turned to Suvi and lowered her voice. "We need to move them somewhere until Jace can heal them. They can't stay here." It was taking too much energy to keep the humans away from the area, and the healer was working his way through the injured as fast as possible.

"We need somewhere secure," Suvi agreed. The witch was still sporting her Louboutins, but her designer clothes were stained with gore. Her usual perfectly styled hair was a mess. "I'm not sure we should risk the mansion after what that bastard did."

"We can take them to Les Auger," Isis suggested. "It has ancient wards that we continually update and a solid foundation. Plus, Izzy's crew is itching to throw down with any demonic bastards who come sniffing."

"That's a good idea, assuming we can get them there." Pema's voice was tight with concern. "Some of these little ones aren't stable enough for transport."

Blackness leaked from the wound in Camael's side. Each drop made her want to punch Jeremiel in the throat. Her archangel was a stubborn male. He refused to stop and have Jace heal him. He was too focused on hunting his fallen brother.

"Ayil, Araton, and Abraxos lost the trail again." His voice was gravel rough, and his fury was barely contained. "Bastard's masking his signature. Every time they get close, the trail goes cold."

"You need healing. Now." She reached for his wound. He caught her wrist in a gentle grip.

"There's no time for-"

"Bullshit." She cut him off and met those ice-blue eyes. They had captured her soul, and she wasn't about to lose him now. "Jace! We need you here." Her voice carried across the cathedral to where the healer worked on the worst cases. "Camael has a wound that needs to be healed so he can hunt his brother."

Jace materialized beside them less than a second later. "It's about damn time. I've been waiting for someone to talk sense into his stubborn ass."

Camael growled but stayed still as the healer's power seeped into his wound. Their gazes locked in a battle of wills that made the air crackle. Jace snorted and continued working. "Alpha males are all the same," Jace informed Amelia. "It's our one major flaw. We would keep going until we dropped."

Amelia chuckled and shook her head. "It's stupid. You will be no good to anyone if you die. You'll leave me and everyone else unpr..." Her words trailed off as the Key

blazed at her throat. Her senses expanded outward. Her hybrid magic flowed through her like eager hounds on a scent. She hadn't realized she was actively trying to track Jeremiel until she picked up traces of his corrupted grace.

"Holy shit! I've got him," she told Camael. "He's at Old Sacred Heart." She couldn't explain why she believed that. She had only gotten a direction. "It's been abandoned since Katrina."

Camael's wings mantled, white feathers catching what little light remained. "You're sure about this?"

Amelia nodded. "Positive. Get the fledglings safe. I'll-"

"I know you're not planning on going without me." His frame vibrated with a protective instinct that made her want to simultaneously kiss him and kick his ass. "We do this together or not at all."

"Then get healed, and let's move." There was no room for argument in her tone. "These kids are evidence of what your brother's capable of. We can't let him keep experimenting."

His curse could've stripped paint off the walls. Jace chuckled as his hands blazed with healing power, burning out the rest of the corruption that would've killed lesser beings. "Done. Try not to get stabbed again, yeah?" Jace told Camael.

Camael inclined his head and turned to his AORs. "Move out," he barked. His wings snapped wide as he gathered Amelia close. "Rami, coordinate with the Dark Warriors. Keep these fledglings safe until we're back."

The Angels of Retribution launched skyward in perfect formation. Their wings cut through early morning sky. Amelia's arms locked around Camael's neck as they

soared over the French Quarter. Below them, the streets still bore scars from earlier battles but a lot of the mess had been cleaned. The Dark Warriors were miracle workers. Amelia had no idea how good they were at what they did.

Turning those thoughts off, she tuned into her magical senses to make sure she wasn't missing anything. From what she could tell, nothing changed, and they hit Old Sacred Heart like a wrecking crew. The AORs wings created thunder as they landed. The abandoned church loomed before them. The energy coming off of the structure made Amelia sick to her stomach.

The church's facade was a nightmare of profaned sacred space. Rotting plywood bore corrupted sigils that pulsed like open wounds. Thick vines choked the bell tower. Each tendril was twisted by dark energy. The wrongness had nothing to do with neglect. This deliberate desecration was one more item Amelia added to the list of reasons Jeremiel needed to die.

"By all the gods," Pema muttered as her power recoiled. Amelia hadn't seen any of the angels pick up the Rowan sisters. She was grateful to have them there to help with this mess. "The corruption is in the foundations," Pema continued. "What kind of monster does this to consecrated ground?"

"The kind we put down," Malachi replied as his blade blazed to life in his hand. "Permanently."

Inside was worse. Jeremiel had turned the sanctuary into a nightmare version of a lab. Chains hung from the ceiling like perverted wind chimes. They pulsed with captured agony. Each link bore marks that spoke of torture refined to an art form. Blood was splattered across every surface, courtesy of the knives piled on a table .

"Sweet mother of fuck." Remi's wings drew tight against his back. "Those chains are made from fledgling grace."

"He harvested it." Camael's voice could've frozen hellfire. "He fucking used their essence to forge tools for his... experiments." There was no doubt about what Jeremiel had been doing in the structure.

"How did he do all of this in a few hours?" Amelia blurted as her stomach recoiled.

There were ritual circles carved into floors. The altars were covered in stains that would never wash away. They were a testament to suffering beyond imagination. Ancient grimoires lay scattered across workbenches. Their pages had been defaced. Amelia walked over and studied symbols she didn't fully understand, but her hybrid magic did. "He was forcing light and shadow to merge. He was using fledglings as test subjects for some kind of transformation."

"I bet he was trying to create his own key," Jo remarked, "since there was no way to get to you, Amelia."

Camael's eyes hardened, and his sword appeared in his hand. "He was perfecting his own fall." Her archangel's massive body vibrated with barely contained rage. "Each 'success' brought him closer to his end goal and complete corruption. He has been at this a very long time. The fledglings he took today weren't the first. He's been conducting sick experiments here for a lot longer. The sick fuck has been kidnapping our children."

Toxic and hungry power surged through the church. Amelia went alert at the same time as Camael and his angels. Jeremiel's 'experiments' burst from hiding with unnatural speed. Some had multiple sets of pinions dripping shadow like acid rain. Others bore growths that pulsed with malevolent energy. Their bodies were caught between states of being as if they were fighting the process. Amelia hoped that was the case for their sake .

