



Gargoyle Sentinel (Shadow Slayers #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A kidnapped Nephilim and the Slayer destined to rescue him. But when betrayal from a shocking source threatens their unborn child, can any of them be saved?

Malachi has been assigned as a Sentinel to the Rocky Mountain lair when Archangel Michael summons him to Aspen. The shadow gargoyles have kidnapped a high-level Nephilim, and he's being held for ransom. In a disturbing twist, the relic the rogues demand is one of the most powerful and can't be surrendered at any cost, not even for an elite Nephilim.

Working as a ski instructor in Aspen isn't Danny's dream job, but he's willing to do anything to get away from his family. His ridiculously wealthy parents consider him an embarrassing disappointment, and relocating to a party town seems like a reasonable plan. However, getting drugged by a creepy weirdo at his favorite gay bar wasn't on his playlist.

The stakes have never been higher, and the Slayers must fight harder than ever. They are so close to destroying the rogues, but will it be in time to save Malachi's new family?

Total Pages (Source): 10

Page 1

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Malachi spread his thick, leathery wings as he inhaled the cool, crisp mountain air, taking a moment to let his gargoyle freely stretch, to appreciate the raw beauty surrounding him.

This part of the range had been untouched by humans, and sometimes he fantasized that if he were ever united with his Fated Mate, this would be where they would live.

He loved the mountains, the stone of the Earth calling to him like a lover's embrace.

Perched atop the highest point of the Shadow Slayers' Colorado lair, hidden within the stone depths of the Rockies, he could see for miles in every direction.

It might be past midnight, but his sharp gargoyle vision allowed him to view every detail within the darkness.

While the modern cities of humanity held the occasional appeal, nothing matched the sheer grandeur of nature.

"Gorgeous," he murmured to himself, scraping his talons against the granite beneath him.

His human form was fine, no longer bothering him after centuries of use, but compared to his abilities as a gargoyle? Meh.

Skin to skin with a willing human was fun, and almost worth having a mortal form.

But otherwise, if the Divine Spark were to take away his ability to shift, he'd get over

it soon enough.

He puffed out his chest, stretching again.

Although once he found his mate... Malachi shook his head.

No point in dwelling on his mysterious other half.

Who knew when he might show up? Just because he was a Shadow Slayer, and had been promised his Fated One upon achieving the required kills, it didn't necessarily mean there was a mate ready and waiting for him.

It turned out there was a loophole they weren't aware of until one of the Slayers reached his kill quota and was disappointed.

Pietro had reached a hundred and forty-four kills, even wiped out a few past that number, but no fated mate was to be had.

Mal pursed his lips.

Apparently, his mate hadn't been born yet.

With his luck, he'd end up in the same predicament, which was why he refused to dwell on when he'd be united with the one who was meant to be his.

For now, he focused on the mission and took his pleasures when he could.

Malachi checked his weapon, which had been newly created by Archangel Michael.

The battle to eradicate the shadow gargoyles and rogue demons had increased in intensity over the past few months.

The consensus was that as the Slayers drew closer to their goal of ending the war, the enemy had grown more desperate, more brazen in their attacks.

Time was no longer on their side.

Malachi ran his palm over the bronze hilt of his fighting blade.

The metal was cool and solid in his grip, smooth under his calloused fingers.

The weight of the blade was a comfort, a reminder of the power it held and the duties he was meant to fulfill while wielding it.

A tingle ran up his spine as he sensed an incoming message.

The mental connection slid into place with ease, and Michael's voice filled his mind. Clear, powerful, yet tinged with urgency.

"Mal. We have a situation in Aspen. I need you here right away."

Malachi straightened, his wings folding against his back. "What kind of situation?"

"A kidnapping. One of the Nephilim children has been taken by rogues, and they're demanding a ransom."

"The fuck?"

This was a new tactic. "What kind of ransom?"

"You'll find out with the others I've summoned after you arrive. Tune into my beacon and don't waste any more time talking."

And with that, Michael's voice was replaced by a low-frequency hum that would guide him to the correct location.

The archangel wasn't typically the life of the party, but he was unusually terse.

Whatever it was the rogues were asking, it had to be extreme.

Malachi mentally left a message for his fellow Sentinel that he was leaving his post, then shot into the night sky, his mighty wings beating against the frigid air.

The beacon pulsed in his mind, drawing him eastward toward Aspen.

Flying as a gargoyle was one of life's great pleasures.

The rush of wind against his stony skin, the freedom of soaring above the world below—it never got old, even after centuries.

But tonight, Mal couldn't enjoy the flight. Not when a precious Nephilim had been taken by such evil filth.

The act was unprecedented.

Shadow gargoyles generally focused on causing chaos and destruction, not kidnapping.

They were brutal, mindless creatures most of the time, which made this calculated move all the more concerning.

The lights of Aspen appeared below, a constellation of human existence nestled between mountain peaks.

Mal's enhanced vision picked out the subtle shimmer of Michael's protective barrier around a large estate on the outskirts of town.

He angled his wings and began his descent.

Malachi landed silently on the expansive back terrace of the estate, his clawed feet barely making a sound against the polished stone.

As he touched down, his form shimmered, bones shifting and skin softening as he transformed into his human appearance.

The change was second nature now, like stretching after a long nap.

“About time you showed up,”

came a familiar voice.

Mal turned to see Dante leaning against an ornate pillar, arms crossed over his chest. The other Shadow Slayer looked as casual as ever in dark jeans and a fitted black T-shirt, but the tension around his eyes betrayed his concern.

“Some of us have actual duties to attend to.”

Malachi rolled his shoulders as the last vestiges of his transformation settled. “Not all of us are lounging around with our mates in our fancy mountain cabins.”

Dante snorted. “Lounging? Hardly. I was pacing the carpet with Chara so Amir could finally get some sleep. In truth, so Leonardo could, too. She’s got an impressive set of lungs.”

Warmth filled Malachi at the mention of Dante and Amir’s two children. He never

thought he'd see the day when the gruff Slayer would settle down.

"How old is Chara now?"

A twinge of shame filled him that he hadn't even visited since she was born.

"Almost six months. And before you say another word, don't worry about it."

Dante pushed off the column. "You're still officially on duty, and I'm supposed to be watching over my neck of the woods in the Cascades while taking care of my family."

They strolled in tandem up the flagship stone walkway. "Which begs the question,"

said Mal, "Why are you here instead of still pacing that carpet?"

Dante regarded him, his lips set in a grim line. "If you're really interested in meeting our new baby, she's in an upstairs bedroom with Amir and Leonardo."

Malachi froze mid-step. "Did something happen? Why did you leave home?"

"Nothing specific happened. It's more that I..."

He cleared his throat. "If you say one word of this to anyone, I swear to all that is holy..."

Dante narrowed his eyes. "Promise you won't say anything."

Mal chuckled. He sensed that Dante's hyper-masculine pride was behind his pleas. "Sure. I promise."

Dante lifted one eyebrow. “You can do that?”

Mal let out a tired sigh. “Yes, I mean it. Michael’s going to have a fit if we don’t hurry up, so tell me what happened already.”

Dante dragged his hand across the top of his head. “I freaked out. I never cared so much before, you know? I always figured, oh well. If I go down, that’s the way it goes. Get dumped into heaven and deal with everlasting boredom. But now with Amir and the kids...”

His voice cracked. “I couldn’t bear it if something were to happen to them. So I might’ve told Michael that Amir was scared, and I brought them all here to appease him. Safety in numbers and all that.”

Malachi’s lips twitched with amusement, but he kept his promise and didn’t mock his fellow Slayer. Instead, he clasped Dante’s shoulder with genuine understanding.

“The mighty have fallen.”

He smiled, hoping that Dante knew his words held no judgment. “But I get it. Having something to lose changes everything.”

“It’s fucking terrifying.”

Dante shook his head. “I’d rather face a hundred shadow gargoyles at once than see a single scratch on any of them.”

As they approached the main entrance of the estate, Malachi noticed the intricate sigils etched into the doorframe. Michael’s signature handiwork was apparent. The archangel had warded the massive home with the highest level of protection.

Mal's voice dropped to a professional tone. "So what do we know about the kidnapped Nephilim?"

Dante's expression darkened. "Young man named Danny Rutherford. Local ski instructor, but there's a lot more to it than that. Michael was getting some additional intel from Ronen and Cassiel when I came out here to wait for you."

Malachi tilted his head. "I thought they were in the Boston lair?"

"They were, but activity there died down to nothing after Zeke's victory at the harbor over Lysander. The Slayers here began to notice an unusual amount of activity in this area, which seemed odd."

Malachi nodded. "That is strange. Too difficult for them to remain undercover."

Dante sighed. "I'll admit that's what led to my fears about my family. We're as remote as it gets up in the Cascades."

He glanced around as if checking to see that they weren't being spied on. "I only found out about Cassiel and Ronan when I arrived. Several other top warriors were brought in from other lairs as well."

"Is the kidnapped Nephilim mated?"

His stomach roiled at the thought that he could be pregnant or being tortured.

If only the war could be ended and the enemy banished back to hell.

It would certainly get Lucifer off their backs.

Having to continuously run into that asshole on the Earth plane during strategy

sessions grated on his nerves.

He wished he had Michael's ability to look past the fallen angel's treachery, despite their ultimate goal being the same.

Dante shook his head. "No. All I got from the brief conversation with Michael before he called you in was that there's an outrageous demand from the rogues for the safe return of Danny."

Malachi sighed. "Damn. I guess we'd better get inside then. Am I the last to arrive?"

As if in answer to his question, Ezekiel touched down next to them, quickly shifting to his human form. "Well, what do we have here? The elusive Dante gracing us with his presence?"

Ezekiel clapped him on the shoulder with a smile. "How's home life treating you?"

Dante's eyes darted in Mal's direction before he answered Ezekiel. "Couldn't be better. They're here, as a matter of fact."

Ezekiel's eyebrows shot up. "Seriously? Wow, that's terrific. I'd love to visit with little Chara."

He grinned. "I haven't seen that cutie since I delivered her and you snatched her from my arms."

"There was no snatching,"

Dante growled. "Just excitement over meeting my daughter, that's all."

Ezekiel barked out a laugh. "Don't get your gargoyle undies in a twist."

Dante frowned. “Who says I’m wearing undies?”

“Hello!”

Michael yelled from the open French doors off the large patio. “Are you goofballs planning on joining us this evening?”

“I’ll show him a goofball,”

mumbled Dante.

“Of course,”

answered the ever-cordial Ezekiel while simultaneously elbowing Dante. “I just landed, so I’m afraid I held everything up while greeting them.”

Even from ten feet away, Michael’s eyeroll was obvious. “Don’t defend them, Ezekiel. They’ve been standing out here gabbing for at least ten minutes. Let’s go!”

Ten minutes compared to the millennia since they’d been created was barely a blip on the radar. Time could be difficult for him to gauge because of that.

They silently followed Michael inside, the archangel waiting for them to all cross the threshold before replacing the glowing light barrier around the stately home. Once they reached the expansive dining room, Malachi noted that at least a couple of dozen fellow Slayers were in attendance. Most he knew, but there seemed to be some newer recruits mixed in. Of those, Ronen was the only one he’d met before. With a measure of relief, it appeared Lucifer wouldn’t be joining them. He wasn’t in the mood.

He’d never been inside the residence that was reserved for special ceremonies and important meetings. The walls were covered in antique tapestries woven with

symbols of protection. The dining table, which could easily seat fifty, gleamed with polished mahogany. Despite the grandeur, there was a heavy sense of urgency in the air.

Malachi spotted Cassiel and Ronen at the other end of the room. When Cass turned his way, he gave her a nod of acknowledgement that she returned.

“Now that we're all here,”

Michael began, his authoritative voice commanding immediate attention, “let’s get down to business.”

The archangel’s form gleamed slightly, his human guise barely containing the celestial energy beneath. He paced at the head of the table, hands clasped behind his back.

“Danny Rutherford was taken approximately six hours ago from the streets of downtown Aspen. What only I and the other archangels know is that he’s a Nephilim of great importance, and one who is completely unaware of his majestic ancestry.”

Malachi straightened in his chair. A thrum of energy vibrated beneath his skin, a sensation he’d never encountered before. Michael’s icy blue eyes locked on his as if he’d felt it as well.

“Malachi, have you or any in your lair felt the increased presence of shadow in your territory?”

Everyone turned his way, and he was filled with a measure of shame. As one of the sentinels of the Rockies lair, he should’ve been aware of a change in the fabric of the etheric plane.

“I’m afraid I haven’t been vigilant enough.”

He hung his head, unable to bear the weight of his shame. He’d always prided himself on how steadfast he was. That was the main reason he’d been chosen as a sentinel. “If I need to be reassigned, I accept whatever you decide.”

“Malachi, look at me.”

He lifted his head, meeting Michael’s gaze. To his surprise, compassion was etched on Michael’s features, something he’d rarely witnessed from the stoic archangel.

“I only ask because every lair from the western edge of the Rockies to the coast sensed nothing. No blame falls on you for that.”

A hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “You’re a prized sentinel. Never doubt that.”

“Yet it was so clear to us in the East,”

Cassiel interjected. “What could’ve caused that?”

Michael’s features darkened. “They clearly had outside help, a being more capable of dark magic.”

“But why this Danny Rutherford?”

Malachi asked. “What makes him valuable enough for a kidnapping? After all, there have been other Nephilim with an impressive lineage.”

Cassiel snorted. “Right? I get that most of the half-angels come from too much earthly partying, but there’ve still been several that weren’t.”

Michael's expression grew more solemn. "Danny Rutherford is no ordinary high-level Nephilim. His lineage traces directly back to one of the most powerful angels, one with a special connection to humanity."

He cleared his throat. "Present company included."

He paused, then took a deep breath before continuing. "Danny is the last of his bloodline."

A collective murmur rippled through the room. Malachi exchanged glances with Dante, who seemed equally unsettled.

"The ransom demand is extreme,"

Michael continued. "They're ordering us to hand over the Holy Grail."

Gasps echoed around the table. The Holy Grail was one of the top three most significant relics. The other two were the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Ten Commandments, and the scrolls of Mary Magdalene's Gospel, written by her personally. Those items had been in angelic possession for millennia. The rogues would no longer need three relics to plunge the world into darkness. One of the Significants would be all it would take.

"That's ridiculous,"

Dante huffed. "They honestly believe we'd hand them ultimate victory on a silver platter? That we'll sacrifice humanity and the earthly realm for one Nephilim?"

Unexpected rage coursed through Malachi at Dante's words. He curled his fingers into fists, gritting his teeth as heat built under his skin.

“Hey. Mal.”

Ezekiel regarded him with concern. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,”

he growled, startled at his enraged tone. He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. When he opened them again, everyone’s gaze was fixed on him. Somehow, he kept managing to be the center of attention, a state that wasn’t familiar to him. “Sorry.”

He laughed shakily. “Not sure where that came from.”

Ezekiel patted his shoulder. “No worries, man. Just making sure you’re okay. I always carry a lavender oil tincture with me in case anyone needs to chill. These are stressful times.”

Michael’s eyes were narrowed as he considered him, and Malachi felt as though the archangel was seeing into his soul. Michael had a tendency to do that, but it was always unnerving. After another beat, he regarded Dante.

“Obviously, we won’t be negotiating with them, and we certainly won’t be handing over the Grail.”

Michael rubbed his chin. “This is what I believe. We’ve already lost at least one Shadow Slayer to the rogue demons when Lysander switched allegiances. And like him, they’re likely newly turned, so they’ll still appear to be like a typical Slayer.”

They all exchanged glances, undoubtedly wondering the same thing as Malachi. Was the traitor standing in the room with them?

Ronen held up a finger tentatively. “Excuse me, but what evidence do we have that a Slayer has turned?”

Michael’s jaw tightened. “The kidnapping itself. The precision of it. And the fact that Danny was taken without triggering the guardians who protect the unawakened Nephilim.”

Cassiel nodded. “Right. Only a Shadow Slayer would know how to circumvent those protections.”

Malachi felt another surge of that strange heat in his blood. The thought of Danny—this unknown Nephilim—in the hands of shadow gargoyles made his chest constrict painfully.

“So what's the plan?”

Ezekiel said. “We can't give them the Grail, but we can't abandon Danny, either.”

“The plan is basic.”

Michael gazed around the room. “Find Danny and rescue him before the rogues realize we have no intention of delivering the Grail.”

Dante snorted. “Basic is an understatement.”

Michael shot Dante a glare. “Don’t you have a mate and children to attend to?”

Dante glared back, but kept his mouth shut for once.

Ronen cleared his throat. “I know I’m still considered a rookie, but do we have any idea where he is? And won’t they assume we’re going to come after them?”

Michael sighed. “Yes, one would think. Fortunately, their greed and thirst for power do an excellent job of clouding their judgment. The haste with which they contacted us tells me they’re still in the area. I’m sure they’ll have him carefully concealed, but not being the brightest stars in the heavens, they should also be easy enough for you to locate.”

“Even with a Slayer helping them?”

Michael see-sawed his hand. “Maybe. But again, I refer you to greed and thirst for power. Gets them every time.”

Malachi shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The strange energy coursing through him was becoming harder to ignore. It felt like recognition, like a pull toward something previously unknown to him.

“I want to lead the rescue mission.”

He blinked several times, surprising himself with the declaration. Not that he ever shied away from confrontation, but that he should be the one to lead the mission possessed an urgency he was unfamiliar with.

Michael nodded slowly. “I was hoping you’d say that. You’ll take Cassiel, Ronen, and four more volunteers, with the exception of Ezekiel and Dante. We’ll need a healer, and Dante can help watch over the estate with the remaining Slayers.”

Once the assignments had been finalized, Michael produced a small leather pouch and removed a gleaming blue crystal, placing it on the table. “This is attuned to Danny’s energy signature. The closer you get to him, the brighter it will glow.”

Malachi reached for the crystal, and the moment his fingers touched it, a jolt of electricity shot through his body. The crystal flared with blinding light before settling

into a steady pulse.

One corner of Michael's mouth quirked. "I've clearly chosen the right Slayer to lead the charge."

He addressed the remaining gargoyles. "You'll leave within the hour. A cache of weapons is located in the wine cellar. Take whatever you need to supplement what you already have. They were blessed by me before you arrived.

As the meeting dispersed, Malachi clutched the crystal, unable to move from his chair or return the stone to the pouch.

"You're feeling it, aren't you?"

Michael gazed down at him with a knowing smile. Although when Michael smiled, it was more of a 'ha ha, got you' than one of warmth.

"I don't know what's happening."

Mal pressed his palm against his chest where the sensation was strongest. "It started when you mentioned Danny's name."

Michael's expression softened. "I suspected as much."

"What does it mean?"

Malachi swallowed hard, the meaning behind the sensation beginning to dawn on him. However, that didn't explain why he would know such a thing before touching him, which is how a Fated Mate was typically revealed.

Michael placed a hand on Malachi's shoulder. "I'm sure you've figured it out. Danny

Rutherford is your Fated One.”

“But that's impossible.”

Mal shifted from foot to foot. “I've never met him. I've never even seen him. Not only that, but I'm still quite a few kills shy of my quota. How can he possibly be revealed to me now?”

“Some connections transcend the physical, defy rules.”

Michael's expression darkened. “Especially when one half of the bond is so powerful and in danger. The Divine has ways of accelerating what needs to happen.”

