



The Angel's Kiss (Tales from the Tarot)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Azazel is the Demon of War, the most powerful and ruthless member of the Twelve Knights of the Round Court of the Hades Empire. He has walked this earth for ten thousand years, feared and respected by warriors of heaven and hell. One fateful night turns his world upside down. Cursed by the last Guardian he killed, he's marked to become the Champion of the next Guardian yet to be born. Now an outcast of both realms, can he find a place where he belongs? Will he be able to obey his Guardian, let alone grow to have feelings for him?

Rai Harrington, the last Guardian to be born. Trained by the Celestial Guild and tasked with protecting humanity from the worlds evils. Being linked to a demon as his Champion hasn't been easy for Rai to accept, especially since other Guardians were bonded to Archangels. Shunned by members of the Guild growing up, he doesn't have many people he can believe in save his best friend and mentor. Will Rai be able to overcome his disdain for Azazel? Can he ever learn to put his faith in a demon? And what about all those feelings he cant control when he thinks about him?

When Rai discovers demons have been hunting for something called "The Key", he's thrust into a dangerous race against time. To stop the threat that will be the ruin of humankind, he will have to find a way to trust who he believes can't be trusted.

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The Night of the Angel's Kiss

Azazel

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I looked at the male Guardian standing before me, the one who was rude enough to interrupt my fun. I happened to be dealing with a miserable lot of humans who thought it would be smart to double-cross me on a transaction for guns. I didn't appreciate this Guardian's intrusion. I swiftly broke the neck of the worthless human I'd been holding to give my full attention to the pest.

Like all other Guardians I'd faced in the past, he was bonded with his angelic Champion and donned the celestial armor the Champion provided. This was white and gold and stronger than any steel, I was sure, based on my experience. Oh yes, he would get my undivided attention.

"You must want to die tonight," I said as I let the corpse fall to the ground. I stepped over his remains like the trash he was.

"Is there anything you filthy demons won't steal? That's my line," the Guardian said, then smiled.

He was holding a revolver with a fancy handle and a sword with a curved blade. The hilt's handguard was intricate in its design. Both weapons glowed a soft blue light. Yes, celestial weapons indeed. Of course, I'd never seen one that glowed before. Was he what his kind called the "Divine Weapon"? If so, then the Guardian who

threatened my life was stronger than the other two I'd faced in the past. They had been easy to kill.

"The last of your kind I killed warned me that a Divine Weapon would come for me. Are you he?" I asked. I had no idea what made a Divine Weapon, nor did I care.

He smiled and nodded.

I welcomed this challenge.

I looked up at the sky to see the moon undergoing an eclipse. Ahhh, what a fitting setting in which I would kill my third Guardian. I let my gaze zero in on my target and smirked. "What is your name?"

"Why should I tell you?" he snarled. His blue eyes remained steady on me, which was smart.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked.

"Azazel, The Demon of War and the most powerful Knight of the Round Court," he replied, and the disgust in his expression gave me a bit of satisfaction to know that I was so loathed by these pompous assholes.

"You say that with such disdain." I snorted.

"Evil is disdainful," he replied.

I sighed. Humans—because that was what he was—were so hypocritical and self-righteous. "I've killed two of your kind already. It was so disappointingly effortless. Aren't you Guardians supposed to be God's last defense?" I taunted.

“Azazel, I, Guardian Jean Dubois of the Celestial Guardian Guild, will end your existence for all of your heinous crimes against mankind. Demon, your horrible reign ends now,” he declared.

Well, at least now I knew the name of the Guardian I’d be killing.

“If not for the evil of humans, my kind would not be here,” I told him.

“Your kind’s only purpose is to breed discontent and hatred. You feed on the weakness of humans like parasites. Your kind—”

I rolled my eyes and waved my hand dismissively. “Yes, yes, I’ve heard it all before,” I interjected. “Let’s dance, shall we?” I beckoned for him to come at me.

He charged at me, swinging his sword with a skill that outmatched the other Guardians I’d faced off with. He was fast and powerful and it took some effort for me to dodge his attacks. I conjured my own armor and sword, the blade was black, the silver hilt had an intricate design with pointed edges, and it glowed red as it was infused with my power. My armor was just as impressive, black with glowing red razor-sharp edges to each layer of metal. But what was most impressive were the spikes on my pauldron, couter, and gauntlets. My armor was wicked enough to bring demons to their knees in fear, and it was metal not found on Earth. No, my armor and sword were forged in the deepest levels of Hell using metals created with damned souls.

The Guardian’s gaze took in my full form, my face morphing into something hideous, my true demonic form. My tanned skin turned black and thicker like leather. My eyes glowed bright indigo, the pupils slitting to mimic a reptile’s. My fangs elongated, and my nails extended to claws as the tips of my ears grew pointed. The Guardian braced himself as he held his defensive stance, waiting for me to attack. I came at him, our blades clashing against each other. The look of sheer determination in his fierce

expression excited me. I knew our battle would be an epic one. Those other Guardians I faced paled in comparison to this one. My heart raced in my chest as our swords clashed. I could not hold back, not with him.

He shot his gun, and the glowing blue bullet whizzed past me, just grazing my cheek. That tiny cut seared my flesh so painfully, I could only imagine what it would have done to me had it hit a vital area. He shot again, and I leaped back and he followed, not allowing any time or space to separate us. I needed to use my other abilities to counter him. I teleported behind him and sliced his armor, my blade splitting his celestial steel, but I wasn't able to reach his skin. My blow wasn't deep enough. I blocked one of his moves, but he countered quickly, slashing me in my arm. His blade did penetrate my arm and the wound in my arm stung even worse than the cut his bullet had inflicted. I spun to dodge another slash and release my fire from the palm of my hand that he blocked with his blade, the fire split as the blade parted it.

Impressive!

He fired his gun at me and I had to move quickly, using my demonic teleportation to dodge the bullets as they hissed through the air past me. This Guardian was making me work for my victory. My state of arousal had peaked and I felt wild with the sense of exhilaration that pumped through my veins. I would have to push myself past my limits if I wanted to defeat this Guardian. His thirst for my blood seemed to match mine for his.

I teleported and, this time, I used the shadows surrounding us, wrapping them around me to conceal myself. He felt me, I was sure, but could he see me? I moved slowly, taking careful steps toward him as he looked around. I played with the shadows, controlling them to throw him off. When he turned to slash at one, I clawed his face, ripping into the skin. He cried out, blood gushing from his wound as shredded flesh dangled from bloody strands.

“You beast!” he yelled as he covered his wound with his hand. He had to dissolve his gun to do that. Good, one of his weapons out of the way was an advantage. His sword grew brighter, which I found peculiar.

“I was trying to cut your throat, but you moved in the nick of time,” I taunted.

“You will die!” he snarled.

I moved in again, and at the same time, played with the shadows. Once I was close, I swung my sword, but he rolled, dodging out of the way.

“That trick won’t work on me, you scum!” he yelled and he looked directly at me, which let me know that he could see me.

How? No matter.

I discarded the shadows and revealed myself, then laughed. “Oh! You’re magnificent! Truly worthy of the death I will give you.”

He released a yell that I felt vibrate through my body and ran toward me, faster than any Guardian before him. I used one of my most powerful abilities to freeze him, but it had no effect. He continued to race toward me.

Interesting and concerning. The longer I fought him, the less my powers worked on him. It was going to come down to skill.

We fought again with swords, feet, and fists. I dodged his sword and punched him so hard, he spun but came back with a kick that caught me in the chest, sending me crashing into the car of the gangster I’d killed. The thick steel was dented from the impact of my body. My armor had protected me from most of it, but it still hurt. I had no time to gather myself before he was on me again. I blasted my fire, forcing him to

leap back. The heat of my flames was lethal to demons and angels alike. Hellfire. The Guardian knew it and it gave me time to climb to my feet.

“Argh!” I growled, my indigo eyes glowing brighter in my fury. My chest heaved as he growled. Never had any being given me this much trouble.

We stared at each other, murder in our eyes. I would have his blood on my hands. I charged at him, a flurry of blows and slashes, some landing, as he did the same. The cut he gave me burned like ice-cold fire. It was the best way I could describe it.

The sky began to darken above us as we fought, the eclipse becoming fuller. I attacked the Guardian, punching and kicking him, both moves landing. He countered with a kick of his own and caught my jaw, forcing me to stagger back. When he came in, thinking I was dropping my guard, I ducked and slashed, my blade slicing through his abdomen. Finally, an attack I could capitalize on!

He cried out and fell to his knees, insides spilling out. In his weakened state, he collapsed to the ground, hands holding his abdomen. I knew better than to give him any time to heal. The wound on his face was almost mended, so I had an idea of how fast it would take him. I sent a blaze of Hellfire at him. The bright red flames engulfed his body, devouring him. He screamed words, which I didn’t recognize. I also had no interest in them, only his death. He thrashed about, arms flailing as he wailed, and that was when I teleported to him, swinging my sword with all of my might and taking his head. I watched in satisfaction as his head catapulted in the air, then landed in a thud as it rolled to a stop. His body, still gushing blood, fell as it continued to burn.

I was breathing hard, so exhausted after our battle as I looked at what remained of the Guardian. “I’ll give it to you, Jean Dubois... you made me work for it.” My human features returned as I absorbed my armor and sword back into my body and turned... or at least I tried to. My body was immobile and no matter how hard I tried to move, I

couldn't. I couldn't even speak. There was a rumble as the ground shook beneath my feet. I could see the eclipsed moon in the sky and it began to turn red. What the hell was going on?

The body of the fallen Guardian floated in the air, which had never happened before when I'd faced other Guardians. In the past, I'd fatally wound one, and their Archangel Champion would die, leaving only the Guardian. And without that power from the archangel, the Guardian was all but dead in my presence. I noticed that wasn't the case with this Divine Weapon. Was this happening because I killed him?

I watched in awe as two souls separated from the corpse and ascended to the sky. Yes, this was very different from before. And the moment they disappeared, I felt the most excruciating pain I'd ever experienced grip my entire body. I couldn't even scream or breathe. It felt like liquid pain—debilitating pain—replaced my blood and was now pumping to and from my heart. The red glow of the eclipse grew brighter and then something shot down from the sky into me. My body jerked about from the powerful force of whatever it was as it invaded me.

The pain I'd been experiencing all but doubled and I was finally able to scream. The windows of the empty factories were all shattered by the powerful roar of my voice, the ground continued to shake as my body was assaulted by the presence that had been sent from above. Was it from the heavens? It felt like it was corrupting me, torturing me. Tears flowed from my eyes and I couldn't even remember the last time I ever cried... if the occasion even occurred.

Finally, the pain just vanished and I fell to the ground, panting hard, my body buzzing with an energy I didn't recognize. Everything hurt and I was too weak to move. There was something cold on my inner forearm and I lifted my sleeve to see a mark glowing white at first. As it seared itself into my flesh, more pain gripped me and I gritted my teeth as I growled in agony. I watched as the mark of a sword burned into my skin and once it was done, that pain faded.

I rolled onto my back, and the cold air from the nighttime breeze washed over my sweat-soaked body. I shivered a little from the entire ordeal. My chest heaved and the fatigue took over; I had just enough strength to teleport home and into my bed. The last thought that plagued me before sleep took me was: What just happened to me?

Chapter one

Azazel

The Darkness and the Light

“To think that the strongest knight in the empire has been reduced to the lowly, pitiful being that I see before me,” cursed my Empress, Astaroth, as she glared down at me from one of the three thrones. “You used to represent all of my glory. You used to be a symbol of the power I wield. And now... you disgust me.” She snarled down at me and my gut clenched.

“How could you allow a mere Guardian to bring you to such a state?” asked Empress Regan, the youngest of the three Ruling Empresses of the Hades Empire. My Empress was the second oldest.

“Answer us!” demanded Empress Lilith, the oldest of all the Empresses.

I knelt on the floor, my head bowed low. I knew better than to look them in their eyes, but I could feel their judgment. I was surrounded by the other Knights of the Round Court, to which I used to be the Master Knight, but I knew that was no longer my title. Not after what happened to me. Even now, I felt dirty and didn’t understand what had happened three nights ago. That was how long I’d slept once I’d returned home. As a demon, I didn’t need to sleep the way humans did. I could go weeks without sleeping and when I needed to, only a few hours were required. It had taken me seventy-two hours to recover and that left me even more confused as to what I had endured. As soon as I’d opened my eyes, I was transported before the Tribunal

for this trial.

“I cannot explain what happened, Empresses,” I said. I told no lies.

“Can’t or won’t?” Lilith asked me.

“Can’t, Empress. I don’t know what happened. I killed my third Guardian. He was to be your trophy. This one was bonded to his angel Champion as a Divine Weapon. His death was my gift to all of you.”

“A ‘Divine Weapon’?” Empress Regan asked.

I nodded. “I know not what it all means, Empress, only that this Guardian was more powerful than any other.”

“Go on,” Empress Astaroth bade.

“But after my victory, I was attacked by the Heavens,” I said, which was the best way I could explain the event.

“You reek of whatever it is inside of you... so revolting,” said Empress Astaroth with a sneer and her words cut me to my core. For millennia, I had worshipped her and obeyed her every command. I was her favorite, how could she speak to me this way?

“His very presence offends this entire Tribunal,” said Empress Regan.

“It offends this entire Empire,” added Lilith.

Their words were as cruel as their souls. I didn’t know why I felt pain at this rejection... why did my throat feel tight? I swallowed to try to relieve the burn that irked me. My heart ached, which was very unfamiliar, what was this... this thing I

felt?

“Please, Empresses, allow me a chance to fix this,” I begged.

“He is your Knight, Astaroth, do with him whatever you will,” Lilith said with a wave of her hand.

“Get him out of my sight,” said Regan, and she turned from me.

Astaroth looked down at me and it wasn't just because of the distance between us, or the fact that she sat up on the Royal Dias. It was because she saw me as lower than the worst human soul to be expelled into our domain. I swallowed again and blinked back the wetness that threatened to seep from my eyes. Tears... never had I cried until that day. I knew that for sure now, and here at this moment, the turmoil I felt made me want to be so weak.

“Though it pains me to do this, I simply must sever our link, Azazel. Your corruption seeps from you into me and it is beyond foul,” Astaroth said.

I raised my head, my eyes on her. “No!” I gasped.

“Lower your eyes, demon!” Astaroth yelled and I quickly bowed again. Hearing that she was about to sever my link to her left me in a state of shock. My connection to Hell would be gone. I wouldn't be able to return just by my will. The doors would be locked to me forever unless she reinstated our link. On top of that, the power she shared would be gone, like the clipping of an umbilical cord from mother to child. That was what Astaroth was to me. She created me to serve her and I did so loyally, faithfully, for over ten thousand years.

This couldn't be happening!

“Please, Empress, do not do this. I have been your humble and dedicated servant since my creation,” I pleaded. I’d never begged for anything in my life. Never needed to, but I found myself groveling, and hearing the words tumble from my mouth sickened me. My body shook with the rage, pain, and frustration I felt that I barely kept contained.

Empress Astaroth rose and walked over to me and stood a few inches away. “Reveal,” she said and a sigil appeared before my eyes and I’d been kneeling in the middle of it.

“No, NO!” I yelled as I looked up at her, my eyes wide in my desperation to get her to give me another chance. I tried to move from the sigil, but couldn’t. All I could do was look on in horror.

“You failed me,” she said, then sliced her palm with her nail. The thick, red blood dripped onto the sigil and a bright flame shot up from the sigil, surrounding me, and I felt a rush of energy flow through me, then an emptiness followed by blackness.

When I came to, I was in my bed where I’d been before I had been transported. I lay there feeling emotions I didn’t have an understanding of. My eyes were wet as tears flowed from them. My chest ached and it felt like my ribs were tightening around my heart. What was this? I curled into a fetal position and held myself and cried because I couldn’t stop the myriad of feelings that held me captive.

I’d been abandoned by my own kind, made an outcast. I was still a demon, but not completely. I no longer had a home. No longer had a place where I belonged. I wasn’t human, wasn’t a demon, wasn’t an angel.

What was I going to do now?

It'd been a week since I'd been cursed by the heavens and abandoned by my Empress right before I was cast out of Hades. A demon without access to Hades might as well be nothing at all. The barmaid came to my table and refilled my brandy. I couldn't get drunk, no matter how much I imbibed, but I did fancy the taste of alcohol. It used to bring me some level of pleasure, but now, I felt nothing. For thousands of years, I walked the Earth, a master of it and every being living on it. I could look into the hearts of men and know exactly how to bring them to their knees.

I roamed the lands from the moment Cain killed his brother Abel. It was me who whispered into his ear that a rock would make a great weapon. It wasn't hard to manipulate humans, they were so susceptible. They needed leaders and beings to believe in whether it was religion or money, one would be their god. I found them entertaining, like fish in a bowl. I was the one who taught them how to make weapons. I never told them what to do with them, never needed to. I knew they'd use those tools to kill each other.

And the blood they shed in my honor empowered me, making me the strongest demon Knight in the Empire. And yet, there I was, sitting in a dank bar on the riverbed mourning my lost glory. I had no idea how to get it back, either. Did I need to kill someone innocent to rid myself of this corruption? Should I seek out another Guardian and kill them? Would that undo what had been done? I had to try something.

I downed the brandy and walked out of the bar in search of someone to kill. It didn't take me long to come upon a church. So many neighborhoods were littered with them. Institutions of indoctrination. I laughed at the steepled roof with the cross at the tip. Contrary to what propaganda existed, demons could enter churches and all hallowed ground. And humans were to blame. I ran my fingers over one of the polished pews, smirking at the fine craftsmanship. I let my eyes roam over the

stained-glass windows to the decorative alter, then walked up to it.

“Can I help you?”

I turned to see the priest standing near the confessional. His black smock and white collar were as neat as his hair and beard.

“Can you help me?” I asked, then began to step closer. I wondered if he would be able to sense what I was. Most humans couldn’t, but there were some that had the gift. Many of them became Guards for the Guild.

“I am here to listen, my son. I can offer you guidance,” he said, then gestured toward the confessional.

I nodded and he went into one and I entered the other half. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t go for all the pomp and circumstance,” I said. I heard him swallow and wondered if he was preparing himself for my confession.

“I will listen and do what I can to help your troubled soul, my son,” he said.

“Can you forgive my sins?” I asked.

“If you are truly repentant, you must ask the lord for his forgiveness.”

“How do I know if I’m forgiven?” I was looking at him through the wooden latticework covering the window, but he was facing away from me.

“You will know in your heart. You will know in your conscience,” he said.

“Let me ask you something, Father. Who do you think will get into Heaven? The atheist who lived their life being good to their fellow man and honest? The person

who'd give a stranger a place to stay or the clothes off their back? Or the person who claims to be Christian all the while harming their fellow man and hypocritically judging people? Going out of their way to treat people who don't look, believe, or act like them as less than? Who do you think Heaven will welcome?" I ran my fingers through my hair. "And if you'd said the latter, is that the Heaven you want to spend eternity in? With all those assholes?"

"Heaven and God welcome all who repent," the priest said.

I snorted, then laughed. "Such a typical response because you don't know. I'll tell you the truth. God doesn't forgive sinners, no matter how hard they beg for it. Do you want to know why?"

"He does, my child. If you truly want his forgiveness," the priest urged.

"You've already sinned. You've had your fun. You've hurt your victims. How can God forgive you when they can't or haven't? Is that fair?" I asked.

"Fair?"

"Yes. Is it fair for the victim who was innocent to then have to spend eternity with the person who sinned against them? Who hurt them, who took away their joy, all because they said they finally felt bad about it?" I asked.

"When a person gives themselves to our Lord and Savior, there is no pain. There is no resentment, there is no regret once they pass on and are accepted into the hands of God. Once they are welcomed into his home," the priest said those words as if he truly believed them.

I laughed then and the sound coming from me wasn't human. It was enough to make the priest finally look at me and I could smell and see the terror starting to creep in. I

smiled then, allowing my fangs to grow, then I slipped my fingers through the latticework, gripping it.

The priest's eyes grew wide as he saw my claws extend and turn black. He shrank back into the tiny space. “W-what—what are you?” he stammered.

“I’m what tortures the souls you believe you’ve absolved of all their sins,” I said. “Hell is full of souls who assumed that with a few words of contrition, they could wipe the slate clean with their last breath. Oh, don’t worry... there is a Heaven, but that God is not as merciful as you would have your flock believe. There is still a debt to pay,” I said the last part with a growl that had the priest shaking in fear.

“H-how can you enter the house of God?” the priest stammered.

I laughed. “The ‘house of God’? God only has one house and this isn’t it,” I said.

“God is all around us. You will not darken this place with your evil!”

I leaned forward so he could better see my glowing indigo eyes. “Can’t you see that I’m a tortured soul, Father? Or are your words only for humans so that they can lie to themselves? How arrogant when humans think whatever good fortune they receive is God’s blessing as if they are more worthy than the next believer. Did they ever consider that it was the work of my kind because of their very arrogance?”

The priest was sweating, his entire body pressed to the other side of the small space as if that would keep him out of my reach. “L-leave t-t-this place, you foul thing!”

I ripped the latticework out of my way, then punched through the woodwork as the priest screamed his prayers louder while shrinking in fear. I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him closer, my indigo eyes glowing even brighter in my rage. “Why do you fear me? Whether you die tonight or fifty years from now, don’t you believe

you're going to a better place? Where's your faith?" I snarled.

He closed his eyes tight, too afraid to look at me, but he didn't cease his praying. I leaned forward and inhaled his fear. "Do you think you'll be saved? Why do you want to be? Why are you praying... haven't you done enough of that to get you into those pearly gates you covet?"

I pulled him through the hole I'd made in the confessional then slung him through the door, sending his body crashing into two of the pews. He cried out and fell to the floor, holding his back that I was sure would have a bruise on it. I felt a sharp jab of pain shoot through my head and stomach, making me grimace. I groaned because it was a discomforting sensation. I've never experienced illness of any kind and whatever just happened was an anomaly. The pain faded and I stepped out of the wreckage of the confessional and walked over to him, kneeling before him. I hated him and everything he represented, and I was eager to relieve him of this mortal coil.

"Allow me to send you to the God who cursed me," I said, my voice deep and laced with all of the menace I felt toward everything and everyone. I drew my fist back to punch him, a blow that was sure to end this brittle being, but a strong wave of nausea attacked me and I fell back and leaned over, vomiting bile onto the floor. My head throbbed like someone was hammering it and my stomach felt like I was being kicked repeatedly. The sickness was crippling and left me weak and shivering afterward. My body aching all over, my head reeling.

"My God did save me," the priest said as he scrambled away from me.

I growled and tried to attack him again when another bout of nausea seized me. It was enough to give the priest a chance to run. Only when he was out of my presence and the desire I had to kill him faded, did the sickness and pain also subside.

"What the fuck!" I cursed and dabbed at the sweat that beaded my forehead. I had

never experienced such a feeling and I was appalled by something happening to me that was so... human.

Furthermore, I couldn't understand why it had happened. Was this curse cast upon me to blame? Slowly, I climbed to my feet and shook the last of that repulsive feeling away. Looked like I wouldn't be killing anyone innocent today. I paused in the threshold of the church, because a depressing thought came to me. What if I couldn't kill anyone at all? What if I had to go through eternity with this pathetic shell of a demon? I closed my eyes at the very possibility that my life could become so insignificant. What would be the point of even existing?

“Want me to end it for you?”

I opened my eyes at the sound of an unfamiliar feminine voice and saw a human before me. No, not a normal human, a Guardian. I snarled, a low growl coming from me as I glared at the bitch. “Just the person I wanted to see.”

If I could kill one of them, maybe I could reverse this curse. I conjured up my sword and armor and the Guardian did the same, her two swords glowing white. She was another Guardian that was fully bonded with her Champion, but maybe not a Divine Weapon. Her weapons bore the same glowing color as the first two Guardians I had killed. I didn't bother with small talk, I was on a mission. I charged forward, my sword raised for the attack and she had taken a defensive stance. We were inches apart when all of a sudden, another bout of sickness took hold and I doubled over, puking more bile onto the ground. My sword and armor absorbed into me as the pain in my arm felt like I'd been struck by lightning. As for my target, she had been thrust backward, but had caught her footing and was watching me in my pitiful state.

That was humiliating.

“Well, well, isn't this interesting,” the female Guardian said. “Say goodbye, you

scourge!”

I was too sick to defend myself and she brought her blade down upon me, but before it could strike my flesh, a powerful blast sent her flying back. She landed hard, dozens of feet from me, and lay there for a few seconds, holding her sore areas. She groaned and sat up, looking at me with what I assumed was the same expression I was giving her.

We were both awestruck.

How could her weapon not be able to harm me? She manifested her gun and aimed it at me. Right before she pulled the trigger, I thought about evading the bullet, but then I thought, why bother? Death was more welcoming at this point. The bullet fired from her gun, glowing white with its holy essence, and I watched as it traveled through the air toward my chest. When it struck, I was knocked back to the ground, but the bullet ricocheted off my body and became embedded in a nearby tree.

We both turned to look at the holy metal still glowing in the damaged bark of the tree. It began to disintegrate the way my body would have had that bullet entered me. Nothing was left of the large oak tree save the holy bullet that killed it.

“My god!” the Guardian gasped, then turned to look at me. “So, it’s true?”

I turned from the bullet resting in the grass to her. “What’s true?”

She looked at the church’s door and I knew why. Out of the corner of my eye, I’d seen movement and knew that the priest, our one witness, had been watching our little exchange. She groaned and then rose to her feet. “Don’t go anywhere. We have a lot to discuss.”

I climbed back to my feet. The sickness that had rendered me vulnerable was now

gone as well as my urge to kill another Guardian. I watched as she spoke with the priest and he nodded, the look in his eyes seemed glazed over and I wondered if she was making him forget what he'd witnessed. Or was she making him forget ever meeting me and my little confession altogether? That would be most unfortunate if she did. Freaking him out was the highlight of my night.

She turned from him and began descending the stairs. "Come with me," she commanded and I remained in place. She was a few feet away from me when she stopped, but didn't turn around. "Please," she added.

I sighed, but followed.

She led me to a nearby park, and there we both sat on a bench. A demon Knight and a Celestial Guardian. "Tell me what's going on and how do I fix it?"

She chuckled. "There is no 'fixing' it."

I turned to face her. "I don't believe that."

She shrugged. "You killed a Guardian who was a Divine Weapon, on the night of an eclipse."

"So?"

She snarled, then sighed as if trying to keep her temper in check. "Right before the Guardian died, they made a Death Wish and gave you a glorious destiny you don't deserve."

I hissed. "Speak in clear terms," I snapped, because I didn't know what a "Death

Wish” was.

She huffed. “You received the next calling of the Champion. The Angel’s Kiss. Normally, in the death of a Guardian and their Champion, their souls go up to Heaven. Their duty is done. When a new Guardian is called, the next Archangel who is to become his Champion would have received the powers and knowledge of the one before him through the Angel’s Kiss. But in your case, it was given to you.”

I was still confused. “I have no knowledge of Heaven that an Archangel would have had, nor his powers.”

“But you have his calling.”

I frowned. “What does that even mean?”

“It means you’re one of us now,” she said.

I scoffed. “The hell I am!”

“I’m sorry, do you have something else you need to be doing?” she mocked.

I opened my mouth to give her my usual wisecracks, but then changed my mind. The truth was that I didn’t. I’d been ready to give up everything back there and accept my death in order to end my existence that no longer had a purpose.

Her expression softened just a bit. “I don’t like that this has happened. You’re a demon and should have been killed tonight. But you are a Champion and soon, you will be called to your own Guardian when it is time. There is nothing you can do to stop the Calling or change your destiny. Consider this a gift and not a curse. A chance to redeem your soul.”

I laughed, but it wasn't because I found what she'd said particularly humorous. "What makes you think my soul needs redeeming?"

"You've received the Angel's Kiss. It doesn't matter if you think your soul needs to be redeemed... you'll have no choice," she said.

I lifted my head to the stars in the sky and sighed. "So, it would seem the night I killed your Guardian, the real victory went to your side."

She snorted. "That's debatable. From what I see before me, I don't understand why a demon was given such a coveted privilege. You're not worthy."

"Finally, we agree on something. I didn't deserve this curse."

"Oh, you lost me there. You do deserve to be stopped by any means," she said with a chuckle. "You can't kill anyone innocent. Your days as the Demon of War are over. Can you even convince them to kill each other?"

I remained silent because, for some reason, I hadn't felt the motivation to do it since that terrible night. But now, I was curious to see if I could.

"Can you?" she asked.

"I haven't tried... I'll let you know," I said sarcastically.

She shrugged. "I bet you can't. You probably don't even want to."

I sneered because she was right.

Again, she chuckled as if she already knew the answer.

“But, how can I be the Champion if I can’t even kill anyone?” I said, getting back to the topic.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re really stuck on that, aren’t you?”

“It’s fun to kill people,” I said with a smirk.

“You’ll be commanded by your Guardian and won’t be allowed to kill innocents. ”

I gave a half-hearted laugh. “I’ve been alive long enough to witness God’s wrath where plenty of innocents died. Why be so hypocritical when it comes to his Guardians and Champions?”

She shrugged. “It just is. A Guardian’s job is to protect the people in the world from evil. A Champion’s job is to protect their Guardian. You’ll be called to fight for him or to become his weapons for battle. Until then, you won’t be able to harm whomever you want.” She smirked. “I bet it hurts, doesn’t it? Not being able to be a complete asshole.”

“It does,” I admitted, as there was no point in lying. She saw first-hand what happened to me when I tried.

“And to think, I was speaking figuratively.” She rose from the bench and turned to look down at me. “It is extra gratifying to know that it also hurts you literally. I hope you suffer every time you even think about killing someone innocent. I hope your body is wracked with pain if you try to live the life you once did. Let it be a constant reminder that you are on the road to redemption. A gift not many demons are afforded.”

“A gift, my ass,” I grumbled with a cocked brow and in my most menacing tone.

She nodded. “Yes, a gift.” She turned to walk away but paused. “Don’t bother to come to the Headquarters of the Celestial Guardians Guild. You will not be welcomed there.”

I smirked. “And here I was under the impression that I was one of you?”

“I shiver at the thought of what kind of Guardian will be born who is supposed to bond with the likes of you.”

I didn’t let her insults hurt me even though I found myself having... what humans called emotions. No insult had hurt me more than the ones that came from the three Empresses of the Hades Empire.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Guardian Terri Uche. Remember my name. We will be watching you, Azazel,” she said as if that was a warning, then she walked away.

I didn’t bother to follow, I had my answers. There was no way I was going to accept this Angel’s Kiss or whatever the fuck it was. I refused to be used by God’s warriors, a mere tool to be commanded. I was Azazel for fuck’s sake. The most powerful demon Knight in the world. I would find a way to restore myself if it was the last thing I did.

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Chapter two

Rai Harrington

The Night of a Falling Star - Angel's Blessing

December 12, 2024

I sat in the backyard with my mom, dad, and little sister... all three of us were waiting to see the comet that was supposed to pass over our sky that night. I'd never seen a comet before and I peered through my mini telescope at the stars shining brightly above.

"When is it going to happen?" I asked my parents.

"Very soon, keep looking, it'll only be a few seconds," my mom said.

"I'm cold. I wanna go back inside," my sister, Rain, complained.

I couldn't really blame her. I was cold too. It was the eleventh of December and Chicago winters showed no mercy. We'd only been outside for five minutes waiting for the comet to pass. It was reported that it would happen around midnight. I'd been the most excited, because I had been told the story of how a comet was in the sky the very night I'd been born. And it was going to happen again on my twelfth birthday. This was so amazing.

My dad looked at his watch. "It's close to the time that scientists say it will pass. Just

a few more minutes.”

“Fine,” my sister said with a shiver. She was bundled up from head to toe in winter gear, but she just hated the cold, period.

I ignored her and focused on the sky through my telescope and just as my dad had stated, I finally saw it. A flash of bright light with a trail zipped through the sky and I yelped in delight. My whole body tingled with little sparks, which was so cool. “Oh my God, did you see it? Did you see it?” I asked my family with all of the enthusiasm I felt.

“Yes, baby, we saw it,” my mother said, then she leaned over, kissing my temple. “Happy Birthday, Rai.”

I put my telescope down and looked at her with a wide grin. “Thank you, mom.” I hugged her and my dad. When I tried to hug my little sister, she shoved me away with a giggle. I still kissed her, though.

“Yuck,” she said, then wiped my kiss away.

“No cake for you,” I threatened.

Rain shrugged. “You can’t stop me from getting some cake,” she said, then she went back inside.

I rolled my eyes and looked at my parents. “You just had to give me a little sister.”

“You both love each other,” my mom said.

“No, I don’t,” I joked and she laughed. I shivered a little as the tingling sensation I felt faded. “Did you all feel that too?”

My mom frowned. "Feel what?"

"When the comet passed, I felt a tingle."

"Probably because you were so excited," my dad said as he rose from the lawn chair.

"Yeah, I really was," I admitted. I was still excited. I only wished I could have taken a photo of it.

My mom clapped her hands. "Okay, it's time for the birthday boy to go to bed. You have school tomorrow."

We walked back inside to the warmth of our home.

"You better get up, too. I don't want to have to drag you out of bed," my dad said.

I was already wearing my pajamas under my winter clothes, so technically, I was already ready for bed. "Do I have to go to school? It's my birthday."

"Oh, you're going to school and you better not get into any more trouble," my mom said.

"You're lucky if we even give you a birthday party after all the trouble you've been in," my dad said.

I frowned. "It wasn't my fault. Those kids are always picking on me. Am I just supposed to let them?" I asked. Because it was true, I'd been suspended once this school year for fighting, and it wasn't my first time either. I had four suspensions on my record and one expulsion in the past two years. I was known as a troublemaker, but I didn't think it was fair to call me that when I wasn't ever the one to start the fight. I just finished them.

“Use your words and not your fists,” my mom said.

“My fists work better,” I mumbled as I removed my hat and scarf.

“What was that?” my mom asked.

“Nothing,” I replied quickly.

“Go to bed, Rai,” my mom ordered.

I nodded, then went to my bedroom and took off my coat, gloves, and boots. I tossed everything into the chair, and then climbed into bed and turned off the light. On my ceiling was a set of glow-in-the-dark pieces that made up the galaxy. Something I’d found fascinating since I’d been born on the night of a special comet. My wall was also decorated with posters of my favorite martial artists, some I found to be attractive.

Thinking boys were cute was one of the reasons other boys at school picked on me. That, and I knew a lot were jealous that I was also smart. “Wise beyond my years,” my mom had once told me. “Brawn and brains,” my dad had added. I think he secretly liked the fact that I fought for myself, whereas my mom didn’t like violence.

Still, I would never back down from a fight. Although, I had been behaving myself so far. I really wanted to have my birthday party this weekend. I’d been looking forward to that.

I stood in a field covered in charred bodies still smoldering. As I looked around, I felt happiness and pride in all of the destruction I’d caused. Buildings burned, flames licking out of windows as more people ran screaming in terror. I felt empowered by

their fear, by their deaths. I stepped over the bodies, making my way to a fountain, and leaned over to wash my hands of the blood that covered them. In the water, I saw my reflection, and it wasn't my own face looking back at me, but one of a gorgeous man with long, black hair and glowing indigo eyes.

My eyes opened and I gasped as I sat up in my bed, my heart raced as my chest heaved. Quickly, I turned on the light and looked around to make sure I was in my bedroom and not some terrifying battlefield from the past. I was and I breathed a sigh of relief. Why had that dream felt so real, like I was there? And why did I dream of something so horrible? I gripped my chest and took another deep breath before I turned off the light and lay back down.

“What was that?” I asked myself because I was alone.

I didn't like it. That dream was too vivid, and why did I dream that I was a man I'd never seen before? No, I didn't like it... but I forced myself to go back to sleep.

I came home from school to a stranger sitting in my living room speaking to my parents.

“Rai, come here, sweetie,” my mom said and I walked over to her and sat down on the sofa where she patted the cushion.

I took off my book bag and placed it on the floor and then looked at the stranger. There was something oddly familiar about him, like I'd seen him before, but couldn't remember where or when. Was it in one of my dreams? Ever since my birthday, I had those vivid dreams every night. For a month, I dreamed of demons and angels fighting. I had even told my parents about it, but they just thought I had an overactive imagination. But something didn't feel right. And now, a man who looked familiar

from one of those dreams was in my house.

I swallowed hard because I was nervous. If he was real, then what about everything else I'd dreamed about? Or was he just someone I saw and then my mind put him into some of those crazy dreams? I just didn't know.

"Rai, this is Mr. Morris. He is the Headmaster of the Stellar Academy," my mom said, introducing us. She had a huge smile on her face.

"Hi," I said and took in the man's appearance. He was so handsome. Brown skin like mine, hazel eyes, his hair cut in a neat fade. And he had a trimmed beard and mustache. His suit was very stylish. I especially liked the fancy chain on his vest and tie as well as the jewel that replaced the top button of his shirt. He looked regal, like a king. His presence reminded me of how I saw him in my dream, but he was a warrior then. Fighting with a glowing blue sword and gun and kicking ass.

"Hello Rai," he said in a voice that was deep and assertive. It made me sit up straighter. He also had an accent I couldn't place.

"He's here because he would like to admit you into their Academy," my mom said and by the tone of her voice, I knew this was an opportunity she wouldn't want me to waste.

I'd never heard of the school before, I had questions. "Why?" was the first one I asked. I was smart, true, but hardly at the top of my class. I was on the Honor Roll, but there were fifteen kids ahead of me.

Mr. Morris smiled. "We see the potential in you, Rai, and want to foster it. It's not always about grades when you have so much more to offer."

It was as if he was reading my mind. How did he know that I was thinking about my

GPA? “Like what?” I asked.

“Sweetie, this is a great opportunity. Let’s not look gift horses in their mouths,” my mom said.

“He’s not wrong, I also want to know,” my dad said, which seemed to draw my mom’s disappointment and she looked at him before turning to Mr. Morris.

Mr. Morris nodded. “I completely understand. I’d be honored if you were to attend a tour of our Academy to see for yourself. We take in gifted children and help them hone their skills to be the leaders of the future. We have the most results for Ivy League university admissions. In addition to that, we have our own levels of higher education that are exclusive and rival other schools. We also offer scholarships for our students, thus alleviating the financial stress such matters can give concerned parents like yourselves.”

He was a smooth talker, because I could see my parents being drawn in with his every word. Even I had to admit, it seemed like a good deal. But I wasn’t looking forward to having to work that much harder in some elite school. And I didn’t want to leave the few friends I had made to go to a school with a bunch of nerds.

“I’d like that, yes,” my mom said.

“What if I don’t want to go?” I asked.

“Let’s at least see the place first, Rai,” my dad said.

I could already tell that if my parents liked Stellar Academy, I wasn’t going to have a choice of whether or not I wanted to attend it.

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Chapter three

Rai

Stellar Academy

It had been ten days since our visit with the Headmaster, Mr. Morris, and now my parents, sister, and I were sitting in the lobby of the Academy's main office where the Headmaster worked. All of our expenses were paid and we were flown to Los Angeles, California, first class, which was really cool. I'd never been here before and hoped we'd have a chance to visit some of the sights before we had to go back home.

Even our hotel room had been paid for and it was huge with three bedrooms, one being a suite, which my parents claimed right away. My sister and I at least had our own rooms and we were told to order whatever we wanted from room service, which was so awesome and made me feel like I was rich. But now, it was time to tour the place my parents wanted me to call my new home.

I looked around the lobby at the high ceiling and fancy archways, tall glass windows, and marble floors. The chandeliers added elegance and I had to admit, it was beautiful. Even the grounds looked extravagant with all of the flowers, topiaries, and fountains. I wondered how much it cost to go to a school like this.

A woman approached us. "The Headmaster will see you now," she said. "Please follow me."

We did and she led us to a set of double dark wood doors that she opened, then

gestured for us to enter.

Once inside, she closed the door and Mr. Morris stood and smiled. “Please, make yourselves comfortable.”

My parents took the seats in front of his desk and my sister and I sat on the sofa.

“This place is awesome,” my sister whispered. “I hope I can go too.”

I didn’t say anything. Yes, it was awesome, but I was still curious about how I kept seeing Mr. Morris in my dreams and what they meant. I listened to the conversation the adults had concerning my education.

“His tuition will be covered. You needn’t worry,” said Mr. Morris.

My mom was beaming at that, dad too.

“Are you ready to look around?” Mr. Morris asked.

My parent nodded. “Yes, please.”

Mr. Morris did the tour himself, showing us all of the amenities and classes as well as the dorms. Okay, yeah, I was sold. I wanted to come to this school so badly. I pulled on my mom’s sleeve getting her attention.

“Please let me come here,” I begged.

“Oh, you are totally going to this school, don’t you worry,” she said to my delight.

I must have been grinning like a fool the whole time because my cheeks hurt. This place had a pool, basketball court, tennis court, baseball field, art studios, dojos, a

theater, and the best part, the lunch room. We had the chance to eat there and could order whatever we wanted and real chefs prepared the food and it was so good! The dorms I would be living in had full-size beds, not twins like I had now. I would have my own room, too, which was awesome. Some of the kids shared rooms and had twin beds, but I wouldn't.

I liked being that special.

The classrooms didn't look like the ones I was used to. Some were held outside, others in large halls, like I'd seen in shows about college or animes. Everything was the best of the best and I wanted to be a part of it. At the end of the tour, my parents were allowed to think about it, but I knew their minds were already made up.

In our hotel room, we had a family discussion about it. I had to get used to the idea that I'd be living here, so far away from my family. I'd be expected to behave so I wouldn't lose this opportunity and everything else my parents were worried about.

"I really want to go to that school," I said. "But can't y'all visit me from time to time?"