"That is just nasty," Jo blurted as she swiped her flaming sword through the closest

minion. "These aren't fresh converts."

Amelia shook her head. "They're as close to successful as he is ever going to get."

The fight exploded like someone had uncorked Hell's finest vintage of violence. Amelia's hands blazed with hybrid power as she launched spells to blow shit up, melt flesh, or freeze the minions in their tracks. Her hybrid magic created projectiles that cut through them like a hot knife through butter. Each of her blasts turned experiments into ash. They didn't have the luxury of trying to save them while they were actively trying to kill them.

"On your six!" Camael's warning had her spinning around. She was already gathering power. The corrupted angel coming at her died screaming as she wrapped it in bands of twilight energy that compressed until nothing remained but goo.

The Angels of Retribution carved bloody swaths through the chaos. Jo moved like death's favorite dancer. Her blade took heads while she spun between enemies. Three experiments rushed her at once. That was a big mistake. Her first strike split one from crown to groin. Ugh, Amelia nearly heaved the contents of her stomach. The second lost its head before the first half of its partner hit the ground. The third tried to flee but caught her blazing steel through its spine.

Az had her back. Centuries of fighting together was evident in how they moved. Where Jo went high, he went low. They were poetry in violence and left trails of destruction in their wake.

Amelia gathered power for her nastiest spell yet. The Key blazed at her throat as she wove it into javelins that phased as they were thrown. When they hit, they erased minions. Five experiments vanished mid-scream. Their essence was reduced to piles of viscera.

"The east wing is clear." Remi's voice carried raw grief and rage. "There are no survivors here. Just... remains. It looks like his failures ended up as raw materials."

"The bell tower!" Jo pointed to where a handful of minions were banging on the metal. Jo's wings carried her through shattered stained glass. "They're signaling something. The bell has been turned into some kind of beacon!"

Amelia realized what they were doing too late. The air rippled and screamed as Jeremiel materialized among them. His midnight wings filled the space with toxic dust that ate away at the blessed stone. His laugh scraped across her senses like sandpaper over crystal.

"You finally found me, brother." Jeremiel pranced around as if he didn't have a care in the world. He was taunting Camael while his minions fought. "You're just in time to witness the end of everything you hold dear."

"It's over." Camael's Sword of Light cut through a minion while he spoke. "Surrender or die. Those are your only options now."

Jeremiel's smile twisted into something inhuman. Those teeth were razor sharp now. His eyes were swirling with a void. "This was just one node in a much larger web. Lucifer's power spreads while you play hero. When the barriers shatter?" His laugh was like breaking bones. "That's when existence learns what true chaos feels like."

Camael launched himself at his brother. His wings blazed white against Jeremiel's corrupted darkness. His blade sang for blood as he pressed forward. Each strike was meant to disable rather than kill. He was still trying to save what was already lost. Amelia felt for her archangel. She couldn't imagine how hard this was for Camael.

The fight went vertical as Jeremiel took to the air. Camael followed. Their wings carried them through the roof in an explosion of timber and slate. The clash of metals

echoed like thunder while centuries of shared training turned lethal. Every move they'd practiced together was now aimed at destroying the other. Amelia raced outside to watch what was happening. The Rowan sisters followed suit while the AORs stayed and fought the minions.

"Still following the rules, brother?" Jeremiel shouted. It was clear to Amelia that his words cut Camael deeper than blades. "Can't you feel it? The pure freedom when you stop letting ancient laws chain you?"

"All I feel is what's left of my brother drowning in madness." Camael's voice cracked with grief even as his blade left trails of holy fire. Each strike was precise as it searched for a way through defenses he'd helped create. "Let me end this clean. Before corruption burns away everything you were."

Hoping to help Camael, Amelia channeled her hybrid power through the Key. She channeled it into binding chains. She wanted to give Camael the chance to save his brother. For one perfect moment, it worked. Jeremiel's wings became tangled in twilight bonds.

His laugh carried echoes of the void between stars. "Impressive, little witch. But did you really think you could bind me with the very energies I'm learning to corrupt? Your parlor tricks are nothing compared to what's coming. The old barriers are already starting to crack."

His wings flared wide, and he shattered her bonds. The backlash sent her stumbling. Power recoiled through her system like a snapped rubber band. Before anyone could react, Jeremiel vanished in a burst of toxic energy. He left traces of evil in the air like a bad perfume.

"Son of a bitch." Camael cursed as he landed next to her. He helped her up and looked her over. "Are you alright?"

Amelia nodded and placed a hand over his heart. "I'm fine. I wasn't hurt."

Camael nodded and cursed. "We almost had him. The fucker escaped. AGAIN!"

Amelia wanted to comfort him but her expanded senses were locked onto something else. It was something the Key was showing her. It was an artifact that hummed with recognition as she traced Jeremiel's retreat through the city's spiritual foundation. His corrupted grace left a signature she could track now that she knew what to look for.

"I can find him," she told Camael. "The Key shows me exactly how he's twisting the energies. And more importantly, it's showing me where that corruption leads."

Camael smiled as his ice-blue eyes blazed. "He's going back to Lucifer, isn't he?"

"After he retrieves an artifact, he will be." Her smile was pure predator as power gathered around her hands. Jeremiel couldn't get away from them this time. She had a lock on this asshole and was ready to teach him a lesson.

CHAPTER 19

Camael's wings cut through pre-dawn as they raced back toward the French Quarter. Each beat of those massive white pinions left trails of divine fire that painted the darkness with holy light. It was a beautiful sight. Not that anyone except other angels could see it.

His witch's discovery of Jeremiel's trail had energized his battle-weary warriors. Fury still burned in his chest like a sacred flame. The memory of those tortured fledglings would haunt him for centuries to come. Their twisted bodies and broken wings were a testament to his brother's madness. Jeremiel had much to answer for, and Camael intended to collect. He no longer hoped there was anything left to save in Jeremiel. He was lost to them completely.