Malachi stared at the pulsing crystal in his palm. It felt warm, alive. Like it contained a fragment of Danny's essence. His Danny. The thought sent another wave of possessive heat through his veins.

He squeezed the stone, pressing his lips together as determination surged through him.

“Then I'll see that he's rescued, kept safe. Nothing will get in my way.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am

Danny rubbed the back of his neck, exhausted from a long day of teaching clumsy newbies how to stand on skis.

He plopped down on the small sofa in his apartment, yanking off his boots.

Normally, he would've changed in the locker room where he worked, but his desire to escape his hideous day had overridden any other considerations.

Actual skiing was impossible with this crowd.

The group of awkward, activity-fearing office workers was at the lodge as part of a team-building exercise.

Only their supervisor had skiing experience, and he lorded it over them as if he'd just returned from accepting gold at the Olympics.

Seniority shmeniority.

Not only was he treated like something management had scraped off the bottom of their shoes, but he was the newest hire.

In other words, he got stuck with all the dorks and vertically challenged tourists who could barely stand up without wearing skis, let alone with them on.

They wouldn't even assign him to teach the kids. At least that would be fun. He loved kids.

Too bad my parents don't.

That probably wasn't fair.

They liked kids who met their expectations.

His perfect, fashion-influencer sister had once been a kid, and she could do no wrong.

Spoiled. Bratty. Mean. But had definitely once been child-sized.

Danny continued to peel off layers of clothing as he moved around his studio apartment, the pre-furnished abode part of his contract for the season.

Employee housing at its most vanilla.

The place had no personality whatsoever.

Beige walls, beige carpet, beige furniture. Every time he stumbled in after work, it was like entering a sensory deprivation chamber—except his senses were deprived of anything remotely interesting.

“Beige, beige, beige,”

he muttered, hanging his ski jacket on the wall hook by the front door. “Heaven forbid we have a splash of color to remind us we're alive.”

He padded to the kitchenette in his socks and boxers, grabbing a beer from the fridge.

The cold bottle felt good against his palm as he twisted off the cap and took a long swig.

He leaned against the counter, staring out the window at the twinkling lights of Aspen. So beautiful, so boujee, so not where he'd imagined himself living at twenty-three.

New York would've been more his vibe, but his parents were within driving distance. He shuddered. Too bad Greenwich, Connecticut, wasn't a million miles away. He took another slug of his beer.

If only.

His phone buzzed on the counter. Danny glanced at it, grimacing when he saw his mother's name on the screen.

Speak of one of the devils.

With a groaning sigh, Danny picked up the phone.

His thumb hovered over the screen for a moment before he swiped to decline.

Not tonight. He couldn't handle another lecture about his 'lifestyle choices' or subtle hints about the 'nice girls' from their country club.

"Sorry, Mother Dearest. Danny can't come to the phone right now. He's busy being a disappointment."

He raised his beer in a mock toast.

The phone immediately buzzed again. He rolled his eyes and set it face down on the counter. Whatever family crisis had erupted could wait until tomorrow. Or never. Never sounded sublime.

The beer bottle was empty before he realized it.

Danny tossed it into the recycling bin with a clang and stretched his arms above his head, feeling the pleasant burn in his lean muscles.

Despite the annoying clients, at least skiing kept him in shape. However, he needed to get out of his beige prison before the walls closed in on him.

“Time to wash away childhood triggers.”

He headed toward the bathroom.

The shower was hot, steamy, and precisely what he needed. He stood under the spray longer than necessary, letting the water pound against his shoulders. It was relaxing, yet something felt off tonight.

A weird tingling sensation had been crawling up his spine all day, like he was being watched.

He’d attributed it to the pervy supervisor who kept staring at his ass during the lessons, but now, alone in his apartment, the feeling persisted.

Maybe he was finally coming unraveled.

The opportunity to escape his family when his primary college hookup told him about the ski instructor job had seemed like a good idea at the time.

An impulsive move, but had achieved his goal of distance and self-sufficiency.

He didn’t want their money to continue having a hold on him, didn’t give two shits about being a business major and figured he’d meet a lot of hot guys in the luxury

resort town.

On the one hand, he'd been correct.

On the other hand, he hadn't planned on how lonely and empty he'd feel after a year of isolated existence.

He didn't miss his family.

He just missed having real friends. Any positive relationships he'd formed over the years were gone once they'd all become adults and chosen different life paths.

After drying off, Danny pulled on a pair of tight as fuck jeans and a blue sweater that his sister had once said made his eyes pop.

Not that he gave a shit what she thought, but the compliment had been rare enough to stick with him.

A quick ruffle of his shoulder-length blond hair and a spritz of cologne later, he was out the door, headed for the Silver Fox.

The trendy club was Aspen's most popular gay bar, nestled between high-end boutiques and art galleries that he could no longer afford to browse, let alone shop in.

He rubbed his palms together after shrugging on his down jacket.

“Time for some overpriced drinks and a meaningless hookup.”

As he made his way through the snow, the club being only a few blocks from his building, the night air bit at his cheeks, and he pulled his jacket tighter.

The streets of Aspen were still bustling with the après-ski crowd, all designer clothing and perfect hair.

He weaved through the jovial groups of people, feeling both part of and separate from the privileged world he'd once inhabited.

The Silver Fox's neon sign cast a purple glow across the snow-covered sidewalk as he approached.

The thump of bass grew louder with each step, promising the oblivion he craved.

He nodded to the bouncer, a burly guy named Rex who'd turned him down twice yet still remembered his name, and slipped inside.

"Danny-boy!"

The bartender, Zack, called out as he entered.

"The usual?"

"Make it a double."

Danny slid onto a barstool and shrugged off his jacket. "Been that kind of day."

"Tourist lessons again?"

Zack chuckled, already pouring vodka with a splash of cranberry.

"The worst. One woman kept shrieking with terror every time she moved an inch. I swear I've got permanent hearing damage."

He accepted the drink with a grateful smile, taking a generous sip. The alcohol burned pleasantly down his throat, dulling the edges of his fatigue.

The club was filling up, the usual mix of wealthy vacationers and the service industry locals who kept Aspen running. Danny scanned the room, noting a few familiar faces and several new ones. A tall, dark-haired man caught his eye from across the bar and raised his glass in greeting.

“Fresh meat at three o’clock,”

Zack murmured, wiping down the counter. “Tourist, judging by the watch that probably costs more than my car. Also, two diamond rings. Definitely real.”

Danny snorted. “Damn, Mr. Cartier. You’ve got some laser vision there.”

Zack smirked. “Funny. He’s been up here twice already, and excuse me if I have a Master’s degree in luxury. I’ve been trained well working in the town.”

Danny laughed. “Fair enough. Well then, time to move in for the kill.”

Zack grinned. “That’s the spirit. Use that charm offensive I know you’ve got.”

Danny downed the rest of his drink, then slid the empty glass toward Zack. “Another for courage, then I’m going in.”

Two drinks and forty minutes later, Danny was pressed against the wall near the dance floor, the dark-haired man—Simon, visiting from San Francisco—whispering something in his ear that was probably meant to be seductive but came off as desperate. He smiled anyway, nodding as if whatever Simon was saying was the most fascinating thing he’d ever heard.

“Want to get out of here?”

Simon's breath was hot against his neck, smelling of expensive bourbon and mint.

Danny hesitated. Simon was attractive enough with his perfectly styled hair, jawline that could cut glass, and designer attire, but something felt off. That same tingling sensation from earlier crawled up his spine, stronger now. He glanced around the crowded club, half-expecting to see someone staring daggers at him, but everyone seemed absorbed in their own revelry.

“Actually,”

Danny said, gently placing a hand on Simon's chest to create some space between them, “I think I need some air first. Want to join me outside for a minute?”

Simon's perfect smile faltered slightly. “It's freezing out there.”

“Just for a minute.”

Danny gave Simon his most captivating smile, already slipping away from the wall. “It's so stuffy in here.”

The man sighed dramatically but followed him toward the exit. As they pushed through the crowd, Danny caught a glimpse of something odd—a shadow that seemed to move against the flow of the club's lighting. He blinked, and it was gone.

Maybe he'd had more to drink than he thought.

Outside, the frigid air hit him like a slap, clearing some of the alcohol fog from his brain. Simon immediately wrapped an arm around Danny's shoulders, pulling him close.

“Fuck. Better hurry with that air. I’m not dressed for an Arctic expedition.”

Simon’s teeth chattered, and he made a sound like a decrepit old car’s engine being started. Simon’s hotness factor had just dropped several notches.

Unease still clawed in Danny’s gut, and he realized there was no way he was going home alone. Irrational or not, he couldn’t escape the feeling of dread that had taken hold of him. Even though Simon’s appeal had diminished, he was taller and stronger than Danny was. At the moment, that was the exact quality he wanted in a man.

“What the...?”

Simon let go of Danny as he staggered backward, his gaze fixed on something behind Danny. His face contorted in a mixture of confusion and fear.

"Did you see that?" Simon pointed toward the alley next to the Silver Fox. “Something just moved in there. Something... Big.”

He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, then took a step back. “I thought it was a weird dude, but...”

Simon shook his head. “I don’t know what the fuck that was.”

Danny turned, squinting into the darkness. The alley was a narrow gap between the bar and an upscale boutique, barely visible in the dim glow of distant streetlights. For a moment, he saw nothing. Then a shadow shifted—blackier than the surrounding darkness, with an angular shape that seemed to unfold from itself.

“Probably just someone taking out the trash.”

Danny laughed nervously, trying to convince himself more than Simon. But the

prickling sensation along his spine intensified, as if tiny electric shocks were dancing up and down his vertebrae.

Simon took another step back, shaking his head more frantically. “I’m not into this weird shit. Look, I’m calling an Uber.”

Simon pulled out his phone, his fingers trembling slightly as he swiped at the screen. “Whatever’s going on with you, I don’t want any part of it.”

“Wait, what?”

Danny reached for Simon’s arm, but the man jerked away. “There’s nothing going on with me. It’s probably only—”

“Only what? Some kind of practical joke?”

Simon’s voice cracked. “You know, having your friends lurk in alleys wearing whatever the fuck that was, isn’t my idea of foreplay.”

“I don’t have friends here,”

Danny blurted, immediately regretting how pathetic it sounded. “I mean, I don’t know anyone who would do something like that.”

“My ride’s three minutes away.”

Simon turned, picking up a light jog. He peered over his shoulder as he increased his pace. “Don’t follow me.”

Danny crossed his arms angrily. “Don’t worry. You’re not that interesting!”

Even as the words left his mouth, he realized they were more than an insult. They were the truth. Which meant he'd been ready to go fuck yet another stranger he didn't think was all that great. Getting laid so he didn't have to be alone. Once in a while, okay. But almost every night? If only there were someone he actually gave a shit about. Even better would be someone who gave a shit about him, too.

An ominous, rumbling growl sounded behind him, and he whirled around with a gasp. That's enough introspection for one night. He needed to get back inside, where there were plenty of people. Figuring out how to get home could be handled in the safety of the bar.

"Are you all right?"

Danny yelped, whipping back around at the sound of a man's deep voice. The tone was what he'd usually consider soothing, yet somehow it was making him squeamish. He regarded the brawny, pale-skinned man who towered over him. Here was another devastatingly handsome guy, another potential hookup that in truth did nothing for him. Maybe his dick was broken.

"Uh, yeah."

Danny cleared his throat. "I'm fine, I just..."

He glanced over his shoulder, almost certain that he heard something like a stick, or large claws, scraping against concrete. He chuckled shakily, muttering to himself, "That's ridiculous."

"What was that?"

The strange man moved closer, and Danny stepped back without thinking. "Did you say something?"

Danny put his hand to his forehead. So odd. His thoughts seemed muddled, as if he'd downed two shots of tequila in a row. It didn't make any sense.

"You know, I think I should go back inside,"

he said, the words like marbles he'd struggled to push out.

The man placed a gentle hand on his elbow. "You'd better come with me. You don't look very well, and there are dangerous people inside the bar. They're trying to hurt you."

Danny's stomach clenched. "Huh? That doesn't make any sense."

He shook his head, trying to clear the fog that had settled over his mind. He yanked his arm away from the stranger's grip, though it felt like trying to move through molasses. "Who the hell are you?"

"A friend,"

the man said, his voice silky smooth, almost hypnotic. "I've been watching you, Danny. Keeping you safe."

Danny's addled brain managed to register the red flag. "Fortunately, that's not creepy."

He tried to move away from the stranger, but his legs weren't cooperating. "What's happening to me?"

The man smiled, revealing too-perfect teeth, the incisors unusually pointy. "A little something to help you relax."

A cold sweat broke out across Danny's forehead. This was bad. Epically bad. The man's face seemed to shift slightly in the dim light, features becoming sharper, more predatory.

"You drugged me?"

Danny managed to gasp, his vision beginning to blur around the edges. The man's features appeared wavy, like a mirage in desert heat, occasionally revealing something that couldn't possibly be human underneath.

"Such a crude term,"

the stranger replied, wrapping an arm around Danny's shoulders as his legs threatened to give out. "I prefer to think of it as...easing the transition."

Danny tried to scream, but his voice emerged as little more than a whimper. The few pedestrians passing by didn't even glance their way, as if they couldn't see what was happening right in front of them.

"No one will notice us,"

the man said, reading Danny's thoughts with disturbing accuracy. "A simple glamour. They see only what I want them to see—two friends, one helping the other home after too many drinks."

Danny's legs gave way beneath him, and the stranger caught him with surprising strength, lifting him as if he weighed nothing. Through his rapidly tunneling vision, he caught glimpses of monstrous silhouettes against the alley walls, twisted, hunched forms with what looked like wings folded against their backs. The creatures moved with a strange, stilted grace, their eyes gleaming with an unnatural ruby fire in the darkness.

“Look, Danny.”

The man laughed, a hideous, booming sound. “Meet your adoring fans.”

As the man’s laughter echoed in Danny’s fading consciousness, he managed to croak out, “What are you?”

“Something ancient,”

the man whispered, his breath icy cold against Danny’s ear. “Something that’s been waiting for you for a very long time.”

Danny’s vision blacked out completely as he felt himself being carried into the alley. The last thing he registered was an inhuman noise, as if someone had beaten a huge wasps’ nest with a bat and they were swarming, stinging, hurting...

Destroying.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am

The moment Malachi reached the outer edges of Aspen, Danny's presence slammed into him like a physical force, nearly driving him from the sky.

"Whoa there,"

Cassiel called out. "You okay, Champ?"

"It's him,"

Malachi yelled. "He's here. Close."

The crystal in the pouch around his neck radiated heat, further confirming what he already knew. The gem connected them. With one final push of his massive wings, he soared downward, toward the rooftop of a building near the eastern outskirts of downtown, near a park.

None of the structures were tall. Most were only two-story, which made it difficult to remain under the radar. A mixture of historic, quaint, and contemporary design dominated the busy town, yet nothing about the mountain location was reminiscent of a large city.

He touched down on the building's surface, immediately shifting. The crystal had warmed his skin to the point of discomfort. But Malachi wouldn't remove it if his flesh caught fire. This fragile piece of stone was his connection to his mate—his kidnapped, endangered mate.

"I can also feel the bastards,"

he growled to Ronen and Cassiel as they landed beside him with the rest of the team. “Shadow gargoyles. At least a dozen, maybe more.”

Cassiel nodded, her gleaming, amber eyes scanning the streets below. “They haven't left the area. Bold move.”

“Or stupid,”

Ronen added, checking his weapons. “Makes our job easier if they're still here.”

Malachi frowned. “Perhaps. Or it's a trap.”

Ronen scanned the pristine streets of Aspen, his expression grim. “I expected them to flee the area immediately after the kidnapping.”

Cassiel clapped Ronen on the shoulder. “When you've dealt with these unwashed assholes enough times, you'll come to realize that they're full of many unpleasant surprises.”

Malachi grunted. “And full of themselves. I'd say one of our biggest advantages over them is their misguided belief that they're stronger, that they can't lose.”

Ronen regarded him with a furrowed brow. “But we've defeated so many of them. How could they possibly believe that?”

Ronen was an excellent warrior, but as a newer Slayer who'd been appointed to fill the empty spots left by traitors, he still didn't fully comprehend how deluded the shadow gargoyles were.

“The Shadows feed on darkness.”

Malachi clenched his jaw, fighting against his anger. “They believe their numbers are infinite. Each one we kill only makes them more determined to prove their superiority.”

He closed his eyes, focusing on the pulsing crystal against his chest. The connection to Danny strengthened with each passing second. He was terrifyingly close, yet somehow obscured.

“Something’s blocking the exact location.”

Malachi opened his eyes as he traced the outline of the crystal through his shirt. “I can feel him, but it’s diffused.”

Cassiel nodded. “They must be using a masking spell. Basic magic, but effective if you don’t know what you’re looking for.”

“Fan out,”

Malachi ordered. “But stay within sight of each other. Ronen and Cassiel, you’re with me. The rest of you split into pairs. I want this entire downtown area covered in the next thirty minutes. If you encounter any shadows, do not engage alone. Signal for backup.”

He sucked in a deep breath, the crystal’s warmth becoming almost unbearable now, yet he welcomed the discomfort. It meant Danny was alive.

“Mal.”

Cassiel elbowed him as the others dispersed. “Are you sure you should be leading this? Your connection to Danny might be clouding your judgment.”

“I’m fine,”

he snapped, immediately regretting his tone. “Sorry.”

He laid a hand on Cassiel’s shoulder, lowering his head. “I wasn’t expecting to feel this way when I found my mate, as if my body is no longer my own. Especially since I haven’t actually met him.”

He glanced up. “It’s so strange. I was with Dante when he met Amir for the first time. He literally didn’t know who they were to each other until he touched him.”

Cassiel arched her eyebrows. “Damn. This is intense. I haven’t been around any Slayers when they found their mates, so I had no clue how it worked. But Michael did say there’s something special about Danny, right?”

She shrugged. “That must mean he has a stronger light.”

Ronen cleared his throat. “Yeah. Michael warned us you might be...”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Unusually affected. That’s why he insisted we stay with you.”

Malachi pressed his lips together, the urge to sling a nasty remark about Michael staying out of his business being almost impossible to resist. He was accustomed to being a level-headed creature. He’d always been the mellow one compared to Dante. Not less dedicated, or less vicious when the occasion called for his ruthless prowess, but not hostile or defensive.

“Look,”

said Malachi. “I get it. My behavior is a little off, but Michael also said I was the

perfect one to lead this mission. You guys are here with me for balance.”

He glanced between his fellow Slayers. “Are we good?”

They both nodded, and Cassiel gave him a wry smile. “I’m not worried. We’ve always had each other’s backs. And it’s kind of cool to witness what this Fated Mate stuff is all about.”

Ronen grinned. “And honestly, I’m relieved you’ve got us for backup. You look like you might tear through walls with your bare hands to find this guy.”

Malachi couldn’t deny Ronen’s assessment. The urge to shift and rampage through Aspen until he found Danny clawed at him from within. Only centuries of discipline kept him in check.

“Then let’s move.”

Malachi did a quick scan of the area and motioned for Cassiel and Ronen to follow him. A darkened area surrounded by a large pine and some shrubbery at the back of the building was ideal for them to land after a quick shift. Even if humans couldn’t see them when shifted, changing to their human form was another matter. That was when they needed to be discreet.