My mom nodded. "He said that we could and the school would arrange it." My mom kissed me and hugged me. "I'm so happy you're getting this chance. Oh sweetie, it's all free too and they'll make sure you get to go to the college of your choice on one of their scholarships!" she squealed in her glee at that.

For me, I just wanted to go to this school, because it was so much better than my current one. By the time it was all said and done, I was enrolled and expected to transfer in five days. I spent that time enjoying my friends and family before my big move.

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Chapter four

Rai

It was all a lie.

I was standing in front of Mr. Morris as he sat behind his desk. “I want to go back home.”

Mr. Morris smiled, then rose from the chair and came around to sit on his desk. “I’m sorry, but there is no going back home for you, Rai.”

“You told my parents this was a school,” I said.

He nodded. “It is. But it isn’t a school to prepare you for the corporate world. No, your destiny is far more noble and important than that. You will be educated, it’s a must. But you will also be trained to become the warrior you were born to be.”

This was bullshit. “I want to go home. You didn’t tell my parents this was a military Academy.”

He chuckled then.

And that enraged me even more. “Ain’t shit funny!” I snapped. He laughed far too many times in my presence today.

His expression lost the humor, but it was also sympathetic. “Colorful language.”

“So what? You deserved it. This is a military academy. You should have been honest.”

He nodded. “In a way, it is. Yes.”

“I want to go home, now,” I yelled.

He exhaled and his expression changed from sympathetic to serious. “Tell me, Rai... what have you seen in your dreams? Have you seen me?”

I stumbled back as I stared at him because how in the hell did he know about my dreams?

“Have you seen epic battles between warriors and demons?” he asked.

“How do you know about my dreams?”

“Because you are special, Rai. You are a Guardian, the last one to be born. The night you came into existence, there was a comet. We call that the Falling Star of the Angel’s Blessing ,” he said.

“I... I don’t get it,” I said.

He nodded, then gestured for me to sit down. I did. “This school is where Guardians train to be able to fulfill their destinies. We also train humans who are known as Guards, who work alongside Guardians to rid the world of evil spirits and demons. What your dreams have shown you are events from the past.”

“But... they’re just dreams,” I said, still confused.

Mr. Morris shook his head. “They are visions that every Guardian receives when they

turn twelve years old. It's a Rite of Passage. It also lets us know that a new Guardian has been awakened. That is why you must start training and learning about what it all means."

I thought back to that night of the comet and that tingling sensation I felt when it passed over me. Did that have something to do with this? "It tingled..." I said softly.

"The comet's passing?" Mr. Morris asked.

I nodded.

"Yes, it marked the moment you turned twelve, Rai."

I wanted to deny his words, but he knew too much. He knew about my dreams, he knew about the comet on my birthdays, what else did he know? "What if I don't want to be a Guardian?"

"You don't have a choice. You are one and the demons know it too. That's why I had to bring you here, to protect you as well as teach you," Mr. Morris said. He moved from his desk to the chair beside mine. "None of us have asked for this fate, but it is what we were born to do. Rai, you will face many challenges as your journey will differ from other Guardians."

"Why? What does that mean?"

"When you're older, I'll explain. For now, you must trust me."

"Trust you? I don't even know you," I said.

"You will. I will guide you, Rai." Again, he smiled as if that should ease me in some way.

“Is this destiny you’re talking about dangerous?” I asked, because I remembered how scary my dreams were.

He nodded. “Yes, but that is why you have to do your best to prepare. Do not refuse what you simply must learn in order to survive.”

“Are you a Guardian?” I asked, because, in all of my dreams, I saw him fighting.

He nodded. “The oldest of all of us.”

“How old,” I asked, my voice shaking with fear and uncertainty. Because in my dreams, nothing looked like anything I recognized. Even the clothes looked ancient.

“I am over fifteen hundred years old.”

My mouth dropped open. “No way!” I looked at him from head to toe. “That can’t be true. No one lives that long.”

He nodded. “Guardians do, if they survive their battles. Listen very carefully to what I’m about to say, Rai.”

I decided to keep my mouth shut.

“Demons have been around for as long as the first human, which is around two point eight million years ago. As humans evolved so did demons, becoming more dangerous as time went on. Five thousand years ago, the first Guardian was born to be the last defense against the demonic reign over humanity. There were to be twelve Guardians born and you are the last one. There are now only six of us alive.”

“Why just twelve?” I asked, seemed like we needed a lot more based on my dreams.

“I don’t have an answer for that. It is what God intended, but it may also be the reason why he created Guards. Humans who have insight into our hidden world. They fight with us and oftentimes, handle lesser demons and spirits on their own. Our duty is to take on the bigger threats. The ones that, if successful, could destroy the world,” Mr. Morris said.

This was too much for me to accept. I didn’t want to fight demons my whole life. I wanted to be an astrologer. Preferably one who could fight, because I was really into learning martial arts. “Are you sure I’m the one?”

“Yes, we can sense each other. I’m sure you felt some kind of connection the day we met.”

I thought back to that day when I came home and saw him sitting on our sofa speaking to my mom. “Yeah, I did. I felt weird. I still feel it. I also remembered seeing you in my dreams, but I just wasn’t sure.”

“I know. I’m positive you’ve dreamed of other Guardians too, both living and dead.”

“Will I always have those dreams?”

He shook his head. “It’s simply to prepare you and to give you the knowledge you need. As time goes by, they’ll be fewer and far between until they are gone. And that’s usually within the first year of your awakening.”

“I don’t know if I want to be a Guardian,” I said, because it seemed like a terrifying life.

He nodded. “I know how you feel, the fears you have, because I’ve had them myself.”

“You’re not the first Guardian?”

“No, just the oldest. My teacher has passed in the line of duty,” he said.

Hearing about the Guardians who died made me even more scared. Just what kind of future did I have? Would I be able to do this as a side job and still have my dream job?

“Will I be able to go to college?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, unfortunately. You must train until the day you’re able to call forth your Champion.”

I frowned because I was curious about that. In my dreams, I’d seen angels merge, which was what made the dreams even weirder to me. Was that what the Champion was? “What’s that?” I asked because it was best to let him explain it to me.

“Every Guardian has a Champion. You can command them to fight for you or if need be, to merge with you and become your weapons of Divine Justice. You’re too young right now and your ability to call forth your Champion has not awakened within you. But when it does, you already need to be able to fight,” Mr. Morris said.

I knew that everything he was telling me was the truth, but I seriously wished that it wasn’t. “So, I can’t be an astrologer?”

“It’s possible that you can be, but you’ll need to be able to leave your job to fulfill your duties at any time. Nothing can take precedence over your destiny,” he said. “I am the Headmaster of this Guild because I must be. However, I can also leave whenever I need to.”

“Guild?” I asked, because up until now, he’d been calling this place Stellar Academy.

“This is the Celestial Guild, Rai. It’s only known as Stellar Academy to those on the outside. The only children we take in are those who will protect humanity—hence the exclusivity.”

“What about my diplomas for elementary and high school?” I asked.

“You will need to train every day. Don’t worry, your education will continue here. You’ll get your diplomas and degrees.”

I now understood why this Guild seemed too good to be true. Why they had so many classes. It was because once you entered, you could never leave. And that realization left me feeling like I wanted to cry. Like I was lost. I felt so betrayed by him.

“So, why did you lie to my parents about everything?”

“Because humans can never know what this place truly is. They can’t learn about the demons who roam this Earth alongside them. Our war is fought in secret, hidden in the shadows. Your parents only needed to know that you would be well taken care of. And at no cost to them, I might add.” He leaned forward, his eyes staring into mine. “You can never return home. Never see them ever again.”

“Why not? I want to see my family,” I said, and rose from my chair.

He grabbed my arm before I could run from his office. “They don’t remember you anymore.”

“Stop lying. Let me go!” I yelled and fought to break free with all my strength, but I couldn’t get loose.

Mr. Morris rose and grabbed both my arms, forcing me to focus on him. “They must sever all ties with you, Rai. Demons will seek to kill or possess any human who has

knowledge of their existence or relationships with Guardians or Guards. If you want your family to stay safe, you must let them go.”

I shook my head. “No one was bothering us before,” I stated.

“It was only a matter of time. Demons can sense us. They would have wanted to take you out, especially with you being so vulnerable,” Mr. Morris said.

I was crying so hard, I couldn’t see clearly. I just knew I didn’t like what he was saying. “I want my mommy,” I said through my tears.

“The moment your family left these grounds, all memories of you were left behind. Your bedroom in their house has been turned into a den by my people. Every sign of your existence in their life has been erased,” Mr. Morris said.

My legs just collapsed and I fell to the floor, crying so hard that my chest ached.

“Why...why even have my family... come here and tour... if you were just going to do this?” I yelled between my choking tears. I was so angry, afraid, and sad that I was shaking.

“It’s a process that makes the parting easier. And it gives us time to do what we needed to do to your home,” he said as a matter of fact.

“How is this easier?! I fucking hate you,” I said as more tears flowed down my cheeks.

Mr. Morris knelt down in front of me, putting a hand on my shoulder as if that was supposed to make everything better. “I know how sad this is for you, Rai.” He looked at me sympathetically, but I didn’t believe him.

I slapped his hand away. “No, you don’t!”

“Endure this pain now, grow stronger from it. Realize I’m doing this to protect your parents from harm. Yes, you’re upset now, but imagine how heartbroken you’d be if demons killed your family simply because you were their son?”

“But I can’t see... them... ever again?” I asked and choked on my tears at the same time. I coughed a few times to clear my airway.

He walked over to his desk, picked up a box of tissue, then returned to me, extending the box. I took several and blew my nose and wiped my tears.

“Not if you don’t want to put them in danger, Rai. You must leave your old life behind and embrace your destiny,” Mr. Morris said.

I was crying so hard, I found it difficult to catch my breath. This was just too much and I wanted to run away from it all and hide.

“I will give you today to gather yourself, Rai. But tomorrow, your new life begins,” Mr. Morris said, then he rose and walked to his desk and called for someone to come.

When the door opened, a teenage boy entered. “Andrew, take Rai back to his room, please.”

“Yes, Headmaster,” Andrew said.

I was still crying as I was taken back to my room. Even though I knew my family was alive, I felt like I’d lost them forever... because I had. I might as well be leaving their funeral, that was how I felt. That was how much pain I was in. All I wanted to do was lay on the bed and wish I’d never met Mr. Morris.

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Chapter five

Azazel

The Promise of What's to Come

“This is him?” I asked as I looked at the photo of a snot-nosed, twelve-year-old boy. He did have the most enchanting features I’d ever seen. From what I knew, Guardians were exotic in their beauty, but this boy was on another level to me. Turquoise eyes, mocha skin... but there was something else I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“He is your future Guardian,” Terri said.

Over the past century, she had become my liaison, so to speak. Since I wasn’t allowed in their precious Guild, I was still kept abreast of information regarding the Guardians. At first, I didn’t care... hell, I still didn’t, but I did have an interest in the boy who was supposed to be my commander.

I sighed and tossed the photo on the table, then poured myself some brandy. I raised my eyebrows at Terri as a way of offering her some. She rolled her eyes, then nodded. I poured her a drink too, then sat back to indulge.

“So, when does he put a leash around my neck?”

“Excited to be at his beck and call?” Terri taunted.

I sneered. “Don’t play with me.”

She smiled and shrugged, then took a sip of the brandy. “Still cranky, I see. I told you a hundred years ago, you couldn’t avoid your destiny. At least, you’ve finally accepted it.”

It was true. I’d tried everything I could to break the curse that bound me to one of those self-righteous assholes, but couldn’t. I’d been an outcast since that night and had ended up killing more demons who sought to insult or attack me. I had to find my pleasure somehow and at least I could kill something, thus doing their side a great service.

“To answer your question, it’s hard to say. Rai—”

“Rai?” I asked, cutting her off.

She nodded. “His name is Rai Harrington. He was born on the twelfth of December and recently had his birthday. When he turned twelve, he got the First Awakening and began to see the visions. That’s what alerted us that he was ready to be trained.”

“So, how’s he taking to it?”

“It’s only been a week, hard to say. He’s still getting over the trauma of losing his family,” Terri said.

I shrugged. “Better that than having them tortured or possessed by demons.”

“You’d know.”

I gave her a crooked smile. “If I was my old self, I would have surely killed everyone but his mother, then made sure she was possessed by a demon. That way, his guard would be down. A quick slit of his throat would do the trick.”

“That’s wishful thinking. A demon can never breach the barrier of the Guild. Hence your exclusion,” Terri said.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t see why an exception can’t be made for me. Aren’t I one of you anyway? Your holy essence flows through me to my utter dismay.”

“True, but you’re still a demon. Be glad I even come to visit you,” she said, then rose.

“Why not make him forget that he even had a family?” I tossed at her.

“No. He needs to deal with that pain in order to make him stronger. A Guardian has to grow from the sorrow of loss,” she said.

I snorted, then laughed. “And you lot call us demons heartless.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You are. It’s because of demons and regular wicked humans that Guardians must be prepared to accept the loss of life. Not everyone they want to save will be. Guardians must learn what it means to make sacrifices for the greater good.”

I didn’t say anything to that, because I understood her meaning. I just nodded.

“I’ll take my leave, but don’t worry. I’ll be back with more progress reports,” she said.

“Wait a minute,” I called out before she left. She turned. “Has he dreamed about me? You said your kind get visions around his age.”

Terri nodded. “From what I’ve been told, he considers those to be nightmares.”

I huffed. “Me in my prime, I bet.”

“Behave yourself,” she joked. With that, she left.

I picked up the boy’s photo again and looked at it. He was in his Stellar Academy uniform, a big smile on his face. I guess it was before he found out he’d been royally fucked by the same destiny that had been kicking my ass for over a hundred years. I tossed the photo on the table again and walked over to my window, looking down at the city below. So much has changed, yet remained the same. Technology had advanced, even beyond my own expectations. Who knew humans would create a bomb that would still kill for years to come? The guns and bombs I’d taught man to make were way more efficient in destroying humanity.

I still fed off all of that death, making me stronger over time. It was interesting to see my legacy ruling supreme and humans had no idea. Of course, I hadn’t been able to take credit for anything created in these modern times like drones that could kill from afar or satellites. It was true, I’d been forced to retire in 1912. Oh, but did I enjoy the twenties and the decades that followed. I didn’t make mankind fight itself, couldn’t even if I wanted to. Their desire to destroy themselves was in their nature... a flaw in their design, if you asked me. I had just made it easier for them to do it.

I watched the lights from cars moving and wondered... who could I kill tonight? Perhaps a rapist? A murderer? I smiled and then put on my long, black coat. Time to go hunting.

“Please... please don’t kill me,” the man begged as he scooted back on the ground, dragging himself through the muck in the filthy alley. A fitting place for him.

I’d caught him trying to rape a teenage girl who happened to be heading home from a party she shouldn’t have attended. The girl was unconscious, having had her head slammed against the wall by her would-be rapist. Her blouse was undone, but that

was as far as the asshole got before he met me.

“Oh, I’m going to kill you. Only question is, do I kill you slowly or mercifully?” I asked.

“Please, I won’t do it again,” he lied.

I laughed. “Do you know how many times I’ve heard that? ‘Please, don’t’ or ‘I’m sorry’.” I sneered at him. “Pathetic. Die with dignity. Own up to your crimes... your sins. Trust me, it goes a long way in Hell. You’ll be tortured, this is true. For centuries, but there is a chance for a promotion if you’re proud of what you’ve done.”

“Please... I never did this before. I won’t do it again.”

I allowed my eyes to glow their bright indigo and his eyes widened. I then allowed my fangs, claws, and ears to transform. I used to be able to show my demonic face, but ever since being cursed with the Angel’s Kiss, I couldn’t. This was the extent of the demon I could show these humans. Still, it was enough.

“Ahhh,” the man screamed, then scrambled to his feet. He tried to run, but I teleported in front of him, blocking the way. He screamed again, his face contorted in the terror he felt, and I smiled, showing off my sharpened teeth. I slashed his chest, ripping into his skin. Blood gushed from the wounds and it felt so good to feel the heat of what pumped life into their weak bodies dripping from my fingers. He fell back to the ground, holding his bleeding chest, his clothes becoming soaked in blood. “Please don’t,” he pleaded.

“Stop,” I said, using my ability to freeze objects and people for a brief period. It was enough for me to set him on fire. I released the freeze on him, allowing parts of his body to feel the pain of the Hellfire burning him, yet his head and mouth remained frozen. He felt every bit of the heat from the fire as it raged, yet couldn’t scream. His

limbs flailed about as the flames devoured him. His death was absolute and pure agony. Watching him suffer had me in a state of extreme arousal. As killing always did.

I released my power over him, allowing the flames to engulf his head, where he did scream, but only for a few seconds before he died. I waved my hand and a gust of wind extinguished the flames, leaving his charred body smoldering. I wondered what happened to the souls of demons and humans I killed who were bound for Hell. Since I was no longer linked to my Empress, I had no way of knowing if those souls went to her or if they just disappeared. Did they remain in limbo, a void that might be even worse than torture? I did wonder.

For now, I had a human to drop off at home and a raging hard-on to take care of.

Chapter six

Rai

A Bad Idea But a Good Ass Time

“Y ou’re dropping your shoulder, giving your moves away,” Instructor Snyder said as I sparred with one of the Guards of the Guild.

“Yes, sir,” I said, then made adjustments as I continued to spar. This was hand-to-hand combat day and I took my opponent down, locking his arm in a hold he couldn’t counter. He tapped out and I let him go.

“Good job, Rai,” Instructor Snyder praised.

I nodded and rose from the mat. I offered a hand to the Guard-in-training, but he refused and got up on his own. I didn’t care. I was used to their attitudes by now. Fuck them. For some reason, a lot of the Guards and some of the Guardians didn’t like or trust me. I didn’t know why. I mean, weren’t we all on the same team?

“Again,” Instructor Snyder said.

“It’s my birthday, can’t we call it a day?” I pleaded. I really wanted to take it easy.

“Will demons give you a break on your birthday?” Instructor Snyder asked.

I didn’t bother to answer that question. I just squared off with Tony again, I made

sure to be mindful of my shoulders when throwing punches or kicks. I was sixteen now and since I'd arrived at Stellar Academy, better known as the Celestial Guild, I'd been training my mind and body. Learning an array of subjects like languages, history, the elements of magic, geography, and of course, combat. The latter was the most important thing to master, so most of my days were spent sparring.

Two hours later, I was finally able to finish training and I walked to the dorm to shower. I had my own bedroom, but not my own bathroom. At least each shower had individual stalls with frosted doors. Before I could get into one, I was shoved from behind and I stumbled but managed to catch myself before I fell. I turned to see who had pushed me and it was Andrew Willard along with Dana Smith and Tony Lombardi. The Trio, as they were called. For most people here, it was just because they were best friends. But for me, it was because they were bullies.

"You must want me to beat your ass for real this time," I said since I had sparred with Tony earlier and had bested him.

"You got lucky, freak," Tony said with a snarl. He was standing behind Andrew, who was their ringleader.

I looked at the three of them and then flexed my shoulders. "This time, I won't be holding back. I'm going to make you feel pain."

"Yeah, you would say that, considering what kind of Guardian you are," Andrew said.

I frowned. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"He's so foul," Dana remarked.

"You must have me confused with your momma's pussy," I told him.

He yelled, then charged at me, but before we could come to blows, the boom of a commanding voice ordered us to stop. We all turned to see Headmaster Darius Morris approaching. He looked regal as always and his very presence demanded obedience.

“What is going on here?” he asked once he was standing in front of the four of us.

“Nothing, sir,” Andrew said.

“Bullshit,” I murmured

Darius looked at me. “Language. I’ve told you about that.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I refrained out of respect for him. Also, because he would probably punish me for it. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Explain what happened,” he said. “And let me add: Do. Not. Lie.”

“We just had a few words for Rai, but he turned savage,” Andrew said.

“I was minding my business when he pushed me,” I said, telling the actual truth.

Our Headmaster studied us and his gaze felt heavy enough for me to lower my eyes.

“Because it’s your birthday, I will not punish you—any of you.”

I looked up at him. “But I didn’t start it. Why should I get punished, sir?”

“Because of your foul language. You’re a Guardian, Rai. You should have better judgment than to further provoke those who are in your charge,” Darius said.

“Provoke, my ass. I don’t start fights, but I will finish them,” I said.

Darius looked at me, his expression was unreadable, which was normal for him. I couldn't tell if he was pissed at me or not. He turned to the other boys. "Go, and do not do this again."

"Yes, Headmaster Morris," they said at the same time.

Darius returned his attention to me. "You're strong and fierce. These are traits a Guardian must have to survive. But wisdom is the main one. To know when to fight is important. And until you can control your temper, you aren't worthy of the destiny you've been given, Rai."

Well, that hurt.

"Go, wash up, and continue with your night." Darius walked away then.

I didn't like what he said, but I decided to think about it. To reflect on the situation where I could have taken a different approach. I finished bathing the sweat and grime off and returned to my dorm room to get dressed. As I was tying my sneakers, I decided that Darius may have had a point. I was stronger than them, could have taken them all on, and that was why I didn't fear them. But, as a Guardian—a leader—perhaps I should have tried to de-escalate. But those assholes always picked on me... a good ass-whooping may be what they need. I came to that conclusion too. There was a knock on my door; I opened it and smiled to see my only friend grinning back at me, his blue eyes alight with mischief.

Marcel and I became friends a few months after I'd first come here and have been thick as thieves ever since. He was the second person I told about my dreams that I was still having. Darius had said those visions faded after the first year, but not for me. The only thing that did change was the visions featured the strange, but gorgeous demon. He was a busy one, too, wreaking havoc throughout time. But lately, he wasn't. The visions I had of him seemed like he was lonely and a bit lost. It made me

more curious about him, and it also made me want to comfort him as in the visions, I could feel his pain. But I had to remind myself when my eyes opened, that he was a demon, and any pain he felt paled in comparison to what he deserved.

As for Marcel, he was my confidant for everything. I could talk about things with him that I didn't feel comfortable discussing with Darius. And it was the same way for Marcel where I was concerned. He didn't like the Trio either.

Marcel shoved past me into my dorm. "Close the door, rapide ," he said in a rush of French-accented words. He always spoke with a mixture of English and French.

I did. "What's up?"

His smile was wicked as he held up two necklaces with black jewel pendants. "I got them."

"What are they?"

He gasped. "Quoi! Mon ami, remember, I said that I could get us out of here for your birthday?"

My eyes widened at that, because I thought he had been talking shit. I walked over to him and took one of the necklaces, studying it. "So, what? We wear these and we're able to get past the barrier?"

Marcel nodded. "Oui."

I laughed and slapped his hand in our celebration. I'd been wanting to get the hell out of here for the longest time. Years, to be exact. "So, when do we go?" I asked him.

"Ce soir, thirty minutes after lights out."

So, nine-thirty. Gotcha. Marcel Monroe was being trained to be a Guard. His training wasn't as extensive as mine and I was the only Guardian who was being trained as all of the others were seasoned warriors. I'd also met the other five Guardians. The only one besides Darius Morris who seemed all right with me was Terri Uche. The others barely spoke to me, and when they did, I could hear the venom in their tone. At first, the attitudes of the majority of the people here toward me really bothered me. I cried a lot because I felt my environment was so damn hostile. But then, I just started ignoring them, not caring about what any of these uppity assholes thought of me.

Sometimes, all you needed was one person to make you happy. Marcel was that person for me.

It was my birthday, but there wasn't any celebration. No parties or anything like that. What I did get to do was pick a movie I wanted to see and anyone who wanted to attend could join me in the theater that we had on-site. It was one of the amenities of this place that had attracted me. That had me begging my mom to let me enroll. Stupid school.

I sat in my seat, feet up, nachos in my lap and Marcel sitting next to me. Only about twenty other Guards and staff had joined us for the action movie I'd selected. I did get a slice of cake for my birthday with one candle to blow out. My only wish? To be able to see my family one day. Even if I couldn't talk to them... I kind of just wanted to see how they were doing. I missed them every day.

I pushed the memory of my family from my mind because it only made me depressed when I thought about them and the life I had to abandon. It didn't help to know that I'd outlive them all because I was to one day become immortal. Instead, I focused on enjoying the movie, but more importantly, I fantasized about how much fun Marcel and I were about to have once we broke out of this hellhole.

The movie was a short one, only ninety minutes, and then we all had to turn in for the night. I only pretended to go to bed and thirty minutes after lights out, I jumped out of my window and met Marcel behind the bushes by the back wall.

“Took you long enough,” he fussed and brushed his blond hair from his eyes, then placed a black cap over his head.

I gave him the middle finger. “I had to run a farther distance. Nice of you to pick a location closest to your dorm, asswipe,” I taunted and he chuckled.

“Mon ami, I already did the hard part and you’re welcome, ingrate,” he placed his pendant on and I did the same.

“Thank you. Okay, let’s go.” I leaped up on top of the stone wall, then extended my hand to Marcel to help him out. My enhanced physical abilities were one thing Guardians had. I could run faster, was stronger, and jumped higher than normal humans and even Guards. They had their own abilities, but not on the level of a Guardian. I thought some of them might have been jealous of me since a lot of us were around the same age, yet, I wasn’t like them.

Marcel didn’t have such petty feelings. He took my hand and I hoisted him up and then we were off, running like two thieves in the night toward our freedom. And no alarms sounded off. No one was chasing after us, nothing. This was the best birthday present I had in years and I was going to enjoy every second of it.

I was huffing and puffing by the time we came to the first car. “When we do this again, we need to figure out a way to get a ride.”

Marcel was bent over, breathing hard as he nodded. “Oui.”

We'd run over ten miles from the Guild to a small town. I had no idea the Guild was that isolated—damn it. Still, I refused to go back before I could get to the city to see what the nightlife was like.

“Don't worry, I got this,” Marcel said, then walked over to the car and pulled something from his backpack.

I watched with keen interest as he managed to get into the car and disable the alarm. I climbed in beside him and he did some other stuff to get the car going and we were off, cheering and giving each other high-fives as he headed down the road.

Thirty minutes later, we were in the city and people were walking around, talking, eating, just enjoying themselves. It almost felt foreign to me because I hadn't been able to see life outside the walls of the Guild since I had been twelve years old. Marcel parked and we got out and just went into stores or other businesses just to see what was going on. Some places ran us out because we were underage, but one place didn't seem to care. It was a club and I'd never been to one before.

We entered and the music was blasting so loud, I could feel it vibrating in my body. We didn't even get carded, which was so awesome. I wondered if they'd let us drink. I grabbed Marcel's hand and drug him off to the bar where the bartender looked at us, then smirked.

“Two Martinis please,” I ordered. I heard about this drink in a movie and really wanted to try it.

The bartender looked at me, then off to the side to someone else. I turned to see a woman sitting in a red velvet booth with a velvet rope blocking the entrance. She nodded and I turned back to the bartender. He mixed the various alcohols together, smirking the entire time as if he knew something we didn't. Probably because he knew we were underage.

“Enjoy, gentlemen,” he said as he handed us our drinks.

We took the booze and then looked at each other, grinning. “Awesome!” we said together before clanking our glasses. After taking a sip, we both coughed at the bitter taste.

“Ugh, that tastes like shit,” I said.

“Not what I expected,” Marcel added. “It sounded so tropical.”

Still, I took another sip, then another, as did Marcel. I took my drink out on the dance floor and Marcel and I just danced and drank, it was so much fun. We were given more drinks and didn’t even have to pay for it. I started to feel lighter, happier, and I hugged Marcel as I laughed. All of a sudden, I felt someone standing behind me. I was grabbed around my waist and pulled against a strong chest. My drink was taken from me by strong hands and the man leaned down to my ear.

“Little boys shouldn’t be in dangerous places like this,” said a deep, seductive voice in a Greek accent. There was something off about his presence, his aura, and I shoved his hands away from me and turned to face him, staggering as I did.

Oh. My. God... he was GORGEOUS! My mouth dropped open, all words escaped me. I had wanted to tell him off or something, but I couldn’t say anything. He had the prettiest eyes I’d ever seen... were they indigo? How unique. His black hair was cut short in the back and sides, but his bangs were longer. His face was sculpted by angels, had to be. It was too perfect and his mouth... so sensual. Who... no... what was he? He looked so familiar.

“What’s your name?” I practically yelled to him over the loud music.

He smiled, then leaned down, kissing me softly on the mouth. It was my first kiss. A

gentle brushing of his lips to mine, but it was electrifying and I felt the heat rush through my entire being. My cock had already stirred to life, but now it was fully engorged. How the hell could one kiss make me feel this way? I opened my eyes to see the man wink at me.

“Rai, Marcel!”

I turned from the stranger who had me captured to the sound of Darius Morris, as his was a voice you couldn’t mistake or ignore. Not even in my drunken state. I saw him parting the dancing crowd along with four Guards.

“Shit,” I cursed and turned back to see that the man who’d stolen my first kiss was gone. A hand clamped down on my shoulder and I looked to see that it was our Headmaster’s, a look of annoyance on his handsome face.

“We’re going now,” Darius said, then shoved me in the direction of the Guards, who took my arm, just like they had Marcel’s, and we were removed from the club and put into waiting Jeeps.

I knew I was going to be in a LOT of trouble, but it had been worth it. Still, I wondered, who was the fine-ass man? Damn, he was hot and why did he look so fucking familiar?

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Chapter seven

Azazel

A Meeting of Sorts

I took a swig of the martini Rai had been drinking and smirked at the Guardian who was glaring at me. “You should keep better track of them,” I criticized. Like with most warriors of the Guild, he was one sexy-ass bastard. The demon in me wondered if he could match me in the sheets.

“I do believe this is our first encounter,” the Guardian said, and I could hear his Egyptian accent. He looked around the club and I wondered if he knew that it was a demon establishment. There was a spell cast on the place to block all demonic auras to be a shield of defense against the likes of him and the Guards. He needn’t worry about it; I’d have my fun in this place anyway. There were only ten demons here, low-level ones too. Easy work for me.

“So, what’s your name?” I asked, then finished the drink. I could taste Rai in it, my Guardian, and he seemed like he was going to be a handful.

He didn’t reply, only nodded for me to follow him.

I did and we were in the back alley now.

“Thank you for calling Terri and alerting us of this situation,” he said.

“Did that hurt? Having to thank a demon?” I asked with a devilish smile.

“You’re Azazel, the legendary demon Knight,” he said.

“Legendary? I like that.”

“Both in Hell and Heaven. You’re responsible for killing three of our Guardians and their Champions,” he said, but his tone was measured and I couldn’t tell if he was disgusted or impressed. Probably both, but the man was hard to read.

“I wasn’t going to hurt him,” I said about Rai.

“I know, not that you could even if you wanted to.”

His lot was pettier than they’d like to admit as they did love to bring up my inability to raise hell the way I once used to enjoy doing. It didn’t annoy me these days. I got my jollies off in other ways as they say. If there was one thing I was exceptionally good at, it was adjusting.

“So, he’s my Guardian? Does he even know about me?” I asked, keeping the conversation moving along.

The Guardian shook his head. “In due time.”

I sighed. “What? Am I some dirty little secret?”

“A secret? No.”

But I’m dirty... I caught that without him needing to be blunt. Those assholes. “So, are you ever going to tell me your name?”

“Darius, son of Jafari.”

My eyes widened ever so slightly because that name was very familiar. “You are also legendary.”

“When the time comes, Rai will call you to him. Have you accepted your destiny, demon?” Darius asked, his eyebrow cocked.

“You may be the oldest Guardian still living, but we are not equals. Show me some fucking respect,” I snapped.

He lifted his chin as he regarded me. “It’s true that you are now one of us, so I should treat you cordially, at the very least.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned back against the wall. “I can accept that. So, what’s he like when he’s not drunk off his ass?” I asked, nodding in the direction of the remaining waiting vehicle.

Darius slipped his hands into his pockets. The action letting me know that he wasn’t worried about me attacking him. Of course, by that same token, I knew he couldn’t attack me as well. The only harm we could do to each other was sling insults.

“He’s headstrong, a brilliant mind, determined, but as you’ve seen, naive. He has a long way to go,” Darius said.

I nodded then gestured to the building. “Did you sense anything in there?”

“No, but I know something isn’t quite right.”

I smiled. “That Guardian intuition. You’d be correct. There are demons in there and the only reason they didn’t kill those two boys was because I was there protecting

them.”

“I see. Don’t worry... the next time you see Rai, it will be when he calls you.” Darius walked off then and I didn’t stop him. I was used to those types of interactions with his lot.

I thought about Rai, he must be sixteen years old now and filling out well. Such a pretty boy. I wondered what he’d look like as a grown man. I guessed I’d find out. As for my night, I went back into the club to slay every demon in the place. But first, I needed to get rid of the humans. I pulled the fire alarm and as the humans fled, I froze all ten demons. I didn’t have much time to spare as I could already hear the sirens of the fire trucks in the distance. I materialized my sword, then got to work. Since Hades had cast me out, I would make them regret that foolish decision.

I left piles of ash from every weak demon I slayed then teleported right before the firefighters rushed inside. No telling what they’d think of the ash piles, but I didn’t care. Leaving that bit of mystery behind was kind of fun. And fun was always on a demon’s agenda.

Rai Harrington, it was indeed a pleasure to meet you.

Chapter eight

Rai

The 18th Birthday

It was the demon again. The one I'd been dreaming about since I turned twelve years old. He was standing in front of a mirror removing his clothes. It was as if I were looking through his eyes and I couldn't help but drink in the beauty of his body as more of it was exposed to me. He was tall and muscular with fine lines and strong curves, not to mention, washboard abs. Behind him, another person stepped out, a man—no, a demon who was handsome, but not as handsome as my demon.

The other demon wrapped his arms around the first and kissed his neck. He moved to the front, kissing and sucking his way down until he undid the string of my demon's pantaloons. They came down and I wanted desperately to see his cock, but all I could see in the reflection of the mirror was the other demon's head bobbing as he sucked. The look of pure rapture on my demon's face was everything. His heavy breathing, his moans... oh, he was so close... so close...

"Ahhhh fuck!" I belted out as I quaked on the bed, my body releasing the orgasm that had built inside of me during my dream. I shook, and the waves of pleasure coursed through me until they faded away. Breathing hard, I lifted my blanket to see the wet stain of cum had ruined the fabric. I'd made a mess of myself, that was for sure. Groaning, I just lay there, thinking about the vision. It wasn't the first one I'd ever had like that. The erotic ones started to come to me when I turned sixteen. To be honest, I preferred those over the ones dealing with death and destruction.

At first, the visions were of him standing by as he watched humans slaughter themselves. Others were of him whispering how to kill someone into another human's ear. Lavish banquets he attended where he moved through the crowd, a seductive menace lending his ear and giving his advice to royals, clergy, and politicians on how to get what they wanted. I had a lot of curiosity about the demon. I wanted to know more, but I never told anyone about my erotic dreams, those were my little treasures. Besides, they wouldn't understand me anyway since they already thought I was weird. Telling the others I dreamed of how sexy I thought a demon was would only make them treat me worse.

There was one vision in particular, though. It left me reeling, catapulting through a maze of emotions I couldn't get out of. It made me conflicted. It was of my demon, lying in bed... crying. Balled up in a fetal position and crying so hard, I could feel it in his soul. I didn't think demons had souls that could feel such torment. But he did. I reached to take him into my arms, kiss him and tell him it was going to be okay. Based on his clothes and the style of his bedroom, it didn't seem like that was too long ago, maybe a century. He was so vulnerable. That dream has haunted me more than any other.

Darius knew of the visions I had of the demon when he was at war, but it wasn't like he could help me avoid them. He couldn't explain why I was still receiving visions, so he also had no advice to give other than for me not to be afraid of them. To embrace them. When I asked him about the demon in my vision, he only told me that he'd tell me one day when I was ready. Whatever the fuck that meant.

My alarm clock went off reminding me that I had training. I climbed out of bed to get ready for the grueling day ahead.

I charged at Darius, my sword relentless as I kept him on the defense. But then I

made a mistake and he took advantage, punching me three times, knocking me to the ground. I groaned, then climbed back to my feet.

“Don’t get overconfident,” Darius said.

The next day after my sixteenth birthday, he’d taken over my training for the majority of my lessons. Something else that made the other Guards jealous was that I had such special attention from the Headmaster. Even other Guardians had something to say about it.

“Sorry, sir,” I said, then dabbed the blood from my split lip.

“Your techniques have improved, this is good,” Darius said.

I snorted. “With the way you just took me down, I can’t tell, sir.”

He smiled. “You will have eternity to hone your skills as long as you’re smart in every battle you face. No two demons fight the same. You must be able to adapt instantly.”

I nodded. “I understand.”

“That is enough for today. There is something I want to show you.”

We put our swords up, they were real because Darius felt like I needed to get used to fighting with steel. I followed him to a chamber that had been forbidden to me in the past. He stood in the middle of the room and allowed me to take in everything. I looked at all of the paintings on the wall, large portraits of the Guardians and their Champions. And under each portrait was the mark of the Guardian. My eyes traveled to a blank space on the wall, but next to it was a portrait of a man who I recognized instantly.

He was the demon in my dreams and after I had sobered up that night, I knew he was also the man I'd met at the club when Marcel and I had snuck out on my sixteenth birthday. I walked over to the portrait and stared up at it. He was so captivating, I felt drawn to him, even his image. In the portrait, he was looking forward as he adjusted his tie. He was wearing a black suit with a black tie and a white shirt. There was a red broach on his suit jacket and he was also wearing a black ring on his ring finger. His hair was in the same style as before, but his eyes... those hypnotic indigo eyes held me engrossed as much as his seductive expression did.

“That’s the demon I’ve seen in my dreams. Who... who is he?”

“Your Champion.”

I blinked as if breaking the spell his portrait had on me and turned to Darius. “What?”

“He is your Champion,” Darius repeated.

I turned back to the portrait. “How? Why?” I looked at Darius again, waiting for him to explain.

“We aren’t quite sure how a demon was chosen to be a Champion. His name is Azazel and he is the oldest and strongest of all the demon Knights of the Round Court of Hades. He is the Demon of War and is rumored to be over ten thousand years old.”

My mouth dropped open at that. Holy shit, ten thousand years!

Darius continued. “On the night that he killed Guardian Jean Dubois, he was given the Angel’s Kiss. For an Archangel, it’s a coveted honor. A gift from God to be a warrior. For Azazel—a demon—it was a curse. He has since been cast out of Hades and unable to cause any harm to innocents. He is unwilfully on his way to redeeming his soul. But he is alone, an outcast of both his side and ours.”

As he spoke, I began to understand why I was also an outcast. “Does he have to be my Champion?”

Darius nodded. “You are the last Guardian and he is the last Champion. It is both of your fates.”

“Why are you just now telling me this? Is that why everyone has been so shitty toward me?” I asked.

“I’m sorry that you had to face that. Since nothing like this has ever happened in the past, some do not fully trust you. Every Champion has been paired with an Archangel of considerable gifts and powers. You have been paired with a demon. An anomaly in every sense,” Darius said.

I didn’t like the fact that I was being judged by something that was completely out of my control. I didn’t ask to be a damn Guardian and I certainly didn’t ask to be paired with a fucking demon. “So, what now? I have to endure their insults and mistrust forever?”

“You have my trust.”

“Do you trust Azazel?”

“No. But that is because he is a demon. The only thing holding him back from his nature is the Angel’s Kiss ,” Darius said.

“When did the last Guardian die?”

“1912, and a hundred years later, you were born,” Darius said. “The Guardian, Jean, was a Divine Weapon with their Champion, which, as you know, makes them stronger. But at the very moment of their ending, they gave a Death Wish, and that

wish was granted by God. That is why the demon Azazel was given the Angel's Kiss. That's the how, that we know. The why is what remains the mystery."

I looked at the portrait again and under it was my birthmark. That which marked me as a Guardian. A sword. My birthmark was on my inner right forearm. "Does he have my mark?"

"He does. Your Guardian mark, he bares that on his inner right forearm."

I looked down at my own arm to see my mark there. "I don't trust him either," I said.

"There will come a time when you will have the ability to call your Champion into command."

"No," I said. I couldn't fathom working with a demon, especially one who was as evil and cruel as Azazel. So many dreams I had of him were nightmares. I felt his pleasure as he killed. He did it because it was fun. I'd been haunted by those visions... But then there were the ones that weren't scary. The ones that made me feel sorry for him, that made me want to hold him. Then there were the ones that made me want to... I didn't want to think or speak about those.

And what was Azazel doing in the club that night? Was he watching me?

"It was time to tell you the truth. You're eighteen, Rai, mature enough to be able to handle it. That is why I'm training you so that you will be able to deal with a demon as your Champion," Darius said.

I shook my head, because I hated the idea that I was linked to a demon. Why me? Everyone else got an angel as their Champion. Why did God do this to me?

"Accept this destiny, Rai. You cannot escape it. You must learn to work with Azazel

if you hope to survive,” Darius said. “I will teach you how.”

I looked into Azazel’s indigo eyes. “How did you get this portrait of him?”

“He sent a photo, as he is not allowed to enter the Guild,” Darius said.

I scoffed. “He can’t even come inside these walls, yet I’m expected to accept him as my Champion?”

“You have no choice.”

We would see about that.

After the revelation, Darius allowed me to have dinner and I was standing in line when I heard my name passing through the lips of one of these petty Guards. I knew the one, too, because he’d been a pain in my ass since day one. I turned to see Andrew smirking at me.

“It’s your eighteenth birthday... did you like your surprise?” Andrew asked. “Demon boy?”

“Do you like the number of teeth you have in your mouth, Asshole?” I retorted.

Andrew stepped up to me. “See, that attitude right there is why your Champion is a demon. You aren’t good enough to have an Archangel, you’re trash, so you get trash.”