Amelia directed him deep into bayou country. Thick cypress trees dripped with Spanish moss and something vile. It looked like shit they'd pulled out of the La Brea tar pits long ago. Everything felt wrong to Camael's senses. It was heavy with power that made his magical core recoil.

"He's channeling through something ancient," Amelia told him as her hands moved through fetid air. "There was some kind of artifact buried out here before the city was built."

Camael's wings cut through the darkness that was as thick as sin. "The indigenous tribes knew about the Oldest Ones. They often left warnings in places like this."

Camael followed her instructions as he prepared himself to do what was needed when

they found Jeremiel. Their strike force moved in formation over murky waters. His Angels of Retribution and their midnight wings blazed hot while the Rowan sisters maintained shields against whatever lurked below. Not all those ripples were from gators and they didn't want to be taken out before they reached their destination.

"There." Amelia pointed toward a mound rising from black water. Old oaks grew thick around it. Their branches were twisted into unnatural shapes. "That's no natural formation. The whole thing's saturated with evil."

"Formation Delta," Camael ordered. His voice carried over the swamp's strange silence. No frogs were singing. No birds were calling. Even the insects knew better than to make noise. "Jo, Az. Clear the perimeter. Mal, Rami. You're with me. The rest of you coordinate with the Dark Warriors as they arrive. No one gets in or out."

They hit the ground running as the first wave of Jeremiel's experiments emerged from the shadows. These weren't the failed ones from the church. These were his masterpieces. These fledglings violated divine law. This was how demons came to be. Jeremiel wasn't content to play Lucifer's second. He wanted to rule. That's why the Prince of Lies wasn't around.

Mutations writhed beneath alabaster skin. It was a symphony of biological heresy that defied every known law of organic design. Razor-edged bony structures erupted from flesh like predatory architecture. The corrupted vessels moved with a predatory grace that spoke of intelligence far beyond human comprehension. It was horrible for the innocent young angels they once were. Something utterly alien had been violently grafted into organic matter.

Their bodies were landscapes of impossible transformation. Limbs bent at angles that would shatter normal anatomical constraints. Their skin shifted like liquid mercury. Each was a nightmare of biomechanical reconstruction that whispered of experiments conducted in the darkest margins between science and sacrilege.

Camael's Sword of Light blazed like a supernova as he carved through corrupted flesh. Each strike left trails and turned flesh to ash. Beside him, Amelia channeled power through the Key. Her hybrid magic merged into weapons that erased whatever they touched.

The Rowan sisters worked their magic with lethal grace. Pema's offensive spells detonated like grenades while Isis maintained barriers against things trying to rise from the water. Suvi danced through the chaos. Her magic was precise and deadly.

The battle spread across the mound as more experiments joined the fray. Ancient oaks shattered under divine steel while corrupt grace ate holes in the earth. It sang to Camael's warrior blood, but he shoved that aside. His target was his brother.

Jeremiel's laughter echoed like breaking glass. "You're too late, brother!" His voice carried traces of the void. "The awakening has already begun!"

"Watch me stop it." Camael launched himself toward the mound's peak. His wings spread wide for battle. His blade left trails of holy fire through the humid air.

Of course, the bastard had planned for this. Energy rippled as more experiments burst from hiding. Their partially transformed wings dripped darkness as they lurched forward. Seeing him, they straightened and began moving with military precision. It forced Camael to divide his attention.

"Worry about Jeremiel," Amelia shouted as she engaged three at once. "We'll hold the rest here!"

Part of him wanted to stay and protect his witch. That was what Jeremiel expected. It would give him an edge. Camael reminded himself that she could handle herself. The power flowing through her hands made lesser beings spontaneously combust. With a growl that shook ancient trees, Camael left her to her fight and championed his way

up the mound.

The top had been hollowed out and transformed into an unholy altar. Shadows writhed across the stone. Everything revolved around a single artifact. It was a blade that had magic that was neither good nor bad. Its metal held neither light nor shadow. It was a blank slate to be turned to the wielder's whims.

Jeremiel stood before it with his midnight wings spread wide. The fallen archangel's transformation was nearly complete. Darkness leaked from every feather while his grace pulsed with stolen power. He barely resembled the brother Camael had known since Creation.

"Welcome to the rebirth." Jeremiel's smile was all fang and madness. "Front row seats to the remaking of everything."

"The only thing ending is you." Camael's wings mantled as divine energy crackled. "Stand down, brother. Die clean."

Jeremiel's laugh scraped like nails on Hell's chalkboard. "You still don't understand. This?" He gestured to the artifact pulsing with ancient power. "Is the key to what comes next. The old barriers are already cracking. Soon, what existed before will reclaim its domain."

Camael swung his weapon through the air, prepared to end the other archangel. Their blades met with enough force to shatter diamonds. Divine steel screamed against corrupted metal as they parried and danced around one another. They took their battle to the air. Camael made sure each of his strikes was meant to kill. On the ground, another battle raged across the bayou. Angels and demons clashed above dark waters while things better left sleeping stirred below. The Rowan sisters' magic painted the air with patterns of power while Dark Warriors eliminated anything that surfaced. Camael wanted to end Jeremiel and help them, but his brother was well trained.

Camael had to dive when Jeremiel's sword nearly connected with his neck. He flew so close he could feel Amelia's hybrid energy as she fought Jeremiel's minions. Camael banked left and was bringing his sword around to cut through Jeremiel. He managed to clip the dark feathers at the bottom of his wings.

Memory hit Camael like a physical blow. He taught his younger brother those same moves. He watched him master Heaven's arts with pure joy. Now, those skills served darkness. Camael let his sadness wash over him. He would take no joy in ending Jeremiel.

As anger and worry surged through him, Camael's blade left trails of holy fire through thick air. "All I feel is what's left of my brother drowning in madness."

They continued that way for what felt like forever. Camael's blood dripped from countless cuts and cured the earth while Jeremiel's poisoned it as it dripped from his wounds. The fight destroyed half the bayou before Camael saw his opening. Jeremiel's fall had left weak points. Places corruption hadn't fully claimed. The warrior in him recognized the tactical advantage. The brother in him grieved as he drove his blade through that gap.

Divine steel pierced corrupted grace, and Jeremiel's eyes went wide. "Brother," he gasped as darkness leaked from the wound. "You chose their order over blood."