They descended to street level and, after shifting, blended seamlessly with the evening crowd of well-heeled tourists and locals. Malachi kept his senses wide open, following the crystal’s pull like a compass. As they moved deeper into the downtown area, the pulsing grew stronger, more insistent.

Mal paused, closing his eyes, visualizing where the crystal wanted him to go. His eyes flew open as a vision of a terrified young man filled his mind.

“This way.”

He rushed down a side street lined with upscale boutiques and restaurants, not bothering to check whether Cassiel and Ronen had followed. He had no doubt they had, but it didn't matter. Danny was so close. Nothing could keep him from his mate.

He was drawn toward a grand building with a distinctive facade. A dark blue awning announced that it was the Wheeler Opera House. The historic architecture stood in stark contrast to the modern buildings surrounding it. The crystal pulsed with an almost frantic energy. As unexpected as it was, this was definitely the right place.

“The opera house?”

Cassiel caught up with him. “That's weird.”

“Too public,”

Ronen agreed. Several patrons were entering for what must be an evening performance. “Why would they risk holding a kidnapped Nephilim in such a visible location?”

Malachi narrowed his eyes, studying the building. “I doubt they're the stars of the evening's show.”

He focused harder, letting his gargoyle senses expand beyond human limitations. “There's more to it. Underground passages, perhaps. Old buildings like this often have secrets.”

Cassiel clapped her hands together. “Works for me. Do we bust in there all dramatic-like? Cause I've been dying to make a grand entrance.”

Ronen smirked at her. “Yeah. Let’s draw as much attention as possible. What could possibly go wrong?”

Cassie tsked. “Newbies. Wouldn’t know sarcasm if it bitch-slapped them in the face.”

“Hey!”

Ronen crossed his arms. “That was completely unnecessary.”

"We can't wait,"

Malachi growled. “Every second Danny remains in their clutches is too long. However...”

He directed his words at Cassiel. “We don’t attract attention.”

He turned to Ronen. “Humor. The only thing preventing me from losing my ever-loving fucking mind in the face of all this evil.”

Ronen nodded. “Got it. I can see how battling demons and traitors for centuries might wear on you.”

Cassiel snorted. “Uh, yeah. Just a tad.”

Malachi gritted his teeth as a sharp pain sliced through his gut. Fuck. They were torturing Danny, he was sure of it.

“No more blabbing. We need to get inside this way too public building that’s away from these crowds. Shifting and using a rooftop window or vent is an old standby.”

Cassie pointed. “Except for the blaze of lights. Wanna make a bet that it’s where the

theatre is? It might seem odd to the opera patrons if windows and vent shields begin opening by themselves.”

Malachi pressed his lips together. “Even so, the theatre can’t be the entire upper floor. There’s a reason we don’t usually break in on ground level.”

He wished they knew the layout of the building.

“Sure, fewer prying eyes,”

said Cassiel. “But there have to be other options.”

Another vicious pain burst in Malachi’s lower back. “Dammit!”

Ronen gasped. “Watch what you say. Michael will have a fit.”

Cassiel rolled her eyes. “When is he not having a fit about something?”

“Enough!”

Malachi growled again. “They’re hurting Danny. He doesn’t seem to be aware of what they’re doing, but that’s not to say he won’t suffer physical injuries.”

Ronen grabbed Malachi’s arm. “Of course. Whatever you say. I’m too familiar with their depravity.”

Cassiel lowered her head. Zeke had shared that Cassiel was part of the team that rescued Ronen when he’d been tortured and questioned by the rogues.

Malachi gave him a quick dip of his chin. “Right. Let’s circle the building and search for the most vulnerable spot.”

He regarded Cassiel, who still appeared sullen from the reminder of Ronen's brush with death. "Makes more sense to go through the ground floor anyway. Especially if there is a basement or tunnels. Right?"

She lifted her eyes and gave him a crooked smile. "Sounds good, buddy."

They quickly made their way to a narrow alley, checking to ensure they weren't being observed before ducking down the dark corridor. Almost immediately, Malachi spotted a simple metal door marked 'Staff Only' that was partially hidden behind a dumpster. He motioned for Cassiel and Ronen to move closer. Cassiel pulled out a small vial of clear liquid from her pocket.

"Lock dissolution."

She held up the potion. "Much more elegant than breaking it down."

Malachi had never possessed the patience for magical doo-dads. Call him inelegant, but nothing was more satisfying than bashing through a barrier.

He grunted. "I suppose we should keep things on the quiet side."

Before she could apply the potion, Malachi froze, grabbing both their arms, whispering, "Wait. Someone's coming."

They ducked down as a tall figure in a long, dark coat approached the entrance on the opposite end of the alley.

The mysterious figure moved with purpose, checking over their shoulder before slipping a key into the lock of another door, perhaps twenty feet from them.

As they turned to push the door open, a shaft of moonlight illuminated their face.

Cassiel slapped a hand to her mouth before whispering, "Holy shit. That's Gideon."

Malachi's blood ran cold, rage building in his body. Sure, they'd theorized there must be a Slayer who had turned, but Gideon was a Sentinel from the main Southwestern lair, one he'd fought alongside mere months ago.

"What's he doing here?"

Ronen shook his head. "Michael didn't mention him being part of the mission."

Malachi opened and closed his fists. "He's not."

The pieces fell into place with sickening clarity. "He's the fucking traitor."

The crystal against Malachi's chest pulsed with renewed intensity, drawing him toward the direction of the betrayer. Danny was beyond that door, surrounded by darkness and malevolence.

"We follow him, but don't shift yet. We don't know what we're walking into once we get inside, so we need to remain low-key. Cassiel, summon the others. Have them remain on alert, surround the building until we call them in for backup."

Malachi's body itched to shift, to tear Gideon apart limb from limb. But Danny's safety came first. They waited until the door closed behind Gideon before moving forward, silent as shadows themselves.

Cassiel uncorked the vial she'd held up earlier and dripped the clear liquid around the lock while Ronen kept watch. The potion sizzled with a soft hiss, the metal dissolving like sugar in hot water.

"Ready?"

Malachi wrapped his fingers around the hilt of his blade.

Ronen and Cassiel nodded, their weapons already drawn.

With practiced precision, Malachi eased the door open, wincing at the slight creak of hinges.

A narrow corridor stretched before them, dimly lit by emergency lights.

The air was thick with the stench of shadow, like sulfur mixed with rotting flesh.

Malachi pressed forward, the crystal becoming like fire.

He quickly grasped the burning stone in his palm before its deep blue glow gave their position away.

Every fiber of his being screamed to rush ahead, but centuries of battle experience kept his movements controlled.

The corridor led to a stairwell descending into darkness.

“They're close.”

Cassiel wrinkled her nose. “A fuckton of them.”

Malachi nodded grimly. “Like plague rats.”

The crystal urged him forward. They moved silently down the hallway, past abandoned storage rooms and utility closets. The building's public spaces seemed miles away from this forgotten underbelly.

The crystal's pulse quickened, matching Malachi's heartbeat. Danny was close. So close.

A faint sound reached their ears—chanting in an ancient language that made Malachi's skin crawl. The words were familiar yet twisted, a corrupted version of the angelic tongue.

“Ritual magic,”

Cassiel murmured. “They're summoning all the powers of darkness.”

Ronen sneered. “Never thought I'd say this, but where's Lucifer when you need him?”

Malachi huffed. “That useless bastard? Why do you think he has minions? He sits around on his sorry ass all day. Never met such a lazy fuck.”

Cassiel rolled her eyes. “Seriously. Every time he shows up at one of our council meetings, I want to bash his condescending face in. I still can't believe Michael puts up with him.”

A muffled sound echoed from somewhere ahead, a pained groan that sent a jolt of fury through Malachi's body.

“Danny,”

he breathed, every muscle tensing.

Ronen placed a restraining hand on his arm. “Easy. We need to know what we're walking into.”

The corridor opened into a larger space that appeared to be an old storage area for stage props and equipment.

Dusty set pieces loomed like ghostly spectators as they crept forward.

The chanting grew louder, emanating from behind a massive backdrop painted with a faded mountain scene.

Malachi signaled for them to fan out, taking the center position himself.

The pain from the crystal only fueled his determination.

Danny's presence enveloped him.

His mate was frightened, confused, but alive.

They rounded the backdrop, where they were met with a stone wall.

Malachi ran his fingers along the cold surface, quickly discovering a seam that had to be the edge of a hidden entrance.

He met Cassiel's eyes and pointed at his discovery.

She nodded, removing another vial with a purplish tint that gave off a faint light.

With a flick of her wrist, she sprinkled several drops against the stone, and within moments, the barrier melted silently, as if it were wood and she'd immersed it in acid.

Malachi whispered in her ear.

"Signal the reinforcements, but instruct them to remain stealth as they close in."

They used their enhanced vision to guide them down the dark, winding hallway.

After rounding a corner, they froze at the sight before them.

In the center of a cavernous basement stood an improvised altar draped with black cloth.

Candles formed a wide circle around the sacrilegious display, their flames unnaturally still despite the draft whispering through the room.

Danny lay across the altar, his wrists and ankles bound with what seemed to be living shadow, tendrils of darkness writhing against his skin.

His eyes were open yet vacant. Clearly, he was under some kind of spell.

Surrounding the altar were what must be forty or fifty shadow gargoyles, their twisted forms hunched in reverence as they continued their unholy chant.

Gideon stood at the head of the altar, hands raised, a malevolent grin distorting his once-familiar features.

A curved obsidian dagger gleamed in his right hand.

He held it up high, perched on his palms as if he were about to auction it off.

“The time draws near,”

Gideon announced, his voice deeper than Malachi remembered, as if something else spoke through him. “As soon as our enemy brings us the Holy Grail, I will plunge this dagger into his heart, catching the blood of the Nephilim in the sacred vessel.”

His lips peeled back in a hideous grin. “Then we will be the ones who will have power over all the rogues and shadow gargoyles!”

The rage building in Malachi’s chest threatened to explode. Danny’s long blond hair spilled across the black altar cloth, his lean body trembling despite his trance-like state.

“Now, Cassiel,”

he snarled. “Summon the Slayers!”

With a feral battle cry, Malachi rushed forward, focusing only on saving Danny, getting him away from the filth who had dared to touch him.

The shadow gargoyles whirled at Malachi’s cry, their ruby eyes flaring with surprise and hatred. In an instant, the basement erupted into chaos. Snarls and screeches replaced the unholy chanting as the creatures abandoned their ritual positions.

“Slayers!”

Gideon roared, his voice no longer human. He yanked Danny up by his hair, pressing the twisted blade against his throat. “One more step and I’ll end him now!”

Malachi froze mid-stride, his entire body vibrating with barely contained fury. The crystal against his chest burned like a supernova, Danny’s fear pulsing through their connection.

“You won’t,”

Malachi growled, his voice dropping to the dangerous register that had made even Michael raise an eyebrow on occasion. “You need him alive for your pathetic little

ceremony.”

Gideon’s face contorted into something gnarled, features shifting between his familiar face and something grotesque beneath. “Perhaps. But I don’t need him unharmed.”

The dagger pressed deeper, drawing a drop of blood from Danny’s throat. Even in his trance-like state, Danny flinched, a small whimper escaping his lips. The sound pierced Malachi’s heart like an arrow.

“Let him go, Gideon. This isn’t you, you’re not like them.”

Cassiel stepped forward, her weapon gleaming. “You’re surrounded. The others are already here.”

As if on cue, the remaining Slayers materialized from the gloomy recesses of the basement, weapons drawn. The shadow gargoyles hissed and snarled, their twisted forms shifting restlessly, primed for battle.

A cloud of doubt passed over Gideon’s features, his expression reminiscent of his true self. But Malachi didn’t have time to ponder whether Gideon could be redeemed. All that mattered was Danny.

With a roaring shout, Malachi called out, “Attack!”

He shifted in mid-air, his wings bursting from his body, blade dropping to the floor as his talons extended. He slammed into Gideon, wrenching Danny free from his clutches. Danny fell to the ground in a lifeless heap, and for a split second, Malachi was also distracted.

Gideon lunged toward him, slicing the black blade across Malachi’s chest, tearing his

stony flesh. No earthly blade could cut gargoyle skin, only the claws, fangs, or spikes of a shifted monster. Whether born of heaven or hell, a grotesque could only be injured by another of a similar kind. Malachi stumbled backward, holding his palm to the open gash. It wasn't deep, but it was bleeding profusely.

"You can't win, Gideon!"

Cassiel shouted, decapitating a shadow gargoyle with a graceful arc of her blade. "The rest of our team is destroying those who follow you!"

Behind them, Ronen and the remaining Slayers engaged with lethal precision, their weapons flashing as they cut through the shadows. The narrow space worked to their advantage, funneling the creatures into a deadly bottleneck.

Malachi remained between Gideon and Danny, determined to stand his ground, Cassiel now standing beside him, shoulder to shoulder.

"You heard her, Gideon. Give up."

Malachi wanted to appeal to the brave warrior who had once fought beside him, reach past the darkness, and bring him back to the light. But his overpowering rage toward the piece of shit who'd dared to hurt and threaten his mate couldn't be contained. If Gideon didn't drop his weapon that second, all bets were off.

Gideon's eyes blazed with hellfire as his form shimmered between his human shape and something far more monstrous than his gargoyle.

"You don't understand what power they've promised me,"

he snarled, his voice oscillating between his own and something ancient, guttural. "This Nephilim is the key. His bloodline carries the essence we need."

“And you believe them?”

Malachi spat, edging closer. “The rogue demons lie, Gideon. They’ve been lying for ages. Lucifer taught them too well, which is the only reason he came to the Divine Spark for help.”

“Don’t you remember, Gideon?”

Cassiel interjected. “You were once a sentinel, a proud Slayer. It’s not too late to let go of your power lust and return to the fold.”

A flicker of doubt crossed Gideon’s features before his expression hardened once more. “Too late for regrets now.”

With inhuman speed, he lunged toward Danny’s prone form.

Malachi intercepted him with a brutal tackle, both of them crashing into the altar. The obsidian blade sliced across his forearm as they grappled, the pain white-hot but secondary to his need to protect Danny.

“Get Danny out of here!”

Malachi shouted to Cassiel as he wrestled with Gideon on the stone floor, talons raking against the traitor's flesh.

Cassiel darted forward, scooping up Danny’s limp form. The moment she touched him, Danny’s eyes flew open, a startled gasp escaping his lips.

“No!”

Gideon bellowed, his partially shifted form contorting with rage. “The ritual isn't

complete!”

Malachi seized the momentary distraction, swiping a wing against Gideon’s side and flipping him onto his back.

“You chose the wrong team,”

Malachi growled, pinning Gideon with his weight. “And you touched what’s mine.”

Behind them, the clash of blades and the screeches of dying shadow gargoyles filled the vast space. Malachi’s focus narrowed to the traitor beneath him, his vision edged with unbridled fury.

“Your mate?”

Gideon laughed, blood bubbling from his lips. “You haven’t claimed him. He doesn’t even know what he is.”

“He’s still mine to protect,”

Malachi gritted, his talons digging into Gideon’s shoulders. “Something you should’ve been doing instead of serving these abominations.”

Gideon’s face contorted, his features becoming increasingly mutated as he crept closer to leaving his true gargoyle behind. “The rogues showed me truths you refuse to see. The Divine Spark keeps us leashed like dogs while we fight their eternal war.”

“Save your bullshit for someone who cares.”

Malachi’s tail curled upward, swishing back and forth, the spiked club at the end of the appendage ready to finish what Gideon had started when he stole Danny. “Last

chance. Will you surrender?”

“Fuck you and your self-righteous stupidity.”

Gideon’s lips pulled back in a sneer. “My only regret is not getting to see him gutted and drained of every drop of his precious blood while you were forced to watch.”

Before he drew another breath, Malachi crushed Gideon’s skull with the club of his tail.

He spat on the traitor, then jumped to his feet.

Oily black smoke and the acrid stench of the ash remaining from slain shadow gargoyles surrounded him.

Ronen rushed over, shifting back to his human form.

One shadow remained, a warrior he’d never officially met still battling it out with the disgusting creature.

Malachi swiped the back of his bloodstained hand across his lips. “Excuse me for a sec,”

he said to Ronen as he stomped across the room. He tapped on the Slayer’s shoulder, and the second he turned, Malachi thwacked the shadow on the side of the head with his tail. The creature vaporized and joined his buddies in a pile of ashes on the floor.

The Slayer frowned at him. “Hey, I had it.”

The crystal around his neck had survived unscathed, and Danny was alive and safe. He couldn’t give a shit about anything else.

“Yeah. I’m sure you did.”

He trained his eyes toward the exit. “But I’ve got somewhere important to be.”

A smile teased at the edges of his mouth. “And I can’t wait a second longer.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am

Danny tried to loosen the cotton from his brain, but it wasn't working all that well. He was in a comfy bed in a room he'd never seen before. The opulent space was nothing like he'd ever witnessed, other than maybe Bridgerton.

I've totally been roofied.

How else could he explain that one minute some weirdo was creeping up on him, then a big nothingness until now? He blinked several times at the muscle hunk staring at him from a fancy chair next to the bed.

Oof.

Hardcore hottie. But then a disturbing thought filled him. What if he and the weirdo were buddies and had been passing him around?

Eww.

His nerves kicked up a notch, and he fought to keep his panic in check. He was a reasonably intelligent person. Surely he could devise a way to get out of this situation.

If only my brain wasn't a big pile of mush.

"You're safe now."

Hot guy's deep voice washed over Danny like warm honey. "I promise."

Danny squinted, trying to focus on the man's face. Chiseled jaw, plump kiss-worthy lips, intense green eyes, wavy chestnut hair. Definitely not the creep from outside the Silver Fox.

“Where am I?”

Danny managed, his voice scratchy. “And who the hell are you?”

The man moved closer, perching carefully on the edge of the bed as if afraid Danny might bolt. “My name is Malachi. You can call me Mal.”

He paused, seeming to choose his words carefully. “You're in a safe house outside of Aspen. We rescued you from...”

He cleared his throat. “A very dangerous situation.”

“Rescued?”

Danny attempted to sit up, wincing as his head throbbed in protest and a jolt of pain shot through his side. He touched his throat where a spot was stinging, and realized there was a small wound. “Like, superhero rescued?”

A ghost of a smile touched Mal's lips. “Something like that. How much do you remember?”

“Not much.”

Danny gingerly touched his side where the pain had flared. “I was outside the Silver Fox with some guy named Simon, then this creepy dude approached me...”

He trailed off, fragments of memories flickering through his mind like a broken film

reel. “There were shadows that moved wrong. And eyes...”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “Red eyes in the dark surrounding me. I couldn’t move, like those nightmares where you’re trying to run away, but it feels like you’re slogging through quicksand. Then something...”

His stomach roiled. “Something foul touched me and...”

He shook his head frantically, immediately regretting it when a stabbing pain crashed through him. “It must’ve been whatever I was drugged with, making me imagine things. No way any of that was real.”

Mal regarded him with a grave expression. “That wasn't a hallucination, Danny.”

Danny swallowed hard. “Awesome. So I'm not crazy, just in the middle of some supernatural horror movie.”

He winced. “Those things weren't human, were they?”

“No.”

Mal’s voice was gentle but firm. “They weren’t.”

Danny's gaze darted around the room, taking in more of the ornate furniture, the massive four-poster bed, and the heavy velvet curtains. This was no ordinary safe house. This was the kind of place billionaires stayed when they wanted to ‘rough it’ in the mountains.