I didn’t say anything, because I’d had enough of his shit. I reared my head back and slammed his face as hard as I could. It hurt, but I knew I’d hurt him more when he

cried out in pain and fell to the floor, his nose bleeding.

“You broke my nose!” he yelled.

“I only gave you what you were asking for,” I said.

Other Guards ran over to us, older ones who were there as security. I was taken to the Headmaster while Andrew was taken to the healing infirmary. I sat in the chair and stared past Darius as he looked at me.

“That temper of yours again, Rai?” he asked.

I huffed and looked at him. “Tell me something. Why is it that I’ve had to deal with those assholes fucking with me since I walked through these doors? If you can’t control them, I will,” I snapped.

Darius smirked then and I blinked, because he rarely did things like that. “I was aware of their bullying of you, Rai.”

“And you did nothing to stop it?”

“No, I didn’t. Because I wanted to see how you’d handle adversity. If you’d be able to negotiate finesse with hostile forces. Or would you behave like a bull in a China shop, destroying everything and everyone,” Darius said.

I rolled my eyes then. “I guess I failed your tests.”

“Not necessarily,” he said.

I looked at him. “Meaning?”

“I think I’m finally understanding why Azazel is your Champion.”

“Cause I’m evil?” I asked with a sarcastic tone. Mainly because it was a question that was buried in the back of my mind for years. I often wondered why I’d been teased. Their little innuendos about me and my Champion. And then I came to discover it was a demon. There must be something wrong with me.

Darius sighed, then rose and walked around his desk. “Follow me.”

I did and he led us out to the garden. One of my favorite places to be. It was so beautiful and peaceful with all of the flowers, plants, animals, and the water fountains. I’d taken many naps in this place, because I loved it so much. We took a seat on a bench and Darius stretched his long legs out before him, then crossed them at the ankles. I decided to do the same.

“Look around you, Rai,” he said.

I did and saw nothing but natural beauty.

“Tell me, what do you see?”

“Nature in its sheer magnificence,” I said.

He nodded. “Evil can’t see that. It only sees this as something to destroy. It doesn’t know how to be humble in the presence of God’s gifts.” He looked at me now. “You’re not evil, Rai.”

“Then why am I linked to a demon?” I asked, because I was really confused.

“Perhaps, it’s not all about you.”

“But he’s my Champion.”

“You’re his Guardian. Maybe God’s plan is for you to help him redeem his soul. You’ve been given the most difficult task of any Guardian, Rai. And maybe you’re the only one of us who can do this. It’s true, you’re not like other Guardians. I don’t think you ever were. You’ve been labeled a troublemaker, a menace, and unruly for so long. Yet, you’ve overcome such negativity and still held true to yourself.”

I looked down at my hands, I was playing with my own fingers. “And what am I?”

Darius chuckled. “A hellraiser who I’m sure will be able to handle a demon. Don’t be intimidated by Azazel. Right now, he’s still lost and trying to find his way.”

“I don’t think I can accept him, sir,” I said, being honest with myself. Although, I did like him calling me a hellraiser.

Darius patted my thigh. “This is when you must put your faith in your fate.” He rose and looked down at me. “In the meantime, you will not have to be bullied by those boys any longer. I’ve seen what I needed to see. But your training will be even more extensive. Enjoy the rest of this day because tomorrow, I’m not going to show you any mercy.”

I watched Darius walk away and I should have felt relief after our conversation, but all I was thinking about was just how hellish my training was about to get.

Shit.

Chapter nine

Azazel

A Weird Occurrence

The field of green grass, flowers, and trees were before me in all its splendor and I felt the warmth of the sun's rays caressing my flesh. So peaceful. The beauty of this world, left untouched by human hands was simply magnificent. I couldn't believe there was once a time when I wanted to see it all burn. To see an ocean of blood drown out all living beings. Those days were long gone. I could feel the breeze brush over my skin, so gentle, like a soft kiss. I leaned my head back on the bench and closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, it was nighttime and the stars were bright in the sky. How odd when it had been a bright, sunny day only a second ago. How long had I been sitting on this bench in this park? Where was I? I sat up and looked around to see a man walking toward me. No, not a man, Rai, only he was an adult. He didn't look the way he did when I'd last seen him at sixteen. No, he was breathtaking. I rose, but he held his hand out, stopping me.

"Sit," he said and I obeyed.

Following his command felt so natural for me, and the authority in his masculine voice touched me in various ways. He was a man now, a warrior.

"Our time is near," he said. "But I will not call you."

I scoffed. “Why? Because I’m a demon?”

He nodded.

“Don’t you kind believe that your God is infallible? He made me your Champion, did he make a mistake, finally, in your eyes?” I asked.

“Ten thousand years, you have hurt the people of this world. How can I ever call upon you?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Your view is immature. You feel that we are evil. Demons are able to thrive because humans are weak and envious. They are greedy and cruel and that’s why they seek what we offer.”

Rai nodded. “And that is why I can’t accept you as my Champion.”

My eyes opened and I blinked several times as I lay in my bed. I sat up and looked around to see that I was, in fact, in my own bedroom. I sighed heavily and ran my fingers through my hair. What the hell was that? Was it a dream? Demons didn’t dream. In all of my years in existence, never once had I had a dream. What did it mean? Was it really Rai I was speaking to or was it my idea of him?

I grabbed my phone from the nightstand and looked at the date. December, 12th, 2036. It was Rai’s birthday, his twenty-fourth to be exact. Was that dream a part of him being Awakened for the final time? That last stage of him becoming immortal and gifted the ability to command me?

What an odd occurrence to dream at all and to dream of him. I needed to speak to Terri. I dialed her number and it rang for a while before she answered.

“Are you kidding me?” she complained. “Do you know what time it is?”

Three in the morning.

“I do, but I wouldn’t have called if it wasn’t important. I had a dream,” I said.

“And?”

I huffed. “Demons don’t dream, Guardian. But I dreamed of Rai. He was a grown man in my dreams... and very delectable, I might add.”

“Have you dreamed of him before?” Terri asked, and I could tell she was taking me seriously now.

“No, never. I don’t dream,” I reminded her.

“Did you two have a conversation?”

“We did and he was being a self-righteous jerk, on par for your kind.”

I could hear her eyes rolling.

“I’m sure you were being a jerk, but that dream is normal. All Guardians and their Champions have that introduction. In the dream, it’s where you can get a bit familiar.”

“So, it’s supposed to happen?” To know that it was normal where we were concerned put me at ease. I didn’t know if angels dreamed, but if they didn’t and they had that one dream, then it made sense.

“Yes. Some of them are peaceful and others can have conflicts. You’ll just have to get Rai to trust you,” Terri said.

“Do you trust me?”

“I trust you to protect him, yes. I trust you to have patience with him. Remember, he’s lived a very sheltered life. He’s going to be a test to himself and to you.”

“If he looks anything like he did in that dream... I’ll have all of the patience in the world if it means I can get him into my bed.”

“And on that note, goodnight,” Terri said, then hung up on me.

I laughed at the cell phone, then placed it back on the table. I laid back down and closed my eyes. As a demon, I didn’t need to sleep often, but tonight, I was exhausted, so the rest came easily.

Very well, Rai... challenge accepted.

Chapter ten

Rai

A Parting Gift

“Y ou want what?” Raina asked me. She was the forger who made our weapons and more importantly, the healing ring all Guardians got on the days of their Initiation. It was my twenty-fourth birthday and at the stroke of midnight, a star shot through the sky and I knew it was because I’d experienced another milestone.

Three times, there was a falling star. Once, when I was born. The second time was on my twelfth birthday when I was Awakened. The year was 2036, and this third time was when the link to my Champion was activated, so to speak. I felt it too, his aura mixing with mine inside my body. It felt hot, which wasn’t the normal experience I was told. All of the other Guardians felt a calming sense of peace. Me, just chaos. I hated it.

“Did you hear my question, because I’m not sure I heard you right?” Raina asked me and it brought me back to the present.

“I want it on my dick,” I said. I didn’t bother to sugarcoat my words. I wasn’t known for doing so anyway.

“That’s very unorthodox, Rai. It’s tradition for all Guardians to wear the rings on their fingers with the symbols of their signs on them,” Raina said.

I snorted. “And what is it about me that tells you that I follow traditions?”

She looked me up and down, checking out my all-black outfit. I was wearing black jeans, boots, a shirt, and a leather jacket. Since I was an Official Guardian now, I’d be allowed off the campus grounds. I couldn’t wait to break free. I was looking to get laid. I wasn’t a virgin, lost my virginity when I was twenty when Marcel and I snuck off the campus for the second time. The whole experience was pure enlightenment. I knew what I was missing and I wanted more.

“It’s going to hurt,” she warned.

I nodded. I knew that getting my cock pierced wasn’t going to feel good. “It’s what I want.”

“I’ve never made one before. Do you have a picture of what you want it to look like?”

I pulled out a picture I’d drawn of the design I wanted. “The etching of my sign would go on the ball tip,” I said.

“Oh my god,” she gasped, her hand going to her chest. “Have you spoken to Headmaster Morris about this?”

“No, didn’t think I needed his permission. It’s my dick. I don’t want such an important ring on my finger that I could lose it easily in battle. Can you make it or not?” I asked.

She huffed as if I’d insulted her craftsmanship. “The ring would not simply fly off your finger. Magic binds it to you.”

“Ahh, but my finger can get cut off, right?” I pointed out.

She frowned but nodded.

I smiled. “Exactly. This type of ring will keep it safer.”

“Give me an hour,” she said, finally relenting.

I nodded and left my design with her and waited in the lounge. I wasn’t sitting there ten minutes before Darius walked in and looked at me. I threw my head back and sighed. “She called you?”

He chuckled and nodded before walking over to where I was and took a seat. “A cockring?”

I widened my eyes and looked at him, shocked that he was so vulgar. “Why Headmaster Morris... mind your tongue, sir.”

He smiled and shook his head. “It’s not a bad idea,” he said, then looked at his own ring on his right ring finger.

“Thinking about getting one for yourself?” I asked.

“Oh, heavens no. I’ve lived long enough to not need one.”

“You’re almost as old as paper, you can upgrade your dick. I’m sure Michael will be shocked,” I teased.

Darius threw his head back and laughed hard. “Clearly, you don’t know Archangels.”

My smile kind of faded then, because I didn’t. I’d never have the relationship he had with his. The kind that other Guardians had with theirs.

He must have seen the shift in my mood because he patted my shoulder. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I know. It’s okay.”

He sighed then nodded. “Get the ring. It suits you.”

“I was going to anyway,” I said.

“In any case, I actually came here to give you this.” Darius rose and left, then returned moments later with a bag with a bow on it. He handed it to me. “Happy Birthday.”

I grinned from ear to ear, because it was the first physical gift I’d ever gotten since coming to the Guild. “What is it?”

“Open it and find out.” He motioned for me to do that.

I pulled a black box from the bag that had a red bow on it. I opened it and inside was a treasure chest of goodies. I saw car keys to a Mercedes, a black credit card, a cell phone, and keys to what might be an apartment. “Holy shit,” I gasped.

“Seriously?” Darius asked, one eyebrow cocked.

I grinned up at him. “Sorry about that. But you get me. This is amazing. Thank you.” I pulled the keys from the box. “Is this my car?”

He nodded. “You’ll find it in the garage.”

“Are these keys to my new home?” I asked, holding up the other set.

“Yes, but it will be warded off. You must remain protected. The only demon who will have access is your Champion.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s in Chicago, where you grew up. One of those high rises downtown.”

My grin got wider, because I missed my home city. To know I was about to return there was the best birthday gift ever. “I thought I’d be living here.”

“You’re immortal now, Rai. That sensation you experienced was more than you gaining your ability to command your Champion. You have been fully Awakened. This Guild will now be for Guards only. You are the last Guardian born.”

“Does that mean you’ll be leaving here?” I asked.

Darius shook his head. “I live here, so I will continue my job as Headmaster. It’s important that new Guards are brought in and properly trained. Their jobs are risky, and unfortunately, we suffer great losses. Demons are always up to something and humans are as well. Both Guardians and Guards must always be on the alert.”

“What about your Guardian duties?” I asked. “I know it was important for you to be here to guide me, but I’m leaving.”

“Make no mistake, I have never ignored my duties. Being the eldest, I am a source of guidance and information for everyone, so I must be where I can be found,” Darius said.

“Unless you’re kicking demon ass,” I added.

He chuckled and nodded. “Very true.”

“Okay, I understand.” I looked back into the box and removed the card. “What’s the limit?”

He smirked. “Don’t get too crazy with it. That’s the limit. Enjoy your life.”

“Do I have to pay the money back?”

He shook his head. “No. Our jobs are our destinies. Income comes from those whom we protect. Just don’t get ridiculous.”

“You’re no fun,” I said with a smirk.

He looked at me and smiled. “You’ve come a long way, Rai, and I’m proud of you. Every hurdle, you leaped over it. You overcame immense sadness and loss to rise to greater heights. Never forget that.”

The memory of the family I had to let go flashed in my mind and I felt the sting of that loss in my chest. I knew they were safe and that was what mattered. I nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

“Stand up.”

I did and he hugged me. “Stay safe out there. Never underestimate your opponent. Use your best judgment and be yourself.”

I smiled. “Even if that means pissing people off?”

He laughed. “You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t.”

“Damn right,” I said. “You should see the weapons I had Raina make,” I said, bragging a little.

Darius frowned. “Weapons?”

I nodded. “Yeah. A sword and gun. For when I’m out hunting demons.”

He opened his mouth, but then closed it. “I see. Then you must be extra careful.”

“That’s my plan.”

The side door opened and Raina poked her head out. “It’s ready.”

I looked at Darius. “Wanna watch?”

“I’ve seen it done before. Like you said, I’m ancient. Have fun and don’t be a stranger. My number is in the phone, call me any time,” Darius said, then hugged me again.

I held on to him tightly. For twelve years, Darius had been my mentor, my father figure. This place had been my home and now I was leaving it for good. My heart felt heavy in my chest, tight too, but I didn’t want to cry.

Darius patted my back. “Remember my words, Rai.”

“Always,” I said. “Wait!” I called out before he could leave.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

I looked at Raina. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

She nodded, then went back inside.

I looked at Darius. “I had a really weird dream last night.”

He smiled. “Did you speak with Azazel?”

My eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“It’s the introduction dream we all get the night of our final Awakening.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“Because then you may have stressed over it and not fallen asleep. You needed to have that dream, that connection. It’s part of your transition,” Darius said.

I smacked my lips because he was right. I would have drunk energy drinks to avoid meeting that damn demon in my dreams. “He... he wasn’t what I expected.”

Darius raised his eyebrows. “Oh? Really? What happened?”

“Well, for one thing, he was sitting on a bench as if he was enjoying the breeze and view. I thought demons didn’t care about things like that?”

“Azazel is no longer your typical demon. He has emotions now, Rai, and he’s spent over a century coming to terms with that. What else happened?”

So, he has feelings... didn’t they always have those? Like feeling happy when they killed babies? I just went on.

I shrugged. “Nothing you wouldn’t expect. I told him I could never accept him.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. I woke up.”

Darius nodded. "I see. Well, I'm sure you two will work it out."

I blinked. "That's it? That's all you have to say?"

He chuckled. "I've given you my best advice... you have to choose your own path toward your destiny, Rai."

"I should have expected that." I laughed, then hugged him again.

We parted and I did cry a little as I watched him walk away. I cleared my throat and took my birthday gift in the room with me.

"Ahh fuck! Fuck!" I yelled as soon as the needle pierced my cock. I felt hot liquid flowing and knew it was my blood.

"The others weren't lying when they said you have colorful language," Raina said.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" I gasped as the burning throbbed in my pleasure zone.

"Oh! Oh my! Let's get this over with, you've got my ears burning," Raina said.

I braced myself as she slid the ring through the holes and then twisted the ball tip on. She then cleaned my penis off and as she did that, the pain started to fade as I healed, thanks to my new ring. Nice to see how it worked. Could have used that trinket during my many years of training. Instead, we had to drink that horrible concoction and heal over time.

I looked down to see the results. There it was. A sterling silver ring shone through my shaft. The tips of the ball bared my sword, the same that was my birthmark. I

wondered how Azazel felt every time he looked down at his arm and saw my mark on him. Did he feel like cattle that had been branded by its owner? I hoped so.

“I pray this doesn’t start a trend,” Raina said.

“Only people who know about it are me, you, and Darius,” I said as I climbed off the table. I tucked myself inside my pants and adjusted my clothes.

“Just so you know... you still need to be careful as that ring can only do so much. The more life-threatening the injury, the longer it will take to heal. In the heat of battle, you’ll have to rely on your Champion to heal you.”

I didn’t want to hear that, but wasn’t going to get into it with her either.

“Thanks, Raina, for everything,” I said instead.

Raina went on. “Those weapons I made you. They will never be as strong as your Champion and what you’ll create together,” she said.

I only nodded, because she had told me that before. I waved goodbye, then left. There was one more place I wanted to visit before leaving the Guild. I entered the Hall of the Guild where the photos of the Guardians and their Champions were on the walls. The first time I visited that place, I was eighteen years old. That was when I found out about Azazel. Since that day, I’d frequented this place to gaze upon his portrait at least once a week. Memorizing every line and curve of his face. His expression I always found intriguing. Like he wanted to seduce me with his wickedness. Just a debonair bastard, that was what Azazel was.

I stood in front of it now, only this time, my own portrait was beside his. It had been painted a month ago, like all of the other portraits. Of course, I couldn’t do anything boring. I posed in the photo, dressed in a cold-ass black suit with a silver tie. I stood,

legs slightly parted with my hands behind my back. My head was lowered just enough for me to look up like the badass I trained to be. My expression was all business. I was proud of it. I looked down at my watch to check the time. I was supposed to meet Marcel soon and I still had to finish packing.

I went back to my bedroom and packed what little I wanted to take with me. I didn't have much to begin with. Mainly, my favorite toy when I was a kid and some clothes. I couldn't have photos of my family, because that might put them in danger. No demon or human could know about them. When I turned to leave, my best friend, Marcel, was in the doorway.

"You don't knock?" I teased.

He shrugged. "It was open." Marcel was twenty-five and already had his orders as a Guard. He'd been one for the past two years. He was six-two, handsome, with long blond hair, blue eyes, a strong jawline, and muscles that had been honed and toned. He also spoke more English now. If he liked men, I might have tried to seduce him, but he was strictly for the ladies. Me, I discovered that I loved the way a man's asshole felt, how their body molded against mine. That was my desire. Too bad for Marcel, I thought.

"Are you here to send me off?" I asked, slinging my bookbag over my shoulder.

"Nope. I've been assigned to your city and to help aid you."

"What? Really?" I asked, smiling.

He smiled and nodded. "Yep."

I hugged him, because it was awesome to have my only friend at my side. "So, you'll be living in Chicago with me?"

“Looks like. But I won’t be living with you. I have a home in the Hyde Park area where they say there’s a lot of demon activity.”

“I wonder why you aren’t living in the same building as me?”

“Who knows? I don’t think any Guard is living there. We’re pretty scattered throughout the city and state. Each with our own districts to patrol. Since I’m young and new to the scene, they gave me Hyde Park, because I can work with two other Guards who patrol that area,” Marcel said.

“I guess that’s cool. We do need our own spaces, especially after living here for all these years,” I said. “And having your own district makes sense.”

“We’ll still be able to see each other and hang out, in addition to my duties.”

Marcel knew his role well. He’d be my scout, gather information for me and handle his own business to weed out wickedness. I was ready to start this next chapter of my life.

I smiled. “This day keeps getting better. Come on, let’s get the hell out of here.”

Inside the garage, Marcel climbed into his Audi and I was sitting behind the wheel of a beautiful black, Mercedes-Benz AMG SL 63 Roadster. I had no idea how much the car cost, but I could smell the money. It was gorgeous and I would have never thought in a million years that it would be mine. I guessed if I had to risk my life to save the world, the least I could do was live in luxury. Considering I spent twelve years in a state-of-the-art Guild, I was used to such finery.

Marcel pulled up in front of me. “You ready?”

“Hell yeah,” I said, giving him a thumbs up. I rolled the top down and we were off to begin our new life together.

After driving from LA to Chicago, we were both exhausted, but ready to see what our new homes looked like. I was now living in a penthouse condo on the seventy-fifth floor of the Stellar Building. Talk about having access to the company amenities, because that was what this was. Not that I was complaining. I opened the door and then walked into the slickest bachelor pad ever.

Leather and suede furniture, a hundred-inch TV, surround sound system, open concept, and state-of-the-art kitchen. Of course, I wasn't the best cook, I knew how to make food to survive, but that wasn't where my training was focused. Stood to reason I'd be ordering out quite often. I continued to gush over my new home as I toured it.

When I got to the master suite, my mouth dropped. It was huge, almost like its own apartment. I had a lounge area where there was a sofa, a desk, and chair, a library, a fireplace, and a bar complete with a sink and fridge. I turned in the other direction and saw that I had a table and four chairs in case I wanted to just eat in my room, I supposed. I made it to the section with the California King bed, dresser, and bench. The closet was humongous and I couldn't wait to fill it with clothes.

I went to the other bedroom and it was very nice, a lot smaller than mine, but perfect for a guest bedroom. It didn't have everything in it that mine did, such as the library lounge or bar, but it did have a TV, sofa, bed, and dressers as well as a private bathroom. I went back to my master and sprawled on the bed, and it was so damn comfortable. I think I drifted off to sleep because I awoke with a start at the sound of my doorbell ringing. I answered it to see Marcel. I let him in and he gasped as he looked around.

“Oh, fuck. Okay, now I’m jealous,” he commented. “I thought my home was awesome, but damn... they spared no expense on your lucky ass.”

I chuckled. “What does your place look like?”

“Not like this, mon Dieu.” Marcel checked out my master bedroom. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me!”

I laughed then.

“I don’t appreciate them splurging on you just because you’re a Guardian,” he said with a smirk. I knew he was joking. Well... there was probably some truth to that, but I knew he wouldn’t hold it against me.

I shrugged. “There’s a lot more of you all than us.”

He smacked his teeth. “Yeah, whatever. Still, this place is beautiful. And check out that view. I have a nice one in my home, but yours is amazing.”

I looked out at the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows and nodded. I even had a sliding door that led out onto the balcony. That was where we walked out onto and looked down at the bustling city below.

“Man, this is perfect,” Marcel said. “We’re so high up.”

I gazed down at the twinkling lights of cars and apartments and nodded. The air felt vibrant and I was charged with the energy that flowed through me. “It is.”

“So, are you excited about your life now? Like meeting your first demon? Speaking of demons, are you going to Call him?”

Azazel, that was who he was talking about. I shook my head. “I don’t need him.”

Marcel looked at me. “Every Guardian needs their Champion, Rai.”

“I’ll prove that I don’t.” I sighed. “Come on, let’s grab some food.”

I thought back to our first encounter when I’d met him at the club. Apparently, the club was owned by demons and we were lucky to have survived. Darius told me that it had been Azazel who was looking out for us. He was also the one who called a Guardian to alert them about our whereabouts. I also found out, after I’d sobered up, that Azazel had killed all of the demons in that club. But I knew it was only because he couldn’t have killed everyone. For over a hundred years, he’d been neutered. That didn’t make him good. I didn’t need him.

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Chapter eleven

Azazel

Outcast

I 'd been watching Rai for the past month, not interfering, just observing. Darius had warned me that he was stubborn and it would seem he was that up to the point of stupidity. Every Guardian needed their Champion. I'd spent the better part of the century resolving my issues with becoming one. I didn't like it, but I was ready and here I was, waiting on the sidelines.

Yet to be Called by him.

It annoyed me. How dare he shun me! I didn't ask for the fucking Angel's Kiss . I'd kill him if I had the choice. He was hunting tonight, looking for demons. He'd had a few encounters, nothing serious. His skill was impressive. The Guild had prepared him well. But then again, the demons he'd encountered were all low-level trash. I followed him to a bar and stood in the back, wrapped in shadows. He stayed an hour until he attracted the attention of three demons. They could smell the celestial essence coming off him and knew what he was.

Demons from all three empires were jonesing to take out a Guardian. I still held the record for the demon with the most kills. And even though I wasn't a Knight anymore, my history spoke for itself. I didn't think I'd ever lose that rank, either. I followed Rai outside where the three demons had cornered him.

“And I thought this night would be boring,” Rai said.

I smirked. So, he had spunk.

“You’re about to die, Guardian,” said one of the demons.

Rai pulled out his sword and a silver pistol. I snorted at the weapons. Useless against a demon worth their grit. He attacked the group, his skill was aggressive, almost as if he took personal offense to the demons. He shot a demon in the head, right between the eyes, and I watched his body go up in smoke. One of the remaining demons knocked his gun from his hand, then grabbed his other arm, preventing him from using his sword. The other demon charged forward, claws bared, but before he could attack, I stepped from the shadows and sliced him in half with my own sword.

The last demon turned and gasped. “Azazel!” he snarled, his mouth black with razor-sharp teeth.

“I am he,” I taunted.

“Get back!” Rai yelled, then hit the demon in the groin with his knee. It was enough to make the demon double over and release his grip on Rai’s arm. It was all Rai needed to chop the demon’s head off, the corpse going up in smoke. He leaned against the wall and panted as he glared at me.

My god, he was beautiful. There was a certain intensity in his turquoise eyes that made something inside of me flutter. He was even sexier than in that dream. Every part of him was toned with hard lines and curves. His legs looked so strong hidden beneath his jeans. I could only imagine how alluring his bare chest looked. The thought made my cock stir.

“I didn’t need your help,” he sneered.

“I thought differently,” I said.

“You’re a demon. You’re disgusting.”

“And if I had feelings, I still wouldn’t give a shit about your opinion,” I stated, then rolled my eyes. I pointed at his gun that was on the ground. “You keep playing with those toys, you’re going to get yourself killed, idiot.”

He scoffed, then picked up his gun, tucking it away in its holster. “I’m doing just fine with them.”

I chuckled. “What? Taking out the garbage?”

“You’re all garbage,” he shot back.

I withdrew my sword and walked closer to him. “What is it about your kind that is so sanctimonious?”

He looked at me, boldly, I might add. “I get cranky when I’m surrounded by filth, motherfucker.”

My eyes widened at that, because I must admit, I wasn’t used to Guardians or Guards using such obscene language. “My, my, my... what a dirty mouth you have.”

“Better to curse your bitch ass out with,” he said.

I lowered my gaze now.

He raised both eyebrows. “Oh, did I hurt those feelings you claimed you didn’t have?”

I exhaled—slowly—because I felt my temper rising. “You’re going to get yourself killed, boy. Your weapons are nothing to a seasoned demon. You need me.”

“Like I need Chlamydia,” he said.

The urge to punch his gorgeous face quickly vanished when the nausea rose. I closed my eyes and backed up as I fought the sensation. I hadn’t had to experience the sickness in over a decade. My urge to kill or harm innocent people was now under my control. But this Guardian made me want to teach him a lesson in respect.

“I thought that Guild would drill intelligence into that thick skull of yours.” I held my hands up. “Fine. If you die without ever Calling me, maybe that’s a good thing. I might be free of this curse and you.”

“You can be free now if you just leave me the fuck alone,” Rai taunted.

Yes, he was very different from other Guardians I’d met. Sexier for sure. I stepped up to him and looked down. Defiantly, he looked up at me, daring me to make a move with his stare. I touched his chin with my finger and he slapped my hand away.

“If not for me, Rai, you would have died eight years ago. You should show some gratitude,” I said. As I stared down into his face, I wanted to kiss his lips, they were begging for my mouth.

He grabbed my hair and yanked my head down and to the side, surprising me with how aggressive he was. He leaned forward to the point where our faces were inches apart. It didn’t hurt, but it was shocking. I didn’t get manhandled, not ever. I growled, my fangs flashing.

“Stay away from me, demon,” Rai said, then released my hair.

I straightened and ran my fingers through my locks. Had I been able to attack him, I would have. But I was physically unable to get my revenge for his little antic just then. I looked at him and I wasn't sure what I felt. Anger, I knew... but something else. Why was my cock hard? Like, really fucking hard.

“Very well. I see you want to learn your lessons the hardest way possible.” I nodded. “I'll let you, then.” I teleported, landing on the rooftop of the building a short distance away where I could still watch Rai. He leaned against the wall, breathing hard as if our little encounter had taken a lot out of him.

I was about to leave when I saw him grab his groin and adjust himself. “Well, well, well... did I leave an impression on you, Rai?” I smiled as I massaged my own aching erection. “We can always kiss and make up.” I winked and then teleported. If he needed me, he knew how to Call me. I was done looking out for him if he didn't appreciate it. I went home, but turned in the direction of the unwanted presence. “Reveal yourself!”

“Hello, Azazel,” I heard the voice say. I knew who it was. Leyak. He appeared from the shadows, dressed in white. His auburn hair flowed down his back, green eyes held me in his gaze.

“What do you want?” I said, then removed my jacket.

He laughed as he walked around me. “I saw what happened with you and the new Guardian.”

I tossed my jacket on the back of my sofa. “So?”

“It must hurt to be rejected by a mere human.”

“Get to the point, Leyak.”

“Spurned by your own kind and by your Guardian. You don’t belong anywhere. You’re an outcast,” Leyak said.

I rolled my eyes. “You have until I finish this sentence to get out of my house before I show you how I treat uninvited assho—” He was gone before I could end my comment. Good. He was lucky that he was a Knight of the Court. To kill one would bring the entire fury of the Court onto me and I didn’t need nor did I want that level of heat. I’d never fought any other of my fellow Knights, at least, not to the death. I was the strongest among us, so most didn’t bother to challenge me. Things were different now and some were getting audacious.

I’d have to stay on guard. Leyak coming into my home was a challenge. Next time we met, I doubted it would end in peace.

Chapter twelve

Azazel

The Need to Protect

O ver the following weeks, I continued to watch over Rai from the shadows. Although I said I'd leave him to suffer, I couldn't just ignore him, even after he told me that he didn't need me. Since leaving the Guild, he'd only come in contact with the lowest level of demons. Those pitiful weapons of his were a joke. I had seen donkeys less stubborn than Rai. I'd make him see that he should accept our fate as I had already done. I mean, for fuck's sake, he'd had practically his whole life to prepare for this moment. What were they teaching or not teaching Rai in that damn Guild?

Rai hunted again that night. He looked sleek and sexy as he rode down the freeway on his Ducati. I bet that motor felt good revving between his legs, at least, that was how it felt to me when I traveled by motorcycle. I teleported along his route, masking my aura so he couldn't sense me. I wondered if he even knew higher-level demons could do that. It was a secret we tried to keep hidden from his celestial kind. An hour later, he was stalking the seedy part of the city looking for demons to destroy.

He was young, you could tell. Seasoned Guardians didn't hunt for demons, that was the Guards' job. And when a Guard came upon a demon situation that was above their pay grade, the Guardian of their territory was notified. In my opinion, they were lofty beings. If a Guardian did happen upon a demon, they would eliminate them, but demons did try to avoid them and Guards. Rai, you could smell his youthful

exuberance a mile away. His need to feel useful. He was being reckless, in my opinion. Which was why he should be taking my guidance instead of ignoring me.

After following him for two hours, he found his prey, three demons who'd been up to no good as demons tended to be. The pregnant woman they were attacking scrambled to her feet and ran away the moment her demonic attackers were distracted by Rai's sudden appearance. Well, I liked when you didn't have to tell humans to run for their own safety.

Closely, I watched the fight, monitoring Rai's fighting ability. He was agile and quick, and there was a savage beauty to his skill. He fought with a ruthlessness that I admired. He took a few blows, but wasn't slowed down by them in the least. When he was finished with the demons, he ran away. I watched him get smaller the farther he ran down the street back to his motorcycle. I then smirked as one of the demons he'd been fighting rose after playing possum. I knew he was still alive, which was why I had lingered. Rai's weapons were no match for that mid-level demon. I knew all demon levels by their aura, how brightly it glowed, and this demon was only a few souls away from a promotion.

I teleported in front of him and he jumped.

"A Knight!" he gasped, his black eyes wide with fear as he should be.

"It was smart of you to play dead," I complimented.

"Are... are you he?" the demon asked.

"He?" I questioned with an arch of my eyebrow.

"A—Azazel."

I smiled.

“Please... please don’t kill me. I’m one of you,” the demon pleaded.

“Ah, I see that my reputation has preceded me,” I taunted.

“You’re the Guardian’s Champion... did he send you back to finish the job?” the demon asked.

I scoffed because if Rai was smart, he could have commanded me to take out the trash for him. It would have been my pleasure. I enjoyed killing. “Why were you attacking that woman?” I asked instead of answering him.

The demon was trembling now. “I’ll never tell you!”

If I cared, I could make him, but I didn’t. Mischief was always a demon’s game and killing that woman was just what demons did. “Very well,” I said, then conjured my sword, it was a lethal-looking masterpiece. Onyx blade with a wicked silver hilt that had intricately designed, sharpened edges. It was the type of sword that struck fear into the hearts of my enemies. I smiled when he registered that this was his end. He tried to run, but I teleported in front of him and ran him through with my blade, finishing what Rai had started.

The demon gurgled, black blood bubbling up from his mouth. Our eyes connected and I saw his anger at my betrayal of our kind in his gaze. I didn’t care, demons had turned their backs on me first. I smiled as his body began to burn and then break apart in flaming cinders that turned to ash. I drew my sword back into my body, then teleported to find Rai.

I found him with a man. Apparently, he'd set this date up beforehand and the man was eager to be with him. That pissed me off. Not sure why? Rai was an adult now, free to be with other humans, but I didn't like it. I hated how the man climbed on the back of Rai's bike and wrapped his arms around Rai's muscular waist. I hated how he was smiling and I wanted to rip the human apart.

I shouldn't have followed them, but I couldn't not follow Rai. And he drove the man back to his home. I took a perch on the rooftop of the building across the street from Rai's building where I had a great view of his condo. He had floor-to-ceiling windows throughout, but some of the windows had shading built into the glass. I was able to see them enter through a few windows, Rai kissing the man as he led him to his bedroom. I leaned forward, hands on the railing as I peered into Rai's bedroom windows. The two of them shed their clothes and the man pushed Rai on the bed, then began to pull Rai's underwear off. That was when the windows darkened and I couldn't see anything else.

Damn it!

I supposed his home was voice command activated. Did he know I was watching or was he just modest that way? In any case, I was robbed of a show I didn't even want to see. Rai was gorgeous and charismatic, of course, men and women would want him. But from what I'd learned, he only seemed to be interested in men. Perfect for me. But of course, being a demon with the ability to shape-change, I could be anyone Rai wanted.

Wait, why the hell was I even thinking about being with Rai like that? Was that what I wanted? Sure, getting him into my bed would be a victory—a pleasurable one, but was that the only reason? I snarled at the thought. Rai was a foolish human and he should be grateful I was watching over him. Still, I waited until I knew the man had left, and then I teleported to Rai's home, standing outside his front door. I decided to take the guise of his best friend, Marcel, then I rang the doorbell.

Rai answered after three rings with a bathrobe on. “What’s up?”

I smiled. “Just thought I’d come by to hang out with you. It’s been a while.” I looked past his shoulder into his home. “Are you going to let me in or leave me out here?”

I didn’t need to be invited in. I just wanted to see if Rai was convinced I was Marcel or not.

Rai looked me up and down, his gaze scrutinizing, and I wondered if he discovered who I was. “Sure, come in.”

I walked past him and he closed the door. Before I could take another step, my hair was yanked back and I was slammed against the door. Rai grabbed my chin in a strong grip. It didn’t hurt me, but I could tell he was stronger than any human male.

“Show your true self, demon,” Rai snarled.

Something about the way he asserted himself turned me on, I couldn’t deny it. I mean, I’d be silly to try considering how hard my cock was at that moment. I laughed and then transformed back into my natural state. “You’re good.”

“I don’t like these games, Azazel,” Rai said.

“I just wanted to see if you could sense me,” I said, then looked around his home. It was perfect for him, because he was so posh himself. I could tell that he loved the modern luxuries. Some Guardians didn’t care for such finery. Choosing to live with only the necessities. Others, well, you wouldn’t find them wearing anything but designer clothes. They may be ordained by God in some way, but had human weaknesses.

Rai smirked then. “I knew you were watching me fuck that guy.”

I lowered my gaze. “You couldn’t have known I was there.”

Rai raised an eyebrow. “Oh? I felt your presence the moment he went for my underwear.”

That’s why he darkened the windows. Did I, at that moment of weakness, let my shield down? Fuck.

“Yeah, you wanted to watch me fuck that guy, didn’t you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said.

Rai chuckled and pressed himself against me. “You’re hard, Azazel. I bet you wanted it to be your ass I slid my cock into, didn’t you? Is that why you tried to sneak into my home?”

“You don’t have the balls to fuck me, Rai.” I shoved him back, there was no nausea, because the intent to harm wasn’t there. I swallowed hard because my arousal was spiking.

“Don’t pretend to be Marcel again,” Rai commanded.

“Fine.”

“Good. Now get the fuck out of my home.”

“I came to tell you that your little demon hunt tonight wasn’t as successful as you thought it was,” I said.

He frowned and that jawline of his was magnificent. “What do you mean?”

“One of the demons you thought you’d killed played you for the fool you are. When you left, he rose and would have gotten away had I not been there.” I walked over to him as he looked off to the side, obviously thinking back to that moment to trace his steps, searching for where he went wrong. “Your weapons are shit when it comes to powerful demons, Rai. Stop pushing me away.” I looked down to see that his cock had tented the robe he was wearing. His manhandling of me got him aroused as well. I reached down and brushed a finger over the hardness and he trembled.

“Stop it!” He took several steps back.

“You can’t go on like this, Rai,” I said in all seriousness.

He turned. “You can see yourself out. Next time, I’ll make sure to cut off their heads.”

“You nee—”

“I don’t need you. Now go!” he snapped.

“Stubborn fool,” I snarled, then teleported home. I wanted to ignore him. If he claimed he didn’t need me, fine. Fuck him! But... I knew I couldn’t let him go out there without any backup. I wasn’t even sure why I felt that way, I just did.

I still had to protect him.

Chapter thirteen

Rai

Things Got A Little Messy

S ix months, that was how long I'd been fighting demons and Hell bound humans since I left the Guild. There were a few moments when the kill was difficult, but in the end, I handled it. The other five Guardians didn't bother me about my choice to fight alone. To be honest, I was expecting at least a lecture or two, but nothing.

It was Azazel who continued to pester me, at least, he did for the first two months, then he transitioned to flirting with me—which was more annoying than him calling me an idiot for fighting alone. He was everything I desired, bold, confident, powerful, and sinfully gorgeous and it was the whole sin part of that which kept me at bay. I also wondered if he was a top or bottom, or did he switch? What would it be like to plunder his demonic ass? He boasted about how great he was in bed, and it left me very curious. So curious, I'd jerked off to fantasies of him, but that was as far as I would allow myself to take it. I could never... would never fuck a demon, let alone fall in love with one, no matter how much his silent presence was a comfort to me. Because, for the past three months, that was what was happening. Azazel was just watching me from afar, I could feel him when he was near. The fact that I knew I could depend on him if I needed to gave me certain feelings I wasn't ready to explore.

I stepped out of the shower and dried off. When I opened the door of my bathroom, I stopped dead in my tracks. Azazel was lounging on my bed dressed in an all-black

suit that looked like it was tailored to fit his form to perfection. He looked at me with those indigo eyes of his and smiled. He actually caught my be surprise, because I didn't sense him. Did that mean powerful demons could mask their auras?

“That was a long shower... I started to join you,” he said with a devilish smirk.

I sighed. “If you come into my home again without an invitation, I'm going to find a way to block your demonic ass,” I said.

He chuckled and then patted the bed. “Come on, join me. It's not like I can't tell that you want me, Rai.”

I rolled my eyes at that, then turned to walk to my dresser to put on some underwear—the most constricting kind. The last thing I needed Azazel to see was the tent my cock made in the towel wrapped around my waist. I could feel his eyes on me, watching my every move as I slipped on the underwear and then removed my towel.

“Awww, not even a little glance of that beautiful ass of yours,” Azazel flirted.

“Is there a reason you're here, Azazel?” I asked, then began to get dressed. I had to cut off his game because if I let him continue to flirt, I might lose my resolve and take him up on his offer to fuck his brains out. Boy, I wanted to pound him into my mattress. It was becoming increasingly harder for me to resist the bastard who'd been in my dreams since I was twelve years old and erotically since I was sixteen. That kiss we shared at the club back then still lingered on my lips.

“God, you're no fun,” Azazel fussed as he climbed off my bed.

I turned to him. “I wasn't put on this Earth to be your fucking entertainment.”

“No, you were put on this Earth to be my fucking Guardian, but you fucking suck at that, too,” Azazel snapped, all of his playful flirtation gone from his tone and expression.

“Well, someone seems sexually frustrated,” I taunted.

He rolled his eyes. “That would make two of us.” He pointed to my crotch and I looked down to see that my cock had betrayed me again.

I huffed. “Again, demon, why are you here?”

Azazel brushed his hand through his bangs, only to have them fall gracefully back into his face, making him look like a damn model. “Demons are up to something. There’s been talk of them looking for a key of some sort.”

“Do you know why or what that key is?”

“Is this you accepting my help?”

“No,” I shot back.

“Only a fool cuts off his nose to spite his face, Rai. Are you a fool?”

“And only an idiot and narcissist can’t take a hint. I. Don’t. Need. You. Leave,” I snapped.

He just scoffed, but then vanished before my eyes in a puff of black smoke, which dissipated instantly and that looked pretty cool, to be honest.