"I'm sorry." Camael meant it with every fiber of his being. This was still his brother. Despite what he had been twisted into. "It didn't have to end this way."

Jeremiel's laugh turned wet as his energy fled him. "You still don't see. This isn't ending. It's beginning. The Oldest Ones stir. What comes next will make Lucifer's rebellion look like children playing games."

"Where?" Camael demanded as his brother's grace unraveled like rotted silk. "Where

is he waking them? Tell me how to stop this!"

But Jeremiel just smiled. Madness still dancing in eyes that had once shone with divine light. "You'll see soon enough. The barriers crack. What existed before... will exist... again..." His voice trailed off as his life force drained from him.

Camael watched his brother dissolve into nothing before he could hit the ground. Each corrupted feather turned to ash that scattered over dark water. The sight branded itself into his heart and memory. Another brother was lost to pride and greed. First, Lucifer and all of those that went with him. Now there was Jeremiel. How many more would fall?

Landing beside the broken mound, Camael surveyed their battlefield. The bayou was a war zone. Ancient trees lay shattered while black water bubbled with otherworldly energy. Amelia reached him first. Her magic still crackled around those hands he loved. Blood and swamp muck streaked her face. But her green eyes blazed with determination that made his heart clench. "He's gone?"

"Yeah." His voice came out rougher than he intended as grief mixed with fury. "But he confirmed our fears. Lucifer's found a way to wake the Oldest Ones. Everything else was just distraction while he worked on the barriers. "

"Then we find him." She touched the Key. "Before those beings decide to make a comeback tour."

Camael pulled her close. He needed her presence as reports flowed in from his warriors. The bayou was secure, but at what cost? And how much time remained before Lucifer's plan bore fruit? The answers wouldn't be pretty, but looking at his witch, he knew they'd face them together.

Watching those around him and holding his witch, something crystallized in Camael's

chest. The thought of losing Amelia to whatever horrors were coming made his ancient heart seize with fear he couldn't ignore. He wouldn't wait to make her his. Not with everything they faced.

"Mate with me," he blurted. The words escaped before he could stop them.

Amelia's eyes went wide as she turned to face him. "What?"

"You heard me." He pulled her closer as his wings created shelter from the chaos still raging around them. "I know the timing's shit, but I don't want to wait. Not with what's coming."

"We will do it after we stop Lucifer." The love filling her eyes as she spoke nearly broke him.

"No. Now." His eyes blazed with emotion too deep for words. Everything he was - warrior, archangel, brother - all of it centered on this female who'd turned his world upside down. "I've almost lost you too many times. I need you bound to me before we face whatever's waking. I need to know you're mine in every way that matters."

She studied him for a long moment as power crackled between them like bottled lightning. Finally, that smile he loved curved her lips. "Yes."

"Yes?" His wings mantled with possessive joy that made his warriors pointedly look elsewhere.

"Yes, you overgrown pigeon." Her arms wrapped around his neck in a way that made him want to take her somewhere private immediately. "But if you get us killed before the honeymoon, I'm haunting your celestial ass for eternity."

His laugh felt good. Only this female could face down the apocalypse and still make

him smile. Make him whole in ways he hadn't known he needed. "Deal."

Heaven and Hell could bring their worst - he had his soon-to-be mate by his side and his warriors at his back. That was all he needed to take on whatever horrors stirred in the dark. The real war was just beginning. But now he had everything worth fighting for.

CHAPTER 20

The mansion's garden bloomed with magic and moonlight as Amelia prepared for a ceremony that would bond her to her archangel. Her hands trembled slightly as she smoothed the silk of her dress. It was a stunning creation in white that seemed to capture and hold the celestial light filling the space. Ramiel's mate had helped Amelia arrange for it. Her hand went to the Key at her throat. The relic that had changed her entire life pulsed as if it approved of the union about to take place.

The aftermath of their battle with Jeremiel still scarred parts of the French Quarter. But in the mansion they'd created a sanctuary where peace reigned. At least for now. The Rowan sisters had outdone themselves in transforming the garden into something out of a fairy tale. Floating orbs of witch-light danced between roses that shouldn't bloom in this season. They'd also used sacred herbs and crystals to form a protective dome over them.

"You look perfect," Pema said as she made final adjustments to Amelia's hair. The oldest Rowan sister's hands moved with practiced grace as she wove protection spells into each twist. "Though I still think we should have postponed until after we send Lucifer home."

"No, Camael was right." Amelia's voice carried steel as she met her friend's eyes in the mirror. "He's already taken too much. We can't let him steal this too."

"Besides," Isis added from where she was putting the final touches on her makeup, "what better way to face that bastard than with a mating bond strengthening their powers?"

Suvi's laugh carried through the open window. "It also gives Lucifer the celestial middle finger in the process. Nothing says we aren't afraid of you more than such an important celebration. It's priceless."

The banter helped calm Amelia's nerves. Unfortunately, she couldn't completely ignore how Lucifer's power pulsed at the edges of her magical awareness. Lucifer's corruption was still spreading through the city's spiritual foundation like cancer. Even now, it felt as if something vast and ancient pressed against the barriers between worlds.

A knock at the door interrupted her dark thoughts. Jo's wings filled the frame as the female warrior entered. "The perimeter is secure," she reported. "The Dark Warriors have eyes on every approach. The triplets are maintaining an aerial patrol. Nothing is getting within a mile of this place without us knowing."

"How's Camael holding up?" Amelia couldn't help asking.

Jo's smile was pure mischief. "Like a warrior facing his toughest battle. Rami's keeping him from wearing a trench in the marble floors. You'd think facing down Lucifer was easier than waiting to claim his mate."

The word sent shivers down Amelia's spine. Mate. The bond they were about to forge went deeper than any human marriage. It would tie their very essences together. It would create something both beautiful and lethal. It was the perfect weapon against whatever horrors were stirring from their ancient sleep.

"It's time," Pema announced as moonlight flooded the room. The full moon had reached its apex and was bathing the garden in a silver radiance that made the protective wards shimmer like starlight.