He should know. Definitely the type of place his snooty, entitled parents would insist on.

“Right. And I'm supposed to believe you're merely some Good Samaritan who happened to be in the right place at the right time?”

His voice held more bravado than he felt. His side also wouldn't stop throbbing like something fierce, and he couldn't shake the feeling that something monumental had shifted in his reality.

Malachi sighed, running a hand through his thick hair. “Not exactly. I was sent specifically to find you.”

“Cool. Thankfully, that's not at all creepy.”

Danny pulled the plush duvet tighter around himself.

“Fair enough.”

Malachi nodded. “You have no reason to trust me. But I swear to you, Danny, I mean you no harm.”

The way this Malachi guy said his name sent an unexpected shiver down Danny's spine. There was something in his tone—reverence, maybe?—that struck him as oddly intimate.

“How do you know my name?”

Danny glanced around for potential escape routes. The bedroom door seemed miles away in his current state.

“It's complicated.”

Malachi sighed. “More complicated than you can imagine. But you deserve the

truth.”

He hesitated, then met Danny’s eyes with an intensity that made his breath catch. “You’re special, Danny. Those creatures wanted you because of what you are.”

"What I am?" Danny let out a nervous laugh. “I’m a ski instructor who pisses off his parents by being gay. Not exactly prized treasure material.”

Malachi locked eyes with him. “You’re Nephilim.”

Malachi had announced it simply, as if that explained everything.

Danny blinked. “I’m...”

He tilted his head. “What now?”

“Nephilim. Half-human, half-angel. Your bloodline traces back to one of the most powerful celestial beings formed by the Divine Spark’s hands.”

Danny stared at him for a beat before bursting into laughter, immediately regretting it when both his head, his side, and now his back protested. “Ow. Okay, now I know I’m still drugged. Or maybe I’m in a coma. Either way, this is much too weird to be real.”

He pressed his palm against his forehead.

“Half-angel? Please. If you’d met my family, you’d know there’s nothing remotely angelic about the Rutherfords.”

Malachi’s expression remained serious, those penetrating eyes never wavering. “Your human lineage is irrelevant. The angelic blood comes from generations back, diluted

but still potent. It's why they wanted you for their ritual.”

Danny’s mouth went dry. “Ritual?”

The word sparked another flash of memory. Black candles, chanting in a language that made his skin crawl, the cold stone beneath his back. “They were going to...”

His breath hitched. “...sacrifice me?”

"Yes.”

Malachi’s voice had softened. “They believe your blood will give them power over all shadow gargoyles.”

“Shadow gargoyles.”

Danny pinched his eyebrows together. Fucking ridiculous. “And I’m supposed to believe this because...?”

“Because deep down, you’ve always felt different.”

Malachi leaned forward, resting his folded hands on his knees. “As though you were meant for something more. Like there was an emptiness inside you that nothing could fill.”

The words slammed into Danny, forcing him to consider that the story Mal was trying to sell him might be true. Because how else could this stranger know the exact feeling that had haunted him his entire life?

“Lucky guess.”

Danny laughed shakily.

“It's not a guess.”

Malachi smiled. “It’s who you are, Danny. The emptiness you’ve felt is your dormant powers, your true nature trying to break through.”

Danny’s heart raced as he tried to process everything he was being told. Half-angel. Nephilim. Shadow gargoyles. It was too much, like someone had dropped him into a fantasy novel without giving him the first few chapters.

“So you’re what? My guardian angel?”

He tried for sarcasm, but his voice came out more whiny than anything.

Malachi’s lips quirked into a half-smile. “Not exactly. Michael and his cohorts would be insulted to have me referred to as an angel.”

He sucked in a deep breath. “No, I'm a Shadow Slayer. One of the original gargoyles chosen by Archangel Michael to fight all the rogues and protect beings like you.”

Danny held up his palm. “Whoa, wait a hot second. Let me get this straight. I'm part angel, you're a gargoyle slayer, and those things that kidnapped me were shadow gargoyles. And an archangel...”

He rolled his eyes. “As in an actual biblical archangel sent you to rescue me?”

He crossed his arms. “Prove it.”

Malachi hesitated. “You've been through a traumatic experience. I’m not sure if—”

“Are you kidding me?”

Danny scoffed, wincing as he shifted his weight. “If I’m supposed to believe all this supernatural horse shit, I need to see something concrete. Don’t get all squeamish on me now. Show me the goods.”

The muscles in Malachi’s jaw ticked, a flash of amber flickering in his green eyes before it vanished. “It’s not squeamishness. The shift can be frightening for humans when they witness it for the first time.”

“Try me.”

Danny lifted an eyebrow. “I’ve watched every season of True Blood. Twice.”

Malachi let out a long sigh. “Television doesn’t quite capture the reality.”

Danny snapped his fingers repeatedly “Quit stalling, big boy. If I’m supposedly some angel-human hybrid, I think I can handle seeing whatever you really are.”

Malachi let out another sigh and stood, taking several steps back from the bed. “If time weren’t of the essence, I wouldn’t give in to you so quickly. But unfortunately, the recent traitorous actions of a fellow Slayer is forcing my hand.”

Danny pinched the bridge of his nose. “Traitorous? I can hardly wait to hear the rest of this dumpster fire I’ve tumbled into.”

He waved a hand in Mal’s direction. “Carry on.”

“Don’t be afraid.”

Malachi’s voice deepened an octave. “I would never harm you.”

Danny's snarky retort died in his throat as the air around Malachi started to shimmer like heat waves rising from asphalt. His skin rippled, hardening before Danny's eyes into what looked like stone—a deep gray with hints of green that matched his eyes. His shoulders broadened impossibly, clothing ripping away before vanishing, his spine elongating as massive wings unfurled from his back, leathery and terrifying.

His face transformed, the features becoming more angular, eyes glowing amber now rather than green. Sharp talons extended from what had been hands, and a thick, muscular tail with a spiked club at the end completed the metamorphosis.

“Holy shitballs.”

Danny pressed himself against the headboard. His heart thundered, his body trembled, but strangely, he felt no fear. What filled him was awe. “You’re beautiful,”

Danny breathed, the words escaping before he could stop them.

The creature, Malachi, tilted his head, clearly surprised by Danny's reaction. His amber eyes glowed with an inner light as he regarded Danny with what seemed like curiosity.

“Most humans scream.”

Malachi's deep voice resonated in this form, yet was somehow still recognizable. “Or faint.”

Danny let out another shaky laugh. “Yeah, well, I've never been accused of being predictable.”

He leaned forward, fascinated. “Can I touch you?”

Malachi hesitated, then stepped closer to the bed, extending one clawed hand. Danny reached out slowly, fingers trembling as they made contact with the stone-like skin. It was warm, not cold, as he'd expected, with a faint vibration beneath the surface, like energy pulsing through living stone. The sensation sent a jolt up Danny's arm, a strange warmth spreading through his chest and deep into his core.

"Wow."

Danny traced the ridges of Malachi's forearm with his fingertips. "You're like warm granite, but you're alive."

He explored further, moving up to where the skin texture changed near Malachi's elbow. "This is freaky. Unbelievable."

He frowned, a flash of memory slamming into him. The sound of wings, a battle cry, someone lifting him from cold stone. The memory was fragmented, but unmistakable.

"You saved me,"

Danny murmured, his eyes widening. "I remember your wings. You fought them to protect me."

Malachi's amber eyes softened. "With my fellow Slayers, yes."

Danny gasped as a jolt of electricity sparked where his fingers met Malachi's skin. "What the fuck?"

The sensation traveled up his arm and spread through his chest, warm and tingling, like nothing he'd ever experienced. Something inside him responded, a dormant part awakening to the touch.

Malachi's eyes widened. "You feel it too."

Danny nodded, unable to form words as the connection between them intensified. It was as if a circuit had been completed, energy flowing freely between them. The pain in his head and side momentarily faded, replaced by a rush of heat and... He frowned again.

Belonging.

Abruptly, Malachi stepped back, his form shimmering again as he returned to his human appearance. The torn clothing reappeared intact, and those piercing green eyes studied Danny with a mixture of curiosity and what seemed suspiciously like longing.

Danny still tingled from the contact. "That was rather interesting. Shocking, but definitely interesting."

"Our connection runs deeper than you can imagine."

Malachi's voice turned husky. "I look forward to us exploring it together."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?"

Danny ran his hands through his hair, trying to process everything. His brain felt clearer now, the fog from earlier dissipating. "So what exactly happened when I touched you? Because it's seriously got me all twisted up inside."

Malachi sat on the edge of the bed, seemingly careful to maintain a small distance between them. "There's more to our bond than rescuer and rescued."

"Yeah, I'm sensing that."

Danny scraped his teeth along his bottom lip, almost too afraid to ask his next question. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“In my world, we have what are called Fated Mates.”

Malachi’s eyes never left Danny’s. “A blessed connection between two souls, predetermined by the Divine Spark.”

Danny arched his eyebrows. His human half was going to need copious amounts of alcohol to deal with the flurry of startling revelations.

“You mean as in God?”

Mal lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. “Many religions refer to them as such.”

Danny’s mouth went dry. “And the Fated Mate part. You think that’s us?”

He gestured between them. “You and me?”

“I don’t think. I know.”

Mal gave him a soft smile. “From the moment Michael mentioned your name, I was consumed by my need to protect you. The crystal I was given to lead me to your location only reinforced my certainty. An etheric tether binds us together.”

Danny’s breath caught in his throat. “A crystal, huh? Etheric tethers?”

He placed a hand to his forehead, desperate to deny the truth of Mal’s words, but somehow knowing he wouldn’t be able to. “You’re hot and everything, but we just met. You could at least buy me dinner first.”

He let out a feeble laugh in an attempt to relieve some of his tension. Unfortunately, it didn't work.

The corner of Mal's lips twitched. "Dinner can be arranged."

"Oh my god, I was joking."

Danny's stomach chose that moment to growl loudly. "Okay, maybe not entirely joking."

"I'll have food brought up."

Malachi gave a sharp nod. "You need to regain your strength."

Danny sank back against the pillows, the enormity of everything crashing down on him. "This is completely insane. You know that, right? Like, certifiably bonkers."

He rubbed his temples. "So what happens now? We're magically destined to be together because some Divine Spark said so? What if I don't want that?"

Malachi's expression remained calm, but something flickered in his eyes—vulnerability, perhaps. "The connection can't be forced, Danny."

He paused, pressing his lips together before continuing. "I know this is overwhelming. Finding out you're Nephilim, being kidnapped, learning about Slayers and Fated Mates. I understand that what's typical for me is unusual for you."

Danny let out a long breath. "Ya think?"

He shifted, wincing as pain flared in his side again. "Not to mention that whatever they did to me hurts like a bitch."

Mal frowned. “Zeke verified you weren’t gravely injured when Cassiel brought you here, but now that you’re awake, he can perform a healing ritual. He didn’t know what you’d been drugged with and didn’t want to chance you being poisoned, so he was waiting for you to awake naturally.”

“Oh.”

He picked at the duvet. “And you sat here with me the whole time?”

For whatever reason, it no longer struck him as creepy.

“I did. I didn’t dare leave you alone for a second. I was never more frightened in my existence as when I saw you being threatened.”

Danny winced. “Do I want to know the details?”

Mal shook his head. “Not for now. I’ll summon Zeke. He’s one of our healers.”

“And Cassiel?”

“A fellow Slayer. While I finished off the traitor who stole you, she brought you to safety.”

Danny’s lips rounded in a small ‘o’. “Ooh, finished off. How Game of Thrones of you.”

Mal’s brow wrinkled. “Another show on television?”

“Oh my God. We should totally watch it together. You’d love it.”

“I don’t really...”

He cleared his throat. “Of course. I can see how much the television means to you, so I’ll try.”

Danny grinned. “Aww, that’s so adorable. Thanks for not making this all about you.”

Mal gave him a lopsided smile. “I prefer it to be all about you.”

Danny’s grin widened. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

If Mal was for real, then maybe this Fated Mate thing wasn’t so bad.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am

Ezekiel had tended to Danny, and Malachi was relieved when Zeke told him he was not only completely healed but also had a remarkable resiliency. The implication was obvious. The ancestor from whom Danny descended was a powerful being.

“That guy was cool.”

Danny stretched his arms over his head. “You said he’s a healer, but he’s also a gargoyle, right?”

“Yes. He’s been by my side in many battles. I also consider him a friend.”

Malachi sat down in the chair next to the bed that Ezekiel had just vacated.

He wasn’t sure how close he should get to Danny yet.

Their connection was so intense, and triggering Danny’s heat didn’t seem like a great idea under the circumstances.

Not when they could be attacked at any moment. Even though Gideon was dead, that didn’t mean there weren’t other traitors waiting for their chance.

The thought tied his stomach in knots.

Never would he have thought to question the loyalty of his closest allies.

Zeke, Dante, Cassiel, even Ronen.

They were above reproach, always had been. But damn. Having his mate was messing with the chemicals in his brain or something.

“Why are you so quiet?”

Danny regarded him with a furrowed brow. “Is something wrong?”

His jaw dropped, and he straightened against the pillows. “Am I doomed? Is that what Zeke told you, that I can’t be saved?”

“What? No! Zeke says you’re in remarkably good health.”

Malachi reached over and clasped Danny’s hand without thinking. The jolt was immediate, and Danny’s eyes widened.

“Whoa.”

He chuckled shakily. “It gets more potent every time.”

He waggled his eyebrows with a mischievous smile. “Why don’t we take the edge off. Now that I’ve been given the all clear, wanna smash?”

Malachi drew his eyebrows together. “Did you want me to teach you how to fight?”

Danny’s jaw went slack before he snapped it shut. “Ancient gargoyle. Right.”

He let out a light laugh. “Keep forgetting. Sometimes my dick insists on taking charge and poof. Goodbye coherent thoughts.”

“Sorry.”

He wished he'd been paying better attention to modern humans. It had been at least fifty years since the last time he'd pursued a man to let off some steam. He'd barely understood that guy either. "It might take us time to understand each other's customs and sayings, but I'm sure as your Nephilim awakens, it will be easier."

Danny pulled away from him and crossed his arms. "Do I have to do that right away?"

"Do what?"

He gave a small shrug. "Be angelic. No one's ever accused me of that before, believe me. I was hoping we could at least have some fun first before we have to be all perfect and godly."

Malachi's shoulders dropped. He was so unprepared to help his mate understand what was happening to him. His focus had been on nothing but guarding the lair, following orders, fighting for the cause. Learning how to integrate his mate into their new life together was something he'd assumed was still far off. He'd only recently cracked a hundred kills. Gideon came to mind.

A hundred and one.

"Danny, I'm afraid I haven't done a very good job of defining our relationship. I think what you mean by godly is that we won't be intimate or have time to enjoy ourselves. To have our own life and family. But that's not the case at all."

Danny's eyebrows shot up. "Did you just use the F word?"

Malachi scrubbed his face with one hand. "Could I ask a favor? I'm not too familiar with many of the human slang words and phrases. Maybe ask me things more directly?"

“You’re so cute. Of course.”

Danny patted his arm, then shook his hand as if he’d been zapped. “Ooh, shocking. Anyway, I’d like to say first that I’m glad to hear that intimacy is definitely on the table, but when you say family...”

He tapped his chin with one finger. “Are gargoyles allowed to adopt? And would we be adopting a gargoyle or...”

He waved a hand around. “Never mind. That’s ridiculous. You’re right about being direct. So what do you mean by us having a family?”

Malachi cleared his throat. He probably shouldn’t have let that part slip. But shouldn’t he tell Danny everything? It didn’t seem fair if he didn’t. Still... Malachi groaned. He couldn’t proceed without backup.

“Hold that thought. I’ll go check and see if your food is ready, then after you eat, we can get into all the details.”

Malachi rose, tempering his urge to race from the room.

“Oh-kay.”

Danny grunted. “Should I be worried?”

“No, no. Not at all.”

Malachi smiled, hoping to reassure his mate that everything was absolutely fine. “It’s just that I know you’re hungry, and if your dinner is ready, I don’t want it to get cold.”

“Sure.”

Danny smirked. “Since I’m famished, I’ll let your obvious deflection attempt slide.”

“Everything’s fine.”

He tried smiling again, but was certain he probably appeared more ghoulish than jovial.

Danny pointed a finger at him and swirled it around. “Dude. That face? Not helping.”

Malachi swallowed hard. “I’ll be right back.”

Before Danny could respond, Malachi raced out of the bedroom, then quickly made his way down the stairs.

Dante had already left with Amir and the kids, and Ezekiel would be heading home to Archer soon, but the remaining Slayers would stay.

They were all needed to keep the compound protected now that Danny was safe.

He burst into the dining room where they’d all met the night before.

Ezekiel and Ronen were chatting, the casual and relaxed scene a welcome sight after all the chaos of the past couple of days.

“When is Michael arriving to be briefed on the mission?”

he blurted. “Shouldn’t he be here by now? I’m guessing he’ll want to speak with Danny as soon as possible.”

They both gaped at him as if he'd just declared he'd grown a second head.

“Since when are you so eager to see Michael?”

Ezekiel set down his cup of coffee. “Usually, you're the first to grumble when he shows up unannounced.”

Ronen nodded. “Yeah, and he's not scheduled to arrive until tomorrow morning. He's finishing up some business with Lucifer regarding the traitor situation.”

Malachi ran a hand through his hair. “I need him here right now. Danny's asking questions I don't know how to answer.”

Ezekiel raised an eyebrow. “Such as?”

“Family.”

Heat rose in Malachi's cheeks. “He asked about family. I mentioned it without thinking, and now he's asking if we can adopt.”

Ezekiel snort-coughed. “Ah. So you haven't told him about the heat cycle? Or the fact that he could get pregnant?”

His eyes twinkled with amusement. “Talk about diving into the deep end.”

“If that's a euphemism, I'm not amused.”

Malachi groaned. “No, I haven't said a word. I'm not even sure how to begin that conversation. 'Oh, by the way, not only are you part angel, but you can also carry children'. He's already overwhelmed enough as it is.”

Ronen chuckled. “And here I thought you were the smooth one.”

“I’ve never claimed to be smooth.”

Malachi pursed his lips as he paced the length of the dining table. “I’m a warrior. Not a relationship counselor.”

“Well, you’d better figure it out fast.”

Ezekiel chuckled. “Because your mate is about to experience his first heat. I sensed it while healing him. By the time Michael gets here, he’ll probably be pregnant already.”

Malachi jabbed a finger at his friend. “That’s not funny. Come on, man. I’m floundering here.”

Ezekiel sighed. “Relax, Mal. Just breathe, you’ve got this.”

He furrowed his brow. “What about everything else? How are the injuries doing? I can do another session with you on your chest. That was a vicious gash.”

Malachi pinched the bridge of his nose. “Thank you, but physically I’m excellent. Emotionally? Not so much.”

“Excuse me!”

Danny’s voice carried into the dining room from the front of the house. “What’s a Nephilim have to do around here to get fed?”

Ezekiel and Ronen laughed while Malachi buried his head in his hands.

“Time to take care of business,”

said Ezekiel. “Poor little angel is horny and hungry.”

“So you’re not going to help?”

Malachi huffed.

Ezekiel reclined against the back of the mahogany chair. “Nope. This is between you and your mate. What better way to deepen your bond and build trust? He won’t want to hear something so personal from anyone else.”