I slid my leather jacket on to go out and enjoy my night. I remembered what Darius had told me before I left. He wanted me to enjoy my life. Being a Guardian didn’t

mean that I hunted demons in my every waking moment. I was given plenty of means to live a fulfilled life and I made sure to indulge. I ate at the best restaurants in the city and Chicago had plenty. Patronized the theaters, orchestras, all of the things I'd never experienced as a kid. My parents were working class and splurges had to come on a budget.

I missed my family, but I decided not to check in on them. I knew they were alive. If demons ever caught me spying on them, they'd get inquisitive and I refused to put them in danger. I snatched my motorcycle keys off the counter and opened the door to leave when I saw Marcel standing in front of me, hand out as if he were about to press my bell.

"What's up?" I asked.

He smirked and held up an envelope. "We need to talk."

I checked my watch to note the time. My movie didn't start for half an hour and the theater was ten minutes away. I had time. I let him in. "So, what is this about?" I asked as he walked over to my kitchen island and sat down on one of the two stools. I remained standing on the other side.

"The demons are up to something big, but I don't know what yet. There's been a lot of talk about looking for some kind of key," Marcel said, and his tone was ominous.

I frowned because Azazel had just told me about this before I made him leave. "What's in the envelope?" I pointed at it.

"Here." Marcel handed it to me and I opened it, reading the contents and looking at the photos of several kids, some looked like teenagers. "Other Guards have noted demons scoping out these kids and their families. Some kids have gone missing who were living on the streets and from orphanages."

I paid close attention to every photo. I looked over the notes taken for their identities, the locations of their homes, schools, their parents' workplaces, et cetera. "Just what in the hell are they up to?" I asked myself, but Marcel answered.

"I don't know."

I gave him an exasperated look. "I know that already. I was just talking to myself."

"Oh? Sorry." He shrugged apologetically.

"Do the other Guardians know anything?"

He shrugged. "You can ask them."

"Lot of help you are," I teased.

He laughed. "You get what you pay for."

This time, I chuckled. "I guess I'll have to pass on that movie tonight. I'm going to check out these kids and their families. See if I get tingles from any of them."

Marcel nodded. "That's a skill us Guards don't have."

"Skill, curse, gift... it's all subjective. Sometimes, I wish I didn't sense otherworldly shit all of the time. I'd like to walk into a bar, have a drink, target some hot guy to fuck, and have a go. Not see a demon, wonder what they're up to, then have to fight their evil asses."

Marcel smirked. "Don't know what you're complaining about. Sounds like fun to me."

“Not when my dick is hard and I just want to get laid,” I said, then stuffed the photos and notes back into the envelope.

“Do the other Guardians know that you have a toilet for a mouth?” Marcel joked.

I nodded. “They know I’m a lost cause.” I nodded toward the door. “I’m going to head out.”

“Hey, what about your Champion? He’s a demon, he might know something,” Marcel wisely pointed out, but he didn’t know how much I hated that idea.

“He won’t give me anything unless I accept him,” I said.

Marcel snorted. “Are you still on that bullshit, Rai? You need him, why won’t you just accept that fact?”

“Because I don’t and you can never accept a deal with a demon,” I said.

“He’s no regular demon.”

“Why are you on his side?” I fussed.

“I’m not. I’m on yours, which is why I said for you to just accept him. Call him,” Marcel urged.

“No. Now, can I go take care of my business?”

“Sure,” Marcel said, then he followed me out. He got into his car and I put on my helmet and climbed onto my BMW S1000 XR, then hit the road.

I had to drive my agitation away. For the past six months, I had been hearing that I

needed to accept Azazel, but I couldn't. If I did, if I went as far as to accept him as my Champion... with the way I felt about him... what else would I accept? Would I accept the forbidden emotions I had toward him? People in the Guild already treated me like a freak, imagine what they'd think if I let all of my inhibitions go? No. I had to stick to my guns. I pushed those thoughts from my mind and focused on my mission.

The first house I checked out, I did sense demonic activity brewing, but it was from outside the house. Inside, were just normal people enjoying their dinner. Maybe they were out of the woods where the danger was concerned, maybe not. The aura of the demons was fading, so maybe these people weren't who they were looking for.

I left and went to the second home, which was located on the far north side of Chicago in the Ravenswood area. Like with the first family, the demonic aura was fading, almost gone. That meant that this family was also eliminated. I wish I knew why demons had been looking into them in the first place.

I pulled out my cell and contacted Darius.

He answered. "Good to hear from you, Rai. How is everything?"

"Nice to hear from you, too. I'm good, but I have a question. Demons have been caught by the Guards spying on certain families but I don't know why. There's been some chatter about them looking for a key. Do you know anything about that?"

"A key?" Darius repeated.

"Yeah."

There was some silence while he contemplated. "I'll have to get back to you on that. I'm not sure. I haven't seen any unusual demon activity on my end."

“The Guards gave me some photos of kids and their home addresses that demons have targeted for whatever reason,” I said. “I’m looking into them now.”

“That’s good. Keep me posted. Perhaps your Champion might be able to shed some light,” Darius said, and I knew what he was suggesting.

“Didn’t he get outcast by his own kind? I doubt it,” I stated. I didn’t want to tell Darius that Azazel had already reached out to me.

“Never hurts to ask.”

“Yes, it will. I’ll let you know if I find out anything, Later,” I said, then ended the call before he could deal out any of his pearls of wisdom to me. I slipped my phone back into my pocket, then headed off to the third location, which was located in the South Shore area. I passed the golf course, then pulled into a parking lot of an apartment complex of Veronica’s home. Immediately, I sensed a demonic aura, a fresh one. I pulled off my helmet and climbed off my bike. I had to break the lock to the automatic door using my strength.

The closer I got to her family’s apartment, the stronger the demonic aura grew. This was a problem. That meant the demons were either here, or had just left. I quickened my pace down the hall and heard a loud crash and screams. A neighbor came out of their apartment to find out what that noise was, but I pulled out my fake badge.

“Please, return to your home. Lock the door,” I said, then pulled out my gun.

That always made people have enough fear to hide. Which meant they weren’t in my way. Now, if they were too damn nosy, that was on them. I couldn’t protect those who didn’t follow directions. The neighbor gasped and nodded before closing their door and locking it. I ran two doors down and kicked the door open to see six demons, strong ones by their aura, blood on their hands, and bodies on the floor at

their feet.

Shit, was I too late?

I aimed my gun and fired, but they were fast. Faster than any demon I'd come up against thus far. I managed to hit one in his stomach and he doubled over, half grunting, half growling. They were transforming now, shedding their human facade to reveal the demons underneath. Red eyes, mouths full of razor-sharp teeth, claws, wings, black skin... deadly.

I pulled out my sword, pushing the button to make the blade extend. I charged forward, slicing and stabbing, kicking and dodging their attacks. They worked as a team, moving to my blind spots, and I caught a blow against my face that sent me sliding across the floor. My gun fell from my hand and I scrambled to get it and reload, but another demon kicked it out of the way, then another grabbed my ankle and slung me as if I weighed nothing.

I went careening through the air and slammed into the large TV, shattering it. The pain wracked my body and I moaned from the brutal impact as I landed on the floor, the TV falling on top of me. I shoved the TV away, then sliced at the first demon who was closest to me, cutting off both of his legs. He roared in agony as he fell to the floor, blood gushing from his stumps. I raised my sword to finish him off when another demon kicked me in the back and I fell forward, my sword sliding across the room.

Fuck, I had to get to one of my weapons. I scrambled to my feet, but they were quick, blocking me, and I had to fight, using my hand-to-hand skills. I punched, kicked, and jabbed, but with it being five to one, I was at a serious disadvantage. I was kicked by a demon and went flying through the wall into another room. Dust and debris filled the air, and plaster fell upon me as I lay there, groaning in excruciating pain. I was sure I'd broken three ribs. The good thing was that they were healing, the bad thing

was, I was still outnumbered.

I sat up and that was when I saw Veronica, lying on the floor, barely breathing, but still alive. I had to save her! I needed to get out of there with her. I climbed to my feet, wincing as I did but before I could reach her, my plan to jump out of the window with her in my arms was derailed when I was clawed by the demons. I felt my own blood gush from my body, soaking my shirt, making the fabric cling to me.

Oh my God, was I going to die?

Damnit, I needed him!

“Finish him,” growled one of the demons, the leader, I figured.

I blocked one swipe of their claws, but not the other that ripped into my stomach. I cried out and fell over. It was at that moment, I knew I had to Call my Champion or die. I closed my eyes and called his name in my desperation and with all of my willpower. I prayed he'd come, that he wouldn't fight my Call since I had rejected him before. I looked up to see one of the demon's feet coming down on my face. I closed my eyes tightly, waiting for the pain of my skull being crushed.

Silence.

I opened one of my eyes to see the foot an inch away from my face, but the demon seemed to be frozen. My wounds throbbed as they healed, but I was still weak from the struggle. I moved my head out of the way to see that not just that demon had been frozen, everyone appeared to be motionless.

“Looks like things got a little messy,” I heard an extremely alluring, Greek-accented voice say and I turned to see him. Azazel dressed in a black suit with a red satin shirt looked too sexy for words. I hated him, I did, I swear but I'd be lying if I didn't say

that I was relieved to see him.

Fuck... he had a smug smile on his gorgeous face and I wanted to put a bullet between his eyes.

“You came,” I said, breathing hard.

He nodded. “I came.”

I was never going to be able to live this moment down.

Chapter fourteen

Azazel

A Compromise is Made

I watched as Rai struggled to climb to his feet and didn't bother to lend him a hand. He claimed that he didn't need me and yet, I felt the desperation in his Call. I felt it in my soul and couldn't refuse it, no matter how much I tried to ignore him. I didn't like the fact that he had that much control over me. But at the same time, I was happy that he'd finally Called on me. Finally needed me, and I hated to see him in such a wounded state. However, I had to hold my stance... he needed to be the one to extend his hand completely this time. I kept a close eye on his wounds as they healed from his Guardian ring and the potion he'd just drank. Good, he was safe.

"I must say, I was surprised to receive your command," I said, then gave an offhanded gesture. "Considering earlier tonight and every encounter we've ever had, you told me that you didn't need me."

Was I being petty—yes—but I also felt it was justified.

Rai snarled, then rolled his pretty turquoise eyes.

"That crow must taste like pure salt on your tongue," I dug in deeper because it was so satisfying.

"Crow?" Rai asked, an eyebrow arched.

“The crow you have to eat along with your words,” I mocked.

Rai scoffed. “Don’t be petty.”

I smirked. “Demon, it’s in my nature. What’s your excuse?”

Rai huffed. “Fine. You were right, everyone was right, is that what you want to hear me say?”

I tilted my head as I checked him out. He looked rough. Clothes shredded and bloodied. If not for his Guardian healing ring, no telling how many bruises and wounds he would have had. The fact of the matter was, he’d been about to die the moment I’d arrived on the scene. I’d only managed to freeze the elements in the nick of time.

“I was wrong, is that also what you wanted to hear?” he snapped.

“It’s a start.” I motioned to the demons. “Do you want me to take care of them? My power to hold them still won’t last too much longer and I won’t be able to freeze them again.”

He nodded.

It was my time to shine, as they say. I needed to prove to this stubborn, beautiful man that he always needed me. I conjured up my sword, then used my demon teleportation to attack every demon, slicing their heads from their necks in a matter of seconds. Their bodies went up in smoke and ash, the particles floating in the air as they drifted to the floor.

“Jesus!” Rai gasped.

I smiled, because that was the reaction I wanted from him. I dissolved my sword, letting the power flow back into my body. Rai was looking at me now, a mixture of bewilderment and intrigue in his expression. I winked and he scoffed, then rolled his eyes.

“We need to get out of here,” he said and I knew why. We could both hear the approaching sound of sirens. He walked over to the teenage girl lying on the floor who appeared to be knocking on death’s door. He scooped her up into his arms.

“You won’t be able to save that child,” I said.

“I have a potion in my bike satchel,” he said.

“She’s been poisoned with demon blood.”

“See if there’s anyone here alive,” he told me.

“Is that your command?”

“Yes,” he snapped.

“Does that mean that you have accepted me as your Champion? I need to hear the words.”

He threw his head back and huffed. “For fuck’s sake. Yes. I didn’t want to, but if I’m going to survive, I know now that I do need you. Happy now, you petty fuck?”

I barked out a laugh, because his personality was much livelier than other Guardians.

“Yes,” I said. “As for her parents, they are already dead. My power didn’t affect them.” I could sense all living beings that my power captured and her mother and father were long since dead. At that moment, I felt my freeze ability fade and that

meant the girl would be in immediate danger. When frozen, even her heart and blood stopped as she was in a state of stasis. That was over now and there was no way that I could freeze her again, as she was now immune.

“Shit.” He frowned, then sighed. “Come on, then,” Rai said, then he opened one of the windows and jumped out of it, six stories to the parking lot below. I simply teleported beside him and he jerked. “Fuck! So, you can do that anywhere?”

I nodded. “I have quite the arsenal of abilities at my disposal.” I bowed my head slightly at him. “And now at yours. Now that you’ve finally come to your senses and accepted me as your Champion, you’ll see.”

“Whatever. Here, hold her.” He handed the girl over to me and I took her.

I looked at her little body struggling to breathe. Her veins were dark, protruding, and thicker than normal. A clear indicator of demonic poison. She looked to be twelve years old, probably why she wasn’t dead yet from the poison. I wondered if his potion could save her. He reached into his black leather satchel and removed a brown vial, untwisting the cap. He put it to her lips and urged her to drink it. She swallowed, her eyes were half closed, her clothes were torn and had blood on them. You could tell she fought and I bet she was terrified the whole time.

She coughed on the potion but managed to drink the whole thing. And as I had predicted, it had very little effect.

“Shit,” Rai cursed.

I pursed my lips as I thought about it. “They might need her for some spell, her dying by demon blood would link her life to that spell. Or it could just be that they injected her with demon blood to see if her body could accept it. There’s a number of reasons.”

Rai cursed. "I'm going to save her regardless. I just wanted to know if I can't, can you save her?"

I wasn't in the business of saving lives... not my natural instinct, although it was one of my abilities. I had over a century to come to grips with the fact that I would be using my powers for good. It was no surprise to me that Rai was asking. "Maybe, but we should get her out of here."

"My home."

"Take her."

We switched the girl from me to him and I took him into my arms and touched his motorcycle. I teleported all of us to his condo and when we landed, he staggered a little, but I caught him and the girl.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

Rai nodded. "That was weird," he said.

"Guardians can't teleport?"

He nodded. "Yes."

I smirked. "After they've merged with the Champions like every good little Guardian should, correct?" I taunted because I did enjoy getting a rise out of Rai.

"Whatever," Rai snapped, then placed the girl on the sofa. "Heal her."

I sighed, but Rai commanded me. So, I placed my hand over the girl's chest and allowed my demonic magic to flow into her. She began to go into convulsions and

cough up blood. I yanked my hand away just as Rai gasped and came to her side to hold her down.

“What happened, why didn’t it work?!” he asked in his frantic state.

I frowned. “My power... it only combined with the demon blood she was poisoned with. That means it was from a Knight.” I looked up at Rai. “I won’t be able to heal her.”

“Which Knight and what do we do now?” Rai asked, a deep crease between his furrowed brow, a sheer indicator of the stress and worry he felt for the human girl.

“I don’t know which Knight. However, there is one place that I know of that may have something to save her.”

“Great, let’s go,” Rai said and when the girl ceased her shaking, he let her go and breathed a sigh of a little relief.

“Where we need to go, I can’t just teleport there,” I said.

He frowned then and I loved his strong, angular jawline. Damn. It wasn’t fair that his holy warrior ass was this breathtaking.

“Where’s it at?”

“Not on this plane,” I said. “I’ll need to draw the doorway with my blood on the floor and sprinkle some herbs on it. Do you mind?” I asked, one eyebrow arched.

He looked down at the beautiful marble floor. “Will it leave a stain?”

“Do you care if it does? Aren’t you trying to save her life?”

He looked at the unconscious girl, her breaths shallow. “You’re right. Do whatever it takes.”

“You can just cover it with that Persian rug.” I pointed to the one under his cocktail table. “Trust me, you’ll want to keep this door.”

“Fine, I believe you.” He walked over to the cocktail table. “I’ll move it and you draw it there.”

I watched him move furniture out of the way for me. And checked out his firm ass and thighs... yeah, he was filling out those pants nicely.

He turned and caught me looking and gave me the middle finger. “Never gonna happen.”

“I’m old enough to know that it’s never wise to say ‘never.’” I smiled at him.

He rolled his eyes. “Just do the fucking door spell.”

“Oh, I love that filthy mouth of yours,” I flirted. He huffed and I got his message. “Very well. But I need to go home to get the herbs. I’ll be right back.”

I teleported without waiting for his reply. Quickly, I retrieved the herbs from my secret safe and then returned. My sudden appearance jarred Rai and got a curse word from him. I smirked, then cut my wrist and allowed the blood to flow. I moved my wrist to form a circle with my blood. I then dabbed my finger in my blood and drew sigils inside the circle.

“What is this place we’re going to?” Rai asked.

“It’s called the Magic Shop. It exists in its own dimension. It’s nowhere and

everywhere at the same time,” I explained. “It’s ancient, even I don’t know how long it and its Owner have been around.” I rose, then motioned for him to join me as I stood in the middle of the doorway. “Come.”

“We can’t leave her,” Rai said, pointing to the girl.

“You must. she’s not strong enough for this journey. We won’t be long. Time works differently there, trust me.” I held my hand out to him.

He ignored my offered hand and stepped into the circle. Well, at least he trusted me enough to do that. I closed my eyes and opened the door with the words that demons used to reach the Magic Shop. When I opened my eyes, we were standing outside at the front door.

“Holy shit,” Rai gasped. He grabbed onto me, his legs wobbly. I held him up until he had control of his body. It didn’t take him long to get himself together. He looked around to see that we were surrounded by darkness, nothing was in the space except for the Magic Shop. “My God,” he gasped and his voice echoed into the abyss. “It’s so small,” he said, as he looked at the square-shaped, windowless building that looked to be no more than three-hundred square feet. “There’s nothing else around here.”

I nodded. “I did tell you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Still. It’s wild... creepy.”

“Are you ready to enter?” I asked.

He looked up at the bright red words over the doorway. “The Magic Shop,” he read out loud. “Not very creative for a place that exists in its own world.”

“Doesn’t need to be,” I said. “Come on.”

I opened the door and stepped inside and Rai followed me.

“What the fuck?” he gasped as he looked around at how huge the place was. Tall ceilings and walls with tons of books and ladders. Rows and rows of shelves with narrow aisles as well as a clothing section and other mystical paraphernalia.

“I know, it’s bigger on the inside than outside,” I said with a smirk. “Did the Guardians ever tell you about this place?”

“Yeah, but I had never been here before,” he said as he continued to look around. “What the hell?” he asked and I turned to see what had shocked him.

It was a minotaur browsing the shelves. He was one of the largest ones I’d seen, with impressive horns and reddish-brown skin. He had a cross necklace around his neck, a ring in his nose, and tattoos on his right arm and chest. Also, his nipples were pierced. No doubt that he was a beast in the bedroom. I bet his member was impressive as well. I smirked, but turned from him to explain the shop’s customers to Rai.

I chuckled. “All kinds of beings from other universes are welcome here,” I told Rai, then put my arm around him to move him forward.

“I can’t believe this place is actually real. I mean, I knew it was, but to be standing inside of it is another story,” he said in a hushed voice filled with wonderment. He looked so adorable right then.

I didn’t say anything, only allowed him to take it all in while I searched for The Owner. I found him in the Aromatherapy section speaking with a customer. I leaned over to Rai’s ear. “That’s The Owner.”

“Oh, and what’s his name?” Rai asked.

I winked. “The Owner.”

He tossed me an annoyed look but didn’t say anything else. The Owner was a tall man, six feet to be exact. Thin, short black hair, clean-shaven with a medium skin tone. For as long as I’d known him, he always wore a white shirt, black pants, bowtie, a top hat, vest, and coat with tails. And he always had a cane, but didn’t need it to walk. A fanciful fellow if ever there was one.

I walked over to him and bowed my head and I caught Rai looking at me, his expression was one of curiosity. He probably didn’t understand the level of esteem I gave this man, but he would. “We need your help,” I said.

He smiled, acknowledging my show of respect. “All who enter here need my help. Give me just a minute,” he said, then finished assisting the customer he’d been speaking to. His accent, like his features, was indistinguishable. I had no idea what race or ethnicity he truly was or if those even applied.

Rai leaned over. “Did he just check you?” he asked with a cocky smirk.

“Don’t get used to it,” I told him.

Two minutes later, we had his undivided attention. “Come with me,” he said, and Rai and I followed. He took us over to the section of the shop where the potions were and took one off the shelf then turned to us. “Give her this. It will rid her body of the demon’s blood.”

Rai’s mouth dropped open. “How did you know?”

“It’s important for a Shop Owner to understand the needs of their customers,” he said.

“Do you know what they want with her?” Rai asked.

The Owner gave us a sad smile and shook his head. “I only know what you need right now.” He handed the potion to Rai, who took it.

“Thank you,” Rai said. “So, once she drinks this, she’ll be healed?”

The Owner nodded. “Make sure she drinks all of it.”

“How much does it cost?” I asked, because nothing was free in this place, not even advice.

He looked at me with his black eyes. “The price is to be determined. First...” he turned back to Rai, “I would like to speak with you privately.”

Rai blinked. “Privately?”

The Owner nodded.

Rai looked at me and I shrugged. He snarled, then returned his attention to The Owner. “Sure.”

The Owner smiled and beckoned for Rai to follow. I decided to browse around. Maybe there was something here that could enhance the pleasures of sex.

Chapter fifteen

Rai

A Fortune is Told

The Owner led me past a curtain to an area of the shop that was more colorful than the rest of the place. He sat down on one side of the round table and then gestured for me to sit down.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather just pay for this potion and get going. I’m trying to save a little girl’s life,” I said.

His black eyes were freaky to me and the whole vibe of this place felt right and wrong at the same time.

“You’ll have time to give that potion to the girl, but you won’t be able to save her,” he said.

I frowned, because that didn’t make sense. “What are you talking about?”

Again, he motioned for me to take a seat. I huffed and decided to humor him, even though I didn’t want to. I sat down. “Why won’t I be able to save her?”

“Because you don’t know why they wanted her, or if she’s the only one they want,” The Owner said.

“That’s why I need to get back to her and finish my investigation after I get her somewhere safe,” I stated.

“Demons who need the lives of children never stop until they get what they want.”

“Yeah, I’m aware of that,” I snapped, because I didn’t appreciate him holding me up with information I already knew.

“And you won’t be able to stop them as you are.”

I sighed. “If this is about that demon out there, I already Called him,” I said. I had broken down and done something I’d promised myself I’d never do. I had to accept my demonic Champion.

The Owner nodded and then reached for a deck of Tarot cards.

I frowned. “I don’t really have time for any of this,” I said. Did he understand that I was on a clock and the seconds were ticking?

“Oh, time you do have. And you’d be wise to spare me a bit more of yours,” The Owner said.

I exhaled as I looked at him. He didn’t seem like too much of a big deal, but even Azazel had bowed his head to him and showed him a level of reverence that seemed out of character for him. If he could get that from a Demon Knight of Azazel’s grade, then perhaps I was being foolish right now. It was just that I wanted to save that poor child. I’d already been too late to save her family.

“To make it easier for you to come to a decision, I won’t allow you to leave until you give me a bit of your time,” The Owner said.

Considering we were in the middle of ‘nowhere and everywhere’ as Azazel had put it, I decided to agree. “Fine. What do you want to do, read my fortune?”

The Owner smiled and nodded. “Exactly.” He began to shuffle the cards and he did it so fast, I almost didn’t see him mixing the cards. He then laid only one out for me, and sighed with a shake of his head. “The Hanged Man.”

I looked down at the card of a man being hung upside down by one ankle and both hands behind his back. It didn’t look good and I frowned. “What does that mean?”

The Owner tapped the card with a slender finger. “This is you, Rai Harrington.”

Okay, how in the fuck did this dude know my damn name? “How did you—”

“An Owner must know what he knows about his customers to better serve them,” he said in that cryptic manner of his.

I decided to keep it moving. This dude obviously wasn’t human, but he wasn’t a demon either. I sensed that much. “Can you explain that card to me?” I asked, since it was so important for him to read my fortune.

“Right now, you are in the reversed version of this card. You have allowed your ego, stubbornness, and inability to adapt to the unforeseen to hinder your growth and opportunity.”

“Azazel?”

He nodded. “Your Champion, my dear Guardian is a part of you whether you want him to be or not. By refusing to trust him, to accept your feelings for him, you might as well cut off both of your arms. That is how defenseless you have left yourself.”

I frowned. “My feelings?”

He nodded. “I sense they run deep, so deep, they have rooted themselves within your soul.”

I scoffed. No way I felt that much for Azazel. I shook my head. “I disagree.”

“You must trust him and in what you share.”

“How can I ever trust a demon? Do you even know who he is?”

“Do you?” he shot back.

“He’s one of the demon Knights of the Round Court in the Hades Empire,” I said.

“He was one of them and has not been for quite some time.”

“He’s evil,” I added.

“He is indifferent, but he is learning.”

I huffed because I didn’t like how this guy had an answer for everything. “He’s been killing people for thousands of years. He’s the reason why so many humans have slaughtered each other,” I said, because I knew Azazel was the Demon of War.

The Owner nodded. “And that is what makes him such a valuable gift to you, Guardian. He isn’t an Archangel, which means your Champion will give you access to powers no other Guardian will ever possess. You must reverse your fortune if you have any hope of saving that girl.”

I lowered my head as I thought about what he said, then licked my lips. “How? How

do I do that?"

"You must surrender completely. Let go of your bias, your hatred, your mistrust. But most of all, you must overcome your fear."

"I'm not afraid of Azazel," I protested.

The Owner shook his head. "Your fear of what will happen if you give him all of you and he gives you all of himself. Give in to him, Guardian Rai Harrington. Make that sacrifice to save yourself and him," The Owner said. "So much depends on you doing that."

I still didn't fully understand what he meant, but regarding Azazel, I knew that I needed him. I had that much perspective. I nodded. "I will try," I said.

"You must," The Owner urged.

I nodded again, then rose. "Can I go now?"

The Owner nodded, then pointed to the item I held. "Oh, and the price will be a few strands of your hair and your Champion's."

"Why? What are you going to do with it?"

He smiled. "I'm simply a collector of rare valuables."

"I don't like you taking my hair," I said.

He picked up the Hanged Man's card from the table and extended it to me. "Don't forget this."

I took the card and felt a sting from my scalp. I rubbed the sore spot and looked at him. He was grinning. “What the fuck? Did you just snatch some of my hair?”

“This concludes our transaction,” he said, then rose and took off his hat and bowed like it was the Victorian period. I felt a rush of air and disorientation and then all of a sudden, both Azazel and I were standing in my living room in the middle of the doorway to the Magic Shop sigil that was on the floor. “That motherfucker,” I snapped as I staggered a bit to the sofa to steady myself.

“He took some of our hair,” Azazel said and he was standing tall, seemingly unaffected by the teleportation.

I sighed in annoyance but nodded. Once I had my senses in check, I looked down at the card in my hand and noticed that it was different. “What the hell?” I gasped with a frown.

“What?” Azazel looked at the card. “Is that me?”

The card had changed from what it was at the Magic Shop. Now, it was clearly Azazel holding an hourglass with the sands of time, and inside was the hanged man. Did it mean that Azazel had some control over me? Or was he waiting for me to break out of it? Hell, I hadn’t a damn clue and The Owner wasn’t here to explain this tricky shit.

“It’s definitely you, not sure what it means, and I don’t have time to worry about it,” I said and tossed the card on the end table. I walked over to the girl and she was still breathing and looked to be in the same shape she was in before we left. I untwisted the cap to the potion and lifted her head a little so she could drink, and she did. With each swallow, she grew stronger and I saw the color come back into her dark brown skin and her veins were no longer black and protruding. The potion was working.

“We’ve only been gone less than two minutes in this realm,” Azazel said. “Time is different there.”

“That’s good,” I said, it explained why he said I had time for his little Tarot reading. I put the empty vial on the end table and watched the girl as she blinked her eyes. I knew I was going to have a lot of explaining to do.

“Ahhhh!” Her brown eyes shot open and zeroed in on me, then she screamed. She jolted into a sitting position, her chest heaved, arms flailing as she looked around frantically.

“It’s okay! You’re okay,” I said over and over again as I grabbed her arms and tried to get her to calm down.

“Help,” she screamed, tears flowed from her eyes and I could see the sheer terror in them. The last thing she must have remembered was the demons killing her family.

“It’s okay, Veronica. We’re here to help you,” I said.

Still, she shook her head and cried. I turned to Azazel to see him standing there with an unreadable expression on his face. “Are you going to help me with her or not?” I snapped.

He rolled his eyes but walked over to her. “The demons who killed your family are dead. They can’t hurt you, calm down, you foolish human.”

“Oh, for fu—” I had to cut myself off because I didn’t want to curse in front of the hysterical girl, but Azazel annoyed me to no end. He only shrugged when I tossed him a heated look. I sighed and returned my attention to Veronica and she was starting to breathe normally. She also stopped fighting me. It was as if Azazel’s coldness was the only thing that could calm her down.

“See, you can talk to her now,” Azazel said.

I rolled my eyes but took the opportunity. “Veronica, we’re here to help you. But you must listen to us, because that’s the only way I can protect you, okay?”

Her cheeks were soaked with tears and she huffed as she looked at me. “Who... who are... you?”

“My name is Rai and he is Azazel. We fight the forces of evil,” I said and I heard Azazel snort and snicker behind me. I turned to him. “You’re not helping.”

He waved his hand. “I apologize. It’s just... that line was so cheesy.”

I sighed in exasperation “I don’t have time for you.” I turned back to Veronica. “I’m so sorry I didn’t get to you before they could hurt you and your family.”

When I said that, she began to cry all over again, drawing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around her legs. “They’re... gone... are they really gone?” she asked.

I nodded. “I’m so sorry.”

“We need to know if those demons told you why they were there,” Azazel said.

“Give her a minute to process all of this, all right?” I snapped at him.

“They are still looking for her, I’m sure. We need to get her someplace safe,” Azazel said.

“They didn’t say anything,” Veronica said suddenly, cutting off the conversation Azazel and I were having.

“Perhaps it wasn’t in English. What sounds did they make?” Azazel asked.

“I don’t know!” Veronica yelled at him.

He cocked an eyebrow as if he was insulted that a mere human dared to raise her voice at him. “Just stash her someplace safe and let’s hit the demon bars. I’m sure we’ll get more information out of them than her.”

He was probably right, but I didn’t like how he was treating her. “If you want me to trust you, then prove to me that you have some humanity,” I told him.

The annoyance in Azazel’s expression faded then and he looked softer, sympathetic even. “I’m sorry,” he said, and it was my time to be taken aback a little. He sounded genuine and it made me feel... something. Still, I had to get back to Veronica.

I nodded. “Let me talk to her, okay.”

“All right.” Azazel took a seat in a chair and watched us.

“Veronica, I know you’ve been through so much tonight. More than any kid should have to experience. But I need to know why they came after you. It wasn’t a random attack,” I said.

“So, demons are real?” she asked.

I nodded. “Unfortunately, yes. And it’s my job to make sure they can’t harm people. It’s my job to take them out.”

“Can you bring my parents back?” she asked. “Are you an angel?”

As far as I knew, there was no way to bring back her parents. I shook my head as I

frowned. “I’m not an angel and there is no way to return a soul back to their body.”

Guardians who were bonded with their Champion could bring someone back from the brink of death, but not actual death.

Veronica looked crushed, but there was nothing that could be done. “I’m so sorry, and I know you’re going through a lot, but I really need to know of any little detail you could remember.”

“They didn’t say anything,” Veronica said in her tender feminine tone.

“Any sounds that they made. It doesn’t matter how obscure, it could help me,” I said.

She frowned as if in deep concentration. “‘Vally’... they said that and I think ‘Cammy’?”

“Vali Cam’mal?” Came the voice of Azazel from behind me.

Veronica nodded. “I think so.”

I turned to Azazel. “So, does that make any sense to you?”

Azazel nodded. “And you’re not going to like it.”

Fuck.

I’d given Veronica a blanket, some food, hot chocolate, and most importantly, a bit of time to gather herself. This was of course after I gave her my shoulder to cry on. She just needed to be comforted. After letting all of that emotion out, she was still upset

over the loss of her parents and wanted to be alone. Now, I was sitting in the dining room with Azazel, waiting for him to elaborate. “So, what are we in for with these demons?”

Azazel sighed, one perfectly dark brow arching. Damn, why was he so fucking gorgeous? Every time I saw him, I thought back to the moment we first met... at that club. And I had wanted him to take me home that night. Sure, I’d been drunk at the time, and sixteen, but also highly turned on. Why did he have to be a demon?

“For millennia, demons have been trying to resurrect the Old One,” Azazel said.

I frowned. “The Old One... Satan?”

Azazel nodded. “The one demon who can unite the three empires under one ruler.”

“It took a Divine Weapon to be able to lock him away thousands of years ago,” I said. I’d learned about the Great War during my studies.

Azazel leaned back, his lips pursing. Damn, his lips were sexy too. His gaze leveled on me and a wicked smirk appeared on his face. “You know... I can sense your desire for me, Rai. Always could.”

My eyes widened and I coughed to clear my throat. “I don’t have any desire for you, demon.”

Azazel smirked. “Yes, you do. I thought Guardians were all supposed to be pure of heart and not tell foolish lies.”

“That’s your demonic arrogance talking, not your intuition. Getting back to the issue at hand. Tell me more about this plan to resurrect the Old One,” I said. It was best I derailed his flirtation. I mean, yes, he was my wet dream walking and talking, but he

was also unworthy. A filthy demon. No way I wanted him... I was sure... right?

Azazel shrugged. "Very well," he said. "There are Three Empresses of Hades, each one has four Knights that make up the Round Table—"

"Yeah, I know all of that already. Fast-forward to the shit I don't know," I said, cutting him off.

"Rude," he commented.

"Azazel."

He chuckled and leaned forward, licking his lip, and I could tell he was trying to seduce me. I felt the heat rise in my body and had to take a deep breath to fan out the flames. "You've spent months trying to keep me at bay. But I've kept my eyes on you, watching over you, because I knew you'd need me."

I rolled my eyes. "What? You want a cookie for being a stalker?"

Azazel scoffed with a sneer. "What is it with you righteous religious types? You think you're so much better than the next person because of whatever God you believe in."

"Because you're evil and you know God is real," I said, looking Azazel directly in his beautiful indigo eyes.

Azazel nodded. "Yes, God is real. But it is humans who have used God to harm each other. They know nothing of God, Heaven, or even of Hades. They even made God a male simply to elevate the male species over the female when God is no gender. All religion is distorted in order to suit the needs of men."

"Guardians do not go by the Bible or any religious doctrine. We know the truth

because of our Champions," I said. My education inside of the Guild came directly from Angelic doctrine.

"And yet, you look down on me from your perch."

"You're a demon from Hell. Why shouldn't I see you as the immoral trash that you are?"

Azazel laughed. "Demons didn't create evil, humans did. Your rage is misguided and misdirected. And your angelic doctrine was bias."

I scoffed. "So, I'm to believe you're just victims of circumstance?"

"We just are. Understand, where humans are concerned, there is good and evil among them. Humans in their feeble attempts to put reason to the unknown created in their own minds a way to separate themselves from people they wanted to hate. So, even those who think they are good are in fact evil when they harm their fellow man in the name of their gods. I've witnessed their delusion for thousands of years."

I decided to remain silent and allowed Azazel to give me his point of view.

Azazel arched an eyebrow. "Oh, nothing to say?"

"I'm just giving you the chance to get that chip off your shoulder."

He snorted. "Fine. I'll continue, because I think you need another perspective." He rose from the table and walked over to my large floor-to-ceiling windows and looked down. "Humans are told through their religion that there will always be rich and the poor. How when all were created equal? When did humans stop being equal? The moment religion was introduced into the world, more blood flowed. Demons had nothing to do with that. It's humans who say 'if you don't believe in my God, you're

wrong and blasphemous.' An infidel, heathen, a sinner. Sooo many insults given to each other to support your superiority complexes. And once you feel like you're better than those you hate, it extends out to misogyny, racism, bigotry, and everything that keeps humans oppressing each other." He turned to face me. "Every religious doctrine man has created in the name of God has created a set of rules that keep men in power."

"Their doctrine gives them hope and guidance," I pointed out.

Azazel smirked. "They don't need it. Not really. And do you want to know why?"

"Tell me."

"Because every human already knows what's right and wrong. It comes at a time in their growth when, even as children, they know what doesn't feel right and what feels good. It's innate and only when that sense is ignored, do they choose to be wicked. You don't need a book to know that killing or raping someone is wrong. You don't need a piece of parchment to tell you to treat your fellow humans with dignity and kindness. But every day, humans choose their paths, because they are flawed creatures."

Okay, I didn't like that he was making points I often asked while at the Guild.

"You know that I'm right," Azazel said.

"Say that you are... where do demons come in, then?" I asked. "Why do what you do?"

"Because there needs to be a balance. We don't force humans to do what they ultimately already want to do. Even the ones you think are good want to be bad." He cocked his head to the side and smiled at me. "Isn't that why you and your friend

snuck out of the Guild that night? Why you both indulged in depravity? A Guardian-in-Training and a Guard—also in training.”

I rolled my eyes. “We were just dumb teenagers.”

“You are human and you made that choice. Unlike demons and angels, you don’t have any set of rules your very souls are governed by. Understand, Rai. No demon has ever done more harm to humans than humans themselves. They always have to find ways to make war. All I ever did was inspire them to create the tools for them to act out their natural instincts, because that is what I was created to do. I played a very tiny part in humanity’s existence and its inevitable downfall.” He looked off to the side and shrugged. “Well, at least I did before the curse.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I’ve felt the way you did, Azazel. Probably why I was looked down on at the Guild. My views weren’t everyone else’s. I once wrote a report titled: ‘The Greatest Victory the Rich Had Over the Poor.’”

Azazel smiled. “Was it getting the poor to believe that they, themselves were the problem?”

I chuckled softly and nodded. “I got an A, but also had to have a conference with the Headmaster.”

“Having faith means you don’t question. As a demon, I only followed my instincts, but now... I no longer have to. I’ve been able to see the world differently, but that also means I see the flaws on your side as well,” Azazel said.

I nodded, because I did too. “Azazel, you still play a part, only now you’re not the cause of humanity’s downfall. You’re its protector.”

Azazel blinked in surprise.

"What? Shocked that I'm choosing to put my faith in you? Isn't that what you wanted?"

He nodded. "Yes, because I have only spoken the truth."

"I want you to prove to me that we were meant to be together, Guardian and Champion," I said.

"I've protected you, isn't that enough?" Azazel said.

"Is it enough?"

Azazel sighed. "Yes. So, what does it matter as long as you get what you want? I'm your faithful Champion."

I leaped up from my chair and shoved him against the wall, then came in closer, so close our chests pressed together. Our faces were inches apart, which excited Azazel. I could tell because the pretty color of his indigo eyes glowed ever so slightly. His cheeks flushed and I found it cute that a demon could blush. I had to brush aside my own desires to make my point, because it was important. I could only trust him if I could believe in him.

"I don't want you to protect just me. I want you to fight for me. I want you to fight with me, so I can protect the humans that you seem to have so much disdain for. And I want that to be your motivation!" I snapped, then pushed off Azazel, causing the demon to grunt.

Azazel exhaled, and I looked down to see his hard cock tenting his pants. I was right about him. Did my aggression turn him on? Interesting. I kind of liked that because I was an assertive person.

“So, where do you stand?” I asked him.

Azazel adjusted his clothing. “I’ve been waiting for you to take me as your Champion, but I see that you need to be able to put your life in my hands. You need that level of devotion from me, but I don’t know if I can give that to you. I’m not the Archangel you should have gotten, but I do want you to accept me. For now, that is my only motivation, Rai. Take it or leave it.”

I thought about what the Magic Shop Owner told me about my fate. Was this moving in the right direction? I didn’t know. But at least now we were willing to work together. I nodded. “Fine. So, demons are trying to bring back Satan, aka Lucifer, aka A Huge Pain In The Ass. How do we stop them?” I asked, getting back to the problem at hand.

He shrugged. “Not sure. First, we need to find out what their plan is. All she was able to tell us was the fact they are looking for Vali Cam’al—The Old One.”

“And was that innocent kid the Chosen One?” I asked.

“I don’t think so, that is why she was poisoned by the demon blood. Whoever it is, the child will be one with a demonic link so their blood can open the door. That is what the key is for,” Azazel said.

“Fuck,” I hissed.

“Do other members of the Celestial Guild curse as much as you do?”

I tossed him a look. “Please don’t tell me you’re sensitive?”

He shook his head. “On the contrary, I find it very sexy. A breath of fresh air, if you will.”

I huffed. “So, if you don’t think she’s the Chosen One, how do we find the kid who is?”

He smirked. “You’re just no fun.”

“I’m all business,’ I said.

“I see. Anyway, I’m not sure if I’ll be able to tell or not. We’ve never once come across a human who had that aspect. To be honest, it’s a bit of a myth among demons because no such human has ever existed.”

“So, what’s changed? Why are they searching so earnestly now?” I asked.

“Not sure. I’ve been exiled for over a century.”

I sighed. “So that means we need to find a demon higher in rank to get information out of.”

“Won’t be easy. Most powerful ones don’t frequent this plane unless it’s necessary,” Azazel said.

“Well, we will need to start somewhere.”

“Excuse me?” came a soft voice from the living room. Both Azazel and I turned to see Veronica staring at us.