Amelia took a deep breath and stood. Her dress moved like liquid moonlight. Its

simple lines emphasized her best assets. Gathering her train with practiced elegance, she moved through the preparation room. The wooden floor whispered beneath her steps. She concentrated on each step. Her walk was a choreography of anticipation. The soft rustle of her gown broke the silence as she approached the back door.

Her hand hovered for a moment over the carved handle. Her breath caught when she opened it. Angels lined the path to her archangel. Their wings created a corridor of divine protection. The Rowan sisters went first and took their positions at cardinal points. Their power helped anchor the wards that would shield this ceremony from darker forces.

Camael's massive frame radiated barely contained energy as his ice-blue eyes locked onto her. His wings spread wide. His white feathers caught moonlight like captured stars. The sight made her heart swell. This warrior of Heaven had chosen her. He had insisted on this moment despite the chaos threatening their world.

Everything else faded when their eyes met across the space. The worry about Lucifer. The fear of what was stirring beyond the veil. None of it mattered. This was their moment. Ancient powers be damned. She moved swiftly to Camael's side.

Michael himself stood ready to perform the ceremony. The archangel's presence was both an honor and protection. Heaven's greatest warrior was also lending his power to shield this union. His wings blazed with holy fire as he raised his hands.

"We gather under full moon and starlight," he intoned, his voice carrying divine authority, "to witness the joining of warrior and witch, of light and shadow, of two beings meant to dance as one."

Amelia barely registered the words as she reached for Camael. His hand engulfed hers. His touch sent electricity through her system that had nothing to do with magic. His wings curled forward and created a shelter of white feathers that shut out

everything but them.

"You're sure about this?" he murmured, quiet enough that only she could hear. "Once we start, there's no going back."

"I've never been more sure of anything." Her smile carried equal parts love and determination. "You're stuck with me, Archangel. Deal with it."

His answering laugh was music to her ears. This male was hers, and she was his. Whatever came next, they'd face it together. The ceremony itself was beautiful and different than she was used to. Things were done differently in the Tehrex Realm, but they were having an angelic ceremony today. The witches would do one for her when everything settled down. The roots of the divine bonding stretched back to the beginning of time. Camael dropped his wings and Amelia's cheeks heated at the catcalls from their friends.

Michael's voice carried divine authority as he began the ancient rites. His wings spread wide to channel Heaven's power. "Kneel," he instructed. She and Camael dropped to their knees before the archangel. Sacred fire erupted from his hands and created a circle of pure energy around them.

"In the beginning," Michael intoned in Enochian. The language of angels flowed like liquid light. "There was neither light nor shadow but perfect harmony. Tonight, we restore that balance through the union of these two souls. "

The Key at Amelia's throat pulsed in time with the ritual words as Michael drew sigils of power in the air between them. Each symbol blazed with divine fire before sinking into their joined hands. It marked them as each other's in ways that transcended physical bonds.

"Repeat after me," Michael instructed Camael first. His voice carried harmonics that

made the air vibrate. "I bind myself to you, body and grace, from this moment until the last star burns out."

Camael's ice-blue eyes locked onto Amelia's as he spoke the vows in perfect Enochian. "I bind myself to you, body and grace, from this moment until the last star burns out. My strength is yours. My power is yours to wield. Where you go, I follow. What you face, I face beside you."

Divine fire wrapped around his wings as he spoke. Each feather lit up with a different sigil. The sight made Amelia's heart skip a beat. This archangel was really binding himself to her. Death wouldn't break their bond.

When it was her turn, Michael guided her through the vows. She instinctively said the vows in the tongue of the First Weavers. The Key responded to each word. Its power merged with her hybrid magic to create something beautiful and lethal.

"I bind myself to you," she repeated, her voice steady despite the power coursing through her, "body and soul, from this moment until the last star burns out. My magic is yours. My heart is yours to protect. Where you fight, I fight. What you defend, I defend with all that I am."

Light and shadow wove together as she spoke. It created patterns around them and enveloped them in a cocoon. Her power reached for Camael's divine grace like missing pieces finding each other after eternities apart.

"With blood and breath, with grace and power," Michael's voice carried through the garden, "I call upon the first light to witness this union."

Divine fire erupted from his hands and wrapped around their joined ones in chains of pure energy. Amelia gasped as Camael's grace merged with her hybrid magic. Before she knew what he intended, Camael grabbed her and dipped her back, then claimed

her lips.

The kiss that sealed their union was the stuff of romance novels. Power exploded outward as their essences joined fully. It painted the night in colors that looked like fireworks. Every angel present mantled their wings in response while everyone clapped and cheered.

Their moment of perfect joy was shattered by a pulse of energy that hit Amelia's magical senses like a battering ram. The Key at her throat screamed a warning at the same moment. Lucifer was up to something.

"He's making his move," she gasped at her expanded awareness. She couldn't see exactly what the Prince of Lies was doing, but she felt something that made her blood run cold. "The barriers. They're starting to crack!"

Camael's wings spread wide as he pulled her closer, their newly forged bond humming with shared power. "Then we stop him. Together."

She met his eyes, seeing her own determination reflected there. They had fought too hard, come too far to let Lucifer win now. "Together," she agreed as she gathered her magic.

The full moon painted New Orleans in shades of silver and shadow as they prepared for war. Whatever horrors stirred in the spaces between worlds would face a united front. Heaven's deadliest warrior and his witch, bound by love and power older than time itself. Let Lucifer try his worst. They were ready.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:23 am

Deep beneath the French Quarter, where even demons feared to tread, Lucifer worked his craft with meticulous precision. The cavern predated New Orleans by millennia, its walls carved with symbols that made reality flinch. Holy hell, even the air down here felt wrong - thick with power that had existed before light learned to dance.

Artifacts of corrupted grace surrounded him, each one pulsing with energy stolen from sacred ground. Their glow cast shadows that moved with hungry purpose, eating away at stone older than human memory. The Prince of Lies had been busy during his exile - collecting toys that would make Heaven's archivists weep.

His fingers traced ley line convergence points on a map spread across an altar of black stone. Each mark pulsed with possibilities darker than sin. Power radiated from his perfect form in waves that would have driven lesser beings mad. But then, that was the point.

"Soon." His voice carried echoes of the void as he completed another sigil. "Everything returns to its original state. No more artificial barriers. No more rules about what should and shouldn't exist."