Malachi let out a long sigh. “I suppose you’re right.”

Danny appeared at the threshold of the dining room. “Phew. I thought Mal got cold feet and left me all alone. This place is huge. I’m lost already.”

He slapped a hand to his mouth. “Am I interrupting important gargoyle business?”

Ezekeil chuckled. “No, Danny. We were just telling Mal that there’s a platter of roasted chicken, sliced fruit, and cheese already made up for you both.”

Ezekiel directed his next comment to Malachi. “That way, you can share a private meal in your room.”

“Nice,”

said Danny with a smile. “I don’t suppose there are any cookies? I’m feeling very carby for some reason.”

Ezekiel rubbed his chin. “Would date bars suffice?”

Danny scrunched his nose. “My Nana used to love those things.”

He stuck a finger in his open mouth and made a gagging sound. “Not even any chocolate?”

Ezekiel snapped his fingers. “Actually, yes. One of the Slayers who flew in from the Middle East last week brought several bars of Dubai chocolate with him. I believe there’s some left.”

Danny placed his hands on his hips. “You’re joking. Don’t tell me he’s a TikTok influencer. My sister is, and she makes my skin crawl.”

Malachi wished he knew what everyone was talking about. “Umm, is that a yes on the chocolate? I can get everything and bring it upstairs for you.”

Danny drew closer and leaned against him, running his palm up and down Malachi’s arm. “Isn’t he the sweetest? Yes, gorgeous. I’ve never tried the stuff, but it has the word chocolate in it, so I’m in.”

“I’ll grab everything.”

Malachi’s skin tingled where Danny touched him, each point of contact sending warmth through his veins. He could sense the beginning of Danny’s heat—a subtle change in his scent that filled with hunger for something other than food.

Ezekiel caught his eye and gave him a knowing smirk. “The tray’s in the kitchen. Don’t forget the chocolate.”

“Thanks.”

Malachi reluctantly pulled away from Danny. “I’ll just be a minute.”

“I’ll help,”

Danny offered, following him. “Four hands are better than two, right?”

As they entered the kitchen, Danny let out a low whistle. “Damn. This place is like a five-star restaurant. Who owns this mansion anyway?”

“Michael.”

Malachi opened the large stainless steel French door refrigerator and located the tray laden with food. “He maintains properties like this all over the world. Places where we can gather safely, protected by ancient wards and modern security.”

Danny hopped onto the counter, swinging his legs. “Archangel real estate portfolio. Now that's a flex. Do all angels have fat bank accounts?”

Malachi smiled, finding Danny’s irreverence oddly refreshing. “The Divine Spark provides what’s needed for the mission. Michael’s been accumulating resources for millennia.”

“Millennia,”

Danny repeated, as if testing the word. “That's such a trip. You’re all so, like, ancient.”

He tilted his head, studying Malachi. “How old are you exactly?”

Malachi hesitated, setting the tray on the island counter. “Does it matter?”

“I mean, I'm not dating you for your 401k, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Danny grinned. “Just curious if I’m hooking up with a senior citizen gargoyle.”

Malachi cleared his throat.”Let’s just say I’ve lived through most of recorded history.”

Danny’s jaw dropped. “No way.”

He stuck out his bottom lip, his expression falling. “Wow. I’m going to seem super boring if you’ve experienced all of human history.”

Malachi set down the plates he’d removed from the overhead cabinet and rushed to Danny’s side.

“Never.

You could never be boring to me. The places I’ve been, men I’ve dallied with, events I’ve witnessed, or battles I’ve fought - nothing compares to the thrill of being with you.”

He brushed the back of his hand across Danny’s smooth cheek. “I’ve never experienced such depth of feeling before you. How could I possibly find you boring?”

Danny stared at him wide-eyed and licked his lips. “I...uh, wow. No one’s ever said anything so nice to me before. Do you really mean it?”

The vulnerability in Danny’s voice made Malachi’s heart ache. “I will never lie to you, dearest. I’m your rock, your sanctuary.”

Danny’s face flushed, and Malachi thought they should probably get back to the privacy of their room sooner rather than later.

“Let’s take this upstairs,”

Malachi suggested, picking up the tray. “We can talk some more while we eat. You can ask me whatever questions you want.”

“Like the family thing?”

Danny popped a grape into his mouth, his blue eyes never leaving Malachi’s face.

“Yes, like that.”

Danny hopped off the counter. “Good. My spidey senses tell me that one’s gonna be a doozy.”

Malachi held in a sigh. “Is that a television reference?”

“Close. Movie.”

Danny walked in front of him, his little round ass swaying from side to side as he made his way to the stairs.

Malachi’s cock swelled. He never watched television or movies, but this was a show he could enjoy all day.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am

Danny licked his fingers, pretending as if he didn't notice Malachi staring, lips parted. At any moment, Danny expected to see him drooling.

All part of my devious plan. As horny as he was all the time. he couldn't believe how much he wanted to fuck Mal. As in, fuck him for days. He figured it had to be whatever healing spell Zeke had done. Maybe a super holy vitamin or something.

“Whoa, this chicken. Soooo juicy.”

Danny sucked in another finger. “I love eating meat. I love it so much, I could do it all the time.”

Malachi licked his lips. “Uh...”

He licked them again. “Didn't you have some questions for me?”

Danny dropped the ravaged drumstick on the platter with a sigh. “I think I'm losing my touch.”

Malachi rubbed the back of his neck. “That's not it at all. Trust me, I want you quite badly right now. But I can't in good conscience make love to you when you aren't aware of what could happen.”

“Aww, you said make love. That's too sweet.”

He could spend all day trying to remember whether anyone had ever said that to him before jumping his bones, but doubted if he'd ever get an answer. “So what exactly

could happen?”

Danny leaned forward, searching Malachi’s face for hints whether it was something good or bad. “You keep hinting at something big, and I’m starting to think you’re worried I’ll run screaming into the night.”

Malachi set down his own piece of chicken, untouched. “You might.”

“Try me.”

Danny reached across the small table they'd set up by the window, covering Malachi’s hand with his own. The familiar jolt of electricity, but it had morphed into something deeper, hotter, as if Mal’s presence was turning him into a space heater. “I’ve already accepted that I’m half-angel, you’re a gargoyle warrior, and shadow demons tried to sacrifice me for a ritual.”

He snorted. “What could possibly be worse than that?”

“Not worse.”

Malachi shifted awkwardly in his chair, his eyes darting away before meeting Danny’s gaze again. “It’s related to the Nephilim physiology. There are differences from regular humans that you should understand.”

“Differences like what? Do I grow wings? Shoot holy light from my fingertips?”

Danny wagged his fingers dramatically. “Please tell me I get some cool powers out of this deal.”

“Not exactly.”

Malachi's voice dropped to that serious tone that made Danny's stomach flutter. "To begin with, all Nephilim pregnancies are much shorter compared to humans. In addition, male Nephilim..."

He rubbed his forehead. "They can also get pregnant."

Danny blinked. Once. Twice. "I'm sorry, but did you just say dudes can get pregnant? As in, me, myself, and I can get knocked up?"

Malachi nodded. "Yes, Danny. Male Nephilim have the ability to carry children. It's part of your divine heritage."

Danny fell back in his chair, his jaw going slack. "Hot damn. That's..."

He ran both hands through his hair, his thoughts racing. But then something bloomed in his chest, a rush of joy that he hadn't felt in such a long time.. "That's actually kind of amazing. I mean, terrifying, but amazing."

He leaned forward again, excitement coursing through him. "Wait, so I could actually have my very own kids? Like, biological kids?"

"You could."

Malachi's expression softened. "I wasn't expecting you to be so..."

"Thrilled?"

Danny grinned, then his smile faltered slightly. "Wait. There's more, isn't there? You still look like you're about to deliver bad news."

Malachi shook his head. "No, not bad. Just different from the human experience. It's

that I want to be open about everything that's happening or could happen to you. For our relationship to be built on honesty and trust.

"When Nephilim find their Fated Mate, they experience what's called a heat cycle."

Malachi's voice was gentle but matter-of-fact. "It's a biological response that ensures the bonding between mates. Your body is preparing itself for conception."

Danny's jaw dropped again

. "Is that why I feel like I'm burning up from the inside out? And why I want to climb you like a tree every five seconds?"

He fanned himself dramatically. "I thought I was just turned on by your hunklicious gargoyle charm."

"Well, it's both,"

Malachi said with a hint of a smile. "The connection between us intensifies the heat. It's why I've been trying to maintain some distance. Once we consummate our bond, there's a high likelihood of pregnancy."

He winced. "I wasn't sure how you'd feel about that."

Danny leaned back, processing this new information. Wow. A family of his own. Something he'd always wanted but assumed was out of reach. Even if he'd adopted, he didn't want to do it alone. No more feeling like he was missing out, that he couldn't build his own family far, far away from his loathsome parents.

"Okay, I'm in. Let's do this."

Malachi stared at him, eyes widening. “Just like that?”

“Yup.”

Danny stood, the heat beneath his skin intensifying with every second. He moved around the small table, his body seeming to operate on instinct as he slid onto Malachi’s lap. “I’ve always wanted children. A family of my own.”

His voice grew softer. “People who would actually love me.”

“Danny...”

Malachi’s hands settled on his hips, strong and steady. “Are you sure? This isn’t something we can undo.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

Danny pressed his forehead against Malachi’s, savoring the closeness. “My whole life, I’ve felt as if I were waiting for something. Someone. And now here you are, offering me everything I never thought I could have.”

The heat between them intensified, Danny’s skin tingling as desire pooled low in his belly. Malachi tightened his hold on Danny’s hips, the rigid length of Malachi’s cock pressing against him through their clothes.

“Your heat is getting stronger,”

Malachi murmured, his voice rough with need. “I can smell it on you, musky and intoxicating.”

Danny rolled his hips, earning a sharp intake of breath from Malachi. “Then stop

being such a gentleman and do something about it.”

With a growl that was purely gargoyle, Malachi stood, lifting Danny with him as if he weighed nothing. Danny wrapped his legs around Malachi’s waist, their mouths crashing together in a desperate and hungry kiss. The sweet taste of him was unlike anything Danny had ever experienced, and he was sure his craving for Malachi’s kisses would be unending.

“Bed,”

Malachi rumbled against Danny’s lips as he carried him to the king-sized bed. He lowered him onto the plush mattress with surprising gentleness, despite the intensity burning in his eyes. “You’re so beautiful. Made for me.”

Malachi’s hungry gaze roamed over Danny’s body. “I’ve waited centuries for you.”

Danny tugged at Malachi’s shirt, impatient to feel skin against skin. “Less talking, more naked.”

Malachi chuckled, the sound deep and rich as he pulled his shirt over his head, revealing a torso that looked like it had been carved from marble. Perfect ridges of muscle rippled beneath tan skin as he moved.

“Fuck, but you’re amazing. Hotness overload.”

Danny ran his fingers over Malachi’s chest. “Are all gargoyles this ripped, or did I hit the supernatural jackpot?”

“Battle-ready for millennia,”

Malachi murmured, his hands moving to the hem of Danny’s sweater. “May I?”

Danny nodded eagerly, lifting his arms as Malachi pulled the soft fabric over his head. The cool air hit his heated skin, but it was nothing compared to the fire that ignited when Malachi's hands traced down his chest.

“Perfect.”

Malachi used his fingertips to map every inch of Danny's torso. “Absolutely perfect.”

Danny arched into the touch, a soft moan escaping his lips. The heat coursing through him became unbearable, every nerve ending screaming for more contact, more connection.

“Mal, come on. I need—”

“I know what you need.”

Malachi's voice was thick with desire as he leaned down, pressing open-mouthed kisses along Danny's collarbone. “Your body is calling to mine. Your heat demanding I quench your thirst.”

Danny whimpered as Malachi's mouth traveled lower, leaving a trail of fire across his chest. When that hot tongue circled his nipple, Danny bucked upward, his hands tangling in Malachi's thick hair.

“Mal, please. I won't survive.”

The words tumbled from Danny's lips as Malachi continued his exploration, those strong, rough hands making quick work of Danny's jeans and boxers until he was completely naked beneath his mate's adoring gaze.

“I never knew what it meant to want someone so completely, an all-consuming

desire, as if the world would stop if I didn't have you."

Malachi flattened his palms on Danny's chest. "Never felt such a powerful need to claim, to protect, to worship."

Danny's cock throbbed against his stomach, already leaking. The heat inside him had concentrated between his legs, creating a strange new sensation. In his core, there was an aching emptiness that demanded to be filled, and a warm, slick wetness that he didn't understand. Yet, even though his body felt foreign, it was as if it had finally awakened to its true purpose.

"What's happening to me?"

Danny gasped, his hips lifting involuntarily as the ache edged toward being painful.

"Your body is preparing. Creating what it needs to bond with me completely."

Malachi's hand moved lower, his fingertips ghosting over Danny's hip bone. "Do you trust me?"

"With my life,"

Danny responded without hesitation.

Malachi's expression radiated something deeper than lust. What he saw was pure devotion.

"Then let me take care of you, my mate. Let me give you everything you've been longing for."

Danny could only nod as Malachi worked to remove his own remaining clothes.

When Malachi's magnificent cock sprang free, Danny's breath caught. The impressive length was thick and heavy, the head glistening with pre-cum. A stray thought ran through his head wondering if it would look the same when Malachi was in his gargoyle form.

He made a mental note to inquire about that later. Right now, it was time to relieve the agony of the unexpected state he was in.

"Come here, big boy."

Danny reached out to wrap his fingers around Malachi's cock. "Is this a gargoyle thing or just a you thing?"

Malachi gave him a mischievous grin as he lowered himself over Danny. "I haven't done a comparison challenge, but I'm glad you approve."

"Approve? I'm the luckiest Nephilim alive."

He stroked Malachi slowly, reveling in the way his mate's eyes darkened, his breaths quickening. "I want you inside me. Now."

Malachi took his mouth in a heated kiss, as if sealing the promise of their eternal bond. After breaking free, Malachi's mouth drifted down to Danny's jaw, and he left a trail of soft kisses to his ear.

"Don't worry, I won't make my baby wait."

Malachi reached between Danny's legs, questing between his ass cheeks, brushing two fingers across Danny's hole.

"Yes, so good,"

Danny let his eyelids fall closed, Malachi's touch all that mattered in that moment.

"That's it, baby. Your body knows what it needs."

Malachi circled Danny's entrance with gentle pressure. "The Nephilim part of you is preparing for me."

His finger slipped inside with ease, the slickness easing the way.

Danny moaned in agreement. The intrusion felt incredible, sharper. His body welcomed Malachi's touch as if it had been designed for this purpose.

"More."

Danny lifted his pelvis to meet Malachi's hand. "I need more."

Malachi chuckled. "So demanding."

He added a second finger while his thumb traced maddening circles around the rim. "But I love giving you exactly what you crave."

Danny arched his back off the mattress, his hands fisting in the sheets as raw pleasure coursed through him. The heat built to an almost unbearable intensity, every cell in his body crying out for completion.

"Mal, for real. I can't take much more of this."

Danny's voice came out as a desperate whine. "I feel like I'm going to combust."

Malachi withdrew his fingers, earning a frustrated growl from Danny. But before he could protest further, Malachi positioned himself between Danny's spread thighs. The

thick head of his cock pressed against Danny's hole, and they both groaned at the contact.

"Look at me."

Malachi's green eyes blazed with intensity. "I never want us to forget this moment. I claim you as mine, Danny. I will always cherish and protect you."

Danny swallowed past a lump in his throat, his eyes burning as an unexpected wave of emotion washed over him. He'd never been so mushy about a guy.

He's not just some guy. He's my mate.

Danny locked eyes with Malachi. "I'll never forget."

Malachi rocked his blunt cockhead against Danny's hole, stretching him wide, filling him in one long, slow thrust until he was seated in Danny's ass.

"Breathe, baby."

Malachi cradled the back of Danny's head with one of his large hands while bracing himself on the mattress with the other. Danny let out a shuddering breath, overwhelmed by the sensation of being completely filled. The stretch burned, but in the most exquisite way, as if every nerve ending had been rewired for pleasure. The heat that had been building inside him seemed to pulse and flow, meeting Malachi where they were joined.

"Holy fuck."

Danny scraped his teeth along his bottom lip, his hands finding purchase on Malachi's broad shoulders. "It's like you were made for me."

“That’s because I was. Just as you were made for me.”

He brushed a tender kiss across Danny’s forehead, then began rocking into him with slow, measured thrusts. Danny’s entire world narrowed to the sensation of Malachi moving within him, each plunge sending waves of pleasure radiating through his body. The heat that had been consuming him transformed, no longer an uncomfortable burn but a golden warmth that seemed to connect every part of him to his mate.

“So perfect,”

Malachi murmured against Danny's neck, his pace gradually increasing. “Feel how your body welcomes me, how we fit together.”

Danny could only whimper in response as he wrapped his legs around Malachi’s waist to pull him deeper. The strange new sensations in his core intensified with each movement, as if his body was reshaping itself to accommodate their bond. It should’ve been frightening, but instead, it felt like coming home.

Danny gasped as Malachi slammed into him over and over. He dug his fingers into Malachi's shoulders, meeting each powerful thrust, neither of them holding back. The friction built between them, Danny's slick heat making every movement slide perfectly. Malachi’s breathing grew ragged, and he pressed his sweaty forehead against Danny’s shoulder.

Malachi snapped his hips forward at a frenzied pace. “Your heat is driving me wild.”

Danny's response was a broken moan as pleasure coiled tighter in his core. The connection between them seemed to pulse and glow, an invisible thread binding their souls together with each thrust. His cock leaked steadily against his stomach, untouched but aching with need.

Malachi slipped one hand between their bodies, wrapping his fingers around Danny's cock. "Let go for me, baby. Let me see you come apart."

Malachi's words sent Danny spiraling. His back arched off the mattress as his orgasm crashed over him, his release coating both their stomachs as he cried out Malachi's name. With a low growl that was purely gargoyle, he captured Danny's mouth in a searing kiss. Malachi froze, pulsing cum into him over and over, while fucking Danny's mouth with his tongue.

A strange sensation filled Danny's ass, as if Malachi's cock was growing bigger rather than softening.

"M-Mal, you okay? Your dick..."

"It's my knot, baby. Keeping my seed inside you."

He nuzzled Danny's temple. "We'll be joined like this for several minutes."

"Wow."

Danny pondered this new bit of information. Interesting.

They remained clinging to each other in the aftermath of their frenzied coupling, still catching their breath, covered in sweat and cum. He was completely sated.

What the fuck just happened?

Sure, he grasped the obvious of what they'd done, but there was so much more. After being with Malachi, he had to wonder what the hell he'd been thinking all these years, giving himself to strange men who meant nothing to him, and even worse, could never measure up to Malachi in a million years.

In more ways than one.

Malachi peppered the side of Danny's neck with soft kisses. "How's my sweet baby?"

Danny smiled. He could get used to this mushy stuff, too. It had never been a turn-on before, but from Malachi? Mega hot.

"In awe of my amazing mate. Oof."

He angled his head so he could meet Malachi's eyes. "You've got skills."

"I've got you."

Malachi smiled. "That's all that matters."

And just like that, Danny lost the battle to keep his emotions in check. Clearly, he was embarking on a journey of new and unexpected revelations about himself and his world.