“Yes?” I asked.

“What is going to happen to me?” she asked.

I looked at Azazel. “Can you give her a better memory or erase the trauma in some

way?”

“No,” he said.

“Demons can’t do that?” I asked.

“Some can. I have no such ability. Not that I ever needed it,” Azazel stated with a shrug. “You’re a Guardian, can’t you? I’ve witnessed a Guardian easing the mind of a human before.”

I shook my head. “I wasn’t bonded to an Archangel, they have the power of the Whisper . It can make a human forget what happened or take away their fear. Unfortunately, I was bonded to you.”

He smirked. “You should be more grateful.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes then walked over to Veronica. “We’re going to get you someplace safe.”

“Where’s that?” Azazel asked.

I had to think about it. The safest place I knew was my Guild. If demons still wanted this girl dead, then that was the best place for her. “To the Celestial Guild.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“The safest place for you. No demons will be able to get you there,” I said. Also, I was sure Darius could put her mind at rest.

“We should teleport there,” Azazel suggested.

“I don’t think...” I paused because it was the better option. Trying to fly there under these dangerous circumstances would not only put us in jeopardy, but everyone at the airport or on the plane if she was still on the demon’s radar. I nodded. “You’re right. But I can’t do that.”

Azazel smirked. “How fortunate for you that you have me.”

I snarled at him, I couldn’t help it. He was just so pompous.

“Are you a good demon?” Veronica asked Azazel.

He looked at her and I gave him a warning glare. The girl had been through hell tonight and she didn’t need any bullshit from him.

He knelt down in front of her and gently covered her hand with his. “Yes, I am.” He looked at me. “You see, Rai is a warrior for God. He was born with special powers that he uses to protect people like you. And I was bonded to him to help.”

Well, I hadn’t expected him to say that and it seemed to work wonders for Veronica’s mental state. I saw the muscles in her shoulders relax as she exhaled.

“But why were you two fighting before?” she asked.

Azazel smiled. “Because we’re both stubborn. But that’s not anything you need to worry about. We need to get you to a safe location, okay? Can you trust us?”

“It won’t hurt?” she asked.

I allowed Azazel to do this part, because he was the one who’d be teleporting us.

He shook his head. “It will tickle. You might feel a little queasy after we get there,

like riding a rollercoaster, but it will pass. All right?"

"I don't want to be sick," she said.

"Only for a little while. Just keep breathing and swallowing," Azazel assured.
"Come."

"You know where it's at?" I asked him.

"I'll get us as close as I can. You'll have to take her the rest of the way," Azazel said.

If he was going to take us as close as he could, that meant we'd be safe going the rest of the way on our own as no demon could follow us. "Let's go."

Chapter sixteen

Rai

Making Strides Toward Acceptance

“H old my hand,” Azazel said to both Veronica and me. He caressed mine, rubbing my skin with his thumb. “Your hand is softer than I had expected.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I asked.

“You had to have been trained to the bone at the Guild, but you don’t have any calluses. You must have been given healing remedies after every session.”

I nodded. “Not just for that, though. For any injuries I got while training.”

“I see.”

Azazel closed his eyes and I figured it was to focus on the destination he was taking us. The sensation of traveling through space and time for me was pleasurable. It tickled and only took the span of a second or two. I sensed the barrier surrounding the land of the Guild and I figured he did too because I opened my eyes when I felt solid ground beneath my feet.

“Ugh,” Veronica said, then swooned a little. I held on to her so she wouldn’t fall over.

“Just breathe,” I said, then took a quick look around. I could see the huge structure of the Guild, but we had a lot of ground to cover to get there.

“It will pass,” Azazel said, and his tone was still that gentle cadence he had used when speaking to her before. Was he really trying to make an effort or was this just how demons spoke to humans in order to gain their trust?

“I don’t like doing that,” she said and wiped her eyes.

“We hope you don’t have to do it again,” I said.

Once Veronica seemed to be in better shape, I began walking toward the Guild with her. “I’ll be back,” I told Azazel.

“How long will I have to stay here?” Veronica asked.

“Not sure. We definitely want to keep you safe until I resolve the issue. Do you have family we can take you to afterward?” I asked.

She nodded. “My Aunt and Uncle.”

“Good. It’s not safe to take you there now. But once the demons have been dealt with, that’s where you’ll go. It’s important for you to be around family the most,” I said. Even saying those words stung just a little. I had to give my family up years ago. It hurt, as I was just twelve at the time, but I’d only bring them harm if I stayed.

“How old are you?” Veronica asked as we made our way over the lavish lawn and gardens.

“Twenty-four,” I said. I stopped in my tracks when I saw two trucks headed our way.

Veronica stopped too and watched them approach. “Are they going to hurt us?”

“No. They’re Guards. They’ll protect you,” I said.

The two black trucks stopped and six Guards, fully armed, climbed out and walked over to us. They all bowed their heads at me. “Guardian,” they said.

I had to admit, that shit was pretty cool. Especially since two of them used to bully me when I first got there. Not the main trio, but they were in that pack. Now, they had to show me the utmost respect. A guy could get used to that.

“Take us to the Headmaster,” I said as I started walking toward one of the trucks with Veronica at my side.

“Yes, sir,” they said and we all got inside the vehicles.

Their timing was perfect because I hadn’t felt like walking the whole way. A few minutes later, we were pulling in front of the main building and I had Veronica at my side as I made my way to Darius’ office.

“Back so soon?” his secretary joked.

“It’s serious and I need to speak with Darius,” I said. I wasn’t in the mood for banter.

The double doors to Darius’ office opened and he stood in the entryway. “Come in, Rai.”

Once inside, he closed the doors behind us. After introductions and all that, I stated the reason for my visit. “She needs to stay here.”

“Why?” Darius asked.

I explained why.

He nodded. "I see. Yes, then she should stay here, protected." He took Veronica by her shoulders and started walking her to the door. "My secretary will take care of you. I'm sure you're exhausted, full of emotions, and just want to sleep."

She nodded. "I'm scared."

Darius nodded. "I understand. Don't worry, you're safe here. No demon can enter. You can rest."

"You promise?" Veronica asked.

"I promise," Darius replied.

Once his secretary had Veronica and her instructions to take care of the girl, Darius closed the door and turned to face me. "Do you know why the demons wanted her?"

"Azazel said it's because they need the Chosen One to open Satan's cell. Apparently, they need a certain human's blood as the key. He doesn't think she's it, though," I said.

Darius frowned. "It's impossible to open that cell. A Guardian and Champion died in order to seal Lucifer away."

"Ade and his Champion Azrael?"

Darius nodded. "Yes. It took the Archangel of Death, 'Whom God helps' to sacrifice himself and through him, his Guardian in order to give their spell the power and celestial essence needed to lock him away. They were a Divine Weapon. Lucifer was too powerful to kill, it was all we could do before he brought upon the total

destruction of mankind.”

“I guess that’s what demons want. Azazel said it was pretty much a myth in the demonic realm too, but maybe it’s not. Maybe something changed where demons believe that there really is a Chosen One and that’s why they’re looking for them,” I said.

Darius frowned as he walked back over to his desk and sat down in the leather chair. I took that as my cue to also take a seat. “I don’t understand why demons want to unleash him. For thousands of years, they’ve been ruled by the three Empresses. For all intent and purposes, Hades isn’t in chaos.”

I shrugged. “Maybe there’s a faction among them who want their original ruler to take his mantle up again.”

“He’s not their original ruler, but he was their most favored. Even the current ruling Empresses obeyed his orders,” Darius said.

“Do you think they will fight him reclaiming his throne?” I asked.

Darius arched an eyebrow. “Hard to say. If there is a dissenting faction, then they want unification.”

“Glorification under one.”

“To them, Satan is their God, so what you’re saying makes sense. I just can’t figure out why they think they have a chance to free him,” Darius said. “I need to speak with my Champion.”

Oh, this was a treat. I’d never met Darius’ Champion. I’d met one of the Guardian’s Champions. Terri had bonded with the Archangel Jeremiel to show me what it would

look like to battle as one during one of our training sessions. That had been impressive enough. But Michael was a bit of a legend among all of the Archangels. I wondered if that was how Darius survived to be the oldest among us.

He closed his eyes, and I knew he was calmly Calling his Champion. I supposed one of the advantages I had compared to other Guardians was that my Champion walked this Earth and could always watch over me. I could have actual conversations and spend time with him. Whereas with the other Guardians, the Archangels remained in Heaven and only came when Called. Once on this plane, they could only spend so much time before Heaven called them back. So, I guess that was a good thing.

Darius opened his eyes and instantly, the Archangel Michael appeared before us. It took all of my training not to jump in surprise. Sure, I knew he was coming, but it was still shocking to have a being just pop up out of nowhere right in front of you.

Damn, I've got to say, Michael was fucking gorgeous. Long, raven black hair, silver eyes, chiseled features, a straight nose, and a full, sensuous mouth. He looked at me first, probably making sure I wasn't a threat, then his keen gaze settled on Darius and his expression changed. And I caught the emotions behind it. He looked at Darius with love and lust.

"You Called?" Michael asked and his voice was deep, alluring... almost like Azazel's. I couldn't figure out his accent, though.

Darius nodded. "Do you know if there is a way for demons to open the lock of Satan's cell?"

Michael's handsome features twisted in a snarl. "There is no way."

"They think it is," I said, and I kind of wished I'd kept my mouth shut by how quickly Michael's gaze shot to me.

“That gate was sealed with the blood and soul of the Archangel of Death, Azrael, as well as the sacrifice of his Guardian, Ade. Opening it is impossible,” Michael insisted.

“But if there was a way, how would it be done?” Darius asked him.

Michael walked over to Darius and sat down on the edge of his desk beside him. Their closeness had the level of intimacy that made me want to almost leave them alone. “Did you miss me?”

Oh yeah, it was fucking weird to see an Archangel flirting. I knew they never had sex as Archangels didn’t possess all of the organs of a human body even though they looked human. No vagina, no dick, no asshole. All the places where procreation and waste happen. They didn’t need them, so they didn’t have them. But whatever was going on between Darius and Michael had some telltale signs. Maybe Michael just sucked Darius off?

What the fuck was I thinking? I needed to pay attention to what was important. Not being curious about them.

“I saw you last night, so no, I didn’t miss you,” Darius said with a playful roll of his eyes.

Oh yeah, something was definitely going on between them.

Michael smiled, then caressed Darius’s jawline. “I do not have the answer for you, but I can find out.”

“We need to know as soon as possible. Demons are searching for children. According to their myth, the blood of the Chosen One will unlock the gate of the Old One,” Darius said.

Michael frowned, his head tilting slightly. “The Chosen One?”

Darius nodded. “They have someone they claim to be prophesied for that purpose.”

“How would that be?” Michael asked.

“We don’t know, that’s why we’re asking you,” I said.

Michael never turned around to face me and I got the feeling that he didn’t like me for some reason. “I was not speaking to you, Guardian.”

Ohhh, okay, that came out with a deadly tone. If I had any doubts that he didn’t like me, I had them no longer. “Do you have a problem with me?”

“Rai—” Darius said, but then he was cut off with the rising of Michael’s hand.

The most powerful of all Archangels turned to face me and I felt my spine stiffen and my heart pump a bit faster. “You are unworthy of the destiny of Guardian.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you are tainted. Your... Champion ... if one can call a demon that... was never supposed to be chosen by the Angel’s Kiss. That honor should have gone to the Archangel Raguel. The ‘Friend of God’ and one who would have brought harmony and equality into this world. He would have been a great asset to you in battle. But you are linked to a foul creature, debased in nature. The most obscene filth that was ever created.”

Hearing him refer to Azazel that way pissed me off. He was my demon and I felt like I was the only one who could talk about him like that. “You act like I chose this life. I didn’t ask for it, and I sure as fuck don’t want it! And I’ve had to sacrifice everything

I loved for it,” I snapped. “But I accepted it. You don’t get to look down on me or Azazel.”

Michael scoffed, then rose so that he could face me completely from his impressive six-six height. “There was something wrong with you to begin with. Born under the Night of a Falling Star. It was a sign that you were unnatural.”

“Michael, that’s enough,” Darius said, finally speaking up.

But truth be told, I didn’t need anyone to speak for me. “Aren’t all Guardians born when a star falls from the sky?”

“The Angel’s Blessing, yes. But it has always been during the day. Yours happened at night.”

Well, that was something I never knew. So, I was always different from the other Guardians, not just because I had a demon as a Champion.

“Not only that. Your entire attitude reeks of arrogance. Look how you feel so entitled to speak to me as if we are equals,” Michael said.

“Considering you come when we Call, I think Guardians are your betters since you want to get haughty,” I snapped back.

His expression turned to stone then and Darius rose, placing his hand on Michael’s arm.

“Leave, and get us the information we need, please,” Darius said.

Michael tore his angry glare from me to look at him. He nodded once, then vanished. Darius looked at me and then released a heavy and exasperated sigh. “You really

know how to provoke people, don't you?"

"He's not a person, and let me remind you, he started it," I said in my defense. I'd spent years living in the Guild being bullied and looked down on by everyone here practically. I learned to fight back even if I were fighting those who claimed that we were on the same side.

"He's an Archangel, Rai," Darius said.

"He's an ass—"

"Don't finish that sentence."

I rolled my eyes. "What did he mean about me being born wrong, or whatever?"

Darius scratched his eyebrow and sat back down. "You were born on the twelfth of December, exactly a hundred years after the last Guardian died which was 2012."

"Twelve, twelve, twelve," I said.

He nodded. "It was an odd event, as there was also an eclipse that night, the same that happened a century before when Azazel was given the Angel's Kiss."

"Yeah, but I'm sure I wasn't the only person born on that day."

"True. But you were the only one born at that exact time. Midnight. It's significant in the sense that you are the twelfth and final Guardian to be born and the twelfth Archangel got the shaft in place of a demon who was cursed when he killed the last Guardian on December 12, 1912. Let us not ignore the fact that Azazel was one of the Twelve Knights of Hades, the most powerful among them."

Okay, yeah... the number twelve playing a significant part in my life was uncanny. "Maybe because the demon Azazel had already been cursed by that time, I was already linked to him. That might be why I was born like that."

"The Angel's Kiss was supposed to kill Azazel by purifying his soul. It was a gift to cleanse him of his sins so that he may be freed to go to Heaven," Darius said. "Jean Dubois had forgiven Azazel for killing him at that moment."

Holy shit! I had no idea that was what was supposed to happen.

"Why... why are you telling me this now?" I asked because it seemed like some pertinent information I should have known before I left the Guild.

"Because we still don't know why he was instead given the destiny of Champion."

I scoffed because it was all coming together. "What you meant to say is that you still don't know if I can be trusted."

Darius' gaze held me. "I may be the one person who does trust you, Rai. Yes, you're rough around the edges. Vulgar, rebellious, and stubborn. You have a viewpoint that sees the shades of gray, but I also think that is who you were meant to be. Just like I believe Azazel is now who he was meant to be. God chose him to be your life partner, because that's what a Champion is. You have to put all of your trust in him and vice-versa. Some may think you're evil, but I never did."

"Michael does."

Darius smiled. "It's his nature to see humans as God's weakness. Still, he will never betray God or his warriors. He may distrust you, but he also has faith in you, if that makes sense."

It did, actually. “So, both Azazel and I are an anomaly.”

“And for good reason. I think you have the potential to become the most powerful Guardian in our ranks,” Darius said.

“Why? How?” I asked because it sounded nice, but I was curious as to what made him believe that.

“Because you aren’t like the rest of us, Rai. You could be the greatest or the worst, it could go either way. But my faith in you leads me to believe in the former. But it’s ultimately up to you if you’re able to tap into your full potential,” Darius said and his words brought back the advice from the Magic Shop Owner.

Basically, I had to find a way to accept Azazel if I was ever going to be at my best. I nodded, because now I had a different perspective regarding Azazel. If he was supposed to die, but instead got linked to me, then maybe he was a gift. A wicked, sexy, trifling ass gift, but one nonetheless.

“I understand.”

Darius smiled. “Good.”

“How long do you think it will take for Michael to get answers?” I asked.

“Not long for us, though, time moves differently in Heaven. It might take him weeks or months, but for us that might equate to minutes or hours. They’re immortal, time has no meaning. For humans, our time has limits.”

“Except for Guardians.” We were immortal.

He nodded. “And we are only six remaining. But though we are immortal, those who

we protect are not, so time is always of the essence.”

“About Veronica, can you help her... I don’t know... forget what happened?” I asked, thinking about that poor child.

Darius nodded. “I will make sure she is taken care of.”

I nodded because that was good enough for me, then suddenly, I had a question. “Something has me curious and I hope you don’t mind me asking.”

Darius’s brow creased ever so slightly. “What?”

“You and Michael... what’s going on there?”

Darius laughed then. “Exactly what you’re thinking.”

My eyes widened. “But how? He has no dick or hole?”

“He has a mouth.”

“Oooh, my God!” I burst out laughing and threw my legs up because the thought of any Archangel getting down and dirty with their Guardian blew my mind. I had wondered if that was true and it was confirmed.

“This conversation doesn’t leave this room,” Darius warned as he pointed at me.

I waved my hand. “I swear, I swear, I won’t tell a soul.”

“Not even Azazel.”

“I bet he already knows. He’s old enough.”

“Hey may suspect, but his only interactions with angels and Archangels have been to battle,” Darius said.

I sighed, wiped my eyes from the tears after laughing so hard, but nodded. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Before we could continue the conversation, Michael appeared and this time, I did jump and yelp. And his ass smiled in satisfaction before turning to face Darius. “It took a lot of investigating, but apparently, six demons, freshly turned, assaulted six women all over the world in hopes that a child would be born that was half human, half demon. This happened over two thousand years ago before your time, Darius. Those children were slayed by the Guardians, their mothers too. As far as we know, nothing like that has happened since then, but perhaps the demons believe one of those children survived and their offspring still carries the demonic link.”

“Freshly turned?” I asked and looked at Darius.

“Human souls who were recently sent to Hell and made lower-level demons,” Darius explained.

“It was believed among the demons that they held some human essence still, enough to be successful in impregnating the women, and they were,” Michael said.

Darius ran a finger over his bottom lip. “Could the Guardians have missed one?”

“Impossible,” Michael said, as if he was offended that Darius would assume a Guardian could make such a mistake.

“Why is that impossible?” I asked.

“Six demons impregnated six women. All six died with their unborn children,”

Michael said.

“Well, something has changed because now the demons are looking,” I said and rose from my chair. “If you discover anything useful, please let me know, and I’ll do the same.”

“Perhaps your demon can tell you more,” Michael said with a bit of attitude.

“More than you, maybe,” I shot back. I didn’t bother to stick around. My razzle-dazzle of meeting the Archangel Michael faded the moment he started treating me like everyone else did. It was disappointing, to be honest. Azazel was one of the few people I’d come across who actually showed me respect.

I got a ride to the limit of the shield’s barrier and Azazel was waiting. I walked over to him and took his hand. “Take me back home.”

“Is everything all right?” he asked.

Again, it caught me off guard that he was concerned for me. I nodded. “Yeah, I’m just tired and want to sleep.”

“Very well.” Azazel wrapped me in his arms and I couldn’t mistake the sense of protection I felt. Like he’d never let anything harm me. It was warm and comforting. I closed my eyes and let him take me back to my home. He released me once our feet hit the floor.

“While I’m sleeping, can you do some investigating? Shake some demons and see what falls out,” I said as I walked toward my bedroom. “Oh, before we part. What can you tell me about those six demons who impregnated those women?”

Azazel released a deep breath. “A failed experiment. It was to make a half-human,

half-demon offspring. Those demons were destroyed by Guardians.”

“Was there a seventh?”

“No.”

I nodded. I guessed he would know. “Okay. We’ll meet back here in the morning. Bring breakfast.”

Azazel smirked, but then disappeared. I climbed into my nice, comfy bed and crashed.

Chapter seventeen

Azazel

It's Nice To Feel Needed.

Being a demon, I didn't require much sleep, not that I didn't need any. Lucky for Rai, I was still raring to go. If demons were trying to release Satan, that would only cause mayhem in both Hades and on Earth. I wondered if the three Empresses were aware. I had no way of contacting them on my own since I'd been banished, but I knew just the demon to lead me to another demon who could.

I materialized in front of a demon haunt I used to frequent when I was still welcomed. I stepped up to the door and didn't bother to knock, they wouldn't have let me in. I kicked it hard and the metal door went flying off its hinges, smashing into the demon guard who'd been minding it. He hit the wall, growled, tossed the metal door aside, then rose, as if ready to take me on.

"Mind your manners and step aside," I warned him.

"The Guardian's Bitch isn't allowed inside," the demon said.

"I can go past you or through you," I said as I came closer.

"Let him in," came the voice of the demon I wanted to see.

The demon who'd been blocking my path—foolishly so—moved out of my way and

I entered the little gambling house. There was a mixture of demons and humans because this was a place where deals were made and lives were changed. Humans putting everything on the line for a chance at fame, power, money, good looks, it didn't matter. Whatever they wanted they could get for that hefty price.

I wasn't a soul-bartering demon, nor did I dabble in life, but the demons here did. A human could bet their soul for what they wanted, or years off their lives—a risky gamble to say the least. Win or lose, the price would have to be paid. But humans, as I had told Rai, were flawed beings who made this world the cesspool that it was. Destroying everything that was given to them. Demons... we just inspired them to do what was already in their nature.

I saw Edgar, the demon who ran the joint, and made my way over to his booth. Two female demons who'd been keeping him company parted ways and I took a seat opposite Edgar.

“Showing up at my place of business like this is bad news,” Edgar said.

“Then I guess it's best that you tell me what I want to know so I can leave,” I said.

Edgar frowned and huffed, but nodded. “What do you want, Azazel?”

I had to control my temper, because I didn't appreciate the disrespect put on my name. Before I'd been banished, demons like Edgar would never have dared to look me eye-to-eye. Never have dared to call me by my name. It was always “my lord” or “Sir” or “Grand Knight”. Now, they felt emboldened to simply call me Azazel.

“Why are demons searching for children?” I asked, just getting to my point.

Edgar sat back into the booth and shrugged. “How should I know?”

I didn't like playing games. I allowed the indigo of my eyes to glow and I saw Edgar stiffen a bit, his jaw tightened as his eyes averted my gaze. "You better know something."

He took a deep breath. "If I tell you, they'll kill me."

"Humans... leave," I commanded.

"Hey, exile, you don't run shit here," shouted a demon. I turned to see he was one who'd been wheeling and dealing at a poker table in a game of life.

I pointed at him sending my Hellfire in his direction, igniting his body as he howled in agony. Immediately, humans screamed and raced to the door, climbing over each other in the melee to get free. Several demons also ran, those who had good sense at least. The demon who'd mouthed off to me was sent back to Hell for his trouble, the body he possessed burned to a crisp, but I controlled the fire so that it didn't spread... not yet, at least.

I turned back to Edgar, who was staring at me with eyes as wide as he could get them. His mouth was open, and sweat shined on his face as more dripped from his pores.

"Well?" I asked.

"Ah... um... Grand Knight Azazel..." he stammered.

Good, he finally learned his place and was showing me my proper respect. "I don't have all day."

"Look, sir. I really don't know much. I'm loyal to Empress Lilith, but everyone knows that there is a faction of demons who want to overthrow the hierarchy of empires. They want to bring Satan back and put him on his throne. They believe

that's his rightful place."

"I know all this. Why are they looking for children?" I snapped.

Edgar licked his lips. "I just know rumors."

"And they are?" I prodded, one eyebrow arched.

"That a seventh woman gave birth to a baby two thousand years ago."

"But there were just six and the Guardians killed them," I said, because that was what I was led to believe all these years.

"I know, but remember, I said these are rumors."

"Fine, go on."

"It's said the seventh woman was kept hidden by a spell made from the blood of an Archangel."

Now, I was shocked. "Whose?"

"Lucifer's... Satan's, I mean."

If that was true, then maybe demons really did have a way to open his cell. "And so, this woman gave birth to a half demon—half human child who was kept hidden?"

"According to the rumor, it died."

If it died, then why are demons still looking for its human offspring? "What else?"

Edgar shrugged. “That’s all I know, I swear, sir.”

I knew he was telling the truth. No being could ever get a lie past me, which was why I knew Rai had feelings for me no matter how much he tried to deny it. I nodded and rose from the chair and as I walked out of the door, I released my control over the fire that had killed the demon and allowed it to spread. More demons ran past me out of the building before I teleported away. Edgar was small fish in the demon world, but a good source of information because lower demons had their ears to the ground. Before I returned to Rai, I wanted more information. I needed to prove to my stubborn partner that I was more valuable than he wanted to admit.

Even though, he was so cute when he frowned up at me. I’d pretty much watched him grow up and my goodness, did he form into a man that made me want to have him scream my name. But first, I had to earn his trust, because he’d spent his life learning to fear me. I’d been told of the visions he had of my past, which I was certain was nightmare fuel for him as he grew up. I made no excuses for what I’d done. It was what I was supposed to do. Unlike humans, angels and demons didn’t have the choice to choose. Even now, I couldn’t decide to go back to how I was. This curse wouldn’t let me. I could only follow the path I’d been given, but I wanted Rai to walk it with me.

I wanted him to stop being afraid and distrusting of me. So, that was why I knew I had to bring him something he could use. And I thought it was time for me to collect on a favor.

I stood in the middle of the Garden of Eden, its location long since abandoned by its angelic Guards after Adam and Eve had been cast from it. The significance of this location was where Cain and Abel were born. It was the only place I could summon the Captain of Lilith’s army. He was the first human I’d made contact with. The

jealousy he harbored for his brother wasn't one of my making, nor did I make him want to kill his brother. All I did was tell him all of the uses a rock could have. It was Cain who decided to use it in violence and like with everything that happened in the Garden, if one gave into temptation, which was just human nature, they were punished.

In my opinion, it was just cruel on God's part. Why make a flawed species only to punish them when they do what you created them to do? If God was all wise and all-knowing, then even God knew everything that had transpired throughout human history was exactly what it was meant to be if people were given the choice to do whatever they wanted. They were made—according to them them—in “God's image”, with the capacity to be both good and evil. At least with angels, they didn't have a choice. Lucifer was the exception and why he was cast out of Heaven. Humans were doomed and I wondered if Rai knew that.

I narrowed my gaze as the sigil I drew in the sand began to burn and turned to glass, a black smoke rising from the signs to shimmer before me in all of his shapeless splendor.

Cain.

“Hello, old friend,” I greeted.

“Azazel. I cannot stay for long. What is it?” Cain replied, his voice reverberated through my body in a deep, gravelly tone.

“Something that may be as bad on Earth as it is in Hades. Demons are searching for kids and the rumor is that they want to unleash Satan,” I informed him.

“Impossible.”

“Maybe not.”

“He has been sealed since forever.”

“According to the rumor, a seventh woman gave birth to a baby that didn’t live.”

The black smoke shook and I couldn’t tell what emotion Cain was feeling. Was it fear, anger, or annoyance?

“Impossible,” he said again.

I rolled my eyes because whether or not he thought it was possible, it didn’t take away from the fact that demons were searching for specific children. “Humor me, my friend. Say it is possible, who would know more about it?”

The black smoke flowed back into the sigil, but it was still smoldering, so I knew he would return as the gateway wasn’t closed. I waited ten minutes before his smoke seeped back through the gateway sigil, shimmering before me once again in the shape of a man. That meant it took him ten days to get that information for me.

“The Demon, Baal, who was banished to Earth, he may know the answers to your questions,” Cain said.

I knew the only reason he was willing to give me this information was because the three Empresses of Hell would not want to war with the members of Satan’s army for control of Hades. They had long since gotten used to being in power and wouldn’t willingly give it up. Baal was the first king of Hell, before Satan took over. Many believe that it was Satan who tempted Eve with the apple, but it was Baal’s idea when he made a bet with Lucifer. It was to prove that God’s creation that was favored by him over angels as Lucifer had believed, could be seduced by evil. According to the story as I knew it, Lucifer had claimed no human could be tempted, to which Baal

wanted to challenge him.

In doing so, Lucifer did exactly what Baal wanted him to do, which enraged God. That was why he was cast out and since he'd made the deal with the demon, Hell was where he was sent. Humans might know his name best as Beelzebub.

I was sure Rai knew the history of the war that took place between Satan and Beelzebub as the two battled for control of Hades—Hell as it was known back then. This happened about ninety-five hundred years ago. Satan won and exiled Beelzebub from Hell and sent him to Earth. It took three Archangels to lock Beelzebub away, as he was that powerful. However, that show of strength on Satan's end was what made other demons want to follow him. But it also made some want to take that power from him. Five thousand years ago, Satan made the mistake of wanting to bring Hell onto Earth as his way to get vengeance on God for casting him out. He also wanted to make the humans who were so weak to temptation suffer his wrath. It brought the army of Heaven and Earth as well as Hell against him. That was when Guardians were created, the first one, Ade, who was bonded with the Archangel Azrael.

Getting to Beelzebub was going to be impossible on my end. After demons had tried to free him from his cell a thousand years ago, security was tightened, so to speak. Meaning only a fully bonded Guardian would know where to find him. I had no idea where he was or how to get there. It was enough, though. And something Rai could work with.

“Is that all, Cain?” I asked.

“That is all.”

“Thank you, old friend.”

The black essence descended back into the sigil and the low flames extinguished

leaving glass that looked like ice with smoke coming from it. I teleported back to Rai's home, having no issues with entering, which was nice. I opened his bedroom door and saw him sleeping soundly and it was already late afternoon. He must have been exhausted. I took off my shoes and slipped under the blankets beside him. He looked so peaceful as he snored lightly. He was so beautiful and fierce, but now, he was vulnerable. I reached out, my finger so close to his lips, but I didn't make contact. I only wanted to trace their voluptuous shape. I wanted to see them part in a smile as he looked at me, even though he was just as sexy when he sneered.

He must have sensed that he was no longer alone, because his gorgeous turquoise eyes shot open and he stared at me.

"Why are you in my bed?"

"In your bed is where I want to be," I said.

He rolled his eyes, then flipped onto his back and wiped his beautiful eyes with the back of his hand. "Ugh, I don't have time for your shit."

"You don't have time to be lounging in bed either... but we could make time for a little fun," I flirted.

He looked at me and, taking me by surprise, he pounced on me, pinning my wrists to the bed. "You're a demon, I'd never stick my cock into you."

I arched an eyebrow at that. "Ooh, tell me more about how you want to fuck me."

There it was, it was quick, but there was a hint of a smile and he went to climb off me, but I stopped him, pulling him down on top of me. "You literally have full control over me... I know you're attracted to me. I can sense it."

His gaze darkened then—a telling sign—and one I wanted to see. It let me know even more that the attraction wasn't one-sided.

“I'd never let you stick your cock inside of me, either,” Rai said.

“That's fine. You can ravage my hole all you want,” I flirted.

“Jesus,” Rai said, then climbed off the bed, and I allowed him, but not before I felt his erection against mine. “Did you find out anything?” he asked as he made his way to the bathroom to do his human business. The way he walked was sexy as hell, he sauntered with this air of arrogance, but also confidence. I bet he pissed everyone off in that snooty Guild because he just had something about him that stood out.

I rested my head on my arms and crossed my ankles. “I did, but you're going to need a real Guardian to move on this information.”

“I am a real Guardian, asshole,” Rai said behind the closed door and I laughed.

Yes, I loved his spice, so refreshing. “Not one who can access the cell of Baal, you'll know him best as—”

“Beelzebub, yeah, I know about him,” Rai said, cutting me off with his know-it-all ass.

“Do you even know how to merge with me?” I asked. “It's not like you've been able to practice with you pushing me away.”

“It's not something we practice. It's just something that happens,” Rai said.

“When?”

“When I’m ready.”

“You will need to get ready.”

“Tell me more about Baal,” Rai said, changing the subject.

I smiled. “He may know something about the seventh woman who was impregnated,” I said, and that bathroom door swung open with Rai standing there with his shirt off. My eyes drank in the vision of him half-naked. Yes, I couldn’t help but imagine how much we’d both enjoy him sliding his cock inside of me. His weight pressed on top of me, him pumping away between my legs. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted him to do it.

“What?” Rai shouted. “What do you mean a seventh woman?”

I explained to him all of the information I’d gathered while he slumbered away.

“Fuck!” he snapped and closed the door.

I heard the shower running for a few minutes, then he came out, a towel wrapped around his muscular, tapered waist. The training he’d undergone at the Guild had done him huge favors.

“Get out while I get dressed,” Rai said.

“No,” I smirked.

He threw me an annoyed look. “Fine. Look because you’ll never touch.” At that, he snatched off the towel and revealed the treasure I wanted to drop down to my knees and worship. His beautiful cock hung limp between his legs resting on dark, plump balls sprinkled with a bit of hair. “Damn, staring much?”

“I can’t take my eyes off you,” I admitted.

Again, I saw it, the hint of his smile. He turned from me, giving me a great view of his plump, muscular ass right before he slipped into a pair of black underwear.

“Awww, you could have taken your time,” I said with a pout, then a smile when he threw me another annoyed look.

“Actually, I can’t and you know this. Be serious, Azazel.”

I sighed, because he was in full-blown Guardian mode and he wanted me to get in line. “Very well.” I sat up and rose off the bed and as soon as he was fully dressed and armed with the weapons of his choice, I teleported us back to the Guild outside of its barrier.

“Wait, here.”

“Of course.”

I watched him take off in a full sprint across the lawn and was taken in by his sheer grace. I couldn’t help but feel some type of ownership over Rai. Sure, I’d been linked to him, destined to obey his command, but he was also made for me. I could sense that much. He was mine and I would have him.

Chapter eighteen

Rai

A Painful Truth

Once again, three SUVs showed up and made my journey to the Guild's Main Office quicker. Darius wasn't in so I had to wait, because he was the Guardian I needed to speak with. I had to wait an hour, but as soon as he returned, he called me into his office.

"Rough fight?" I asked as I watched him nurse a wound on his arm. Must have been a really bad one for him to still be healing.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," he said casually.

"Who was it?"

"A rather powerful demon I dispatched back to Hell. A foolish human had opened a portal in China to release the Demon of Fortune," Darius said. "It will heal in a little while. Why are you here?"

"Azazel did some investigating and spoke with Cain."

Darius' eyes widened. "He spoke with Cain?"

I nodded. "I know. I wish I'd been there." I really did, because how often did you get

to meet the world's first murderer? So many questions I'd want to ask him. The very fact that Azazel could summon him, I found impressive... but then Azazel was just that badass. Oh my God, why was I praising his demon ass?! I blamed those damn visions. The ones that let me look into his soul to see every facet of him. The good, the bad, and the ugly, but it was the good that was guiding my emotions now. The dreams of him helping humans and especially those where he was sexual as if he were seducing me in my sleep. Shit, maybe he did.

"Are you listening to me, Rai?" Darius said with a snap of his finger.

I blinked and looked at him. "What? I'm sorry, did you ask me something?"

"Yes, twice."

"Oh... my mind just... you know what, doesn't matter. What did you ask me?"

"What did Cain say?"

Yeah, that was an obvious question. I kicked myself for drifting off into my thoughts of Azazel like that. "He said we'd need to speak with Baal."

At that, Darius scoffed and it was something he didn't normally do. He usually found that reaction distasteful, but he did it.

"What's up?" I asked.

"He will be difficult. After his war with Satan, he lost and was cast out of Hell. He may hate Satan, but he hates us more. Getting information out of him won't be easy," Darius said.

"But we will get information, right?"

Darius nodded. “Are you prepared for what we might have to do?”

“I’ve been on my own for months now, killing my fair share of demons—”

“Low-level demons, hardly anything to brag about, Rai.”

Well, shit... way to cut me off at the knees. “So, do you want to take over this case since I’m obviously an amateur?” I snapped.

Darius sat back in his chair and studied me... the way he used to when I was a kid and I’d felt like he was judging me. “No Rai. This case is your destiny. You will have to rise to the challenge. But when we go to Baal, he will be the most powerful demon you’ve ever seen and faced off with. He was the king of Hell before Lucifer. He will not be easy to break.”

“I’ll learn from your example, and then I’ll get creative,” I said.

Darius smirked, then nodded. “Very well.” He rose and I did the same. “You will need to bring your Champion and I’ll bring mine.”

“How do we get there?”

“Michael will take us.”

I laughed then, I couldn’t help it. “Oh, this is not going to be a fun field trip.”

“It’s not supposed to be.”

“What I mean is Michael and Azazel will be face-to-face.”

“Who says that won’t be fun?” Darius said with a wink and I saw a glimpse of a side

of my mentor I didn't know existed. The part that seduced an angel, I was sure. Darius was never as stuck-up as the other Guardians I'd met. Well... save Terri, she was okay. Perhaps that was why I'd always felt more comfortable around him. He made me feel like I was normal whereas everyone else made me feel like an outcast. To put it plainly, Darius was just cool as hell.

Azazel had been lounging on the ground and when he heard us approaching, he rose and gathered himself.

Darius looked him up and down. "We meet again."

"Let's not make a habit of it," Azazel shot back.

I pointed at him. "Behave," I told him.

Azazel rolled his eyes but nodded.

"Are you still using conventional weapons?" Darius asked me.

"Yeah," I shrugged. "They work. The magic forged in them is good."

"Not on powerful demons. Those weapons Raina made won't work on Baal. Why haven't you bonded with Azazel?" Darius asked me.

"Yes, Rai, do tell," Azazel said, and looked at me with a smugness that made me want to kick his shin.

"Because you're an asshole, that's why."

Azazel smirked. "I have an asshole." He leaned in close to my ear. "And I want you inside of it."

I immediately felt heat rise to my face as it raced through my body and I shoved him back. "Stop it!"

Azazel laughed, then his gaze shifted to Darius, who was just looking at us with one eyebrow cocked.

"Ignore him," I said.

"Gladly," Darius replied, then sighed. "In any case, you must bond if you plan to be of any use as a Guardian, Rai. I can't stress that enough."

"Yeah, I know, I know," I said, waving my hand. To be honest, I didn't know if I could bond with Azazel. I wanted to, I knew that I needed to... but did I have the ability to?

Again, Darius gave me that contemplative look of his.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm going to call Michael now," Darius said, and then he did his thing. A second later, the Archangel, Michael, stood before us. The smile on his face as he looked at Darius transformed into a sneer as his gaze panned over to Azazel and then to me.

"What are these abominations doing here?" Michael asked.

"Wishing that I didn't have to be in your sanctimonious presence," Azazel snapped, not missing a beat.

“Perhaps then, you shouldn’t have killed three Guardians and their Champions.”

“Awww, but it was fun,” Azazel shot back.

A flaming sword shot from Michael’s hand just as a black and silver sword that looked wicked as hell materialized from Azazel’s hand. It glowed red as Michael’s glowed blue. I looked at Darius and he didn’t seem to be at all alarmed by the fact our Champions were about to go at it. Before I could say anything, the two attacked—or rather, they tried to. An invisible force exploded between them, sending both in separate directions. Their fierce swords disappeared as they sailed through the air. Michael floated to his feet, but Azazel landed hard on the ground, and then began to vomit. His face was screwed up as if he were in agony and he gripped his stomach.

“Fuck!” I ran over to him, rubbing his back as he heaved. “What’s wrong with him?” I asked the other two.

“Worried about your demon?” Michael sneered.

“Yes, happy?” I shot back.

“No, I’m not,” the Archangel retorted.

“You know, he may be a demon, but you’re acting like a dick right now,” I snapped because I was tired of his shit. I continued to rub Azazel’s back until his heaving stopped. “Are you okay?”

He spit the last of the bile out, then nodded. “I haven’t felt that sickness... in quite some time,” he said between pants.

“What happened?” I asked, because I needed to understand.

“Go on, explain it to him, Azazel,” Darius said.

Azazel rose and I did the same, looking up at him for answers. “I can’t harm the innocent or anything celestial for that matter. If I try, I get violently ill, the pain is pure agony.”

“So, as you can see, a demon is a demon. Only thing holding him back from being his old self is the curse,” Michael taunted.

I turned to him. “So, what’s your excuse?”

Michael tilted his head to the side and Darius chuckled. “Excuse me, human?” the Archangel said.

“Sure, I saw what happens to Azazel if he tries anything, but I also saw your ass thrown back too. Which means you’re not supposed to harm your own kind.”

Michael’s face twisted in contempt, so thick I could taste it. “He is not my kind.”

“Yes, he is, or you would have been able to harm him.” As soon as I said that, I felt something tingle inside of me, drawing me closer to Azazel. I felt... protective of him. I didn’t like anyone looking down on him or me... I’d had enough of that my entire life.

“Well, now that we’ve all seen the proof that Azazel is on our side, shall we go so that we can stop whatever it is demons are trying to do?” Darius looked at all of us as if we were being a bunch of school kids, and though I kind of agreed... I also felt that what happened was significant. I was glad it did, even though Azazel had to suffer. I didn’t like that part.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said.

Darius held his head back, arms out, and before our eyes, Michael turned into a bright, blue light and flowed into Darius' body. When my mentor opened his eyes, they were illuminated for a second, the color of blue before turning back to brown, with flecks of the light in them. I wondered what it would look like when I finally merged with Azazel.

"Come," Darius said, and he held his hands out. I took it and Azazel took the other.

The teleportation was quick and something only a Guardian could do once they were bonded with their champion. It didn't feel weird at all, in fact, it was pleasant without any side effects once we landed.

"Ugh," Azazel groaned and staggered a little before he caught his balance.

Okay, so I didn't feel any side effects. Couldn't say the same for my demon. My eyes widened as I realized what I had just said. I called Azazel my demon. Why was I getting so possessive over him lately? Was it because he saved me? Or was it because I knew he'd been watching over me all those months—no, years, while I pretended I didn't know he was there? Was I feeling something more toward Azazel? As I thought about it... it wasn't my first time referring to him as mine. How long had I felt this way?