A smile curved lips that had once sung Heaven's praises. Now that same beauty promised chaos older than Creation itself. The expression would have made demon lords run screaming.

"Let's see how they handle what comes next." Pure satisfaction filled each word as he turned to the artifacts he'd spent millennia collecting. "Time to wake the universe's firstborn children."

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:23 am

The French Quarter's cobblestones glistened under the moonlight like scattered jewels. Abraxos didn't give a shit about the picturesque view. His scarlet wings carved through the pre-dawn air as he tracked yet another demonic signature threading its way through New Orleans' oldest streets. For a fallen still gathering his powers, Lucifer was an active asshole.

The energies pulsing beneath the city's historic foundations had both stabilized and been more erratic over the past few weeks. Ever since Camael and his witch had bonded. The massive incidents like they'd seen right before their mating hadn't continued happening, but the minor ones had increased ten-fold. Tonight's patrol was serving up the kind of frustration that made him want to punch something. Preferably something ugly with too many teeth.

Fuck. He hit another dead end. The trail went cold near Bourbon Street. It dissolved into nothing but traces of sulfur and wasted time. This was the third lead tonight that had fizzled out like cheap champagne .

His comm crackled. "Anything?" Araton's voice carried that edge of tension they'd all been wearing lately.

"Negative." Abraxos banked hard around Jackson Square. His crimson wings reflected off ancient brick. "These bastards are getting better at masking their movements."

"That's what worries me," his brother replied. "Since when do demons understand stealth?"

"Since that bastard clawed his way topside, leaving his frozen time-out chair empty," Abraxos muttered, finally voicing what they'd all been thinking. A growl rumbled in his chest at the memory of how the Prince of Lies finally traded his icy prison for Earth's playground. "Speaking of Heaven's most wanted. Did you get anything on those energy spikes by the river?"

"It's clean as a confessor's conscience. Whatever's causing them knows how to cover its tracks." Araton's curse crackled through the comm. "Ayil's checking the warehouse district, but I'm not holding my breath."

Abraxos's boots hit the rooftop of the Presbytère with practiced silence. The pre-dawn air carried hints of beignets from Café du Monde mixing with traces of power that made his battle instincts hum. Below him, drunk tourists stumbled down Bourbon Street like sheep begging for supernatural predation.

"The Dark Warriors have the port locked down," he reported, scanning the skyline. "Something about this feels wrong. It's almost like we're being herded."

"Tell me about it. Even the low-level demons are acting with tactical precision. Since when do hell-spawned uglies understand formation fighting?" Araton's question was rhetorical. They all knew the development was courtesy of Lucifer.

Abraxos's mind went back to the problem at hand. Lucifer was still trying to free the Old Ones. They could all feel it. Even the air was charged like the moment before lightning strikes.

As it had every night for weeks, his gaze drifted to the weathered facade of Crescent City Arcane. Light still burned in the upstairs windows despite the unholy hour. Sarah Morgan was burning the midnight oil again. She was probably lost in those ancient texts she guarded so carefully. She'd been searching for something to help them hunt down Lucifer. Not that he was keeping tabs on the human bookseller. He absolutely wasn't.

"I'm going to check the Quarter's eastern perimeter," he told his brother. "Something's been bugging me all night."

"Sure, it has." Araton's knowing smirk came through loud and clear. "Nothing to do with a certain bookstore that happens to be in that sector?"

"Shut it," Abraxos growled, though his feet were already moving. His wings mantled as he dropped to street level. "The shop houses enough occult knowledge to give Lucifer new ideas. It's tactically sound to ensure its security."

"Keep telling yourself that, brother." Araton's laugh followed him down. "Just remember. Human females are complicated."

"Everything's complicated these days," Abraxos muttered as he landed.

He sent a pulse of angelic power through the wards and into the lock, opening it. The bell above the door chimed softly as he entered. The scent hit him first. It was old leather, paper, and something unique. The last one made his ancient blood sing. It was salt air and sunshine. And all Sarah.

Sarah emerged from the stairwell like she was ready for demonic batting practice. She had a Louisville Slugger gripped in hands that clearly knew how to use it. Her dark hair was a mess of waves escaping a messy bun. She was rocking a pair of flannel pajama pants covered in little cartoon skulls and a tank top that showed off curves that did serious damage to his concentration.

"We're closed," she announced. When her eyes landed on Abraxos, there wasn't much heat behind the words. Just the kind of bone-deep weariness that came from dealing with supernatural shit at ass o'clock in the morning. "Unless you're here about the tremors in the Quarter's foundation?"

The female looked ready to go ten rounds with Hell's ugliest. Holy hell wasn't that

just perfect? Most humans would be cowering under their beds if they felt the kind of power currently making the Quarter's foundations do the cha-cha. Instead, here she was, barefoot and beautiful, with enough steel in those green eyes to make a demon lord think twice.

Not that he was noticing how that tank top hugged her in all the right places. Or how those flannel pants hung low on her hips. Or how the bat was the icing on one very dangerous, very appealing cake. Shit. He was absolutely noticing all of it.

"You were expecting company?" he drawled as he nodded at her weapon of choice and moved deeper into the shop. His warrior's instincts automatically cataloged exits and sightlines. Old habits died hard.

"In this neighborhood?" Her smile could've cut glass. "Always." She gestured to a shelf where leather-bound volumes shuddered like they were having seizures. "That started around midnight. It's been driving me batty. Something old is stirring. Do you think he managed to wake the Old Ones? Who are they, anyway?"

How much did this female pick up on? Most assumed she was nothing more than a regular human, but Abraxos detected something else in her. "Define old," he told her.

She shifted her grip on the bat, and damn if that casual display of readiness didn't do things to his concentration. "Old enough to make those pretty wings of yours look like they showed up yesterday for kindergarten orientation." Her eyes tracked his scarlet pinions as they shifted restlessly. "And don't try that 'classified celestial information' bullshit. My books have been practically throwing themselves off the shelves."

Before he could respond, power slammed through the shop's wards like a battering ram. Books flew off shelves as something seemed to hit the side of the building. Abraxos moved without thought when Sarah stumbled. His hands caught her waist and he steadied her against his chest as tremors rocked the building's foundation.