He'd never been so happy.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am

Malachi held a snoozing Danny in his arms, his mate's head resting on Malachi's chest. Danny snored softly, his lips parted, and his brow relaxed. They'd spent the entire previous day and night making love, at least as much as Malachi could handle. At this point, he wondered if his dick might fall off.

Sure, he'd heard plenty of tales about what other fated couples experienced when their Nephilim went into heat. But hearing about a heat and actually going through one were worlds apart.

Malachi cuddled Danny tighter, placing a light kiss on the top of his head. As much as he wished they could remain in bed another day, with or without extracurricular activity, Malachi had missed Michael's updates the day before.

While Danny was dozing after their third romp, he went downstairs to check in and get a refill on food and drinks. He figured he could leave Danny some refreshments while he joined the others for the final report on the events at the Wheeler Opera House.

However, Michael had informed him that his place was with his mate for now, and he'd brief him later. Malachi sensed he was being phased out of active operations. That was typically what happened when a Slayer was united with his mate. Yet his situation was unique. Malachi wasn't sure what took precedence. His obligation as a Slayer that hadn't reached his kill quota? Or as the mate of a high-level Nephilim.

"Baby."

Malachhi gave Danny a slight jostle. "We should get up so I can get you something to

eat.”

In truth, he was rather hungry himself. Satisfying Danny had been a lot of work. He grinned to himself. Not that he was complaining.

“Mmm...”

Danny stretched with a long groan. “Fuck. I was definitely ridden hard and put away wet. Princess needs a shower.”

Malachi laughed. “I’ll go make some coffee, then join you.”

The suite they were using had an attached bathroom, so they’d been able to lose themselves in their own private paradise.

Danny rolled out of bed. “Coffee. The elixir of the gods.”

He paused, tapping a finger to his lips. “Am I allowed to say stuff like that. What with the Divine Spark being top dog.”

Malachi stood, rubbing his lower back. Rolling around with Danny had taken a bigger toll on his body than most demon battles.

“Don’t worry about it. Obviously, humans have worshipped many gods over the ages and have expressed themselves in a multitude of ways. The Divine Spark is much more complicated than a single God. They encompass all that is creation.”

Danny scrubbed his face. “Okay. Remind me not to ask deep, theological questions before coffee anymore.”

Malcahi chuckled. “Deal. Do you want anything else while I’m down there?”

“More fruit. And the croissants, if there are any left. That should hold me for now.”

Malachi strode over to Danny and gave him a quick but firm kiss. “Be right back.”

After giving Danny’s smooth ass cheek a quick squeeze, he yanked on his discarded jeans, then jogged down the stairs. No one else seemed to be around, and Malachi wondered if they should be vacating the safe house as well, or if Michael had purposely sent everyone away so he and Danny could be alone.

While the coffee brewed and he piled up a new platter with goodies for them, he remembered when Dante and Amir first got together. Their relationship progressed quickly, the same as his and Danny’s. But they hadn’t been anywhere special like the Aspen mansion. They’d made do with the lair in Southern California, with very little privacy.

Once he had everything ready, Malachi made his way up the stairs, balancing everything carefully. When he reached the closed door to their suite, he silently chided himself. Had he known no one else was around, he could’ve left it unlatched to simply push his way in.

He carefully set the food tray down, then used his free hand to turn the door knob, being careful not to slosh the mugs of coffee he held in his other hand. Malachi had barely opened the door when he was met with the sight of a naked Danny frantically rushing around the room, tossing clothes around, and pulling up chair cushions.

“Hey, slow down. What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

Danny’s hair was dripping wet, and beads of water decorated his skin, so it appeared as if he’d rushed from the shower without drying off.

Danny paused, staring at him with a worried expression. “Do you remember if your

friend Cassiel had my stuff with her when she brought me here?”

Malachi tilted his head, wondering what stuff Danny was referring to. “I’m afraid not. The only thing you had with you was what you were wearing.”

“But I was wearing my jacket.”

Danny clutched his hair. “It had everything in my pockets—my phone, keys, wallet... Everything. Why would those asshole demons steal my stuff? I need that shit.”

“I see.”

Malachi rubbed the back of his neck. “Okay, let’s figure out how I can help you fix this.”

Danny arched his eyebrows. “You’re way more grounded and mature than I am. I hope you can put up with my freakouts.”

Malachi pressed his lips together. “Stop that. I’m honored to be with you. Let me get the food from the hall, you sit down over here...”

he gestured to one of the chairs at the table. “...and have some coffee. I’ll get you a towel too, so you don’t catch a chill.”

While he gathered everything together, he ran Danny’s concerns through his head. Even if he didn’t use a phone, he knew humans were unusually attached to them. They also needed special cards for money, another card to prove they were who they said they were, and of course, keys were essential for any being. Everyone needed those.

Malachi sat down with Danny and laid his hand over his mate’s. “If you’re worried

about money, I'll be taking care of you. Food, shelter - everything you could ever want will be provided. I'm not sure where we'll be living permanently yet, but the next time I see Michael, I'll press him to give me an answer."

Danny tipped back his head, muttering to himself. "I never thought this through. Of course, we'd be living together, starting a new life."

He dropped his head in his hands. "Holy shit. I had a shift today. They're going to kill me."

Malachi shot to his feet, his gargoyle fighting to be set free. "Who the hell is going to kill you! I'll rip them to shreds!"

Danny gasped, grabbing Malachi's arm. "Whoa there, Tiger. No one is going to literally kill me."

He paused then sucked in a breath. "Well, at least not anyone I know. I meant I'm in big trouble because I missed my work shift, and I need my ID, all the stuff in my phone. I probably have at least a thousand missed calls."

"I see."

Malachi lowered himself onto the chair, his rage slowly dissipating. "I will certainly ask Cassiel about your jacket, but I'm afraid it's unlikely she brought it with her. I saw her lift you then race from the room before the shadows could harm you further."

Danny let out a long sigh as he fell back against the chair. "That makes perfect sense. I'm sorry if I sound ungrateful. Obviously you weren't worrying about all my crap, that's ridiculous of me."

He sighed again. "It's not the end of the world. It'll just be a hassle to replace

everything.”

“Is it vitally important that you have these things? Like I said, I can provide for you.”

Danny smiled at him as he took a sip of his coffee. “You’re the sweetest. I’m not expecting that, though. I can still work and contribute.”

“Uh...”

Malachi cleared his throat. “I appreciate your willingness to do your part, but your role as my mate and a Nephilim won’t be fulfilled in the human world.”

Danny stopped mid-chew, setting the other half of his croissant down. “Oh. Like, I’m never going back?”

His eyes darted around the room. “But, what will I do all day? Don’t get me wrong, the fucking?”

He bit his bottom lip. “Sublime. However, I doubt that it’ll be an around-the-clock activity.”

Malachi winced. He truly was out of his element. The next time he saw Dante, he’d have to be sure and apologize for teasing him when Dante was so befuddled by Amir.

“It’s unsafe for you in the human world, so there’s that. But also, we’ll have a home to build together with our children. I imagine I’ll be transferred to training, or perhaps assigned to oversee a territory.”

Danny arched his eyebrows. “Before I get to the part where I’m snippy, I’d like to state that I’m very much looking forward to having kids, raising them, all that good stuff. But I’ll also need to do something else with my time. Kids grow up, you know?

Then what?"

"Well, of course. I don't expect you to give up everything to raise our children."

Malachi racked his brain for the right answer to Danny's query. "Because of your Nephilim status, Michael might have an assignment for you."

He chewed on his lower lip. "Or maybe you have other interests you've always wished to explore? Amir has two children, but he also studies ancient texts and analyzes where other hidden relics might be found."

Danny snorted. "Yeah, unlikely that'll be my calling."

"Okay..."

Malachi struggled to come up with other options. All he ever thought about was protecting this, killing that, when it came to his duties. "Ezekiel's mate is a doctor. So they work together when healing is required."

Danny rolled his eyes. "Mal. Come on. Do I look like I've studied medicine?"

"I'm sorry. I've never thought about these things before."

Danny pressed his lips together, nodding. "No, you're right. This isn't on you. I can't expect you to decide for me. This is my problem."

He picked at the other half of his croissant. "All I've ever done is party and purposely reject anything and everything my parents wanted me to do."

"But you've been working and taking care of yourself. That's something to be proud of."

Danny shrugged. “I guess. Skiing is just something I’ve done all my life, an opportunity to move away from my family. I’ve never considered it a long-lasting career choice.”

Danny gave him a half-smile. “And I doubt there’s much of a call for skiing gargoyles and angels.”

Malachi chuckled. “No. I don’t imagine there is. But maybe there’s something else that you haven’t considered yet? Perhaps something you rejected because your family was encouraging you in that direction, but you secretly wished you could do.”

Danny tucked his damp hair behind his ears. “Hmm. Well, at one point, when I was younger, I really got into cooking. I used to watch all those gourmet cooking shows, especially the challenges. I would experiment, try to copy what they did by inventing recipes of my own.”

Malachi did love a good meal. “Why didn’t you keep pursuing that?”

Danny stared at his fingers, fidgeting with them. “I was still in the pre-teen, lack of self-confidence phase. My sister mocked me, and my parents were horrified. Apparently, crafting gourmet meals made me gayer. And the fact that I was in the kitchen spending so much time with the ‘help’ mortified them even more. They completely shut me down, and I’ve never returned to cooking.”

Malachi frowned. How dare Danny’s parents treat him like that? Under different circumstances, he might feel guilty about taking Danny away from his family. Not anymore.

“If you ever want to pursue that again, you can experiment on me.”

Malachi patted his belly. “I love a good meal.”

Danny laughed. “I might take you up on that. But I should wait and see if Michael gives me some cool Nephilim stuff to do first.”

He raised his hands, wiggled his fingers, and waved them from one side of the room to the other. “Pew, pew, pew. I’m still holding out for superpowers.”

Malachi laughed, relieved that his mate wasn’t upset anymore. He hadn’t expected Danny’s distress to hurt his heart so much.

He reached across the table and clasped Danny’s hand. “I’ll help you however I can. But now that you’ve brought up your old life and possessions, if there’s anything you’d like from your apartment, we should retrieve it today. I’m afraid you won’t be going back there anymore.”

Danny squeezed his hand back. “Wow. Reality is setting in. I’m really doing this.”

Malachi’s stomach clenched. “Do you still want to?”

Danny jumped up from his chair and rushed over to Malachi. He draped himself across his lap and wrapped his arm around Malachi’s neck.

“Are you kidding? Give up my hunky gargoyle? No way, buster. You’re stuck with me.”

Danny slipped his tongue between Malachi’s lips, and he allowed his mate to take control. With each hungry swipe, Malachi was reassured of Danny’s affection, his belief that they could build a life together.

Malachi made a solemn promise to himself. He would devote his existence to Danny’s happiness. His mate deserved nothing less.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am

After picking up a new phone and transferring all his data over, Danny discovered that he did indeed have several messages from his supervisor.

Oopsie.

While Malachi drove them to his apartment in a massive SUV from the safe house available for everyone's use, Danny called his boss to announce that he was eloping and wouldn't be coming back. After a string of colorful language, Danny hung up and let out a satisfied sigh.

New life, here I come.

He wiggled in his seat as the other messages nagged at him. The ones from his friends could be handled through Messenger. Eventually, he would just drift out of their lives, let his social media go dormant. The sad part was that his connections were primarily party ones. His parents had chased off his bestie when he was growing up for being a bad influence. This time it wasn't because Tony was too gay. Just too poor.

However, the messages that really nagged at him were from his parents. What the hell should he do about that? Their need for control would demand they search high and low for him, and they definitely had epic resources with which to pursue such an endeavor. The last thing he and his new cohorts needed was Danny's parents creating a big fuss and calling attention to him.

He straightened in the seat as a diabolical idea hit him.

“Dude.”

Malachi glanced his way before facing forward again. “What?”

“Huh?”

Danny shook his head, chuckling. “I wasn’t saying that directly. It’s that the most amazing idea struck me on how to get my parents off my back.

“But wouldn’t they simply forget about you after a while? You said they don’t care.”

“Ouch. Way to stir up those pesky triggers.”

Malachi’s expression fell. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, you’re probably right in the long run.”

The truth was painful to face, but part of him always knew they’d eventually give up on him anyway. However, perhaps he could speed it along. “But let’s get them out of my life for good right now.”

“How? You can’t tell them the truth, that you’re part angel.”

A sobering thought filled him. “Wait a minute. Are they my biological parents? Because if they aren’t, it would explain soooo much.”

“I’m sure they’re your real parents. I’ve received no intel that suggests otherwise.”

Danny stuck out his bottom lip. “Then they’re part angel, too? And Emma? Blech. How is that possible? She’s so mean.”

“The angel gene remains dormant until it is ready to be awakened.”

“Oh.”

So much of what he’d learned the past couple of days seemed impossible, so dormant angel genes shouldn’t be that far of a reach. “Then it was being passed down for a zillion years until it was ready to pop up in me?”

Malachi gave him a crooked smile. “Something like that.”

He pointed ahead. “Is that you’re building?”

“Yeah, but try to park on the street. I don’t have my parking pass for the garage.”

“That was with the stuff?”

Danny nodded. “Yup.”

He held up his purple holographic phone. “Thanks again for my new phone, though. I adore it.”

When he told Malachi his dream phone was too expensive, his generous mate insisted on buying it for him. “Anyway, here’s the plan. I grab my photos, my skiing medals, a bag of my best designer shirts and jeans, then I take you to meet the parents.”

Malachi shook his head. “That’s a bad idea. They mustn’t know who I am.”

“Duh. I don’t mean go full gargoyle on them. I’m talking about introducing you as my fiancé, and announcing that we’re getting married tomorrow. Ooh, and that you’re a car mechanic.”

Danny burst into laughter. “That’ll send them over the edge. Oh, wait. I’ll add that we went shopping for a gown today, and I found a gorgeous Oscar de la Renta Cinderella dress. I’ll say I need some money to pay for it.”

He choked and snorted, wiping away tears. “Oh fuck me, this is awesome. They’ll lose their minds and order me out of their lives forever.”

Malachi expertly pulled into a parking space. “You think that’ll work?”

Danny squeezed Malachi’s knee. “Like a charm. Let’s grab my shit, then I’ll call and make sure they’re home. With luck, my sister will be there, too.”

For the first time in forever, he couldn’t wait to see his family.

However, Danny’s nerves started getting the better of him the closer they drew to his family home. His stomach churned, his body shook, and barfing wasn’t out of the question.

“Hey, baby.”

Malachi reached over and patted his hand. “I’m here with you, no matter what. If you find yourself becoming too stressed out, we can leave. This doesn’t all have to be resolved today.”

“Thanks. You’re the best.”

He smiled at his perfect mate. As far as he was concerned, Malachi really was his fiancé, so that part wouldn’t be a lie. “Man, I wish we had an old Chevy, but not like a cool one. It would be two different faded neutral colors, like you had to replace one of the doors with one from a junkyard. A cracked windshield and rust would be excellent as well.”

“Everything will be fine, sweetheart. I promise.”

Danny sucked in a deep breath and reminded himself that he wasn't alone anymore. Maybe danger still nipped at their heels, but he had someone who cared about and would do anything for him. Everything else could be handled as long as he had Malachi by his side.

After being allowed to pass through the gates and traveling up the long driveway to his parents' stately home, they reached the imposing front doors. If all went according to plan, he'd never have to see them or his childhood abode again.

As Malachi helped him out of the truck, he whispered, “You weren't exaggerating their wealth. The Slayers possess some of the most luxurious homes in the world, but this one even rivals those.”

Danny regarded the European Manor home that had been his prison as he grew up. The grand house was constructed of pale limestone with soaring arches and a steeply pitched slate roof. The manicured grounds stretched for acres, with formal gardens and fountains that had always felt more like a museum display than a place where children should play.

“Yeah, it's obscene.”

Danny grunted. “Lumber money plus real estate equals this monstrosity.”

He took a deep breath and squeezed Malachi's hand before pressing the doorbell. The chimes echoed inside, and Danny's heart hammered against his ribs. He'd rehearsed what he would say in the car, but now his mouth felt dry as sandpaper.

The massive oak door swung open to reveal Henderson, the family butler, whose perpetually pinched expression softened slightly at the sight of Danny.

“Master Daniel,”

he said with a slight bow. “Your parents are expecting you.”

He held in a giggle. They’re not expecting this.

“Henderson, my good man. A pleasure, as always.”

Danny had nothing against the man. Out of everyone employed by his parents, Henderson had never ratted on him.

Henderson’s gaze darted to Malachi before he extended a gloved hand toward the drawing room. Danny tugged on Malachi, leading the way across the crystal chandelier-lit, marble foyer. The familiar scent of lemon polish and expensive floral arrangements hit him like a blow to the chest, bringing back memories he’d tried to bury.

“Try to look a little rougher,”

Danny whispered. “Like you’ve spent the day under a car, wielding a greasy wrench.”

Malachi ran a hand through his perfectly styled hair, mussing it slightly, and hunched his shoulders in a way that diminished his regal bearing. Danny bit back a laugh—it was like watching a lion try to impersonate a house cat.

The drawing room doors were already open, revealing his parents seated like royalty receiving their subjects. His father, Richard Rutherford, occupied his usual leather wingback chair, newspaper folded precisely in his lap. His mother, Victoria, perched on the edge of an antique settee, her posture as rigid as her smile. Both wore expressions of barely concealed displeasure.

“Daniel.”

His mother’s icy tone was as abrasive as ever. Victoria's gaze slid from Danny to Malachi, her lips twisting as if she’d just sniffed a piece of shit. “I see you've brought a... friend.”

“Dearest Mother, Father.”

Danny grinned, clutching Malachi’s arm as he pressed himself against his mate’s side. “This is Malachi, my fiancé. We’re getting married tomorrow.”

His father’s newspaper crumpled in his grip. “I beg your pardon?”

“Fiancé,”

Danny corrected. “We’re madly in love. It was love at first sight, wasn’t it, honey bunny?”

Malachi cleared his throat, adopting a rougher accent than his usual cultured tone. “Sure was, babe. Knew the moment I saw him standin’ there at the garage that he was the one.”

Victoria’s perfectly plucked eyebrows arched toward her hairline. “Garage?”

She practically spat the word. “Daniel, surely this is one of your tasteless jokes.”

“No joke, Mother." Danny beamed, sliding his arm around Malachi’s waist. “Mal here is the best mechanic in Aspen. You should see what he can do with his hands.”

Richard slapped his newspaper down on the side table. “That’s quite enough. I won’t tolerate this vulgar display in my home.”

“Whatever.”

Danny waved his hand dismissively. “We just stopped by to share our wonderful news. Oh! And to ask for a teensy wedding present.”

He batted his eyelashes. “I found the most divine designer gown. It’s absolutely me. And the veil?”

He pressed a hand to his chest. “It dusts the floor, cascading from a rhinestone, seed pearl crown.”

His father’s face turned an alarming shade of purple, his knuckles white as he gripped the armrests of his chair.

“Have you completely lost your mind?”

Richard shot to his feet. “This goes beyond your usual rebellious nonsense, Daniel. This is—”

“Fabulous?” Danny fought to keep a straight face. “Romantic? The happiest day of my life?”

Victoria dabbed at the corner of her eye with a monogrammed handkerchief. “Richard, I told you that allowing him to attend a public university would end in disaster. All those horrible influences.”

She looked Malachi up and down like he was something she’d found stuck to her designer heel. Her gaze sliced toward Malachi. “And you. I don’t know what my son has promised you, but there will be no money forthcoming.”