I closed my eyes to shift my focus and when I opened them, I finally took notice of where we were. It looked like a beautiful garden and in the direct path of us was a golden cage where the biggest demon I'd ever seen stood watching.

"Holy shit," I gasped and took several steps back as my eyes took in a demon that stood eighteen feet tall, with red scales covering its black skin. He glared at us with glowing, red eyes with black pupils and sneered at us, baring a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. His black claws looked deadly as did his black horns that were massive with pointed tips. At least his feet and wrists were chained up and I was certain those

weren't made from regular iron.

I'd heard stories about Baal, and even seen drawings, but none of that could have prepared me for what I saw face-to-face. Now, I understood even more why Darius said my swords wouldn't mean shit to a demon like Baal.

"Gather yourself, Guardian," Darius whispered to me.

Damn, okay, yeah... he was right. I cleared my throat, swallowed, and straightened my back. I was the only one caught off guard by how massive the demon was. Darius approached the door of the gate, opened it, and then walked inside. Both Azazel and I followed.

"Long time, Beelzebub," Darius said.

Baal growled. "Call me by my name, maggot!" the demon roared in a voice so deep, it must have come from the abyss. The ground shook with each word he spoke.

"I won't keep you long," Darius said and I watched the master at work, learning from him, always. "Why are demons looking for the key to unlock Satan's cell?"

Baal smiled wickedly. "And why should I tell you?"

"Because you hate Satan, surely you don't want him freed while you remain locked away," Darius said.

"He betrayed me!" Baal said.

As I watched the two converse, my heart was beating a mile a minute. My palms were so sweaty, I thought I'd drop my sword and gun. Azazel stepped up next to me and his very presence calmed my nerves. I didn't know if it was something he was

doing, or just the fact that he was beside me, but I did start to gather my wits about myself.

“Your Majesty,” Azazel began as he walked over to the cage. “Can you help us?”

“Do not try to flatter me, Azazel. You have no loyalty,” Baal said with a sneer.

“I’m loyal to the strongest,” Azazel said. I couldn’t help but wonder if he was talking about me now, or when he was a demon. Because he had served three rulers. Baal, then Lucifer, then his Empress.

Baal glared at Azazel. “How can you call yourself a demon when you fight against your own kind?”

“It was my own kind, like you, Baal, who cast me out. I’ve been exiled for over a century,” Azazel said.

“I am your King! Respect me!” Baal yelled.

“You were my King and are no longer. Also, need I remind you that I tried to show you respect and you told me not to ‘flatter you,’” Azazel said and I wanted to laugh, because it was stuff like that which made me like him. He didn’t take shit from anyone.

“And so, you side with them... was it for your freedom, Azazel?” Baal spoke and his tone was very much of one that was used to being in control.

“I am his Champion,” Azazel said proudly and I wasn’t expecting that. It made my chest puff out just a little bit.

Baal spat a ball of fire onto the ground at Azazel’s feet that exploded, then fizzled

out. “Pathetic!” To Azazel’s credit, he remained unfazed.

Azazel smirked. “What’s ‘pathetic,’ sire, is you being beaten off your throne by a fallen angel, then cast from Hell only to be locked away for eternity.”

Baal roared again, fire blazing from his mouth directed at Azazel, who dodged it. Azazel, I knew was immune to fire—hell, he controlled it, but I figured Baal’s fire was on another level, one Azazel didn’t want to fuck with.

“How dare you speak to me with such insolence!”

“I’m no longer a Knight of the Round Court. I have no demonic ruler, you nor Satan or the Empresses,” Azazel yelled.

He conjured his sword as Darius did the same, it was the same sword Michael was going to use on Azazel, only it glowed with white flames instead of blue. I knew it was because Michael and Darius were one. Both Darius and Azazel’s armor covered their bodies. Darius’ was white with gold trim, and Azazel’s was black with glowing red trim. They both looked badass.

“Answer our question. Can the demons free Satan?” Azazel asked Baal.

Baal roared and swung around, whipping his large, scaly tail at us with the sharp tip like an arrow. Instinctually, I slashed at his tail as I leaped over it, and my sword broke in two. The shard of the blade went flying in the air to land on the ground. It was at that point I realized just how useless I was. And... it hurt to have to admit that. I dropped the rest of my sword, which had been shattered along with my pride.

“Rai!” Azazel yelled

Before I knew it, he’d tackled me to the ground just as Baal’s tail reversed to slash at

me. There was a strong possibility that I could have been sliced in two had Azazel not saved me. My heart hammered in my chest as my breath came in rapid succession. My adrenaline was at full force, and yet, I was completely out of my league in my current state.

Azazel shoved me through the cage door. “Stay here,” he said, then joined Darius as he fought the demon.

Relegated to the sidelines outside the parameters of the cage, I had to stay alert, but also watch as Darius and Azazel worked as a team better than I had expected. Their blades sliced wounds all over Baal’s body, causing the demon to grow increasingly more enraged. The wounds Darius made weren’t healing like the one’s Azazel made, but still, it was effective.

Darius was like a beast, his movements were swift and agile as he leaped, slashed, and dodged, which seemed to drive Baal insane with agitation that he couldn’t get the upper hand. I guessed it didn’t help that the chains that bound his arms and legs gave him little room to maneuver. Still, he was doing more than enough fighting, in my opinion. I watched as Darius flipped back, then darted forward and swung his blade with a roar of his own. His sword cut through Baal’s tail, slicing it off in the middle.

“Ahhhhhhh!” Baal screamed and thrashed about in his confining chains.

“Are you done?” Darius yelled. His chest heaved and he was bleeding from several cuts he’d suffered while fighting, but he looked like he could go a few more rounds.

“Stop... stop... no more!” Baal begged.

“Answer me, then, demon,” Darius commanded.

“What... what will I get in return, Guardian?” Baal asked.

Azazel had pulled back as well, taking his place beside me again, his sword still at the ready, though. “Are you all right?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said and he nodded.

He’d also been wounded in the fight, but they were healing.

“You’ll get to live, demon... Or shall I dispatch your soul into the ether. Banned from entering Hades, forbidden to enter Heaven. Lost drifting aimlessly... a disembodied mess?”

“No! Please, I beg you, show me mercy!” Baal whined.

Who knew a threat like that could terrify a demon that powerful? Shit, shouldn’t we have led with that before the bastard got a chance to show his ass? Even better, let’s just do it. Why keep him alive? I needed to ask Darius about that later.

“Answer me!” Darius yelled again and I’d never seen this side of him. The Warrior.

I liked it.

I wanted to be like him... to have that level of confidence.

“Fine.” Baal looked at Azazel. “You know this demon well, traitor. Birds of a feather and all.”

“Who?” Azazel asked.

“Saraphell,” Baal said.

“Ahhh,” Azazel said in acknowledgment. “So, she became a Seeker, the one who

betrayed you.”

Baal nodded as he growled. “She is one of the four Seekers—Those With The Blood That Calls.”

“Does this mean that demons do have a way to free Satan?” Darius asked.

Baal nodded. “A thousand years ago, when demons attacked me in this very cell your kind has trapped me in, they were stupid enough to tell me their plan. As homage to Satan, they would bring him my horns as a trophy for him to display.”

“So, there really was a seventh woman?” I asked after stepping back into the cage, finally joining the party. Azazel had told me the rumors, but now it appeared it was the truth.

“There was a seventh at that time, hidden by the blood of Lucifer himself. That is what flowed inside of her. She gave birth to a human baby with his corrupted blood. The other women were simply decoys sacrificed for the slaughter,” Baal said, and I was happy he was being generous with the details. Not even the Guardians knew this shit, or demons as powerful and old as Azazel.

“If she gave birth then, why is Satan still locked away?” Darius asked.

“The baby born and many thereafter were not the Chosen One. The blood lays dormant and every hundred years, they search for the one child whose blood is the key to Satan’s cell,” Baal said.

“Only every hundred years? Does time run out?” I asked.

“In three days, as the door must be opened on the full moon,” Baal said. “However, that’s just for this attempt. They have nine others as the window is opened for a full

year at the end of the century.”

“Fuck,” I cursed, that meant this month would mark their third attempt. I looked at Azazel. “Did you know about this? I mean, why demons were looking for children every century?”

Azazel shrugged. “Demons are always looking for children for various reasons. Nothing stood out. Also, the last whispers of a rebellion I’d heard was a thousand years ago and those demons were punished.”

“Not all of them apparently,” Darius stated.

“Is there anything else we need to know?” I asked Baal.

“That is all I know,” the demon said.

“And why do you even know that? I mean, I’m glad you do, but how? You’ve been trapped here for like—ever,” I pointed out.

Baal lifted his head to look down at me with those creepy red eyes. “Because they wanted me to know when they thought I wouldn’t be alive to see my enemy rise back to power.”

Demons did love to gloat. I just nodded at that.

“Do you know where to find this Seeker demon?” Darius asked Azazel.

He nodded. “I do.”

“Why is it called a Seeker demon?” I looked at Baal for that answer, and both Darius and Azazel did the same.

Baal huffed like we were getting on his nerves. Probably were. “Only they can find the Chosen One. Their blood is drawn to the offspring of Satan like a beacon.”

“But their blood has been dormant, right?” I asked.

“Dormant, yes, but still can be sensed by a Seeker. They won’t know if the blood works until they have it,” Baal said.

“Do I need to take the Seeker with me or just their blood?” Azazel asked.

“I do not know,” Baal replied.

“Does the child need to be killed?” I asked.

“That, I do not know,” Baal said. The whole time we’d been speaking since the fight, I noticed that his tail hadn’t healed. I knew that it would take a long time too, Darius’s blade was the most powerful of ours and it did real damage.

“We should go,” Darius said.

I agreed, I was ready to leave. Sure, the garden was gorgeous, the company of that big ass demon, not so much. I bet the surroundings of such beauty were another form of torture for the demon. We left the cage, locking it behind us.

Darius took our hands and once again, we were teleported back to the Guild, just outside its border. Azazel had the same reaction as before, but that was expected.

“You did well, Rai,” Darius said.

“Thank you... I guess. I wasn’t much help in the fighting department,” I admitted.

“And now you understand what I meant. Move forward from this experience,” Darius said, then looked at Azazel. “You also did well.”

“I’m older than you by a landslide, of course I did,” Azazel bragged.

Darius didn’t bother to retort, but I bet Michael would have. Speaking of the Archangel, Darius released him and he flowed out of him then formed his solid body. Darius shivered a little but was okay nonetheless.

“I must alert the other angels of this development, Darius. We need to be prepared if Satan is released. War will be imminent,” Michael said and he was all business.

Darius nodded. “Go.” Michael vanished and Darius looked at me. “I will contact the others and let them know. You, find that Seeker.”

“I will. I have a question,” I said.

“What is it?”

“Why didn’t we just kill Baal? Why keep him alive?” I asked.

Darius sighed. “I would love to, but killing him would cause immense damage. His soul would splinter and invade millions of humans and animals, turning them into God knows what. That cage is the only thing that will keep this world safe from him.”

Oh shit... now I understood why he was still alive. “So, you just lied to him?”

Darius smirked. “For the greater good.”

“Sure, justify it,” Azazel remarked.

“I need no justification,” Darius said. “Now, don’t you have a Seeker to find?”

“I’m on it.” I turned to Azazel and held out my hand. “Take us to them.”

“I have to find her first. Seekers can’t be sensed,” Azazel said.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Chapter nineteen

Azazel

A Champion is Rising

After traveling to two other locations looking for Saraphell, after torturing the last demon because he wanted to be stubborn, I teleported Rai to her hideout. Demons surrounded it, but I made sure the shadows surrounding us cloaked our presence so they couldn't sense or see us.

"Four on the outside, no telling how many inside," I said.

"I don't have my sword," Rai said. "Can you handle them?"

I smirked. "Is that your command?"

Rai looked at me and I turned to him. "What?" he asked me.

He looked so adorable when he was confused. During the fight with Baal, I was... worried for his safety. I acted out of instinct when I rushed toward him to push him out of the way of Baal's attack. He was mine, I wouldn't let anyone hurt him.

"I am your Champion, Rai. Why don't you have some fun with me? If you're concerned that these demons mean anything to me, don't be. I will annihilate them."

Rai smiled. "I like hearing you say that you're mine."

Ohh, what was this here... he was becoming possessive of me... after all this time? I liked it. No, I loved it.

“Yes, baby,” I flirted, daring to use the term. He only snorted and rolled his eyes. I took that as a sign that he was warming up to me.

I unraveled the shadows, exposing us to the demon guards, who became instantly alert. Before they could attack, I was on them. My sword emerged from my aura, lethal and precise as I slashed through each one, slicing them in half. Low to mid-level demons like them were easy work for a demon Knight like me.

“Damn, that was awesome,” I heard Rai say.

I turned to see him stepping over one half of a pile of ash toward me. I kicked open the door, or rather, kicked it off its hinges, sending the wood splintering into deadly shards that stabbed several of the demons inside. I stepped through with Rai following me and the demons gathered themselves for an attack.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Rai warned.

“You have a lot of nerve coming here,” said the demon I assumed we were there for.

“Saraphell?” I inquired to make sure.

“Azazel.” Saraphell stepped between two large male demons, all looked human as they’d taken over human bodies when they had entered this world. She had taken the form of a woman who resembled her once-human countenance. Yes, she was beautiful.

“Do you know why I’m here?” Rai asked and his tone was full of authority.

He was growing into his role as a Guardian well, I thought.

“I do and you will get no answers or help from me, trash,” Saraphell said with a sneer. “Kill them!”

“Azazel,” Rai said only my name, but I needed no instructions.

Twelve demons, excluding Saraphell, rushed at us, but I attacked them, freezing others while I sliced through the horde. When Saraphell saw what was happening, she tried to flee, but I froze her as well. As the last demon fell by my sword, Rai made his way over to her motionless body.

“Unfreeze her. I need answers,” Rai commanded.

I approached them and released my power over her. She tried to run, but I grabbed her hair and slung her to the floor. Immediately, I towered over her, pressing my foot to her chest, the tip of my sword at her throat.

“Don’t,” I threatened.

She glared up at me, her fangs showing in her rage. “You traitor! I used to look up to you. You’re pathetic now... a fallen demon!”

She wielded insults like all demons did, nothing I hadn’t heard before. They no longer affected me.

“Play nice, Saraphell, and I won’t make you suffer,” I said.

“How low you are now,” she said.

“Yes, yes, he’s such a disappointment to you, big fucking deal,” Rai said as he joined

us, then knelt beside her. “He’s my Champion, bitch, and I’ll have him gouge out your eyes if you sling one more insult his way. Got me?”

Saraphell’s eyes widened, then narrowed. She looked at me and I smiled, then winked. She growled, but returned her gaze to Rai because he was the one who was in charge. It took me a century to prepare myself for that realization. To accept it. I didn’t think I would, but the moment I saw him fighting demons, I knew he’d need me even if he didn’t, or kept refusing me. More importantly, I felt our connection and it made me want to serve him. Even now, as I carried out his orders, I felt a sense of satisfaction that had my cock hard. I wanted more of what only Rai could give me.

“What do you want, Guardian bastard?” Saraphell asked, her nostrils flaring as she struggled to breathe due to the weight of my foot pressed on her chest. Human bodies did have their weaknesses if you weren’t strong enough to transform that weakness into your power the way higher level demons could.

“Are you trying to open Satan’s cell?” Rai asked her.

Hearing his voice brought my focus back and I paid attention.

“Yes! And he will rise to rule Hades and Earth and Heaven,” she said in her sycophantic exuberance.

“How will you open his cage?” Rai asked in a calm voice.

“Like I’d tell you,” Saraphell shot back.

“Do you need to kill the child?” he asked.

“We need only their blood, but killing the child will be fun,” Saraphell said, smiling.

“How will you find the child?”

“All we’ll need is a drop of her blood,” she continued to taunt.

Rai’s brows lifted. “So, it’s a female child you need?”

Saraphell looked off to the side as if realizing her error. “Fuck you.”

“How will you find her as the Seeker?”

“How much did you cry yourself to sleep after giving up your family?” Saraphell mocked.

I saw Rai’s body tense a bit. “What do you know of my family?” he asked.

Saraphell laughed. “More than you know.”

“She knows nothing,” I said. Demons were masters of manipulation and finding a human’s weakness was our bread and butter.

“I know everything!” she spat back.

“Oh? Then you must know his mother died, you can’t hurt him with that,” I said and I hoped Rai wouldn’t take my bait. I watched his muscles relax and knew that we were on the same wavelength.

“We know that... But the rest of his family won’t be safe. We’ll kill them for what he is doing now,” Saraphell said, peddling a wolf ticket, as they say.

We got the answer we needed regarding Rai’s family. Demons had no idea who they were, or that his mom was alive and well.

“Tell me how you’ll find the key,” Rai demanded.

Saraphell smiled as she snarled.

I sliced her throat a little with my sword, just enough to sting and bleed. She hissed and then glared at me. “Answer his question, Saraphell.”

“Go to Hades, Azazel! Oh! That’s right... you can’t.” Her cackle that followed was full of cruelty.

“I don’t want to go back to Hades, Saraphell. I much prefer my life here.” I smiled. “Who knew torturing and killing demons would bring me so much joy? There’s nothing I love more than knowing how much trouble I’m causing those three bitches,” I said, thinking about the Empresses.

“Fuck those whores too. Our true ruler will rise!” Saraphell declared. “You cannot stop it.”

“Azazel, do you think if we take her heart, the blood that flows through her will lead us to the Chosen One?” Rai asked me.

“It’s possible.” I knew of a spell I used to locate certain people using their blood.

“Kill this bitch then, and get me her heart,” Rai commanded.

I almost orgasmed, I was so aroused, that I swooned. Seeing him in his butch mode made me want to ride his cock until we both came screaming in ecstasy.

“No... don’t,” Saraphell pleaded, and her pitiful voice helped me gather myself. Rai had given me a command.

Rai stepped back and I knew he wasn't going to give her any more chances. I plunged my sword into her throat, the blade embedding into the floor. She could no longer scream, a sound I did enjoy, however, I didn't care. I knew the wound wouldn't kill her, but it would keep her pinned in place. I removed my foot, then leaned down, thrusting my hand into her chest, breaking through her bones to reach the beating organ. She thrashed for only a few seconds. Once I had it, I ripped it out, blood and bones splattering around her dead body.

"Jesus, I thought you were going to cut it out," Rai said as he stared in disgust at my blood-soaked hand with her heart in it.

I shrugged. "This was quicker." Using my magic and a few words to channel it, I infused her heart with the spell to help us find the child. The heart continued to beat, which made Rai shiver in revulsion.

"That shit is gross," he said.

I chuckled. "But effective."

"So, do you feel anything?"

"Not yet."

Rai looked at Saraphell, then stepped over her corpse. "How do you know her?"

I looked at her and then back to him. "We met a millennia ago. She had been raped by four men. The townspeople mocked and shamed her, so much so, she was going to kill herself. I came to her then, and told her to get her revenge. Then I gave her the Bella Donna flower.

"Poison being the weapon of choice for many women," Rai said.

“When people wrong you, don’t be suicidal, be homicidal. That’s the only way you’ll get true satisfaction. Why should those who’ve hurt you live happy lives when you’re suffering?”

“But they’ll go to Hell,” Rai said.

“Ahh, but don’t humans believe in that trusty loophole? Where if they repent, they can go to Heaven? Only way you can’t is if you kill yourself. You see, that was always one of my favorite lines to convince mankind to give into their base nature.”

“You know, you were winning me over before that shit.”

I rolled my eyes. “I was a Demon of War, Rai. It’s what I did. I am that no longer,” I reminded him.

“But do you still feel that way?”

I tilted my head to the side. “Don’t you?”

He scoffed. “No, I don’t. I don’t think people should kill.”

“Yes, you do. And that’s what makes you different from other Guardians. That’s what makes us compatible. Because you truly do believe there are times when killing someone is completely justified.”

He was silent and I knew he knew I was right about him.

“Let’s go,” he said, finally.

I smiled, because it was a victory in my book. I took his hand and began to teleport, feeling the power of her heart taking me to the target. Saraphell couldn’t teleport, she

could fly though, but being able to teleport gave me a great advantage. Traveling the world through the portal of space and time allowed me to cover more ground. The blood of her heart glowed brightly when we came close and I landed us in New York. Harlem, to be exact. I kept the shadows surrounding us, and we were standing in the alley of a tall apartment building.

“Where are we?” Rai asked, his eyes on the glowing and beating bloody heart.

“In Harlem. We must hurry,” I said, then teleported him to the very apartment where our target was because I had sensed a powerful demonic presence.

“Oh shit!” Rai said as soon as we landed.

I tried to freeze the demons, but I couldn’t and I knew why. Four demons had laid waste to the humans in the home. One I was sure was a Seeker by the way Saraphell’s heart shook in my hand. It recognized one of its own. The other two were foot soldiers, but the one who worried me was a Knight. He was also the one who nullified my power to freeze the other demons. Demon Knight Leviathan stood in the room, blood dripping from his claws, his glowing green gaze on me. He must have also been the Knight who’d poisoned Veronica.

I tossed Saraphell’s heart because I needed both hands free for this encounter. “You’ve betrayed Lilith,” I said.

“Lucifer is the only one I serve, Azazel,” Leviathan said, then he charged toward me.

I brought out my sword and armor, then slashed, but he dodged, then conjured up his sword and armor. His was silver with black razor-sharp edges. Rai pulled out his dagger and gun as it was all that he had to defend himself.

“Save the girl, Azazel!” was his command.

I looked past Leviathan to see a demon trying to climb out of the window with a teenage girl. I threw my sword, piercing the demon in the back of his head. At the same time, I had to dodge an attack from Leviathan. The demon my blade killed, burned to ash and the girl fell to the floor, still unconscious. Rai ran over to the other demon and their fight ensued. He was at a disadvantage because we weren't fighting as one, but he wasn't without skill and fortitude. He was going to need it.

I called my sword back to me in time to block a downward slash from Leviathan. We clashed as we fought, I caught glimpses of Rai's tussle with the other two demons. It wasn't looking good, which meant one of those demons had to be at mid-level. He needed me, but I couldn't go to him. I had to switch my complete focus to Leviathan. I kicked him and managed to slash his back, but he countered by jabbing me in the side with his blade, making me growl. The pain was searing, but the wound wasn't life-threatening.

Both injured, we stumbled away from each other, my stomach bleeding and burning from the power of his blade and him falling to one knee as his back gushed blood. I pushed the pain aside and charged forward and Leviathan blocked my blade. We were both on our feet again, our swords slashed as the sound of steel echoed off the walls. Leviathan was Lilith's highest-ranking Knight and he was proving why with every calculated move. The wound in my stomach would take time to heal, just as the wounds I was giving him would. Blades from demon Knights could not be matched.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Rai had killed one demon, but that attack left him open to the other. "Rai!" I screamed and sent my sword toward that demon. It spun in the air like a flying guillotine and when it struck, it did the damage I wanted. The head of the demon flew from its shoulders before his blade could kill Rai.

It was a decision that cost me as Leviathan's sword pierced my chest. I grabbed it before it could stab my heart and held it tightly. Blood bubbled up from my mouth and I choked on it as I fell to one knee. The wound burned and throbbed as I fought to

keep my heart safe.

“Azazel!” Rai screamed, the sound of his voice reverberated through my very soul. Something inside of me burst open. I’d never felt anything like that before. All pain disappeared as my body lost its shape and formed into a black mist that floated into Rai.

Chapter twenty

Rai

The Bonding

When I saw Azazel get stabbed in his chest with that demon's blade, I didn't know what came over me. All I could do was scream, my heart leaped into my throat, and I couldn't breathe. I wanted to cry and then I felt something inside of me break open. Before I knew it, Azazel had turned into a black smoke or mist and flowed into me. My body was ignited with energy, all of my senses were heightened to a level that felt like I'd been made a god. I stared at the demon before me. The last one. The one who had almost killed my Champion.

Oh, I was about to kick his fucking ass. I felt a level of confidence take over and just knew what I needed to do. All of my years of training were for the moment when I truly called my Champion to me. To fight as one. Black armor covered every part of my body that didn't feel heavy at all. It looked like the armor Azazel had when he battled Baal. I let my sword extend from my hand using the energy that flowed inside of me. But I also conjured up a black gun with flames on the handle. The bullets I knew would last as long as my energy did.

"Azazel really has sunk so low as to be a Guardian's dog," the demon said.

My sword was an arming sword with a double-edged blade so sharp, it could cut through any bone, I knew it. The hilt that was just as dangerous with its sharp design. It was the most badass weapon I'd ever seen. It looked like the perfect slayer of

demons.

I charged forward with a speed that was astonishing even to me and slashed, catching the demon off guard. He managed to bring his sword up in time, but the impact of my blow sent him flying back and crashing through the brick wall into the next apartment. Thank goodness no one was there. The lights were out, so it would seem no one had been home. Perfect. Dust and debris fell as I stepped through the hole. The demon groaned as he brushed the rubble off his body. I could feel the power, more intense than anything I'd ever experienced, circulating all around me and through me. I was high on it.

Before he could get to his feet, I shot at him several times and he had to roll out of the way to dodge my bullets. I leaped over to him and stabbed him in his leg and he screamed and tossed a ball of red light at me. I pulled my sword from his ankle fast enough to slice through the energy he'd sent, making it fizzle out. He rose and made a break for it, limping toward the girl, but I was on him. I was not going to let that motherfucker get away with that girl. Not after what he'd done to Azazel. I shot at him, the indigo flaming bullet leaving my gun and hitting the demon squarely in the back. He arched and screamed, his back smoldering from the flames that were lighting him up. I teleported in front of him, which seemed to surprise his ass and I slashed, my sword cutting through his body. Blood gushed out like a fountain and I kicked his body away from me.

"Oh my god!" I heard a female voice gasp.

I turned to see the teenage girl the demons had tried to take was now standing in the farthest corner of the room, trembling in fear. All of the demons were dead now. The one who I had just killed burst into indigo-colored flames, he was the only one who did thanks to my bullet. That demon was strong as hell, definitely a high-level one.

Holy shit, did I just kill a fucking demon Knight? Oh man, wait until I told Darius

and my best friend about that. I had to snap out of my elation at having just kicked major ass and bonding with my Champion. While I still had Azazel inside of me, I wanted to use his powers to teleport the girl out of there. My armor, sword, and gun absorbed back into my body and I felt the return of their energy. I wondered if Azazel felt the same when he did it. It tingled.

I ran over to her. “Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded, her brown eyes still wide with shock. “You... you saved me from them.”

I turned to see one woman and two men—all human—lying among the dead. “I’m so sorry that I couldn’t save your family.”

“They weren’t my family. They kidnapped me and brought me here where those fucking monsters tried to take me away,” she said.

Oh... well, it looked like I didn’t have to feel bad about them, then. Humans who worked for demons were just as bad, in my opinion.

“How did you do that? What are you?” she asked, her eyes looking at me from head to toe. “Are you going to hurt me?”

She rattled off a lot of questions and I had to hold my hand up to stop her.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I came here to save you. I’m a celestial warrior known as a Guardian. We protect innocent humans like you from demons. But first, I need to get you out of here and someplace safe, okay? I’ll explain more then.” I held my hand out to her.

Considering what she’d been through, she responded pretty well. Tough kid. She slipped her hand into mine, giving me her trust and I teleported us back to my home. I

knew how to use all of Azazel's powers, it was like his knowledge was my knowledge. He was helping me the whole time. But once we landed, the girl screamed, then wobbled.

I caught her. "I'm sorry about the sensation, it will pass."

"What... what was that?" she asked as she swallowed hard.

"I teleported us back to my home in Chicago."

She looked at me, eyes wide in shock. "We're in Chicago?"

I nodded. "My home. It's warded against demons, they can't enter, and you'll be safe."

"How... how did you..." she stammered.

I exhaled. "I can teleport. It doesn't hurt, but it's how I can travel quickly over great distances," I told her. "I'm not a demon, but my Champion is. It's his powers that I used to save us."

She was staring at me and I could see the wheels in her mind trying to keep up with all of the information she had to take in. "And you promise you won't hurt me? How do I know you don't want me for something bad like those demons did?"

"Fair question, but I don't. My mission, what I was born to do, was to protect humans from evil."

"But you just said you're a demon."

"No, I said that my Champion was. He's a good demon, bound to me. He will not

harm you either. And we're safe here, that's why I brought you to my home," I said, trying my best to put her at ease.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." I started to feel the energy high coming down and I knew I'd have to release Azazel. "Give me a minute, okay?"

"Don't leave me." She clung to my arm.

"I'm only going into my bedroom."

"Don't leave me," she begged.

I sighed. "Okay, I won't, but what you're about to see, please don't be afraid. I'll explain, okay? But I have to help my friend."

"What friend?"

"My demon, he was hurt and he needs me," I said.

"Where is he?" she asked as she looked around my home.

"Inside of me, so that's why I don't want you to freak out or anything when I release him."

She looked at my chest. "He's inside of you? What does that feel like?"

"Powerful, but now, I can tell it's time I bring him back."

"Okay," she said as she released my arm. I was sure she had no idea what I was

talking about. She was going to find out.

I closed my eyes to concentrate and focused on letting go and I felt all of that power leave me. Again, the girl screamed and I opened my eyes to see Azazel standing before me. He wavered and then collapsed, but I caught him and guided him to the floor. He was still wounded from his battle with the Knight. His flesh was pale and the wound was deep enough that it was still bleeding.

“Oh my god,” the girl screamed.

Ugh, this was why I had wanted to go into the bedroom to avoid this moment of hysteria. I released Azazel and took her by her arms as she was backpedaling.

“It’s okay. He’s mine, you don’t have to fear him,” I reminded her. She was on the verge of hyperventilating. As much as I wanted to tend to her, I had to go to Azazel. “Listen, he needs me. Can you let me help him?”

She looked at me, then back to Azazel, and gave me a weak nod. It was enough. I released her and ran back over to Azazel. “What do you need from me?”

He was breathing hard, his face contorted in pain, and I hated seeing him like that. It brought back all of those dreams I had of him being vulnerable. Dreams where I just wanted to hold him. Quickly, I ran to the bathroom for my first aid kit, the one with the potion for healing. I returned to Azazel, putting his head in my lap. “Drink this.”

He turned his head. “It won’t work.”

“How do you know that.”

“Because I’m a demon.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the girl watching us intently, and I knew she was listening to every word spoken. “But you’re my demon,” I told him. “It might work.”

He looked up at me with those hypnotic indigo eyes and I just wanted to protect him... to save him. He had risked his life to save me, he didn't even think twice about it. “What... ahh,” he groaned in pain and I wasn’t going to argue with him.

“Drink it,” I ordered and he pouted, but opened his mouth. I poured it down his throat. The worst it would do would be to make him sick. He swallowed, made a face like a big baby, but he didn’t puke it up. That was a good sign. I watched him carefully for a moments and felt some ease when the color began to return to his gorgeous face. “How do you feel?”

“Better, my wounds... they aren’t as painful,” Azazel said.

I released a sigh of relief. “Good... good.” I nodded, then looked at the girl, because now I knew he would live. Also, the fact that a celestial potion worked on him proved that he was really on our side... my side. Throughout this mission, the more I learned about Azazel, I knew I didn’t have to doubt him anymore. His fight with Michael, the potion, and the fact that I didn’t feel corrupted when we bonded... I knew I could trust him completely. His soul wasn’t evil and that was my main fear. A fear I had no more. I continued to rest his head on my lap as I watched the deep wound in his chest mend back together, the skin knitting as it repaired itself.

“Holy shit, that is wild,” said the teenage girl.

I looked up at her. “Are you okay over there?”

She nodded. “I mean... you two did save me and I have to give you a chance to explain what the hell is going on.” She took a deep breath, then released it. “So, I’m

going to stay calm.”

Well, what a mature way to handle this fucked up situation. She looked to be a teenager around maybe fourteen years old. Her long, dark brown hair was in box braids that flowed down her back. Her ebony skin was blemish-free on the surface, but what stood out most to me was her serious expression. Her eyes held knowledge beyond her age. A life lived that no teenager should have ever experienced. I needed to find out more information about her, like where her parents were. She took off her jacket and that was when I finally noticed that she had blood on her arm. The blood was on her arm and her shirt had been cut by something sharp.

“Did they cut you?” I asked her. I needed to know if the demons took her blood.

She shook her head. “This happened when I was fighting my kidnappers. They cut me, but I poked one of them in the eye and he dropped his knife and let me go. But I couldn’t get to the knife before another one of them grabbed me. They brought me there and those demons came. They said they were going to kill me and were laughing about it. That was right before you got there.”

“So, they never touched you?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

“Was it just those four demons?” Azazel asked.

She nodded. “They had killed those assholes who’d kidnapped me first and then those motherfuckers were going to come for me.” She shivered and took another deep breath. “Thank you for saving me.”

She reminded me of myself at her age. I could imagine what she was going through at that moment. A fear like no other. I was glad I got to her in time too. “You’re

welcome.”

Well, the one demon I knew who had put his hands on her, Azazel killed before he could get anywhere. So, it was safe to say they didn’t take her blood. She had to have been the Chosen One if Saraphell’s heart led us to her where demons were already.

“Here, drink this, it will heal you,” I said. I gave her a potion to heal her wound.

“It’s just a scratch, see?” She rolled up her sleeve so I could see how superficial the wound was.

“I’d feel better if you didn’t have a wound at all. Please, drink it.”

“Does it taste bad? That demon didn’t like it.”

“No. He’s just a big baby,” I joked. I wasn’t too surprised that it didn’t taste good to Azazel. However, I was pleasantly surprised that it worked.

“Okay,” she said, then took the vial from me and swallowed one sip. “Mmm, tastes sweet.”

I nodded and she drank a bit more. “That’s all, you don’t need much.”

She handed the vial to me, but I waved it off. “Keep it.”

“Okay.” She looked down at her wound and widened her eyes in surprise as her skin began to heal. “Oh wow, it really does work!” she exclaimed in delight. “Who knew magic and demons and all of that was really real? This is kind of cool—well, not those demons.”

“I can see why you’d say that. I’m glad you’re okay.” I ran my finger over Azazel's

face, tracing his cheekbone, and he seemed to be enjoying the extra attention. He earned it. I sighed before looking at her again. “So, what’s your name?” I asked because it was important.

“Monique Jackson,” she said. “What’s yours?”

“Rai Harrington and this is Azazel,” I said, giving our introductions.

“Like the demon Azazel?” the girl asked as she stared at him.

I nodded. “That’s him.”

Azazel smiled. “My reputation precedes me.”

“He’s like the son of Satan, right?”

To that, Azazel scoffed. “My dear, I’m older than Lucifer’s reign in Hell. I handed Cain the rock,” he bragged as if he couldn’t help himself, even in his weakened state.

I rolled my eyes. “There are different human versions of him, but he is—was—the Demon of War. Now, he’s my Champion. Those evil glory days are behind him,” I said, then playfully slapped the side of his head. To my delight, he chuckled. Not only did that mean he was feeling better, but also that we were bonding more. Considering all of the fights I’d been in lately, I knew I needed him more than anything. Why had I been so afraid to let him in before? It felt wonderful to connect with him on that level, to become one. I loved it.

“Oh man, I’m still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that demons are real and that I was attacked by some,” she said, then sat down on the sofa.

“Did they tell you why?” I asked.

“They said that I was the Chosen One. I don’t want to be their Chosen Anything,” she said and her expression displayed all of her emotions; fear, sadness, and curiosity.

Considering that I, too, was a Chosen One with a predestined life, I understood where she was coming from. “I won’t let them harm you.”

“I believe you,” she said. “I don’t know why, but I just do. I don’t feel like I’m in danger around you.”

“Good, because you are safe,” I said.

“How old are you?” Azazel asked.

“Sixteen,” Monique replied.

Okay, so I was off by a few years. She looked younger and she was about five feet tall. “Where’s your family?” I asked.

“I don’t have one,” Monique answered. “I’ve been living on the streets since I was fourteen. I’d rather do that than be whored out by that bitch of a foster mom.”

Azazel snorted. “Humans.”

I huffed. “Behave,” I told him. I looked to see that he was completely healed, but hadn’t bothered to move his head. “Comfortable?” I asked him.

“I still need to recover. Don’t move,” Azazel lied.

“Are you two boyfriends?” Monique asked.

“What?” My eyes were wide, because I hadn’t expected that. “Why would you ask?”

Monique shrugged. "I mean, I don't care. I'm not judging. Love is love and all that. It's just you two seem pretty intimate," she pointed out. "There's a vibe I'm sensing." She waved her hand and wiggled her fingers for emphasis.

"Yes," Azazel said.

"We're not," I countered.

Azazel nodded and I pushed him off my lap. His head hit the floor with a thump.

"Ow!" he grouched, then rubbed the sore spot.

Monique half snorted, half laughed.

I huffed and climbed up to sit down on the opposite sofa. "We're not boyfriends," I said for clarification.

"Doesn't matter to me," she said with a shrug.

"You're the only one uptight about it, Rai," Azazel said as he sat up and climbed onto the sofa beside me.

"Look, enough about this. We need to get serious. You don't have any friends or family?" I asked her.

"Not anyone that really cares about me. I sleep in shelters and get my necessities from charities and sometimes churches," Monique said.

"Damn, okay. The good thing about that is you're the only person we need to protect."

She looked around my home. “Your place is really nice. Are you rich?”

“Okay, why are you so laid back right now? You should be freaking out,” I said. I couldn’t help myself. No teenager could be this damn cool.

Monique shrugged. “Living on the streets, I’ve seen some shit. I’ve had to survive all kinds of fuckery. Men who wanted to rape me, murder me...This one motherfucker wanted to piss on me. And let me not get on all the bitch ass motherfuckers who stole my shit. This night was just as fucked up as any of those. At least this time, someone helped me.”

Living a hard life would make a warrior out of you if you survived it. This girl was living proof. “I’m sorry you had to go through all of that. And you don’t know your biological parents?” I asked.

Monique shook her head. “I’ve been in the system my entire life, bouncing from one foster home to another. To me, I’ve always been surrounded by demons.” She shrugged again. “The fact that actual demons are real was a mindfuck, but considering humans took me to them, they’re all one and the same.”

“Oh, I like this girl,” Azazel beamed. “She’s a realist.”

“Oh, shut up,” I told him.

“Why? Because she’s telling the truth about human nature? Do you think demons had anything to do with her upbringing?” Azazel asked me.

I knew that they hadn’t, or they would have had her blood ages ago. I shook my head. “But let’s not pretend that demons don’t play a part in why there’s so much evil in the world.”

Azazel shook his head. “You know, Rai, you keep calling demons evil. But we’re not responsible for human nature. God made that flaw when he gave you free will. Humans created the systems throughout time that have been the backbone of their society and only the rich control it. Humans designed the concept of bartering, be it with spices, services, people, or money. The quid pro quo if you will. ‘What am I going to get out of it’ mentality. That’s how demons can make deals so easily.”

“I know that. But that’s not all humans,” I said. “People have made huge strides in growth. When things happen in the world, there is always an outpouring of support. No one is ever alone in this world.” I pointed at Monique. “Even she had places she could go for help.”

“It’s all humans who follow a system that is always against them.”

“It’s how we have order. without it, there would be chaos.”

Azazel smiled, a hint of fang showing. “There’s already chaos, but it’s organized, so you don’t see it. And when humans get angry, they don’t do anything other than complain and half the time, it’s misguided or not fully informed.”

“People have challenged and even overthrown their governments,” I stated.

“And replaced it with more of the same under a different name. Take your political and social systems. Humans vote against their best interests all of the time. Because for some of you, it's in your instinct to court chaos. Demons... we don't even have to try to seduce you. You come to us.” Azazel snorted with his arrogant smirk before continuing. “I mean, every country is a capitalistic society as long as money fuels their government. Doesn’t matter if it's democratic, republic, communist, socialist, libertarian—whatever.” He waved his hand. “It’s all based on the greed of the few that dominate the many.”

This time I remained quiet, because Azazel wasn't being cruel, just honest based on his observation and I felt it was wise for me to listen. "Go on."

"For instance, take today's society in this country. The cycle. Your government allows corporations to give you shit products—let's take food—for this example. You buy it, even at prices that are too high already for what you're getting. Down the road, it makes you sick. So, if you're lucky enough to have the means to change your diet, they charge you even more for the food that's supposed to be better for you. If you don't eat it and get sicker, well, now you'll need medicine and surgery and that's when they can milk you. And then when you die, here comes another industry that gets to take more money from you. And while you're being a good little cog in the machine, those who created the machine are laughing all the way to the banks they control."

"I can't deny that. It's fucked up."

"Demons didn't do that. It's human nature. Why anyone would continue to bring innocent life into this world is a mystery to demons." Azazel shrugged. "But hey, it keeps us entertained."

"I see you still consider yourself a demon," I said, noting he said 'us' in his statement.

"I am what I am. I don't have any qualms about that. Do you still?" he asked me, his indigo eyes captivated me as he awaited my reply.

I shook my head. "No." It was the truth. In fact, the more I thought about it, I think I got over the fact that Azazel was a demon years ago, but I just couldn't admit it to myself.

"I find that comforting," he said.

“Do you still take pleasure in human suffering as other demons do?” I asked, because that’s the answer I wanted when I made my earlier comment.

Azazel tilted his head to the side, his luscious lips pursed slightly, then he sighed. “Not the way I used to. In fact, I only enjoy the suffering of those who deserve it. Does that answer give you satisfaction?”

I nodded. “It does. Back to what you said, that is all true. But my job isn’t to change that.”

“Same here, yet your side thinks we should.”

“My side just wishes demons wouldn’t make it worse.”