The contact sent awareness shooting through him that had nothing to do with supernatural disturbances. And everything to do with how perfectly she fit against him. Her scent filled his lungs. Salt air and sunshine with an undertone of power no human should have.

"The basement," she gasped as she pushed away from him. "The texts-"

He followed her down narrow stairs into a space that hummed with contained power. Ancient grimoires lined shelves carved with protective sigils to keep them safe. Her family definitely had magical origins, even if she no longer carried much of it. In the center of the room, a massive tome lay open on a pedestal. Its pages turned by themselves as waves of energy pulsed through the space.

"No," Sarah breathed, reaching for the book. "This can't be awakening now."

Abraxos caught her wrist before she could touch the pages. "What is it?"

"The Codex Titanicus." Her voice carried equal parts fascination and fear. "It contains accounts of beings that existed before angels and demons. "

"And you just happen to have this casual piece of apocalyptic literature lying around?"

"It's a family inheritance." She tried to pull free, but his grip was unbreakable. "Unlike me, my ancestors were more than just booksellers."

The grimoire's pages continued to turn. It revealed illustrations that made his warrior's blood run cold. Ancient beasts with serpentine bodies and multiple heads twisted through darkness. Their scales gleamed like polished obsidian. Creatures with bat-like wings spanning leagues and fangs longer than broadswords prowled through eternal night. There were also things that looked like dragons but weren't. Their bodies were covered with eyes that leaked shadow.

Each page showed horrors that predated angels and demons. These were the firstborn children of pure darkness. Some had bodies made of living flame. Others wore metallic armor. All of them radiated the kind of raw power that made his divine grace recoil in instinctive recognition of something beyond his experience.

"The Titans." Sarah's voice carried ancient weight. "These aren't the fairytales humans know. These are the original nightmares. Beings that make angels and demons look like newborns. And that book? It's been my family's responsibility since before recorded history. I'm the last Guardian left."

As if in response, the book's pages burst into black flame. Sarah cried out and reached for it. Abraxos pulled her behind him as his wings mantled to create a barrier between her and whatever was trying to manifest. "Don't touch it," he growled as power crackled through the air. "That's not normal fire."

"Back off, angel. This is what I was born for," Sarah told him.

Abraxos caught her arm again. "Not happening, female. "

"You don't understand." Steel and desperation mixed in her voice. "That book is bound to my bloodline. I'm the only one who can contain it when it wakes up like this. My grandmother died protecting it. My mother too. I won't fail them."

"And I won't watch you die." His wings created an impenetrable wall of crimson feathers between her and the flaming tome. "There has to be another way."

The flames died suddenly. They stared at a page with an illustration of a massive serpentine beast with multiple heads. Each was crowned with curved horns that stood out a foot on each side of its skull. When a drawing radiated malevolent power like that, Abraxos didn't want to meet the real thing.

"They're stirring." Her voice shook. "After all these centuries, they're finally waking

up. I never imagined it was possible. I've heard stories passed down through my family, but nothing ever happened."

"We will stop them," Abraxos vowed. His wings drew tighter around her as his ancient warrior instincts kicked in. Something deeper than battle training made him need to keep her safe.

He watched as her fierce green eyes locked onto him like targeting lasers. Damn if he didn't feel it in his gut. "Not without me. The Codex Titanus," she started, "has been in my bloodline since before there was electricity or indoor plumbing. My ancestors didn't guard it because they enjoyed late-night reading."

True that. The tiny human female had stones of steel to go with that razor-sharp mind. And fuck him, but he was starting to respect both. "Tell me everything." His voice came out rough. Professional. Nothing to do with how she moved as she began to pace. "About the Titans. All of it."

"My grandmother trained me since I could walk." Her voice cut through the darkness like a blade. "Every night after school, while other kids played video games, I learned dead languages and memorized containment protocols. The Codex wasn't bedtime reading. It was battle plans."

She moved to the ancient book with the practiced ease of someone who'd spent a lifetime studying its secrets. Her fingers traced the worn leather binding. Abraxos caught the spark of power that jumped between skin and surface.

"The prison holding them?" She barked out a hard laugh. "It's built into the bedrock of major cities. The tremors we're feeling? That's them testing the walls, looking for structural weaknesses. My family's been monitoring the foundations for generations, tracking energy signatures, mapping fault lines. I never believed it was real. I only went through the motions with Nana."

Her hands ghosted over the grimoire's metal clasps. They were solid things made of cold iron and blessed silver. "The text was written in angel's blood mixed with holy water and sealed with divine fire. My grandmother showed me pictures of the burn scars on her grandmother's hands from helping rebind it the last time the seal started to fail. There was nothing poetic about that shit."

"Until now?" He kept his voice carefully neutral, though everything in him wanted to move closer.

"Until now." She met his gaze again. "I wished I had taken it more seriously. Look at these passages. The language shifts between ancient Greek, Latin, and another language. The text literally changes depending on who's reading it."

Abraxos leaned closer. His wings created a canopy over them both as they studied the grimoire. The script swam before his eyes before it finally resolved into perfect Enochian. The words made his ancient blood run cold.

"When the first light split the void," he translated, "they were already ancient. What exists now was built in their shadow. Shaped from their dreams and nightmares. The barriers hold them in twilight sleep. When they stir, they will remember and hunger."

Another tremor hit. That one meant business. Loud thudding above their heads told him books had flown off the shelves. Abraxos moved without thinking. His massive crimson wings created a shelter around her smaller form. The contact sent a jolt through his system that had jack to do with the supernatural chaos.

"The wards," he growled against her hair. Over her head, he noticed the complex patterns taking shape around the book. "Those are angelic sigils."

"Apparently, my ancestors knew powerful beings," she shrugged. "It would make sense. We guard more than just books. And before you ask. Yes, I have power. I find it's easier to keep it masked. And no, I'm not discussing my family history right

now."

His phone buzzed because he'd turned his comms off. It was Araton. Probably pissed about another shit show at the port. But this female with her ancient knowledge and hidden power, had become mission-critical. And maybe something more. Fuck.