“That’s correct.”

His father sneered at him. “If you don’t abandon this revolting plan right now, you’ll be disinherited immediately.”

He shook a finger at him as if he were reprimanding a naughty puppy who had just peed on the rug. “Tell this beast to leave this instance, or get out of my house forever and never come back!”

“Father, be careful you don’t hurt yourself.”

Danny was growing tired of his charade. As far as he was concerned, he’d achieved his goal, and it was time to get the fuck out of there. Right as he was about to give them his final goodbye, Emma came rushing into the room.

“Oh my god!”

she squealed. “Is my baby brother getting married?”

She gasped as her gaze roamed Malachi’s frame before she elbowed Danny. “You lucky bastard.”

Emma turned to Malachi, using her kissy lips to speak to him. “I don’t suppose you have a straight brother looking for a good time?”

Victoria gasped. “Emma Josephine Rutherford, bite your tongue! This... person is a car mechanic. I’m sure his siblings indulge in equally repulsive professions.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Oh, mother. Don’t bust your girdle. I wouldn’t marry anyone like that.”

She nibbled the end of her finger as she regarded Malachi with hooded eyes. “But a rough fuck or two isn’t off the table.”

Their mother let out an even more dramatic gasp and fell to the sofa as if she'd fainted. It was one of her signature moves. Danny had never had to question where his flair for theatrics came from.

Malachi leaned down and whispered. "Too bad I can't release my gargoyle."

Danny snorted. "Yeah, no kidding."

Emma hooked her arm through his, tugging him away from Malachi. "Can I be your maid of honor?"

"Err..."

He hadn't expected Emma to be home, or for that matter, to give a shit. "Actually, we're eloping. Mal is a big Elvis fan, and we want to seal the deal with an Elvis impersonator presiding over the nuptials."

"Aww..."

She made a pouty face. "Can I at least give you a wedding present?"

"Uh..."

He'd never been at such a loss for words before. He glanced up at Malachi, who shrugged. He glanced in the direction of his parents, noting that his father was shaking his mother, trying to get her to stop putting on a show.

Danny turned to Emma. "Sure. But we're in a hurry."

She dropped her jaw. "That's not very nice. Now I'm not so certain I want you to have it."

“That’s okay, I understand.”

His sister being cordial to him was way too disconcerting. He’d get over losing out on whatever her gift was. “We have to get going anyway.”

She playfully smacked his shoulder. “Kidding! Don’t be such a baby. Come on, you’ll love it.”

Emma tugged on his hand, but he dug in his heels. The tingling sensation he’d felt the day Gideon kidnapped him came to life, not strong, but enough to make him pause.

“You!”

His father yelled, pointing to Malachi. “I need some help here.”

Malachi hesitated as if he felt the same thing, and Danny grabbed his arm. The strange sensation was now spreading down his spine like ice water. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

“Actually, we really do need to leave.”

Danny’s voice came out sharper than intended. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up as Emma’s grip tightened.

“Oh, come on,”

Emma cooed, her voice taking on an oddly melodic quality that made Danny’s skin crawl. “It’ll just take a second. I promise you’ll be very surprised.”

Malachi’s green eyes suddenly blazed with amber light. “Danny, step away from her. Now.”

“What?”

Emma’s laugh was too bright, too perfect. “Don’t be silly. I’m his sister.”

But as Danny tried to pull free, Emma dug her fingers into his flesh.

“Ow! Damn, Emma.”

Danny twisted his arm to try and escape her punishing hold. “Let go of me!”

“Yes,”

growled Malachi through gritted teeth. “Let go of him.”

“Hey!”

His father’s booming voice echoed in the large room. “I said I need some help! She’s actually fainted this time.”

Emma scowled at him, her eyes blazing red. “Shut up, Father. I’ll deal with you later.”

Their father fell into a heap on the floor, and Danny almost choked on his tongue.

“Holy shit, Emma. The fuck?”

Malachi’s body exploded into his gargoyle form before Danny could take another breath. Emma shrieked, yanking Danny in front of her. From her wide-leg designer pants, she whipped out an obsidian dagger that seemed familiar, yet Danny couldn’t remember why. With an inhuman snarl, she held it tight against Danny’s throat.

“Don’t come near me or I’ll open him up. No one denies me the jewel.”

“I’ll buy you a super bitchen one for Christmas,”

Danny croaked.

“Shut up, you pathetic loser.”

Her disgusting breath fanned across his cheek. “I’ve always been the special one, but now I’m more than that. I’m a creature of the underworld, and all I have to do to get the Great Mughal diamond is hand you over to a secret society.”

“That’s no society, they are rogue demons. They have poisoned your mind!”

Malachi roared. “You would sacrifice your flesh and blood for a bauble?”

“Uh, yeah.”

She gave a loud snort. “A two hundred and eighty carat diamond is hardly a bauble. I’d do it for half that.”

Danny’s jaw dropped. “You wench!”

She pressed the pointy end of the dagger into his flesh. “Tell whatever that thing is you’re marrying to back the fuck off, or I’ll slice into you like a Christmas ham.”

Malachi let out a low, throaty growl that would’ve scared his pants off if he were on the receiving end of it. Danny’s mind raced as the blade bit into his skin. This couldn’t be happening. His own spoiled, vapid influencer of a sister was working with the same creatures that had tried to sacrifice him a couple of days ago.

“Emma, listen to me.”

He was careful to keep his voice calm and steady. “You don’t understand what you’re dealing with. These aren’t merely some rich collectors. They’re demons. They’ll kill you the second they get what they want.”

“I’m not fooled by your lies!”

She pressed the blade harder, and Danny felt a warm trickle of blood trail down his throat. “The jewel will be mine tonight, no matter what. Trying to talk me out of it is useless.”

Malachi’s blazing eyes never left Emma’s face, his massive form coiled and ready to strike, his wings spread wide and tail raised high.

“You can’t win, Emma. I won’t let you hurt him.”

Malachi’s resounding voice filled the room, and Danny wondered where Henderson and the rest of the staff were. If they had any sense, they would be running for their lives.

Emma laughed. “Guess what? I think I’ll give my wedding gift to you both right now.”

Her laughter took on a sickening edge, like the dying cries of tortured souls. “Surprise! I’m not alone.”

A shadow fell across the room as three grotesque creatures, which Danny assumed were corrupted gargoyles, burst through the bay windows, sending glass shards flying in all directions.

Malachi lunged at the creatures with his fangs bared, talons extended, and a spiked club at the end of his tail.

Even his wings bore a large thorn at their fold.

Emma backed away from the fight, dragging Danny with her, knife still pressed to his throat.

He watched in horror as Malachi battled the creatures with terrifying efficiency, his stony form a blur of motion as he tore apart the first beast.

Its screeching wail echoed through the drawing room as it dissolved into black ash.

“You see?”

Emma hissed in Danny’s ear, still dragging him backward toward the hallway. “Your darling fiancé is as monstrous as they are.”

Danny struggled against her hold. “He’s nothing like them! Let me go, you psycho!”

The remaining shadow gargoyles circled Malachi, their ruby eyes gleaming with malice.

One lunged at him from behind while the other attacked from the front.

Malachi caught the front attacker by its throat, crushing its windpipe with a sickening crunch before whipping his tail around to impale the other through its chest.

Emma’s grip faltered slightly when Malachi dispatched the final shadow gargoyle.

But before he could cry victory, five more shadows rushed in from all sides, crashing

through the remaining windows and the French doors leading to the garden.

These creatures were larger, more vicious-looking than the first wave, their inky, twisted forms rippling with dark energy.

“Mal!”

Danny shouted, his voice cracking as he struggled against Emma, battling her attempt to drag him away.

Malachi’s head snapped toward them, his glare burning with fury. The sound that erupted from him was pure rage—a battle cry that shook the crystal chandelier above.

“You made a mistake touching what’s mine!”

Malachi snarled.

Right as the group of hideous shadows rushed Malachi, Emma’s laugh turned shriller, more unhinged. “Oh, this is even better than I hoped! Watch your precious gargoyle get ripped to shreds, brother dear.”

But Malachi moved with deadly grace, his centuries of battle experience evident in every calculated strike.

He seized one shadow gargoyle by its wing and used it as a weapon to bludgeon another, both dissolving into ash.

His tail lashed out, taking the head clean off a third creature.

Danny’s throat closed up as the remaining two attacked Malachi, one on either side of him.

Malachi roared in defiance, but exhaustion was beginning to show in his mate's less precise movements.

Danny was thrown to the floor by an unknown Slayer, with Emma still clutching him, but the force of the blow ejected the knife from her hand.

They both landed with an oomph, and Danny quickly rolled away from his deranged sister.

She lunged for him while scrambling to her feet, making it easier for him to throw her off balance with a volley of kicks from where he lay on the floor.

“Get the fuck away from me, you sibling disaster!”

She snarled and shrieked like a rabid weasel, clambering toward him with jerky movements, her mouth frothing.

Yikes.

Danny crab-walked away from her, and right as his back hit the wall, a Slayer plucked her from the floor by the back of the neck as if she weighed no more than a feather.

Danny squinted at the gargoyle, something vaguely familiar about its eyes.

Cassiel. His memory returned in a flash, remembering her face when he'd stared up at her as she flew him to safety.

“Danny!”

Malachi's voice cut through the chaos as he dispatched the last shadow gargoyle, its

body crumbling to ash. “Are you hurt?”

“Mal!”

He scrambled to his feet, rushing toward his mate, overpowering relief filling him that Malachi hadn’t been killed.

Malachi caught him easily, one stony arm wrapping around Danny’s waist while keeping his lethal talons angled away. As his mate inspected him, a rumble vibrated in Malachi’s chest.

“She nicked your throat.”

His lips pulled back in a snarl. “She’ll pay.”

Cassiel held the thrashing Emma at arm’s length, her gargoyle strength making his sister’s struggles appear pathetic. Emma’s perfect makeup was smeared across her face, mascara running down her cheeks in inky rivers.

“Careful with this one,”

Cassiel called out, her amber eyes fixed on Emma. “She’s on the verge of completely turning.”

“You don’t understand!”

Emma screamed, her voice cracking. “They promised me power! Influencer fame beyond anything I’ve achieved! The diamond was only the beginning!”

Cassiel grunted. “Hate to break it to you, sister. But that diamond was chopped up a long time ago. Those demons lie like snakes.”

Danny balled his fists. “You were going to sacrifice me for Instagram followers? Seriously?”

Emma’s eyes flashed red again, confirming she was no longer just his shallow sister but something corrupted.

“You’re nothing. Nothing! I’m special, unlike most of the losers on this planet. All I needed was a little push in the right direction.”

Danny tried to pull away from Mal to get to Emma. “I’ll give you a push in the right direction. Ever visit the Grand Canyon?”

Malachi held onto Danny, fighting against his mate’s strength as pointless as Emma struggling with Cassiel. “Don’t, Danny. Her fate is sealed, and her judgment awaits. Cassiel will take her to the peak where she will pay for her crimes.”

Danny buried his face against Malachi’s chest, his sister’s unholy cries like more daggers threatening to pierce his skin.

As the other Slayers worked on clearing away all the ash, Malachi held him gently and rubbed his back, whispering soft words of comfort.

Danny allowed his emotions to break free, to weep for the loss of his old life, to accept that they never loved him, and would gladly discard him like trash.

Even in his angriest moments, he hadn’t wished for them to be harmed.

Danny sniffed, opening his eyes.

He caught sight of his parents lying unconscious on the floor, his mother sprawled across the settee with his father crumpled nearby.

“Are they...”

Danny couldn't finish the question.

“Just unconscious.”

Malachi shifted back to his human form. “We'll make sure all the evidence of the shadows is removed. It will appear that they were vandalized and attacked by mysterious intruders. However, it's possible that they'll recall we were here and blame you for everything.”

Danny tensed. “Henderson will for sure remember we were here. What happens if the police come looking for us?”

“Even if they did, we'll be in the Rockies lair where no human can touch us.”

Malachi gave him a jostle. “Don't worry about Henderson or the rest of the staff. They saw the Slayers in their human forms approaching the mansion as they ran. They'll likely blame the attack on a bunch of ruffians when the investigators interview them.”

“Speak for yourself.”

Ronen brushed his palms together as he approached them. “You're the only ruffian I see here.”

Malachi ignored the dig. “Are you done?”

Ronen chuckled. “I think we're good to go. Michael will want a full report at the safe house.”

Malachi gave a sharp nod. “We’ll drive back. I have to get the SUV out of here.”

As they left Danny’s now mutilated childhood home, he glanced over his shoulder to look at his parents one last time.

Danny shook his head in awe at the unbelievable aftermath of the battle. “Man. It’s a good thing the other Slayers showed up when they did.”

He halted abruptly. “Wait. How did they know we needed them?”

Malachi opened the passenger door of the truck and held out his hand. “I sent a telepathic call of distress.”

“Of course you did.”

Danny accepted Malachi’s offer, his mate helping him into the seat of the tall vehicle.

He could only imagine what else he was still clueless about when it came to his new world.

As they traveled back to downtown Aspen, they passed police cars with sirens racing toward the estate. Danny hunched down in his seat.

“They have no idea we were involved, baby. I promise you.”

“Sorry. I think I’m getting paranoid after everything that’s happened.”

Malachi laid his hand on Danny’s thigh. “It breaks my heart that you’ve had to endure so much these past few days. But I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“Aww, you’re the best.”

He really was. Danny pressed a hand to his stomach. “I could use some ice cream, though.”

He licked his lips. “With lots of fudge and whipped cream.”

Danny arched his eyebrows. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had anything as carby as that, but suddenly, it was all he could think about. “Do you think there’s ice cream back at the safe house?”

“If there isn’t, I’ll make sure you have some before the night is over.”

“Thanks, Mal.”

Danny relaxed in the cushy leather seat, finally letting go of some of the crippling tension from the attack. His anxiety came back as his thoughts drifted to his sister. He didn’t know how to feel about her betrayal other than really sad. Even if they never liked each other, she was willing to resort to sacrificing him? Brutal.

“Soooo... Emma’s judgment. What’s that going to be exactly? Clearly, you guys aren’t turning her over to the authorities.”

Malachi paused, as if weighing what he should say. “No. Not the human authorities. But in extreme situations like this, she’ll be getting a personal escort from Lucifer himself.”

Danny’s eyes went wide, and he let out a low whistle. “Do they have social media in hell?”

Malachi’s brow creased. “Not that I’m aware of.”

Danny grinned. “Excellent.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am

Malachi's healing session with Ezekiel had been far less intense than the previous one.

Since his fellow Slayers had already been nearby and on alert, they were able to arrive quickly, and their foes had been fewer in number than usual.

Danny sat next to him at the long table in the dining room of the Aspen safe house, leaning against Malachi's arm with his eyes closed.

They'd be spending the night there, but in the morning, Malachi would bring Danny to their temporary home in the Rockies lair.

Michael still hadn't given him the location of their final home, but he hoped that if Danny had a preference, Michael would take that into consideration.

Everyone from the day's battle was chatting with one another, but not about the fight.

They had endured plenty of battles that, when they had the chance to interact away from the chaos, they focused on more pleasant topics.

"Hey, Mal."

Ezekiel leaned closer to him. "Are you allowed to share the source of Danny's lineage yet?"

"Is that what you guys have been gabbing about?"

Malachi shook his head. "I would, but Michael hasn't told us."

Danny yawned, his eyelids fluttering open as he straightened in his chair. "It's so annoying."

He stretched his arms above his head while yawning even wider. "I'd like to know the reason behind all this mayhem. It's exhausting."

Michael chose that moment to sweep into the dining room.

It wasn't as if he had pulled up in a Mercedes and then come through the front door.

However, he loved making a grand entrance. Therefore, materializing somewhere else in the house and then strolling into the room as if from nowhere was his preferred way of appearing.

"Good evening, everyone."

Michael took a seat at the head of the table. "I trust you've all recovered from this afternoon's melee?"

The room murmured and nodded in response. "Good,"

Michael continued. "I apologize for taking so long to arrive. I was seeing Lucifer off on his journey back to hell with his new resident."

Danny grunted. "Sorry I missed that show."

Malachi draped an arm over Danny's shoulders. His poor baby would need him more than ever while he recovered from the treachery of his family.

Michael regarded Danny. "It pains me that you had to endure your sister's horrific betrayal. She sprouted from the basest life forms, so her destiny was always going to result in damnation."

Danny smirked. "Not sure that's how genetics work, but okay."

He frowned. "I still can't believe she was willing to trade me for a rock. I mean, she was always the worst, even before she was crawling with demons. However, I think social media is what finally plummeted her into true darkness."

Michael's lips quirked in what might have been amusement, an expression so fleeting Malachi almost missed it.

"Your family's unique character makes more sense now that I've confirmed your lineage."

Michael folded his hands on the table. "I believe you're now ready to learn of your celestial heritage."

Everyone at the table leaned forward slightly, even Cassiel, who typically feigned disinterest in Michael's pronouncements.

"Danny Rutherford,"

Michael began, his voice taking on a resonant quality that made the crystal glasses on the table vibrate slightly, "you are a direct descendant of Gabriel, the Messenger."

Michael's words were met with complete silence. Danny's jaw fell open, and even Cassiel's usual snark seemed to have abandoned her as she stared at Danny with wide eyes. Malachi wasn't sure what to think.

“I’m sorry, what now?”

Danny's voice came out as a squeak. “Gabriel? As in, the Gabriel? Horn-blowing, announcement-making, Mary-visiting Gabriel?”

Michael nodded solemnly. “The very same. He’s the mouthpiece of the Divine Spark. He doesn’t get out much, but the one time he did, he made it count. Your bloodline traces back through centuries, his powerful angelic essence lying dormant within you until the time was right for it to awaken.”

Michael turned his palms upward. “But as we know, where there is light, so must there be dark.”

Danny gasped. “Emma.”

Michael dipped his chin. “I’m afraid so.”

“Of course,”

Cassiel breathed. “No wonder the shadows were so desperate to get him. Gabriel’s blood amplified by the grail would’ve given them power over—”

“Everything,”

Michael finished grimly. “The rogues and shadows would have gained dominion over both realms, heaven and earth.”

Michael's eyes locked with Malachi’s. “Your mate carries the most potent celestial bloodline since the Nephilim of old.”

Malachi gave Danny a squeeze, his mate still staring wide-eyed, undoubtedly in

shock from the startling revelation.

“So...”

Danny blinked repeatedly. “Is that like royalty?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Michael offered Danny a smile, something he rarely graced anyone with. “Gabriel's essence grants you certain abilities that will manifest as your connection to your heritage strengthens.”

“Abilities?”

Danny perked up. “Like what? Trumpet playing? I’ve always wanted to learn an instrument.”

A collective groan sounded from everyone. Danny glanced around the room, his brow wrinkled. “What? I was being serious.”

Michael’s lips twitched. “Your gifts will be more aligned with Gabriel’s nature. Communication, revelation, clarity of vision. Already, you possess an extraordinary capacity for perceiving truth. Have you not always been able to see through deception?”

Danny tilted his head. “I mean, I guess so? I’ve always had this weird knack for knowing when someone’s bullshitting me.”

He snorted. “Fat lot of good it did with Emma, though.”

“Your sister was corrupted by forces that specifically mask their true nature,”

Michael explained. “But as your powers awaken fully, even such deceptions as those will become transparent to you.”