Azazel laughed. “We’re not. That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Rai. Your side sits back and watches what you already know is the inevitable. My side only gives the humans what they already want. We don’t change the outcome that is their destiny.”

“So, is this you trying to convince me that ‘we’re not so different you and I’?”

Azazel smirked. “Is that too hard a pill to swallow? If so, I have something else you can swallow.”

“Oh My God! Go fuck already,” Monique said.

“Jesus!” I gasped and turned to her. “Girl, that mouth on you.”

“I’m just saying, you two sat there and bickered like an old married couple. I bet you forgot I was here. The sexual tension is so thick in the air, I choked on it,” Monique said. “Just go fuck already. It’s so obvious that you’re into each other.” She shoed us away. “Go, go on... close the bedroom door. I’ll turn the TV up so that I don’t hear.”

She grinned then. “Not that I wouldn't mind, because my god, you two are gorgeous!”

Azazel laughed outright then, slapping his knee and everything. I was still trying to process what she'd said. My face was so hot and I knew I was blushing. “It's not that.”

She smirked and even I knew I didn't believe the bullshit I just said. It was totally that. I wanted to take Azazel to Poundtown and leave him twitching on my bed in soaked sheets. And the only reason I hadn't done so... how would others look at me? Judge me?

Azazel tapped my temple. “That brain of yours trying to figure out reasons to deny what even the girl can clearly see.”

“I'm a Guardian.”

“And you're still a man... with needs and desires.”

“Azazel, we're not having this conversation in front of a sixteen-year-old, girl. Okay?” I put my foot down and he nodded. I turned back to Monique. “I'll admit, you're a tough little cookie, you don't break. That's badass. To answer your question, my lifestyle is supplemented by the celestial organization I live for. I have to be on call twenty-four-seven and able to travel all over the world to save people.”

“I'm rich,” Azazel said.

“Do you two live here together?” Monique asked.

“Not yet,” Azazel said.

I started to protest but then decided not to. With the way I was feeling, my cock

stirring to life, I'd be damned if I let it make a liar out of me. "Not yet," I echoed Azazel's response and he tossed me a wicked smile.

"I can move in ASAP," Azazel suggested.

I shrugged. "Fine. It's best that we live together anyway."

Azazel raised both sexy black eyebrows. "Really?"

I nodded. "You were right about everything. We're best when we're together, stronger. And unlike other Guardians, I can live with my Champion."

"Consider it done," Azazel said with a wide grin.

"Must be a nice life living in the lap of luxury," Monique said.

"It is," Azazel answered and I slapped his pec... his very muscular pec. "What?"

"I really don't think Monique needs to hear about how lavish our lifestyles are," I said.

He shrugged. "She asked."

"I sometimes forget how honest demons can be when it suits them."

Azazel laughed and nodded. "But have I ever lied to you, baby?" he asked, using that term again that made me feel all kinds of tingles.

"No."

"And I never will," he said with a charming smile.

“Shouldn’t you be honest too?” Monique asked and I had to tear my gaze away from Azazel to address her.

“I am, but I’m also tactful. He’s not. I try to spare feelings, he can hurt them,” I said.

“I prefer blunt honesty, to be honest. I don’t need anyone sugar-coating shit for me. I’m not a child,” Monique said.

I studied her for a few seconds, then nodded. “No, I suppose you're not.”

“You never had the chance to be,” Azazel stated.

Monique was silent as she seemed to reflect on Azazel’s words, then she nodded. “I guess not.”

“It made you stronger and that’s what you need to be to survive what’s happening now,” Azazel said.

Monique nodded once, then exhaled. “So, what are you two going to do next?” she asked. “Why did they need my blood?”

Azazel sighed. “Well—”

“It’s best that you don’t know,” I said, cutting Azazel off.

“I want to know,” Monique demanded.

“That must be that tact he was talking about,” Azazel teased.

I rolled my eyes at him. “Monique, trust me, I’m not trying to shield you because I think you’re a kid. I’m not going to tell you because I need you to be able to live your

life as normal as you can. In this case, ignorance is bliss.”

“They’re going to do something really bad, aren’t they?” she asked.

I nodded.

“I figured. I can’t be the Chosen One for demons and not have it be something serious.” She sighed and nodded. “Okay... I trust you. I don’t want to know. But whatever it is... can you stop it?”

“I’m going to try. This means that we need to leave, but I won’t be leaving you alone,” I said.

“I’m going with you?” she asked.

“No, I’m going to have my best friend, Marcel, come to watch you,” I said, then pulled out my cell and texted him. After I finished, I looked at Azazel. “We need to go back to that Magic Shop, there’s something I want to ask The Owner.”

“We need to go back to my home for the special herbs I’ll need to open the doorway,” Azazel said.

“Okay.” I looked down at my phone when it beeped to see Marcel text back that he was on his way. I then looked at Monique. “Are you hungry or sleepy?”

“Hungry, yeah,” she said.

“Do what kids do, feel free to raid the kitchen.”

She smiled and walked over to the kitchen and started gathering goodies to eat.

“She’s a pretty cool kid,” I said softly.

Azazel looked at her. “She’s had an unfair life thanks to humans.”

“Don’t start.”

He chuckled. “Okay, I won’t.” He scooted closer to me. “Is your cock still hard?”

I reached over and grabbed his, which was hard. He growled in lust and moaned. “Behave.”

“How can I when you’re touching me?”

I smiled, but released him. “Get it together, demon. As for you moving in with me, it should be soon.” I didn’t need Azazel to be in the same home with me in order to call him, but I wanted him near me at all times. I just couldn’t explain why, it was just how I felt.

“Once we solve this demon mess, I’ll move in,” Azazel said.

“Good.” I rose. “Let me freshen up.”

“Can I join you?” Azazel asked.

“No, take care of Monique,” I said, then walked off to my bedroom. I showered quickly, dressed, and then decided to grab something to eat while Azazel took his turn, bathing to get all of the blood off his body. I tried not to imagine how hot he must look with suds dripping off his body, but it was a task I was failing at and my cock was tempting me to interrupt his shower.

“So, what’s up with you and the demon?” Monique asked as she sat down in the chair

across from me.

Her voice brought me back to reality. I cleared my throat. “What do you mean?” I asked, then took a bite of my ham sandwich.

“You’re obviously into him, is he your boyfriend?”

I paused eating and looked at her. “No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think we should be having this conversation.”

“I’m not a kid. I can talk about stuff like this.”

I snorted. “Yes, you are a kid and I don’t want to talk about Azazel and me.”

“You trust him,” she said, then she grinned wickedly. “I bet you’re sooo in love with him.”

“Shut up and eat your food,” I said and she giggled. The last thing I was going to do was discuss my complicated feelings about Azazel with a wise-mouth, street-smart, sixteen-year-old busybody.

The door to my bedroom opened and the demon in question emerged wearing the clothes I’d given him. He was five inches taller than I was and my clothes were too small for him even though they were made with stretchy fabric. Seeing how short my sweatpants were on him was kind of funny.

“I still look good,” he said, being a good sport about it, even though his ankles and legs were showing. His attitude made him even sexier to me. I was still chuckling at

the outfit on Azazel when I heard the knock on my door, I knew it was Marcel. I let my BFF in and Monique's eyes lit up when she saw my handsome friend with the French accent. Girls had their crushes, I supposed. I made quick introductions.

"Okay, quick question, why are both of you going back to his house?" Marcel asked.

"Because we need to get the ingredients," I said.

"It's only some herbs," Azazel stated, which pointed out the amount of bullshit that was in my response.

I couldn't pretend like I was needed to do that task and the damn doorway to the Magic Shop was under my Persian Rug. "I need to speak with Azazel alone, okay?" I said finally.

Marcel winked. "Alrighty then. Don't worry, I'll watch over her," he said, and I was relieved that he didn't continue to pry. He looked at Azazel from head to toe. "You take care of my friend, all right?"

"Always," Azazel said.

The two seemed to be friendlier than I was expecting. "Have you met before?" I asked.

Marcel nodded. "From time to time when he was checking in on you."

I looked at Azazel and felt even more emotions flood into me. He even went as far as to be cool with my best friend just to make sure that I was doing well. Wow.

"Shall we?" Azazel said.

I snapped out of my thoughts and nodded, then looked at Marcel. “I have so much to catch you up on, buddy, but it will have to wait,” I said. I wanted to tell him about everything that had happened in the past forty-eight hours, but I had to leave.

“Don’t worry, we’ll have time,” Marcel said.

I nodded and left with Azazel, who teleported us back to his home.

Chapter twenty-one

Rai

A Demon's Allure

We landed in Azazel's home and the traveling through teleportation didn't affect me the way it used to. No dizziness, no nausea, and I knew it was because we were bonded now. I held onto Azazel's hand still, because it felt good to be this close to him. He smelled so sexy to me and I knew he wasn't even wearing cologne. It was just him and I found myself wanting to bury my face into the crook of his neck and take a deep breath.

"Are you all right?" he asked me, and the sound of his sexy voice drew me out of my state of arousal.

I looked up at him and nodded, then took a few steps back for some much-needed distance between us. My cock was hard and angry that I'd been ignoring its demands for too long. Yeah, I'd been with other men, but none of them had been who I wanted. Could I do what Eve did and take a bite of the forbidden fruit?

"What did you want to talk to me in private about?" Azazel asked.

"What?"

"You said you wanted to come to be able to talk," he reminded me of my lame excuse.

“Oh, that. No... I just needed a moment away from it all,” I said and I didn’t even think that was a good excuse either. Truth was, I just wanted to be alone with Azazel.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly to center my thoughts. I took the time to take a quick look around his home and saw that it was a large studio with lavish furnishing, lots of leather, and art. His bedroom was on a raised platform behind a frosted glass wall with a sliding door. Fancy. His kitchen was a modern design with stainless steel appliances. I wondered if he ever cooked in it. I looked at Azazel because we needed to get to the Magic Shop.

“What do you need to make the doorway?” I asked him to get us back on track.

“Just a few things... it’s not complicated—the spell—I mean,” Azazel said as he fished clothes out of his closet to wear.

I frowned. “What else would you be talking about?”

“Us... our relationship. It doesn’t have to be complicated, Rai.”

“We have a working relationship.”

“Partners?”

I nodded.

“Not good enough for me.” He stepped closer and I felt the heat rise inside of me. “What are you afraid of?”

“I...” I sighed and looked off to the side because I didn’t want to lie to either of us about how I didn’t want this.

“It’s just us here. No one to pass judgment,” Azazel said, then grabbed my hips and pulled me closer.

“Archangels and Guardians don’t have those kinds of relationships,” I said, but then I thought about Darius and his obvious relationship with Michael. They were in love. He was the only Guardian I knew who did have that kind of bond with his Champion, so maybe it wasn’t forbidden. Then again, his Champion wasn’t a demon.

“Stop thinking about everyone else and focus on us, Rai,” Azazel said. “I want you and I know that you want me to. Why deny it?”

“Because...” I struggled to find a good enough reason to push him away, but none were coming to me.

“Why?” he pressed.

“You’re a demon, Azazel,” I said finally, then pushed his hands off me. “Go find what you need so we can go.”

Azazel looked down at me and I had to look away. I saw the pain in his eyes, the eyes that watched over me, making sure I was safe. Eyes that held so much emotion I didn’t think any demon was capable of. Azazel was different and he... he was mine.

He walked away from me and knowing that I’d been foolish enough to say something stupid just to push him away stung my heart. Yes, he was a demon... But he was mine! I wanted him and I was tired of pretending like I didn’t. Tired of denying my attraction to him, which I had done damn near my whole life since the very first moment I saw his face. Hell, I had wanted to lose my virginity to him when I was sixteen when we met for the first time at that club. He should have been my first, but I didn’t think he was worthy. What a mistake that was.

Azazel was in his bedroom, rummaging around when I made my way in there.

“I have the herbs,” he said.

“Stop,” I said and he turned to look at me.

“What?” he asked.

I lowered my head to gather my thoughts, then looked back up at him and he was just standing there, waiting. He’d always been waiting for me to come to him. “You almost died tonight,” I said, my voice cracking a little as I thought back to that moment when I’d nearly lost him and whatever chance I had to be honest.

“But I didn’t,” Azazel said.

“But you could have and it would have been my fault.”

Azazel walked over to me. He went to take me into his arms, but I stopped him. I needed to say what I was feeling. “You warned me that I was being stupid by not accepting you, but I didn’t listen. I put both of our lives in danger because I was scared.”

“What were you afraid of?” he asked and his indigo eyes were full of warmth. Proving once again that he wasn’t any typical demon... probably never was and that was why he was chosen by the Angel’s Kiss.

“I’ve had to give up so much for this destiny chosen for me. My life in the Guild wasn’t an easy one. I... I was afraid of my feelings for you. What those feelings said about me. How could a warrior of god love a demon?” When I finally said the word out loud, the word that I kept buried deep within the depths of my soul, I felt my heart expand. I felt a tear flow down my cheek and I felt free.

Azazel caressed my cheek, his thumb wiping away my tear. “Do you think I didn’t know? I’ve been waiting over a century for you, Rai... I was willing to wait until you were ready.”

I shook my head. “My stubbornness almost robbed me of the thing I’ve wanted most. I’ve wanted to be with you ever since I was sixteen years old. That kiss we had still lingers on my lips.”

The look Azazel gave me was pure seduction, that smile of his trapped me in his nets and I didn’t want to escape. “I know,” he said. “I felt it the moment we bonded... when I was inside of you. I could feel your every emotion and thought, and I know you could feel mine.”

I nodded. I felt him inside of me and that was why it felt so good. So right. “I’m sorry, Azazel. I—”

His mouth captured mine in a kiss that rivaled the one he gave me long ago. My knees almost went weak, but I didn’t fall. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and kissed him back. I felt my passion for him rise and I wanted him. God, did I want him. No longer would I deny us. I wasn’t afraid of what others would think of me anymore. Not even God could judge me... hell, it was God who gave me Azazel in the first place... His gift. I knew that now.

Azazel broke the kiss, his breath coming out in heavy pants. He licked his lips. “We... we should get ready to go. Monique and Marcel are waiting.” He stepped away from me, walking over to his safe to collect the herbs.

Yes, they were waiting, but they were also protected by the wards. The demons didn’t get Monique’s blood and so, time was on our side. I decided it was time to give into my desires. I walked over to him and took the herbs from him and tossed the bag on his dresser. He looked at me, his eyes glazing over with lust, and I grabbed him by

the back of his head and brought his mouth to mine. His mouth was possessive and fiery as he claimed me as much as I claimed him. I walked him back to the bed and then pushed him onto it. I climbed on top of him, kissing him, he parted his lips and I slid my tongue inside. He tasted sweet just like a forbidden fruit should. Azazel moaned as we kissed, his hand caressed my ass as I ground my cock against his, both of us beautifully hard.

I pulled back and Azazel lifted up, planting fevered kisses on my lips, chin, and neck as I ripped his shirt open.

“Finally,” Azazel panted.

“Shut up,” I said, then kissed him again. He smiled at first, but then locked his lips to mine wholeheartedly, our hands groping each other's bodies. We broke our kiss long enough to discard our clothes, then I was back on him, licking and sucking all over his body. I loved seeing him writhe on the bed in pleasure, how sexy he looked giving himself to me. “Suck me,” I commanded.

“I love when you’re all butch like this,” Azazel said with a toothy grin before pushing me back onto the bed and taking my cock into his mouth.

“Oh fuck,” I gasped because my god, did the demon have skills.

Azazel pulled off, then licked my cockring with the tip of his tongue. “This is so fucking hot. I can’t believe you have one.”

I licked my lips and nodded. “I’m the only Guardian who does. I couldn’t think of a safe place to put my ring.”

“And that’s why you’re so perfect for me,” Azazel said, then swallowed me whole.

“Awwwww shit, baby!” I gasped, because if this was a sin... I didn’t regret it.

My whole body felt like my cock, it was that intense, that pleasurable. I looked down to see him sucking and licking all over me, he looked up, his indigo eyes trapping me in their gaze and that was where I wanted to get lost forever. I felt the sexual sensation tingling from the tips of my toes all the way up to my balls and I knew I was too close. “Stop,” I called out.

Azazel paused mid-shaft, then popped my spit-slicked cock from his gorgeous mouth. “My ass is so ready for you, baby.”

“You’re a bottom?” I asked, because I had always been curious.

He nodded. “I prefer that, yes. On occasion, I like to top.”

My eyes widened because he was such a badass Dom-like demon, I just knew he was going to give me a fuss. Holy shit, that just made him even more perfect for me. I preferred to top, but on occasion, I liked a good pounding. I pushed Azazel on the bed, then climbed on top of him and began licking my way down his chiseled abs to his thick, uncut cock. I swallowed him down my throat, gagging a little because he was a nice size and I wasn’t that used to it. But I wanted to give him my all.

“Ohh yes... yes... Rai, ahhhh,” Azazel moaned in pleasure and that fed into my ego and desire that I could make a ten thousand-year-old demon quake in ecstasy. He arched and moaned, his mouth opening in that sexy way. His cock felt so good in my mouth, natural, and I couldn’t believe I was sucking off a demon, but I gave it everything I had. I stroked his shaft, running my tongue around his sensitive head. I sucked gently, teasing his glans and he gasped as he trembled. The whole time I did it, only one word kept repeating in my head. Mine.

I was lost in the pleasure of giving pleasure when Azazel gripped my shoulder. “I’m

cumming,” he warned me.

I kept sucking, feeling his cock swell as it grew even stiffer against my tongue.

“Ah fuck!” he cried out, arching on the bed, then shaking as my mouth filled with demon spunk. I choked, pulled back, and coughed. Azazel was still coming. Taken over by the pleasure, he spasmed uncontrollably. He reached down, stroking himself while I cleared my airways. Damn, he shot hard and it was hot and salty. Not burning, but a surprise to say the least. You could probably marinate meat with his cum, it was that savory. Once my throat was clear, I leaned down, licking his softening cock clean, because he just tasted so fucking good.

“Ahhh, baby...baby,” Azazel moaned and quaked several times, huffing as he did.

I loved hearing him call me that. Even the first time he did, I liked it, but was being too foolish to admit it. I wanted to hear him call me that for all eternity.

I flipped him over and he laughed, surprised by my strength probably or my actions. But I wanted to get a good look at his ass and yes, it was a beauty... even better than I had imagined when I would check him out when he wasn't looking.

I leaned down to his ear and licked him... again, he trembled and I loved his vulnerability in my presence. Azazel, the Demon of War, was mine for the taking. At this point, nothing mattered. I could only focus on him and what I wanted to do next. Slowly, I kissed and licked his back, shoulders, and then trailed my tongue down the middle to the crack of his ass. I kissed both cheeks, then licked them, and Azazel moaned and gasped when I took a little nibble.

“Mmmm, I'm yours,” he said.

“Mine,” I replied before parting his cheeks and diving between them. My demon, my

Azazel. I licked and sucked on his puckered hole that was tighter than a drum. I slipped my tongue inside, as far as it could go, and his moans increased in volume. Their pitch getting higher too. Someone turned to mush when their ass was getting rimmed. I smiled, then licked more, wanting to see him come undone.

“Ah fuck... baby... I need you... my cock... so hard,” Azazel said in desperation.

Very well, I hated to deny him what he so badly needed... what I'd been dying to give him. A good fucking pounding.

I sat up, my cock was so hard I couldn't ignore it anymore. I spit into my palm and slicked my shaft up, mixing my saliva and precum to get myself ready. “I'm not going to hold back, I know you can take it.”

Azazel grinned. “Give me everything you have, baby.”

“Roll over, I want to see your face as I make you mine,” I growled in my lust-filled state.

Azazel growled too, only his was real and it turned me on to hear that rumble flow from him as he turned over onto his back. His pretty eyes stared up at me with... yes... I saw it clearly... with love and trust.

I felt overwhelmed at that moment and just had to kiss him again. Our tongues caressed as I savored the taste of him. The energy flowing between us was magnetic. Oh man, this was happening. I was having sex with Azazel and it felt so right. So perfect like it was meant to be. The way his legs felt pressed against me had me so aroused. I continued to kiss him as I pressed the head of my cock against his hole. I pushed forward and Azazel gasped as he arched into me. I broke our kiss to look at him, our eyes connected and his were glowing. It would have probably freaked out any normal guy, but to me... he just looked so beautiful. As soon as I entered him, I

felt so much pleasure, more than I had with any human I'd been with. The energy that had been surrounding us seemed to flow through us and it made me quake. I felt electrified. I wasn't going to last long, I could tell. I was too riled up and this moment was too perfect.

I pumped my hips, swirling them with each thrust, and kissed Azazel, his mouth so sweet to me. The gentle caresses of his tongue pulled me deeper into everything that was him. Buried so deeply in him was where I always wanted to be. His hands roamed all over my body as if he couldn't touch me enough. I carded my fingers through his dark, silky strands, pulling his head back so I could lick and kiss the strong column of his neck. I loved the feel of his stubble against mine and my hips pumped faster, working us both to another climax.

"Ahh, Rai... oh shit." Azazel made so many sensual sounds, he was so seductive, and addictive.

God, he made me so horny, I couldn't control myself, not right at the moment when I finally gave in to my desires for him. I bit his bottom lip, tugging at it a little and he smiled, the hint of his fangs was hot as the Hell he came from.

That was all it took for me to lose it. I came so hard, crying out, body shuddering as the ecstasy took me into orbit and held me there. Azazel arched against me, my body twitching, and he was vocal when he came and I loved hearing every grunt, growl, and breathless pant as he unleashed his pent-up pleasure all over the both of us. The moment was over too soon for my taste. I wanted more of him, but my body was drained of every bit of energy I had. After a few moments, I managed to pull out and collapsed on the bed next to him. We lay side-by-side, breathing hard, sweating, sticky, and feeling so relaxed and satisfied.

The room was quiet, and in the silence, I had time to think about what had happened. I had just fucked a ten-thousand-year-old demon. The most ruthless of all the twelve

Knights of the Round Court, but I didn't feel any guilt or shame. And it wasn't because I knew that he was mine, a gift given to me by the last Guardian, too. It was because I understood Azazel now. I realized that all of our conversations were just him trying to reach out to me. To explain to me that he wasn't evil, but a being whose purpose was what mankind made possible. He wasn't to blame for his existence. He wasn't fully to blame for his deeds, humans were because without those flawed humans, demons wouldn't exist. And for the past century, he'd been trying to be better... better for me. And Monique was right... I think I loved him for that.

No, I didn't just love Azazel, I was in love with him. I smiled at the thought.

I knew who Azazel was even before I knew his name or what he meant to me. I knew because of my visions. I saw some of his most glorious and horrific moments. I saw his vulnerable moments and his private moments. I knew him intimately.

"You're awfully quiet over there. Please don't tell me you're regretting this," Azazel said as he gazed at me.

I turned to him. "No, not regretting anything. I don't care what anyone else thinks about us anymore, or me."

"Good, because that was the best sex I've ever had," Azazel praised and my eyes widened.

"Now you're just lying. You've been banging bodies for ten thousand years—"

"And yes, Rai, you're the first man I've been with that made me come that hard both times."

Well, he knew how to pump up my ego. "I don't have much experience," I admitted.

“I know, but I don’t think that mattered.”

“Do you think it’s because we’re bonded?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t really care. I just know I want to do it again.”

I smiled and felt the heat rush to my face.

“You’re blushing,” he teased, and brushed his fingers over my cheek, then leaned in to kiss me. “You’re so adorable, Rai.”

“It was the best sex I’ve ever had,” I said because it was true. “We’ll do it again, especially since you’re moving in. For now, we have to get back. I want to ask that Magic Shop Owner a question and I want to take Monique to the Guild. I’d feel safer with her there where Darius and the other Guards can watch over her. If demons have another nine months to find the Chosen One to open Satan’s cell, she can’t stay at my home.”

“Are you even sure if she’s the Chosen One?” Azazel asked.

“Not sure, to be honest. I mean, Saraphell’s heart led us right to her,” I said. “And we weren’t the only ones looking for her.”

“True,” Azazel said. “But she also wasn’t the only child demons sought out or killed for their blood.”

“We’re on the same page. For all I know, the demons could just be coming for the kids whose blood is doing the Calling and hoping one of them is the one they need.”

Azazel nodded.

“That’s the reason I wanted to speak to The Owner. Maybe he has something that can help us find out if Monique is the Chosen One. Or, maybe he has something that can nullify the blood inside of her so demons can’t find her or any other child.” I climbed out of the bed. “Come on, let’s shower real quick, then get dressed.”

Azazel didn’t delay and we managed not to get freaky in the shower, but I wanted to. My fantasy had been on point because he did look so good with suds flowing down his body. Took all my strength to just wash up and exit the shower. I put my clothes back on and he was in the middle of putting on his shoes when I felt a sting inside my chest and I immediately knew what it was.

“We need to go back,” Azazel said, and I knew he’d felt it too.

Chapter twenty-two

Rai

Divinity in Motion

My home was being attacked, a demon breach. Azazel grabbed the herbs for the Magic Shop door and then took me into his arms. He teleported us back to my home in time to see a demon leap into a portal. The other who tried to run, Azazel froze and a second later, the portal closed.

I had all of three seconds to try to take in the carnage that was in front of me. That was when I saw another demon charging toward me. I leaped out of the way and Azazel turned to see the demon pivot to attack me, blood dripped from his claws, and I had to dodge him before he could slash at me. Azazel appeared between us, gripping the demon by his throat and lifting him up. The demon's feet dangled wildly as he struggled in Azazel's powerful grip. This demon was a mid-level one and I'd learned from past experiences that the weapons I had wouldn't kill it. But my Champion could.

"Destroy him," I commanded Azazel.

"Gladly," Azazel said with a smile that dripped with his wicked pleasure. He reared his hand back and punched a hole into the demon's chest, ripping out the demon's heart at the same time. He then pulled his arm back, it was covered in blood and bone splinters, the wet, slippery sound both gross and satisfying. He dumped the body on the floor, then tossed the heart. I watched as Azazel seared the blood and gore from

his hand and arm into ash, then brushed it off. He turned to the last demon left who was still frozen “He won’t stay like that for long.”

I nodded, then looked around for the first time to take in the damage. That was when I saw what had happened. Marcel lay motionless on the floor, his throat ripped out and Monique was moaning as she was bleeding profusely.

“Fuck!” I ran over to her. “Check him,” I told Azazel.

“He’s dead,” Azazel said as he joined me while I applied pressure to Monique’s wound. Tears clouded my vision, nearly blinding me as I thought about Marcel’s death.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I cursed. Had I been here, Azazel and I could have prevented this, but I didn’t think demons could breach my home. It was protected. My heart felt like it was made of pure iron because it felt so heavy. I shook with panic and sorrow. I felt so lost. I looked up at Azazel. “What do I do?”

All of the happiness I’d experienced less than three minutes ago was gone and replaced with terror and heartbreak. My chest felt tight and I was having trouble breathing. I think I was hyperventilating.

“Save them, Rai. You can do it.”

I shook my head, the tears flowing freely. “I don’t know how!” I yelled in my manic state, I didn’t mean to lash out at Azazel like that.

He grabbed my face. “Look at me, Rai.”

I did, I couldn’t help but look at him.

“I trust you, Rai. You’re more powerful than you know. Take me into you and use my power and together, we can save them,” Azazel said. “Trust in us, baby.”

A calmness washed over me and filled me with a warming and comforting sensation that could only be described as pure bliss. I closed my eyes and opened myself up to receive Azazel and when he flowed into me, it was different than when we bonded the first time. My entire body glowed as it levitated from the ground. Flames swirled around me as if I were in an inferno, but they didn’t burn. I was held captive by the power that was infusing us as wind whipped all around us, sending lightweight items into the whirlwind. Suddenly, I felt an odd sensation happen inside of me like something fitting into place perfectly. Our souls melding into one.

The wind settled, the flames evaporated, and my body stopped glowing as my feet touched the floor again. I had no idea what had just taken place, but I’d never experienced so much power flowing through me.

“Go to Marcel, place your hand on his chest, you’ll know what to do next,” I heard Azazel say, which was a new experience. The last time we merged, he’d been either silent or unable to communicate.

“How can I hear you now?” I asked.

“Don’t know. You couldn’t before?” Azazel asked.

“No.”

“And you still kicked demon ass without my direction,” Azazel praised.

I felt satisfaction in that, but push it aside to save my friend. Quickly, I ran to Marcel. As he was already dead, I had to restore his soul first before it was too late. Azazel’s knowledge was now mine. I pressed my hand to his chest as Azazel had instructed.

Instinctually, I knew what to do, and let my power seep into his body, the power to pull a soul from the ether. I touched his soul, then I had to grab it. I heard footsteps—heavy ones—charging at me.

“Behind you, Rai!” Azazel shouted.

I turned to see the demon that had been frozen before coming at me. I had wanted to ask him questions, but I realized I already had the answers. He was no use to me now. I conjured my gun from the power inside of me. It was different from before, black with Hellfire flames on the handle and barrel. I didn’t have time to marvel at it as I shot a flaming bullet right between his eyes. The charred hole emitted smoke as the demon dropped to his knees and turned to ash. I drew the gun back inside of me which made me shiver a little because it felt good.

“You’re so sexy right now,” Azazel said.

I closed my eyes for a second, because it felt weird to have his voice in my head. “Focus,” I said out loud.

“I am. You can save your friend, use my power, baby,” Azazel encouraged.

There he went again, making me feel things. I couldn’t believe I’d been so stubborn before to appreciate his affection. No more. I would no longer deny myself what I wanted... what I needed.

I returned my attention to the soul I had in my hand. It felt familiar and tingled a little. As I lifted my hand from Marcel’s chest, I pulled his soul out of the ether, the place between life and death. A soul was only there so long before it was dispatched to Heaven or Hades. Sure, I was certain Marcel was Heaven-bound, but I also knew he wasn’t ready to die. At the same time, the grotesque wound in his throat started to heal and when he took his first breath, I knew I’d done something amazing. I’d heard

of Guardians being able to heal people, thus bringing them back from the brink of death, but I wasn't sure about them actually doing what I did. I knew it was only possible because of Azazel. Marcel opened his green eyes and looked at me and I felt pure elation. Not only because my friend was back, but because I brought him back. I could save more people now.

"I know you must be confused, but rest for the moment, I have to help Monique," I told him, then I rushed over to her. She was still alive, but barely. I held my hand over her body and pushed my powers into her, healing her wounds in a matter of seconds. I was that strong now. I knew I'd never need to take that potion again as long as I could merge with Azazel. And the same went for him. We were each other's greatest strengths, our greatest weapons, and our greatest support. I understood that now.

She sprung up, gasping, and I grabbed her shoulders to keep her from losing control. "It's okay. You're safe now," I told her.

"The demons—"

"I know. We killed them, but one got away."

"They put something in me then took my blood!" she said, her voice shaking in fear.

"What happened?" I asked to get a clear picture.

"They shot me with a needle that had something black inside, then cut me to take my blood," she explained.

Fuck!

For them to go through such extremes to get to her, maybe they knew for a fact that

Monique was the Chosen One. And since they had her blood, I didn't need to go to the Magic Shop now. I needed to go to the Guild. We had to stop the demons.

"What's going to happen to me? Will I become a demon?" she asked.

"No, that's not how that happens. I think they needed your blood corrupted with theirs in order to activate the demon essence that was already lying dormant within you," I said.

"This fucking sucks," she said, tears flowing down her cheeks.

I hugged her. "I know... I'm so sorry you're going through this. It's not your fault. Don't worry... I won't let anything happen to you again," I promised.

She hugged me tighter.

"Can you stand up?" She nodded and I helped her to her feet. I turned to see Marcel standing, yet staring at me, a mixture of awe and fear in his expression. "Are you okay?" I asked him.

"I was dead," he said as he touched his freshly healed throat.

I licked my lips and nodded. "I brought you back," I said.

He frowned and took a step closer to me. "But how?"

"Azazel helped. We are one now. Marcel, I will explain more, but we have to go. The demons have what they want and we have to stop—"

He held a hand up. "I get it. Let's go."

Being trained the way he was, he understood when shit was urgent.

“Give me your hands,” I said.

They did and I teleported us to the Guild, but I wasn’t allowed to enter. We landed outside of the border. Maybe it was because I was still bound to Azazel. We landed and Monique shook in revulsion.

“I really don’t like doing that,” she said and swallowed.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I said. But it was the best way to travel.

“Let’s go,” Marcel said and ran off toward the main building.

“Marcel, wait, take Monique with you,” I said.

Marcel stopped and turned, then held his hand out for her to join him.

“Is this place safe?” Monique asked.

For someone who’d been through hell tonight, she was holding up well. But then, I had no idea what her life on the streets had been for one so young. This could just be a regular day of the week for her with a little bit more horror.

I nodded. “Yes. Go with him.”

“I trust you,” she said then turned to join Marcel, only when she took two steps forward, she hit the invisible barrier. “What the hell?”

My thoughts exactly. I walked over to where she was standing and held my hand out, but felt nothing but air. Was it only Monique who was forbidden to enter? I decided

to test that theory and walked to where Marcel was standing and yet Monique couldn't join us.

"Holy shit," Marcel said. "She's a demon."

"She's not," I corrected. "But she has demon corruption in her. I think that's why she can't enter."

"If you're merged with Azazel, then how can you enter?" Marcel asked.

"Because—" the voice of Darius startled us and we all turned to see him walking toward us. "You have reached the highest level a Guardian can, Rai. You and Azazel have become the Divine Weapon."

"The Divine Weapon?" I repeated because I couldn't believe it.

"What's that?" Marcel asked.

"What does it mean exactly?" Azazel asked.

"Azazel is listening too," I informed him.

Darius nodded. "Michael as well. He wanted me to tell you that he's ... begrudgingly impressed that you two managed to achieve the coveted level."

"Can all Guardians communicate with their Champions like that?" I asked.

Darius shook his head "No. You can because you are a Divine Weapon. A perfect union."

"I like the sound of that," Azazel said. "I wonder if that happened to him after

Michael stuck his tongue in Darius' ass."

My eyes widened at the boldness of Azazel's comment and at the mental picture his words painted. Darius had already admitted that he and his Archangel did... things.

"What?" Darius asked.

"You don't want to know what Azazel just said," I stated.

Darius smiled at me. "I suppose I don't. To further explain, it's a term among Archangels when they reach a certain level with their Guardians. It's extremely rare as only three Guardians have achieved this feat. Ade, Jean Dubois—both are dead, and me... now you're the fourth, Rai."

"What does it mean for me?" I asked.

"It means that you are now the second most powerful Guardian, or you may be the most powerful considering you're bound to Azazel."

My eyes widened. "Surpassing you?" I couldn't hide the shock from my voice.

Darius shrugged. "Maybe. You share Azazel's power completely now. You may be able to do things even I can't do."

"What about physically stronger?" I asked because I'd seen Darius in real action. He wasn't no joke.

Darius smirked. "One day... let us test that, shall we?"

"Hell yeah, I'm game." I'd love to spar and would love to test my limits with my mentor.

I thought back to my home and how I'd brought Marcel back to life. I had to find out. "Since you're also a Divine Weapon, can you bring someone back from the dead?" I asked. I realized I had a lot to learn about being what Darius was. I knew he'd be able to teach me only so much because my Champion was a demon and my powers would be unfamiliar to him.

Darius shook his head, but there was a crease in his brow. "Have you brought someone back from the dead, Rai?"

I nodded.

"Me, sir," Marcel said.

Darius' eyes widened then, his mouth opening at that fact. "My god," he gasped as he looked at Marcel. His eyes noting the blood that coated Marcel's shirt.

"Yeah, my thoughts exactly. It was... weird... but in a good way, I guess. I mean, I'm glad I'm not dead anymore, sir," Marcel said.

I looked at him and smiled... he smiled back.

"He healed me, too," Monique chimed in.

Darius looked at Marcel, then Monique, then back to me. "Then you may very well be the most powerful amongst us, Rai. That is incredible!"

"More than you? I mean, you're over fifteen hundred years old, Darius," I said because I knew power came with age.

Darius nodded. "True, however, the power I get from Michael isn't the same that you get from Azazel. I cannot retrieve a soul from the ether and return it."

“Does it mean that Azazel has that power?” I asked both Darius and Azazel to see who could or would answer me.

“Yes,” Azazel said.

“I would believe so,” Darius said.

“Azazel answered. He said that he did.”

Darius nodded. “Makes sense. He’s extremely powerful. Restoring a human life in limbo is something a demon of his caliber could do. Once they get to the level of a Crossroad demon or surpass that.”

Ah, that made sense if you were a demon who could grant a human’s wish, you’d need that power. That was what made demons alluring to humans. Not only were they something a human could see, but their abilities could be proven. It was a hard battle I had ahead of me.

I cleared my throat and looked at Darius. “You don’t find me freaky because I can do that?” I asked.

“Stop it, Rai. You’re better than any of them,” Azazel said. I knew he accepted me with no issues. But I still needed to hear it from my mentor.

Darius smiled and shook his head. “No, not at all. I find you to be a blessing for all humankind, Rai. You saved two lives tonight with your new ability. Imagine how many more you will continue to save as a Divine Weapon.” He walked up to me and hugged me, which made me feel all kinds of warmth, because his approval was very important to me.

“I still have questions. How did he become one and you, sir?” Marcel asked.

“When a Guardian and Champion reach a level of trust, love, and devotion, and they merge, that’s when it happens,” Darius explained.

“Don’t all Guardians and Champions feel that way about each other?” I asked.

Darius shook his head. “Not in the way that you’re thinking.”

When he said that, I remembered the way Michael looked at him and what he said about their relationship and I finally understood. He did say that Michael and he did have sex. But it couldn’t just be the sex, it was because Azazel and I would die for each other. I knew that now. I wouldn’t let any harm come to him if there was anything I could do about it and Azazel felt the same way about me.

“I will always protect you, Rai,” Azazel said and his voice and words made me smile.

I would have to ask Darius more about being the Divine Weapon later. But I was happy to know that I was hella-powerful now. To be stronger than Darius was out of this world, but I couldn’t—wouldn’t let it go to my head. I decided to get back to the situation at hand.

“Darius, can’t you let Monique in? She needs to be protected in case the demons come looking for her again.”

“No. I’m sorry, Rai, but no one with demon blood can enter the Guild. It would weaken the defenses,” Darius said.

“But how about when Azazel was able to enter my home,” I asked.

“Exactly,” Darius said. “The demons who attacked you must have used Azazel’s blood and figured out a way to exploit the opening. We can’t create an opening for her at the Guild, I’m sorry.”

I chose not to make a fuss about the weakened defenses in my home. They did the best they could, I just wish I'd known about that little security flaw beforehand.

"Now, he tells you," Azazel retorted, pretty much expressing my thoughts.

"Well, where the fuck can I take her?" I asked, because I refused to leave her where she could be killed.

"I'd like to know that, too," Monique said. She'd been so quiet throughout most of this conversation, but I realized that was how she had been able to survive on her own. Watch. Listen. Learn. She was a smart young lady.

"I think you know," Darius said in that cryptic way of his when he wanted me to figure shit out for myself.

"Can you make anything easy?" I snapped.

"No, he can't. That stick up his ass won't let him. By that, I mean Michael," Azazel wise-cracked and I had to hold in my laughter.

Darius turned to Marcel. "Go and rest. You've had it rough."

"But—"

"Go." Darius gave him a look that said he wasn't about to argue. Marcel nodded, then hugged me before leaving. When you got an order from a Guardian, you followed it, no questions asked. Especially one from Darius.

Darius turned to Monique. "I'm sorry for all that you have gone through tonight. I apologize that I can't let you in, but you will be protected. Our young Guardian here knows the perfect place for you."

I did? Oh shit...yeah, I did!

“The Magic Shop,” I said.

Darius turned and smiled at me, then he nodded. “No demon can enter there to cause harm. There is no place where she will be the safest. Also, you’ll need the backroom of the Magic Shop to get to Satan’s cell.”

“Is that the only way to find it?” I asked, because I wasn’t sure if that creepy Owner was going to be reasonable. Or what would he ask for to gain access to that backroom?

“No,” Darius said. “But it will be the fastest way for you to get there. It’s located in the space between Heaven and Hades and both demons and angels can get there, but it’s not easy... unless one goes through the portal in the Magic Shop.”

“That’s good enough for me, then. Do I need to give him anything for access?” I asked.

“He will tell you his price... if there is one,” Darius said.

“Are you coming? I mean, this is Satan we’re talking about.”

“I can’t, and even if I take the other route, I won’t get there in time. It will take me at least three days,” Darius said.

“Why can’t we go together?” I asked.

“Only one can enter for a specific span of time. You will have to be merged with Azazel when you do,” Darius said.

I didn't like the idea of going alone.

"You're not alone," Azazel said.

"You won't be alone, Rai," Darius said, and I wondered if he'd read my mind.

"But—"

"You'll have your Champion with you." Darius smiled. "Have faith."

"I do, but the last time a Guardian tussled with Satan..." I let my voice trail off because that Guardian died to lock Satan away. And he was a Divine Weapon, too.

"He also wasn't bonded to the most powerful demon Knight in existence, Rai," Darius said.

"I'm starting to like him," Azazel said.

I've always liked Darius and the way he said that made me feel special, as if he wanted me to know that I was always meant to be different. He wanted me to take pride in the fact that I wasn't like the others. All of the bullying I'd endured that made me feel less than others should no longer hold any power over me. I felt my chest swell as a heavy weight was lifted from my soul.

"Thank you, Darius," I said because I had needed the boost in both faith and confidence.

"One more thing, and this is important," Darius said.

"What?" I waited.

“Now that you are a Divine Weapon, if you die, so does your Champion and vice-versa. Before, if you were just bonded, if one died, the other could still live. But no more,” Darius said.