The Codex pulsed with a sickly light. The pages turned themselves and stopped on diagrams. Sarah's fingers traced symbols that writhed beneath her touch. That was interesting. Her "just a bookseller" facade was getting thinner by the second.

"We need to get this somewhere secure," he said, though his wings refused to retract from their protective arch. "The mansion has wards that?—"

"I'm not leaving my shop." Her words snapped out like a whip. "These books need protection. If something's coming, this knowledge could be our only defense."

"Then I'm staying too." The words came out before he could stop them .

She blinked. "Don't you have a city to patrol?"

"My brothers and the others can handle it." He met her gaze. "This is more important."

His phone buzzed again. Araton's text was terse. "MAJOR SITUATION AT PORT. NEED YOU NOW."

"Go," Sarah said, not looking up from her work. "I've got this."

"Like hell." He moved close. "You've got knowledge they want. And power they didn't expect. I'm not leaving you unprotected." At least now, it made sense why she had been targeted by the demons before.

She finally looked up, and the fierce intelligence in those green eyes hit him harder than celestial steel. "I'm not helpless."

"I never said you were." His wings shifted restlessly. "But this is bigger than both of us. Whatever's coming – these Titans, the prison break Lucifer is attempting with them – it's going to take all of us working together to stop it."

Another tremor rocked the building. It was stronger this time. The very air seemed to vibrate with wrongness. Above them, books crashed to the floor. "This is getting worse," Sarah said as she snatched the codex and headed up the stairs. Abraxos followed behind her as she moved between the stacks. She shifted the codex to one arm and gathered fallen texts with practiced urgency for several seconds until she looked up at him. "Are you picking up a pattern to them?"

Abraxos shook his head as she led him to a workstation tucked between towering shelves. He hadn't sensed anything of the sort. Wondering what she was feeling, he focused on the star charts and ley line maps that covered the surface of the desk. Each one was marked with timestamps and energy readings. For someone who claimed to be "just a bookseller," she ran one hell of an intelligence operation.

"Here." She set the codex down and traced a series of intersecting lines. "The pulses are hitting major convergence points, but they're not random. They're searching for something."

Abraxos leaned closer, inhaling that intoxicating mix of salt air and ancient paper that clung to her skin. "Or testing defenses."

"Exactly." She turned to face him. Fucking hell. That was a mistake. They were suddenly inches apart. Her fierce intelligence burned in those green eyes. "The Titans are looking for weak points in the barrier of their prison."

"Where did you learn these calculations?" He asked to distract himself.

"My grandmother." A shadow crossed her face. "I learned everything I know about being a guardian from her. Her whole life was dedicated to watching for signs that they were waking up. I didn't listen like I should have."

"You couldn't have known the Titans were real if you never saw proof."

She nodded and sighed. "Among other things." She ran a hand through her hair, loosening more strands from that messy bun. It took all his control not to reach out and touch them. "The books really are weapons. The knowledge was passed down through generations of watchers. That's how I always thought of us."

Another tremor hit. This one was targeted. It almost felt like something had sensed them discussing it. The Codex's pages began to turn faster, creating a nightmarish flipbook of horror. Abraxos caught glimpses of monsters moving through dimensions like water through a sieve.

"There." Sarah's finger stabbed at a page as the book finally settled. "That's what they're looking for."

The illustration revealed a massive underground complex that made his warrior's instincts scream danger. The structure descended at least fifty levels deep. It had walls of black stone etched with lines of silver sigils. Steel and concrete reinforced the ancient stonework. Mystical containment systems merged seamlessly with ceremonial circles that his angelic eyes recognized as pure power. The blueprints showed a network of chambers that were connected to form a massive binding circle. They were prison cells designed to hold beings that could shatter mountains.

"The Prison," she breathed. "This is what Lucifer is trying to break into."

"And these tremors are what? Attempts at a prison break?"

She lifted one elegant shoulder. "More like... jailhouse riots." She traced symbols that

writhed beneath her touch. "Lucifer woke them up, and now they're testing the bars. Looking for stress points where the wards are thinnest."

His phone buzzed again. Araton wasn't playing. "MAJOR SITUATION. CIVILIANS AT RISK."

"Go." Sarah didn't look up from her work. "I've got this covered."

"You expect me to leave you here alone?" The words came out rougher than intended.

She finally met his gaze. The power in those green eyes hit him like a physical force. "I've been training for this my whole life. My grandmother made damn sure I could handle myself."

The last threads of his control snapped. His hand cupped her face before he could stop himself. "You know that's not why I want to stay."

The air between them thickened until breathing became optional. Her pulse jumped beneath his palm. For one endless moment, he thought she might pull away. Instead, she leaned into his touch.

"This is a terrible idea," she informed him at the same time her hands were reaching for him .

"The worst," he agreed. Without another word, he lowered his mouth and claimed hers.

When their tongues tangled together, power exploded between them. It was like someone had crossed divine wires with mortal flame. Her taste was salt air, sunshine, and coffee. It flooded his system like the most addictive drug. His wings curled forward and wrapped around her as he gave himself up to his desire for her.

The kiss lasted somewhere between seconds and centuries. When they finally broke apart, her eyes had gone storm-dark with possibilities. They had nothing to do with their current problems and everything to do with the electricity still crackling between them. Another pulse of energy rocked the city's spiritual bedrock. Their moment shattered like spun glass.

"We have to stop this," she breathed against his mouth.

"We will." He forced himself to step back. Everything in him screamed to keep her close, but he had a duty to fulfill. "But first, I need to help my brothers at the port. Then we figure out exactly what's trying to wake up and how to put it back to sleep."

"And after that?"

His smile held promises. "After that, we're having several conversations. About your power. Your family history. And exactly what this is between us."

"Assuming we survive," she countered as she wrapped her arms over her chest.

"Oh, we'll survive." He stalked to the door and paused just outside. "I've got too many questions that need answering. And you, Sarah Morgan, are the most interesting puzzle I've encountered in centuries."

He was airborne before she could respond, but her laugh followed him into the pre-dawn sky. His brothers needed him, but every instinct screamed to go back. To protect. To claim. She wasn't part of the mission. That didn't stop how much he wanted her. His existence had just become infinitely more complicated. And he wouldn't have it any other way.