Malachi rubbed Danny’s shoulder. “That also explains why you weren’t afraid of me when I first shifted. You could sense my true nature beneath the form.”

“That’s right! I did know.”

Danny smiled. “So what else can I do? Or will I be able to do?”

Michael leaned forward slightly. “In time, you’ll develop the ability to communicate across vast distances—not only through words, but you’ll be able to communicate across vast distances, perhaps even between realms. The veil between worlds will thin for you. And most importantly, you’ll be able to see the true nature of beings. Their essence will be revealed, regardless of what form they present.”

“So I’ll be like a supernatural lie detector?”

Danny’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “That’s actually pretty cool.”

Malachi’s heart surged with pride—but also joy. Not because Danny was special, but because Danny felt special. He wanted his mate to have the life he’d never dared hope for.

Danny grabbed Malachi’s sleeve and tugged him closer, whispering in his ear, “Will Michael think it’s rude if we leave right now so we can spend some quality time in our room?”

“You’re excused,”

replied a smug Michael.

Danny jumped. “Bionic hearing. I’d better be more careful.”

As Malachi and Danny said their goodbyes on the way out, Malachi cast a glance at Michael, hoping it conveyed his deep gratitude for everything. Danny wasn’t the only one who felt special.

Back in their room, Danny waited impatiently for Malachi to finish showering. He had rinsed off earlier when Ezekiel performed a healing session on Malachi, so now Danny was stuck waiting. He had considered joining in, but there wasn’t enough room for both of them. There was barely enough space for Malachi alone.

Malachi appeared in the doorway of the bedroom, nude and ready for action. Danny did love the fact that gargoyles didn’t suffer from annoying bouts of shyness. Who needed to waste time on that nonsense?

“Hey, gorgeous.”

Danny leaned back on the bed in a seductive pose. “See anything you like?”

He’d shed his clothes the second Malachi stepped into the shower.

Malachi tossed the towel onto the floor. “Like? Try fucking adore.”

As Malachi moved across the room, his muscular thighs accentuated his rugged physique, his generous cock at half mast atop his heavy balls as he approached Danny with a predatory grace.

“Wait!”

Danny shot to a sitting position, and Malachi almost stumbled over his own feet. “I have a request.”

“You know I’ll give you whatever you want if it’s mine to give.”

Danny chuckled. “Oh, trust me. It’s definitely yours to give. What I want from you is some hot, gargoyle action.”

Malachi’s eyes widened. “You want me to shift? Now?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Danny nodded eagerly, his heart picking up a rapid beat. “I’ve been thinking about it since that first time I saw you transform. Your gargoyle is magnificent.”

He licked his lips. “I want to know what it feels like to be with you that way.”

Malachi hesitated, his brow furrowing. “I don’t want to frighten you.”

“Frighten? We’re fated mates.”

Danny crawled to the edge of the bed, rising to his knees and reaching out to trace his fingers along Malachi’s chest. “I’m descended from one of the most powerful angels. I think I can handle my big, strong gargoyle.”

Malachi’s eyes darkened, and Danny could tell he wanted to shift as much as Danny wanted him to.

“Are you certain?”

Malachi’s voice dropped to a husky whisper. “I’ve never been with a human, not even part-human, in that form. It’s more…”

He coughed into his fist. “Primal.”

Danny dragged his fingers down Malachi's sculpted abs, following the trail of hair that led to his growing erection. "I'm counting on it."

Malachi stepped back, the air around him beginning to shimmer with the now-familiar heat haze that preceded his transformation. Danny sat back on his heels, watching in anticipation as Malachi's skin hardened into living stone, his shoulders broadening impossibly as massive wings unfurled from his back. His face metamorphosed, features becoming sharper, more angular, eyes shifting from deep green to glowing amber.

"Oh yeah. That's the stuff right there."

Danny's cock firmed right up at the sight. "You're fucking stunning."

Malachi loomed over him with his gargoyle physique, all rippling stone muscle and a feral gaze. He cupped Danny's cheek with his enormous palm, his thick fingers wrapping around the back of Danny's skull.

"I'll keep my claws and tail spikes retracted so they won't harm you."

Danny scooted closer, pressing his body to Malachi's solid frame. "Good call. Not in the mood to be shredded."

Malachi descended on Danny's mouth, his lips touching Danny's carefully at first, then with more insistence. Danny parted his lips under the gentle pressure, welcoming Malachi's exploration. At first, he was startled by the difference in the kiss. His mate's tongue was rougher, but also forked, each side moving independently.

So many possibilities.

The kiss deepened, and Danny melted into Malachi's powerful embrace. When they broke apart, Danny could barely catch his breath.

"God, even your kisses are different like this. The woodsy smell is stronger, too. More pungent."

Their first time together, Malachi's natural scent had caught him off guard.

Malachi stilled."I hope it isn't repugnant."

Danny shook his head vigorously. "Not at all. It was addictive already, but this is even more captivating."

Malachi smiled, his thin gargoyle lips exposing his large fangs. "Good. Your floral scent does the same for me, drives me wild. Everything is more intense in this form."

Malachi let out a rumbling purr. "Our senses, my strength, my need for you."

Danny's heart ticked up a notch. "And my need for you."

Malachi scooped Danny up and laid him on the bed before lying down beside him so they faced each other. Malachi brushed Danny's stray hair back from his face.

"My baby, so small and perfect."

Danny arched up against him, their cocks trapped between their bodies. "I'm not that small,"

he protested, grinding his hips against Malachi's stone-like body. "At least where it counts. But I'll take perfect."

Malachi's booming laugh vibrated through Danny's chest. "Fair enough."

He enveloped both their cocks with his large hand, the rough texture of his palm creating delicious friction as he stroked them together.

"Fuck,"

Danny gasped, his head falling back against the pillows.

Malachi's eyes glowed brighter as he increased the pace, his massive wings spreading behind him like a canopy. His tail curled around Danny's calf, the warm, pebbled appendage anchoring him as pleasure built at the base of his spine.

"I want more."

Danny reached up to caress the angular contours of Malachi's face. "I want all of you, Mal. Like this."

Malachi's glowing eyes flashed with heat. "Cock or tail?"

Danny swallowed hard. "Both?"

Malachi yanked Danny to him, nipping softly at his neck, dragging his long, textured tongue across his throat. He kneaded Danny's ass, gripping his ass cheeks and spreading them open. Danny encouraged him by draping his top leg over Malachi's hip, although he was barely able to reach that high.

As soon as Malachi plunged his tongue into Danny's mouth, his tail slid toward Danny's ass, taunting his exposed hole with a decadent promise. The knobby end was thicker than the already generous girth of Malachi's cockhead, but being the size queen that he was, Danny didn't see a problem with that. Although, he'd never been

more thankful for his newfound natural slickness.

Danny pressed back against the bumpy knob, anxious to feel it inside him.

“Eager little baby.”

Malachi chuckled as he pushed forward, the knob breaching Danny’s tight rim with delicious pressure.

Danny gasped, digging his fingers into Malachi’s shoulder, the tough skin barely yielding to his desperate touch. Danny rocked on the bulbous appendage, the burning stretch sending sparks of pleasure radiating to his core. He writhed and moaned, the ridges of the tail teasing his rim and banging his gland with every short, stabbing thrust.

Malachi worked his ass good and hard, the way he’d always wished someone would. His cock ached for relief, and he whimpered against Malachi’s chest. Malachi growled, an enticing sound that he now associated with his mate.

Malachi’s tail slowly retreated from his ass, but Danny clenched, not ready to lose the blissful sensation of being stuffed so full.

“Let me go, baby. I need to be inside you, fill you with my seed.”

Danny held back from pointing out that he was already pretty full, but at the same time, he had no idea if Malachi could get off from tail-fucking. With great reluctance, he complied, allowing Malachi to pull out slowly.

“Mmm...Turn over for me, baby.”

Danny didn’t hesitate, rolling over, then pushing up on his hands and knees. The

position was one that always made him feel vulnerable and exposed, but with Malachi, he felt safe.

Malachi palmed Danny's ass cheeks again, kneading and squeezing the globes before spreading them open.

He paused, not saying a word. Danny felt Malachi's heated gaze on his hole, and imagined his mate staring at the glistening opening, slick and wet, ready for Malachi to claim.

"I wish you could see this."

Malachi breathed the words like a prayer. "Your hole red and swollen, waiting to swallow my cock, to grip me with your tight heat until I scream your name."

Danny dropped his head between his shoulders, sweat dripping from his hairline. "Damn it, Mal. Do it already. Fuck me like you mean it."

Malachi surged forward, filling Danny in one powerful thrust that drove the breath from his lungs.

The stretch was intense, almost too overwhelming, but Danny's body welcomed the invasion, his already stretched opening adapting to accommodate his mate's impressive size.

"So tight,"

Malachi gritted.

He wrapped his thick fingers around Danny's hips, clutching him with a punishing grip as he fucked Danny hard and fast.

Danny gasped, his arms trembling as he fought to stay upright. “Fuck, Mal, you’re splitting me open.”

Malachi leaned over his back, cocooning him, driving his cock even deeper into Danny’s passage. Danny fell to his elbows, panting, barely able to catch his breath.

Malachi whispered in his ear with a throaty rumble, “Taking it so good, baby.”

Danny cried out as his orgasm barreled through him right as Malachi’s movements became erratic.

With a roar, Malachi froze, his wings flaring wide as he emptied himself into Danny’s trembling body.

The primal sound echoed through the room as his massive form shuddered against Danny’s back.

Danny collapsed onto the mattress, Malachi's weight pinning him deliciously to the bed.

He felt utterly claimed, marked inside and out by his mate.

The sensation of Malachi’s stone-like body against his sweat-slick skin was unlike anything he’d ever experienced. Cool yet somehow radiating heat.

“I’m wrecked,”

Danny gasped when he could finally form words again. “But in a totally good way.”

Malachi nuzzled the back of Danny's neck, his rough tongue laving the sensitive skin there. “I didn’t hurt you?”

“Not at all. I’m not only filled with gargoyle cum, but elation.”

Danny sighed, the sound muffled against the pillow. “I’m pretty sure I saw through the veil between worlds, though. I think one of my Gabriel powers just kicked in.”

Malachi chuckled as he carefully withdrew and shifted back to his human form. “I highly doubt it, but I’m flattered nonetheless.”

Danny rolled over, wincing slightly as his well-used muscles and ass protested. “Hot damn, I’m going to need another shower.”

He groaned. “And possibly a wheelchair.”

“I warned you it would be intense.”

Malachi stretched out beside him, gently brushing Danny’s damp hair from his forehead. His adoring gaze was like a gentle embrace.

“I love you, Danny. You’re not only my mate, you’re a sweet, clever, compassionate, adorable, beautiful man who I’m so blessed to have for eternity.”

Tears burned in Danny’s eyes, the declaration from Malachi surprising him, even though he felt the same way.

“Eternity? You want me for eternity?”

He hadn’t known that literal forever was an option, but decided to save that conversation for another time. Right now, it was about them and their most perfect and magical romance.

Malachi pressed a soft kiss to his lips, then drew back, locking eyes with him. He

brushed the back of his hand along Danny's cheek.

"For eternity."

"Me too, Mal."

He drew his eyebrows together, irritated with himself for his weak attempt at declaring his love for Malachi.

It occurred to him that he'd never told any man, and barely anyone else, that he loved them.

At least a decade had passed since the last time he'd uttered those three words.

Malachi still gazed at him lovingly, so he didn't seem to mind. But Danny couldn't take it. His mate deserved better.

He cleared his throat. "What I mean is that I love you, too. It might take me a while to be as eloquent as you are when it comes to expressing my affection. Sarcasm? Snark? Complaints? I'm your guy. I'm sorry that I'm not very good at being romantic right now, but I'll try to do better."

Malachi gathered him in his arms. "Just be yourself, baby. That's all I care about. I love you the way you are."

Aaaand... I'm back to crying.

Danny fell asleep wrapped in the comfort of Malachi's arms, the way he knew he would for always. Who knew that being kidnapped by rogue demons could be the best thing that ever happened to him?

Page 10

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“Is he supposed to be screaming like that?”

Malachi clutched Dante’s arm in a panic and was rewarded with a death glare from his friend.

“Do you mind?”

Dante yanked his arm away.

“Sorry.”

Malachi twisted his fingers, unable to keep still. “I wish he would let me be in there with him. Why did he kick me out when Ezekiel arrived?”

Malachi rubbed his forehead, then dragged his fingers through his hair before frantically twisting them again. “I must’ve done something wrong. I can’t stand that he’s so mad at me, of all times.”

He glanced up and was met with Dante’s smirking expression. “It’s the birth of our first child.”

Dante sighed. “So I heard.”

He clapped Malachi’s shoulder. “Amir said that Danny’s worried you’ll think he’s ugly while giving birth and won’t love him anymore.”

Malachi jerked back his head as if he’d been slapped. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Not really, buddy. I’ve learned the hard way that raging hormones are not to be trifled with. Think about how you react whenever anyone threatens your mate.”

Malachi let out a low growl, balling his fists as a flush of anger crawled up his neck.

Dante crossed his arms, smirking again. “Class dismissed.”

Malachi grunted. “Shut up.”

With a sigh, Malachi took a seat at one of the tables in the Rockies lair’s kitchen and dining area.

He tapped his fingers on the table, wondering how much longer it would take before their child was born.

Ezekiel had reassured him that sometimes first babies took a while, but that didn’t stop Malachi from worrying about Danny.

“I wish we were at home for this,”

Malachi muttered. “He’d be so much happier there.”

They’d been away from their permanent residence in the Alaska Range to celebrate Ronen’s promotion to Lead Warrior Defender, Gideon’s previous post. Danny’s due date was still two weeks away, but the baby apparently decided they couldn’t wait any longer.

Dante joined him at the table with a cup of coffee. “Amir had his first child at a lair. It was a similar situation for us. But Zeke knows what he’s doing, and everything was fine.”

Malachi eyed Dante’s coffee. “I guess you’re right. I’ve been awake all night, so I’m

on edge.”

He pointed to the mug Dante held. “Is there some left?”

“Yup. I made a pot while you were arguing with Zeke. I figured you could use some.”

Malachi chuckled. “And here I was thinking you’re not all that smart.”

He winked. “Thanks.”

The moment Malachi began to rise from the table, Ezekiel appeared at the kitchen's threshold. “Who wants to meet their new little girl?”

Malachi gasped, abruptly straightening, the chair falling backwards with a clang on the stone floor.

“A girl?”

Malachi’s voice came out as barely a whisper, his heart thundering. “Danny’s okay? The baby’s healthy?”

Ezekiel’s face broke into a wide grin. “Both perfect. Danny’s exhausted but doing wonderfully, and your daughter is absolutely beautiful. She’s got his blue eyes and your stubborn chin.”

Malachi didn’t wait to hear more. He bolted past Ezekiel, flying down the corridor toward the room where Danny had been laboring for almost ten hours. His hands shook as he pushed open the door, and the sight that greeted him made his knees nearly buckle.

Danny sat propped up against a mountain of pillows, his damp, blond hair plastered

to his forehead, but his face glowed with pure joy. In his arms was the tiniest, most precious creature Malachi had ever seen. Their daughter was swaddled in a soft white blanket, her face scrunched up as she let out tiny mewling sounds.

“Mal.”

Danny’s voice was hoarse but filled with wonder. “Come meet our sweet angel.”

Malachi approached slowly, afraid his trembling legs might give out. The closer he got, the more overwhelmed he became. She was so small, so delicate, with adorable, tiny fingers peeking out from the blanket.

“She’s...”

Malachi swallowed hard, his voice thick with emotion. “She’s incredible, Danny. You’re incredible.”

Danny shifted carefully, making room on the bed. “Want to hold her?”

Malachi’s eyes widened. “I don’t want to hurt her. What if my hands are too rough? What if—”

“Mal. Stop.”

Danny pursed his lips. “She’ll be fine.”

He gave Malachi a tired smile. “You’ve always been gentle with me when that was what I needed from you.”

Tears burned in Malachi’s eyes. “Okay. I’ll be careful.”

“And anyway...”

Danny fell against the pillows, his eyes hooded. "I'll be needing a break now and then."

"Of course, sweetheart."

Malachi gingerly took his daughter from Danny's arms.

The moment she settled against his chest, something shifted in Malachi's universe. She weighed almost nothing, yet she anchored him to this moment more firmly than any battle ever had. She smelled of something indescribable, like sunshine and divinity mixed with Danny's sweet scent. He traced a finger over her impossibly soft cheek, marveling at the perfection of her features.

"She has your nose,"

he murmured, unable to tear his gaze away from her plump, rosy face. When she yawned, her mouth forming a perfect 'o', Malachi's heart nearly burst.

Danny reached out, squeezing Malachi's forearm. "I'm sorry I kicked you out. I was being stupid."

"No, you weren't."

Malachi smiled. "You were in pain, and I would've moved heaven and earth to take that from you if I could."

"I wasn't exactly at my most charming. I'm fairly certain I called Zeke some names that would make Lucifer blush."

Danny's tired smile turned sheepish. "And I may have threatened to strangle you with your tail."

Malachi chuckled softly, mindful not to disturb the bundle in his arms. “I would have let you.”

Their daughter made a tiny snuffling sound, her eyelids fluttering open to reveal those brilliant blue eyes. Malachi’s breath caught as she seemed to focus on him, her gaze somehow ancient and brand new all at once.

“Have you thought about what we should call her?”

Danny yawned. “All those names we picked.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Now that I see her, none of them feel right.”

Malachi studied her delicate features, the way her little fist had escaped the blanket and was curled near her chin. “She looks like...”

He paused, the name coming to him as if by heavenly inspiration. “Seraphina. Like the seraphim, the highest order of angels.”

Danny’s eyes lit up despite his exhaustion. “Seraphina.”

He seemed to be testing the name in his mind, like he was rolling it around on his tongue. “You know what? It’s perfect. Our little Sera.”

As if responding to her new name, Seraphina cooed, the sound filling Malachi with a peace he never thought he would have.

He’d faced countless demons, battled shadows that would terrify mortals, but nothing had prepared him for the overwhelming protectiveness he felt for this tiny being.

“She’s going to be so spoiled.”

Danny let out a soft chuckle, his eyelids drooping.

Malachi gazed down at the most perfect baby there ever was. “She deserves nothing less.”

Malachi noted how Danny’s eyes kept drifting shut. “You should get some rest, sweetheart. I’ll watch her.”

“Are you sure?”

Danny’s voice was barely above a whisper. “I should probably try to feed her.”

“When she's hungry, I'll wake you.”

Malachi cradled Seraphina against his chest, leaning over to press a kiss to his exhausted mate’s forehead. “Sleep, my love. You’ve done the hardest part.”

““Kay. Love you, you big, beautiful brute.”

Malachi held in a laugh so he wouldn’t wake their daughter. “I love you, too, my sweet baby.”

Danny managed a drowsy smile before his breathing evened out, exhaustion finally claiming him.

Malachi watched the gentle rise and fall of his mate’s chest, marveling at the strength Danny had shown.

He might not know what the future held for them as a family, but there was one thing he was certain of.

He would sacrifice his life to protect Danny and Sera. As far as he was concerned,

they were the most precious gifts the world had known. Malachi grinned.

And they're all mine.

* * * *

Thank you for reading Danny and Malachi's sweet and spicy romance. Are you ready for more in the Shadow Slayer world?