“Well, that’s good to know, but I wasn’t planning on dying anyway,” I said.

Darius smiled and nodded. “Now, go... save the girl and the world. It’s the destiny of every Guardian.”

“Taking on Satan is one hell of a mission right out of the Guild, though,” I half joked, because it was true. I mean, damn.

Darius nodded. “I will get everyone ready if you need backup.”

“Meaning?” I needed to know if he meant if I died.

“If Satan gets free, we must all fight,” Darius said.

“You know you just told me I could do this, but now you’re saying I might fail?” I rolled my eyes. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Darius laughed then. “I do have faith in you, Rai. But it would be foolish to not prepare for the worst. Now, make me proud.” He vanished then.

I needed to get to the Magic Shop. I ran over to Monique. “I’m sorry. We have to go back to my home, then we can go to the Magic Shop. You’ll be safe there.”

“I just want to point out that’s what you said about your home and this place,” Monique stated in what I was learning was her sassy way.

“I know... I’m sorry.”

“I don’t have a choice but to believe you. I know you’re doing your best. Please, just don’t let me get hurt or killed,” she pleaded, and for the first time, I saw tears brimming in her eyes. She’d been holding strong for so long, but right then, she was a kid who just wanted to be safe and protected.

I took her into my arms, hugging her tightly. “I swear, I will not let anyone hurt you again. I will kill those demons who did.”

She hugged me back. “I trust you.”

Trust... one word that meant everything.

It was time to put things into motion.

Chapter twenty-three

Azazel

Hell's Coming With Us

We were back at Rai's home and I was in charge of opening the door to the Magic Shop. I mixed the herbs I had in a bowl with my blood while Rai and Monique stood by and watched.

"How does it feel being inside of me now that we're a Divine Weapon?" Rai asked.

I smiled. "It feels good. I feel your heart beating with mine. I feel what you feel, your fear, anger... lust." I winked at the last one.

He rolled his eyes and I chuckled. "I'm glad we can talk to each other now."

I nodded. "I am too. You'll need my direction."

He opened his mouth to protest, I could tell, so I interjected.

"I'm not giving any insult to your extensive training, Rai. But please don't think you won't need my instructions."

Rai nodded then. "I was just going to say don't shout if you can help it. I find it distracting."

“Oh. I see. All right, I’ll try to be mindful of the level of my voice.”

“Is it done?” he asked.

“It is,” I said.

“Wait, before we even go there, is this even someplace humans can go?” Monique asked as she tied her braids into a ponytail. “I’m not trying to get blinked out of existence going to some unknown location you have to take a fucking magic portal to get to.”

She had asked a bunch of questions about everything she’d seen thus far and this was just one more. Rai had the patience to answer all of her questions in order to put her mind at ease.

“It’s safe for humans,” I said, saving him the effort.

“Okay.” Monique nodded.

“Are you both ready?”

“We have to go. The demons might have already freed Satan,” Rai said.

“Very well. Please, step inside the sigil.” They did and I then began sprinkling the herb mixture on the sigil doorway to the Magic Shop. Like before, the sigil lit up, the brightness of the light filled the entire apartment as it had before. The sensation of traveling through space, time, and the ether was unmistakable. I wasn’t affected by the sensation, but when we landed, Monique puked. Luckily, Rai also had anticipated her regurgitation and he moved out of the way same as I did. Rai patted her back while I took a look around.

“Oh my god,” I heard Monique gasp and I figured she was done spewing and noticed that we were in the middle of nowhere—literally. The only thing standing before us was the Magic Shop with its tacky neon red lettering. “Where—where are we?” she asked.

“Nowhere and everywhere,” I said.

“I don’t like it,” she said.

I chuckled. “Let’s enter, shall we?” I led the way.

“What the hell?” Monique said after we entered the enormous shop.

I heard Rai chuckle. “Yeah, I know. It looks so much smaller on the outside. I was surprised when I first came here too.”

The Owner stepped out from between two aisles of potions and items that other beings were perusing. With all due respect, I bowed my head to him and he nodded in acknowledgment. I didn’t know much about this man. But I knew he must have been someone time didn’t touch, like Death. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rai bow his head as well. He was learning. Monique just looked at him dumbfounded.

“We need your help,” Rai said, stepping in front of me.

The Owner’s black eyes—eyes that I avoided—looked at my lover.

My Lover. Yes, that was who Rai was, who he was meant to be. I smiled at the thought. I watched my lover look The Owner in the eye and didn’t know if it was fearlessness, ignorance, or arrogance. Probably a bit of all three, but I thought it was adorable. I didn’t think The Owner would harm him. Still, I was a demon who knew better than to disrespect something or someone whose origins were unknown.

“We have to stop the dem—”

“I know what has happened,” The Owner said.

Rai frowned. “How?”

“It is my job as the Keeper of the Shop to know what all of my customers’ needs and desires are,” The Owner said in that otherworldly manner of his.

“So, you know what we need to do?” Rai asked.

“You need to go to Satan’s cell now,” The Owner said. “Leave the girl, she will be safe. Follow me.”

Rai threw me a look that was both cautious and curious and I nodded at him as we followed The Owner.

“Should we have any special weapons with us?” Rai asked.

“You are the only weapon you need. The Divine Weapon and one that is more powerful than any other Guardian. You must trust in that power. I am happy that you took my advice, young man,” The Owner said.

Advice? I had wondered what the two of them had discussed the last time we were here. Whatever it was, I was glad Rai took it as well.

The Owner turned to Monique, who had been quiet as she took in her surroundings, which was wise on her part. It might have been because she was too afraid to say anything, or because she was caught in wonderment. Either way, the Owner calling her name drew her attention.

“Yes?” she said. “Wait, how do you know my name?”

“I know many things, my dear... as any good Shop Owner should.” The Owner made a sweeping gesture to a room with several sofas where people were reading and drinking beverages. Some of the beings there were clearly not human. “Please, wait here.”

“I don’t want to go in there,” Monique said, seeing an elf, a fairy, and what I knew to be a vampire along with three other humans sitting calmly.

“No harm will come to you,” The Owner stated.

“You can trust him, Monique,” Rai said.

“If you want a world to go back to, child, we must leave,” I said to speed things along.

“Tactless,” The Owner criticized me, but there was a smirk playing on his lips.

“Monique, it’s safe here. See, no one will bother you. We have to go,” Rai said. “I know this place is strange and scary. But you need to be brave.”

Monique hugged him suddenly and he hugged her back. “I’ll stay,” she said.

There was something about Rai that made people want to trust him. I didn’t know if it was his ethereal beauty or his personality, probably both. It may also be his aura, that of a Guardian that instilled hope and trust in those he protected. Whatever the case, Monique walked into that room and took a seat closest to the door.

Survival instincts were what kept her alive.

“Follow me,” The Owner said, then he led Rai and me to the back room. I’d never been, but knew of its existence. A portal to all things, to all worlds. “You must become one now.”

“Okay,” Rai said, then he turned to me. “Are you ready?”

“Take me deep inside of you,” I said with a seductive tone on purpose.

Rai scoffed, but smiled. “That’s my line.”

“Ooooh, yes, baby,” I purred and he grabbed me by the back of my head and pulled my face down for a kiss that rocked my demonic soul.

“I love you,” Rai said. “I think I have for a long while.”

Hearing the words again and knowing they came from Rai was everything to me. I’d never had such genuine words spoken to me, let alone words of love. Nothing I’d ever done in my entire demonic existence gave me so much joy and fulfillment than knowing that Rai loved me. That I belonged to him and he to me. I knew my eyes were glowing because I could see their indigo reflection in Rai’s turquoise gaze.

“I love you and yes, I have for a long time,” I said.

I didn’t know what emotion it was that I felt whenever I looked at him or was in his presence. I just knew I could not lose him. I could not exist without him.

Love... that was what it was we both felt. Love, a four-letter word that was bigger than anything. I would fight for love, die for it, my love for him. For Rai.

I kissed him again and when we parted, The Owner was smiling at us.

“What?” Rai asked, because that was his style.

“I’m glad to see that you have become enlightened,” The Owner said.

Rai smiled then and nodded. He turned back to me. “Let’s do this.”

I nodded and when he closed his eyes, I felt him draw me inside of him and I embraced his pull. Soon, I was filled with the warmth of his essence, of his body. I could see what he saw, hear what he heard. We were one.

“You are finally ready, Rai Harrington and Azazel,” The Owner said.

“I’m ready, but still a little scared shitless,” Rai said.

The Owner nodded.

“I’ve got you, baby,” I told him.

I felt his body heat up and knew that he felt comforted by my words and presence. I’d never abandon him.

The Owner stood in front of a set of black double doors and traced a symbol on them as he chanted a phrase I had no knowledge of. The doors opened to a red light in a room with swirling red and black smoke. A normal person would have to be insane to walk inside that portal, but Rai was a Guardian. The last line of defense for the human race and he had me. He could do this.

Rai took a deep breath and entered.

Chapter twenty-four

Rai

In For the Fight of Their Lives

The portal felt cold on my flesh and it was powerful, pulling me through it so fast, my skin felt the velocity of the speed at which I traveled. It kind of stung. When I landed, I fell to one knee, panting and sweating. It was the most intense teleportation I'd ever experienced and I was at my height of strength because I had Azazel with me.

“Stop him!” I heard a demonic voice yell.

I looked up to see two demons coming at me, I could see their auras and knew they were high-level demons. Quickly, I stood up and conjured both of my weapons of choice. My gun and my sword. They flowed from my body becoming solid in the palms of my hands. My gun was badass, but seeing my new sword excited me. Both edges of the double blade were inflamed with fire that looked cool as fuck and deadly as hell. Which was where I was about to send all of these fucking demons.

I shot and they dodged, but with my enhanced speed, I swung, flames trailing my sword and I sliced through one of them, cutting him in half. His body turned into burning ash embers that floated to the ground. Ah, so the flames on my sword were Azazel's Hellfire—even better and cool as fuck!

“He's coming,” Azazel warned and I turned, firing my gun, the flaming bullets hitting

their target after he dodged the first two. The bullet caught the demon in his neck, black blood gushed from the ragged wound. Advancing, my body moving faster than I ever had in my life. I swung my sword, the flames of my blade flashing through the air as I sliced through the neck of the demon, severing its head. Both the body and head burst into ash, its flaming embers evaporating as what little was left fell to the floor.

“You’re too late, Guardian,” said the third demon.

“My god, that’s Lilith,” Azazel told me and I could tell that he was shocked. I checked her out. Long, braided, black hair, bronze skin, and lovely curves. She was beautiful and from what I knew, Lucifer had made her his favorite. Might explain why she had betrayed the others to side with him.

So that was what the empress looked like, Adam’s first wife.

For the first time since coming to this place, I got a chance to take a look at my surroundings. Which I did quickly as to not get distracted. I had to kill Lilith. The location we were in was a scary place only because there was nothing around but whiteness and Satan’s cell, which looked to be a pulsating black orb that now had a crack in it that glowed red.

“You couldn’t stop us from getting the key from the Chosen One and you won’t be able to stop Satan’s rising.” Lilith smiled in her wickedness. As she stared at me, I saw her black wings grow, the leathery-looking things had silver veining and sharp claws.

“She won’t be as strong on this plane, she had to give up a lot of her power to come here, but do not hold back, Rai!” Azazel urged.

When he said that, I felt my back tingling, then I felt my flesh parting, the coolness

being replaced by wings that grew. It didn't hurt, in fact, it made me feel even stronger. Next, I felt something flow from my skin. Armor the color of obsidian and glowing red edges. Holy shit, it made me look like a bringer of death with all the spikes. I loved it. Somehow, I knew this was my most powerful form. Like Darius when he faced Baal and the wings of Michael came out. Mine were black with glowing red veining and had sharp claws at the tip.

I watched as Lilith's eyes widened in what was obvious disbelief. "What are you?" she asked in awe.

"A badass Guardian of the Celestial Guild." I smiled "In other words, your death." I flew at her. She raised her sword, a silver one that looked almost as wicked as mine. Our blades clashed, and the sound of metal striking metal echoed throughout the area.

We flew around the area, our wings giving us inhuman speed and agility. I slashed and Lilith dodged, I shot and she narrowly avoided the bullet. Yeah, she was damn good. We danced this way, our movements so fast, I bet no human could see what was going on. The flames from my sword were bright as they flashed with each swing. The black orb began to shake now, the crack widening. I knew I had to dispatch Lilith before that door opened.

"Die, Guardian," Lilith yelled and charged at me.

This time, I ducked low, sweeping her leg and when her foot caught, she staggered and I shot. My bullet hit her square between her wings.

"Arggg!" Lilith cried out.

I fired more shots, the flaming Hellfire bullets moving faster than any normal bullet would. Her body twitched with each penetrating bullet until she dropped to both knees and then fell forward. Her body burst into flames to my delight. I'd just killed a

fucking empress of Hades! My cock was a little hard, but I ignored it.

“Stay focused, Rai... Satan is coming,” Azazel said.

“Can we stop it?” I asked.

“No.”

I’d just fought three demons—all hella powerful—but I knew none of them would compare to the battle that was coming. Damn, I wished Darius was here.

“You have me, Rai,” Azazel said.

I nodded and swallowed, then gripped my weapons harder as I watched the crack widen even more. The room shook, which made it difficult to keep my balance. I floated to avoid falling and when the black orb finally broke apart, Satan was revealed. My heart damned near stopped because... Holy Shit... Satan... Lucifer! My pulse was pounding so hard, I could hear it drumming in my ears. The smell of sulfur drifted up my nose and I wiped it to stop the tickle. The fallen angel was kneeling on one knee. His silver feathered wings opened up as if he was waking up. He had long, black hair that glistened in the light that was reflected all around us. His pale skin practically shined with luminance.

Slowly, he rose and I swallowed hard. Sweat poured from me and I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach. His armor was red and silver and looked absolutely stunning.

“Calm down, Rai. You must fight with everything we both have,” Azazel said.

I knew he was right. Our very survival was dependent upon my ability to handle my damn business. I watched as Satan lifted his face and was taken aback by his sheer beauty. Silver eyes stared at me and his full lips parted ever so slightly in a smile.

Lucifer in the flesh.

He took one step, then another as he began to walk out of the cell he'd been in for thousands of years. The only thing standing between him and the humans of Earth was me.

Lucifer stepped out of the ruins of his cell and he stood about six feet, not as tall as I thought he'd be. I landed now that the whole area had stopped shaking.

He tilted his head. "So, they sent a Divine Weapon to challenge me?" Lucifer asked in a voice that was deep and full of seduction. It made me almost want to drop to my knees before him. I had to fight hard not to.

"Not to challenge, to kill," I said.

His wicked smile widened as a sword materialized in his palm, a golden one that glowed red. "You're different from the other Guardian I met thousands of years ago. Ade, was it? And his Archangel, Azrael."

The wounds I'd sustained while fighting Lilith were all healed now and I felt like I was on top of the world with the amount of power flowing through me. But I didn't let that go to my head. I couldn't. One mistake and it would be the end of us. I had to give Lucifer the respect he deserved as both a fallen Archangel and a former demon king of Hell.

"You should repent now, Lucifer, for after I kill you, your soul can return to Heaven," I said.

He scoffed. "Heaven... why would I ever want to drop to my knees and beg for forgiveness from a flawed father?"

“Hey, I don’t have anything to do with your daddy issues. If you go back to Hell, just know, you’ll be at the mercy of two Empresses of Hades,” I told him and shrugged. “I killed your girl, Lilith.”

He sneered. “You speak as if you’ve already won, mortal.”

“I’m a Guardian with one hell of a demon Champion.”

His eyes widened when I said that and he stared harder at me as if he could look inside of me to see who my Champion was. “Who is this demon you speak of?”

“Enough talking.”

His eyes glowed red. “Yes. Enough.”

He advanced on me faster than any demon I’d ever faced. My reflexes were damn good, but I still caught a cut from the tip of his blade on my arm.

“Turn around, block,” Azazel said and I followed his directions in time to block a blow from Lucifer’s downward slash. I shot and he dodged the bullet. I shot some more, my gun never needing to be reloaded. Lucifer spun and leaped between my bullets dodging each one. “Shoot ahead of him, then back.”

Again, I obeyed Azazel and when Lucifer dodged the bullet that I had shot before him by jumping back, the bullet I’d fired rapidly caught him in the arm.

“Arg!” he yelled as smoke floated from the gaping wound.

I shot again, and he moved out of the way toward me. I sucked my gun’s energy back

into my body and combined it with my sword now. Making the ultimate weapon. The blade of my sword split to form the barrel of my gun as the hilt created the trigger. I charged at him, using both hands with my finger on the trigger of my gun sword.

My heart was racing so fast, I thought I'd have a heart attack before it was over with. My adrenaline rushed through me making me feel invincible. I trusted Azazel completely and let him guide me through this fight, using his powers to the fullest.

"Freeze him," Azazel said.

I held my hand out toward Lucifer as he ran toward me, but that didn't work.

"Go stealth," Azazel instructed. "Then teleport."

I did as he told me and I was so happy that because he was inside of me, the knowledge of the abilities he had was shared with me. I appeared behind Lucifer and slashed my sword, but he blocked it with his sword and then turned around.

"Nice try," he taunted.

Sweat soaked my clothes at this point, and the first signs of exhaustion were starting to plague me. I knew I had to push that all away. I couldn't slip up, not now. Again, we clashed, our swords moving so fast they were a blur. I caught Lucifer with a kick and he caught me with a jab, both of us falling back. I realized that we were nearly evenly matched as far as strength went, but I still had an advantage I thought. I was a celestial warrior after all. I spit blood on the floor, then attacked Lucifer again, this time using Hellfire balls as well as my weapon. He got blasted by one of the fireballs, the flames engulfing him. I knew they wouldn't kill him, but it was enough to distract him with pain, and when I saw my chance, I teleported behind him. I rammed my sword through his chest and he screamed. I then shot my gun sword repeatedly, Lucifer's body dancing with each powerful bullet.

“You bastard!” he yelled then pulled himself off my blade.

“It’s not over,” Azazel said.

“Fuck, it’s not?” I asked, because I couldn’t believe that Lucifer had more fight in him. I ran toward him, my sword poised to take his head when he yelled and a powerful blast threw me back into the air. My wings expanded and I caught myself and looked to see what the hell had happened.

Lucifer had transformed from his angelic countenance to his demonic one. He was ten feet tall, with glowing red veins that bulged beneath the leathery-looking black skin. His horns were black and protruded from both sides of his temples. He had large hands and feet with sharp, black claws.

“Stay calm,” Azazel said. “Speed and agility are on your side, Rai.”

I took several deep breaths and tried to stay focused. Nothing I’d ever trained for at the Guild had prepared me for this. I knew I was probably only alive because of Azazel. His ten thousand years of experience was everything right now.

“You will die,” Lucifer roared and the sound of his voice shook whatever the hell this place was to its core. Everything vibrated. Everything about him was monstrous, even his voice, which no longer sounded human or seductive.

I split my sword into two of them and took a small bit of satisfaction to see Lucifer’s eyes narrow. Both swords also had the ability to shoot my bullets, which I knew weakened him. I just had to capitalize on it. I flew over to him slicing as he slashed, his deadly claws narrowly missing me. Like Azazel said, I had to use my speed and agility as it was my greatest advantage. I ducked low and tried to slice Lucifer’s leg, but he floated up, his black wings flapping, sending gusts of wind in my direction. He roared and a ball of fire shot my way, but I flew to the side, then teleported and

reappeared, slicing Lucifer's face.

He screamed and swung, I dodged his blow, but not his wing, the tip of it stabbing my stomach, piercing my armor. I cried out and fell to the floor, my blood gushing from the wound that burned and throbbed.

"Rai!" Azazel screamed. "Get up!"

This was where my training helped. All of the times I'd been forced to fight even when injured. "Fight through the pain," is what Darius would tell me. "There is no pain." I had to hold it all in, the agony I felt. I could tell my body was healing itself, but it wasn't instant and if I took another blow like that, I could die.

Lucifer was on me, too, and I rolled out of the way before he could jab me with his claws. I fired my gun swords at him, the bullets hitting their mark as he was too slow to dodge them in that form. I climbed to my feet and rushed at him. Azazel gave me directions and with his help and using my own knowledge, trusting in my training, I attacked. Spinning to dodge claws, ducking to avoid another swing, then leaping high to slice off one of Lucifer's horns.

He screamed, both hands going to his wound as blood gushed between his fingers from his skull. It was now or never. I ran over to him, stabbing his chest with one sword and when he reared back, roaring in pain, I stabbed his throat with all of my might, the blade slicing through bone and flesh. Lucifer fell to both knees, which put him closer to my height. I pulled both swords out of him, combined them to become one larger sword, then I sliced before he could heal. His head flew from his body, blood splattering all over me.

Exhausted, I collapsed to the floor, my weapon, wings, and armor absorbing back into my body. I watched in glee as Satan's body... Lucifer's body burst into flames like all of the other demons. But instead of turning to ash, the demon part burned

away, leaving his original angelic form behind. I looked at his severed head, the silver eyes still open and staring blankly. I grunted and held my stomach, my wound healing, but still very tender. Throughout the battle, I'd suffered several cuts and bruises, but those were healing too.

"It's... over," I panted in relief. I couldn't believe it... I had fucking killed Satan! If I wasn't so tired, I'd want to fuck Azazel, I was that stoked. Celebratory sex would have to wait. I'd done something no other Guardian had done before. Shit, I didn't even know it was possible!

All of a sudden, the room began to shake and glow bright white, then I felt a woosh! My body was sucked into an abyss and I screamed, not knowing what was happening to me. I was slammed against a hard surface, which knocked the wind out of me. I moaned and blinked to see that I was sitting on a hard wooden floor.

"Welcome back," said a voice I recognized.

I looked up to see the Magic Shop Owner smiling down at me. "Is it over?" I asked. I couldn't move yet. I was too wasted for that. No energy.

"It's over," The Owner said with a smile.

I nodded and released Azazel, his essence flowing from me in black smoke to form his beautiful face and body again. He lay on the floor beside me, panting. It would seem that he was just as out of it as I was.

"Is... is Monique... safe now?" I asked.

The Owner frowned and shook his head. "I'm afraid she will always be in danger from the demons. Her blood will call to them and they will seek her out if they need her."

I snarled because that shit pissed me off. Monique's life had been difficult enough thus far and now she had to live her life in constant fear from demons. Something had to be done. "Is there any way to protect her? Can we take the demon essence out of her blood?"

"She will die if you try," The Owner said, then he held up a finger. "I have given her a protection charm that should mask her aura from most demons. Seeker demons, however, will be an issue."

"Well, at least something will help. Are you sure there's nothing more than that?" I asked.

"Some things are just what they are," The Owner said.

This shop wasn't that great, in my opinion, if we couldn't save Monique.

"The Shop has what you need to put you on your path," The Owner said and that was it. Either he could read minds or he was just uncanny as fuck.

"You're back!" Monique squeaked.

I turned to see her running toward us. She slid into my arms and hugged me.

"Yeah, we're back," I said with a small smile as I hugged her back.

"Did you really kick Satan's ass?" she asked, a wide grin on her face, eyes as big as saucers.

I laughed and nodded. "But it wasn't easy, trust me."

"I bet. You two have been gone for three hours," she said.

I blinked, because everything happened so fast there, it felt like less than twenty minutes. “That’s so crazy. Didn’t feel like three hours to me.”

“The Owner said the Sands of Time are different there,” she said.

I smiled at her. “You seem in better spirits.”

She nodded. “Yeah, this place isn’t as scary as I thought and I can’t believe other universes and dimensions exist. I kind of want to go to them.”

I laughed, but kept my opinion to myself. I had enough to deal with in my own world. “I still can’t believe we killed Satan,” I said, because I was still in disbelief.

“You were the only ones who could,” The Owner said. “That is what made your union so significant. It was God’s will.”

I looked up at him. “So, you think God wanted me to kill Satan?”

The Owner smiled, tipped his hat, then walked away.

“I don’t like him,” I grumbled.

Azazel chuckled. “He’s not to be trifled with, Rai.”

“Yeah, I figured since you even bowed your head to him,” I said, then struggled to my feet with Monique’s help. I then reached down to give Azazel a hand. “Let’s go home.”

“I can’t think of anywhere else I’d want to be,” Azazel said.

“I’m so happy you’re back too,” Monique said, then she hugged Azazel.

At first, Azazel was stiff, as if unfamiliar with the gesture, then he smiled and hugged her back. Yeah, he'd come a long way from the old demon he used to be.

We left the Magic Shop and as soon as Azazel teleported the three of us back home, I told Monique to make herself comfortable and that the guest bedroom was hers.

"What about you two?" she asked.

"We're going to sleep for like... a week," I said.

"Sleep... sure... in the same room," she teased.

I scoffed. "You know what... stay in a child's place," I playfully chastised.

"I don't mind if you two get busy." She grinned now.

"I just want to sleep."

"I'm actually good to go a round," Azazel said.

I turned to him and slapped his arm. "Stop it." I huffed. "Anyway, I need to call Darius to let him know about everything."

"Sleep, I'll tell him. You can barely stand, baby," Azazel said, then he picked me up, surprising me.

"Awww," Monique gushed, her cheeks reddening.

I didn't bother to put up a fight. I let Azazel carry me to the bedroom we were about to share and when he laid me on the bed, I dimly felt him removing my shoes before everything went black.

Chapter twenty-five

Azazel

What a Future Can Bring

I smiled down at Rai, who was sound asleep before I was able to take off both of his shoes. I removed his pants and shirt, both of which were ripped and bloody. I then took a soapy cloth and wiped most of the blood away from his cinnamon-colored skin. So beautiful—his complexion. Lastly, I covered him up and chuckled when he released a little snore. He'd fought with everything he had. Hell, he'd fought with everything I had too, draining us both of our energy. I was tired as well, but wanted to make sure they were protected, Monique and him. The barrier that was once over this place was damaged and would need proper repair and that was something I couldn't do. So, while Monique and Rai slept, I'd watch over them.

I walked out onto the balcony and looked at the sun as it began to rise over the horizon. It was quite the sight. Over the past century, I'd learned to appreciate such wonders. The Angel's Kiss that was given to me allowed me to see the glory of God's creation. The rivers, mountains, valleys, deserts, it was truly a kingdom. Were humans worthy of it? No, not in my opinion, but neither were demons who only wanted to destroy it. Perhaps, the animals who roamed this Earth, following their nature, were the only ones truly deserving of this masterpiece.

I felt a familiar presence before she spoke.

"I'm glad you survived."

I turned to see Terri Uche leaning against the railing. I smirked, as over the decades, our relationship had grown less contentious, I'd say. "Satan is dead."

She nodded. "We know, Heaven got the message."

"Did it get his soul?" I asked, an eyebrow cocked.

"It did, but from what my Champion has told me, he is imprisoned in Heaven's cell to carry out his punishment," Terri said.

"Really? I didn't think Heaven had a prison."

"For misbehaving angels, yes. Is it worse than where he was, or worse than a prison in Hell..." She shrugged. "I'll never know."

"Well, in any case, he won't be a problem for us," I said.

She smiled. "You two... you did what none of us could. I'm told you've reached the level of Divine Weapon."

I leaned against the railing and crossed my arms over my chest. "Does that surprise you?"

"Yes, it does."

"Why?" I asked. "Is it because you've been with your Champion for nearly six hundred years and have not achieved such strides?"

She snorted and looked off to the side before sighing and returning her gaze to me. "I'm not going to pretend I understand how you attained that level. Even Darius, who is also a Divine Weapon, can't explain it where I can understand. Probably because I

don't have that connection with my Archangel."

I smirked. "You've never fucked?"

"I'm sure that's not all it takes," she said with a roll of her eyes.

"Have you, though?"

"No. But I still think it's more than that. And I don't think Darius and Michael would do such things," Terri said.

Oh, now I was intrigued. "Why not?"

"Archangels don't even have genitalia or any sexual desires," Terri said.

"Have you ever asked him?" I uncrossed my arms and gripped the railing as I leaned against it.

"I don't meddle that way into the personal lives of Guardians. If, by some chance, Darius and Michael have had... relations, I doubt that was the reason he became a Divine Weapon," Terri said.

I chuckled. "Well, Rai and I will be living together from now on... as lovers."

She raised both eyebrows. "Lovers?"

I nodded.

"He knows you're a demon, right?"

"He knows."

“How? Why?”

I smirked. “I thought you didn’t meddle?”

She rolled her eyes. “Humor me.”

“Because look at me,” I motioned to my face and body and she rolled her eyes. “I’m irresistible.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going to try to make sense of that. Rai has always been... different. I suppose that’s why he was able to do what we couldn’t.”

I sighed. “The Owner of the Magic Shop said that our union was God’s will.”

Terri’s eyes widened then. “The Owner said that?”

I nodded.

“Holy shit.”

Again, I nodded, because I understood.

“Then I certainly won’t be judging your relationship if it was meant to be. Do you still feel like the Angel’s Kiss was a curse?”

“No. I believe I stopped feeling that way the moment you showed me the photo of that twelve-year-old boy. Seeing his picture and knowing that it was my job to protect him... knowing that someone needed me. I started to want to be what Rai needed me to be for him. I wanted to be...”

“Worthy,” Terri speculated.

I nodded. “Worthy of him. Yes.” I turned back around to watch more of the sun’s rising. Terri stepped next to me. “I’d done so many horrible things in my many years on this Earth. How he could see past all of that, to see that I loved him, I’ll never know.”

“We get visions, you know.”

I turned to her, frowning. “Yes, but don’t those end after a year? Rai still has them.”

She nodded. “I’m aware. Another thing that made him unique. We get the visions of our future Champions and the lives they’ve lived in order to prepare us for what’s to come. We get to know our Archangels and during our training, we get to meet them. Rai, all he had was his visions of you and from what I know, he pretty much kept them to himself, only confiding to Darius about what he’d seen. But there’s no telling what he saw of you. Perhaps it was enough to make him see you for more than your atrocities.”

“If he saw all of that and could still say that he loved me, then maybe God gave me a gift with the Kiss of the Angel,” I said, because I now knew what love felt like. To be the giver and receiver of it. No other demon would experience such bliss. I never wanted to exist without Rai... I felt content knowing that we were forever linked... as we were meant to be.

Terri patted my back. “You’re really one of us now, demon.”

I smirked and looked down at the city coming to life below as humans headed off to work their tedious jobs. “Well, the world is still here until we have to tackle the next crisis.”

“Speaking of crises, what are you going to do about the girl?” Terri asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll let Rai decide.”

“She’ll never be able to enter the Guild.”

“And she can’t stay at the Magic Shop,” I said.

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out together.”

“What about the barrier here? Can you repair it?” I asked.

“We’re sending someone to restore it today, but keep in mind, it’s not as powerful as the one on the Guild,” she said. “It will have to have that opening for you and her.”

“I know, but something is better than nothing.”

“We may be able to tweak it to make it a bit more powerful, but if demons have the right spell, they may still be able to break it.”

“Just do what you can,” I said.

She nodded. “Take care of yourselves.”

“You do the same.”

She smiled, then vanished. I took one more look out at the sky, then went inside to lay in bed beside Rai, taking him into my arms.

Yes, this was the perfect existence.

“So, the barrier is restored?” Rai asked.

I nodded. “They took care of it while you and Monique were still sleeping.”

Rai nodded. “Is this everything?” he asked me as he looked at my clothes hanging up in the closet that was once his, was now ours.

“Everything I wanted to keep. I ended my lease.”

Rai half snorted, half laughed. “You were paying a lease?”

I smirked. “I’m not a demon who can use persuasion to fool a human into believing whatever I want them to,” I said.

Rai sighed and nodded. “Ahhh, yes, to have that power. The Whisper.”

“Yeah, I know. I wished I did.”

“I just thought you’d threatened the landlord or that you owned it,” Rai said with a shrug.

“I can’t harm innocent humans. Over the past century, I’ve been a good boy, baby,” I said seductively.

Rai turned to me then and gave me one of those looks of his. The kind that called to my cock and made me want to submit to him. “You better have been.”

Ahhh, he was so butch. I loved it.

“I’m going to shower,” Rai said.

“I’ll join you.”

“I won’t be long.”

“Oh, we can be quick,” I flirted and he had that “aha” moment when he finally caught on.

“Monique is in the living room,” Rai stated.

“And as long as we keep our voices down, she will never know,” I said with a wide grin. I walked over to him and kissed him as I slowly backed Rai up into the bathroom. I kicked the door closed behind us.

“Took a long time in there,” Monique teased as she opened the box of the large pizza. She sat across from Rai and me in the living room as she bit into her slice of pizza. Rai reached into the carton and pulled out two large slices of supreme pizza and placed them on his plate.

“Mind your business,” Rai said with a smirk.

Monique chuckled. “Just saying.” She looked at me as I lounged on the sofa next to Rai. “Are you going to eat?” she asked me.

I looked at the pizza, then leaned over, took a slice, and put it on a plate. “I don’t really have to eat, but I do enjoy human food.”

Monique frowned. “If you don’t eat food, what do you eat?”

Rai looked at me, both eyebrows raised like he wanted to see how I’d respond to the

question.

I chuckled. “Not humans if that’s what you’re worried about. I’m well-fed because humans kill each other on a daily basis. Food, like this, is what I suppose you could call an indulgence.” I took a bite of my slice and it was very flavorful.

“Wait, what? You feed off murder?” Monique asked as she stared at me all wide-eyed.

I nodded. “It’s how I’m so powerful. It’s how I was created. Violence is human nature, make no mistake. There will never be world peace, because there will always be greed. Whether it’s greed for power, money, another man’s woman, the list goes on. Someone always wants to be in control and humans always want a leader. They even kill in the name of God, so yes, my dear... I’m well fed.”

“I’m sorry I asked,” Monique said with a semi-disgusted but freaked-out look.

I chuckled, then took another bite of my food.

Rai just shook his head, all of this he knew about me, and still... he loved me. I couldn’t help myself, I leaned over, kissing him and he opened his mouth, letting me slip my tongue inside as we shared one hell of a passionate kiss. I pulled back and he gave me a peck before eating more of his pizza.

“So, you’re like ancient old, right?” Monique asked me.

I nodded.

“Have you met Adam and Eve? Are they real?” she asked.

“I have and they are, but not in the way you were led to believe how they looked. The

first human was around the same time as the woolly mammoth. They looked very much like apes and they had a lot of hair to cover their bodies. Their natural way to acclimate to their climate. Like everything else, humans evolved as the Earth warmed. The woolly mammoth turned into elephants and saber-tooth tigers are just regular tigers today,” I said, then took another bite of my pizza as I was enjoying it. “Adam and Eve weren’t the pretty white people you’ve seen in drawings. They had darker skin, thick hair, and pronounced bone structure to be able to survive. They also weren’t the only ones, but they were the ones who were tested in the Garden of Eden.”

“Oh my god, this is so cool. I bet you know everything about everything, don’t you?” she asked.

I smirked. “You’d be right.”

“Oh lord, please do not feed his ego. It’s massive enough,” Rai teased.

I laughed.

“I just think you’re both awesome,” Monique said with a smile.

That felt good. I looked at Rai. “I’m sure you’ll be hearing from Darius soon. I did speak with Terri earlier and they already knew about Satan,” I said.

“Oh, really?” Rai asked.

I nodded, then proceeded to tell him what Terri had told me.

“Well, that’s good. After that battle, I just had to sleep. I’m glad everything is settled and Lucifer is being punished still, that asshole,” Rai said.

I laughed. “Terri did bring up a situation that we find ourselves in, though.”

“Oh? What?”

I nodded at Monique. “What to do with her?”

“Me?” Monique asked as she chewed on her pizza.

Rai sighed. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that.”

Monique shrugged and looked down at her plate. “I mean, you saved my life. I can’t ask for more.”

“But you want to,” I said.

“Azazel.” Rai said my name in a way that let me know he didn’t approve of my approach.

“I... I don’t have anywhere to go,” Monique said, but still held her head down.

I looked at Rai and he was looking at her and I already knew what he was thinking.

“Are you ready for that?”

He turned to me. “If you’re okay with it, then I can handle anything.”

“We really can’t send her anywhere and I know you’ll never feel at ease knowing she’d be unprotected,” I said.

Rai nodded. “It wouldn’t feel right to me.”

I supposed not. We’d gone through so much to save her, what a waste of our efforts it

would be to leave her to the wolves. I nodded and Rai smiled, then turned to Monique.

“If you want to, Monique, you can stay with us. I know we’re practically strangers, but—”

“I want to,” she said with a wide smile.

“Are you sure? You’ll be living with a celestial being and a demon.”

“And I know I’ll be cared for and safe,” she said.

“Wise beyond her years,” I stated.

“Growing up fighting for your life will do that to you,” Rai agreed. “Very well, it’s settled. You can have the guest room. We’ll buy you stuff to make you feel more at home. But there’s going to be rules, young lady.”

Monique laughed. “You can’t be much older than I am.”

Rai scoffed. “You don’t know that. I’m immortal.”

Her eyes widened. “You are?”

“Yep. I’ll be this age forever.”

“What age is that?” she asked.

“Twenty-four,” Rai answered.

“And what about you?” she asked me. “I know you’re like ten thousand years old, but

at what age did you stop aging?”

“Twenty-four,” I said because that’s how old the human was whose body I possessed, then manipulated to look the way I wanted throughout time.

“So, you’re both twenty-four forever... must be nice,” Monique said.

I nodded.

She looked at me from head to toe and back up. She slouched back on the sofa. “Man, this is so wild. Will I be immortal too?”

“No,” I answered. “You’re a normal human, but you do have demonic essence. You’ve probably never been sick, have you?”

She frowned and stared hard as if she were thinking about my question, then she shook her head. “Not that I can remember, no.”

“You’ll age slower than humans, but you’ll still age,” I said. “You’ll probably be entered in the Guinness Book of World Records as the oldest human by the time you do succumb to your mortality.”

“Really, Azazel? She’s sixteen, she doesn’t want to hear about that,” Rai fussed.

“No, it’s okay. It’s nice to know that as long as I don’t die in some crazy way, I can live to be nice and rickety,” Monique said.

I chuckled at that.

“What I want to do is make sure you live a good life, Monique,” Rai said.

“So, you’re going to let me live here and take care of me?” she asked.

“Yes. If that’s what you want too.” Rai smiled.

“I feel safe with both of you and you’re both super cool and cute,” Monique said, and blushed at the last part.

I smirked and Rai just huffed.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll come up with the rules later. For now... let’s just chill for the day,” Rai said.

“I’m down with that,” Monique said and turned to me. “Hey, you said humans looked different then, way back when... so how do you look like that if that’s not how humans looked?”

I chuckled and tilted my head at her with a cocked brow because she was as smart as a whip. “I manipulated my features over time to match those of humans in order to...” I let my voice trail off as I looked at Rai, who was watching me with both eyebrows raised.

“Go on,” he said, smirking.

I sighed. “I’ve always made myself whatever form was best to seduce humans into doing what they did best.”

“Killing themselves,” Monique said.

I nodded. “Humans are vain and petty. So if I needed to appear attractive or weak, I did. But this vision you see before you, is my own preference. I’ve looked this way for five-hundred years.”

“And you call humans vain when you look like that,” Rai stated.

“And you love it,” I teased and put my arm around Rai and he laughed. We snuggled while we ate, mainly because I wanted them to feel comfortable around me. Engaging in more human activities would go a long way in keeping them both contented. And of course, there was one activity humans enjoyed that I couldn’t wait to take part in again with Rai. And by the way he kissed me earlier, we’d probably be going at it tonight.

As we three lounged on the sofa, Rai leaning on my left and Monique on my right, I realized that this was my family. A real one, not some hierarchical faction I belonged to with the Guild or with Hades. No, this was love and trust and devotion only a family could give you. This was a dream I never knew I wanted made real. This was peace.

I smiled and pulled both of them closer.

My family.

The Perfect Union

Rai

It had been a year since Azazel and I had formed our found family and I'd never been happier. Monique was in school and adjusting well, and her grades were picking up. We did get her a tutor to help her along the way. She was seventeen now and the boys were sniffing around, but I think they knew not to mess with our girl. She had two powerful and protective dads.

As for Azazel and me, well, it was our wedding day!

"So, will it just be you and Terri who'll come to the wedding?" I asked as I adjusted my tie in the mirror.

Darius stood up behind me and took over my tie and began to do it correctly. "The other Guardians haven't quite reconciled that you're in love with a demon."

I snorted. "So, they're boycotting my wedding?"

Darius snorted. "Some are, some are busy. There's only six of us still living."

Considering how rigid those other Guardians were, I started to understand why they had not reached the level Darius and I had with our Champions. Well, I didn't need them at my wedding anyway. It was a small affair, only the people I loved and cared about were invited.

I turned around to face Darius. “How do I look?”

Darius looked at me and smiled. “Happy.” He patted my shoulder. “I’m sorry that your parents can’t be here.”

I gave him a sad smile and nodded. They didn’t remember me, so it wouldn’t make sense for them to be there. “It’s okay. I’ve had plenty of time to get used to the fact that they can’t be in my life.”

Darius nodded. “You’re the second Guardian to marry your Champion.” He winked.

I smiled, because he had married Michael two hundred years ago in a private ceremony only attended by both grooms, The Archangel, Raguel, who would have been mine, had done the officiating. So, no one but those three knew about it. Well... Now Azazel and I knew.

“Are you ready? It’s time,” my best man, Marcel, asked. He was wearing a suit, nothing too fancy, just a shirt, pants, tie and jacket. But he looked damn good. “You look great.”

“Thanks,” I said. To think, I’d almost lost him a year ago. The thought still stabbed my heart. Thank God Azazel and I had the power to bring him back.

“So, are you ready?” he asked again.

“To marry a grumpy demon, yes.” I laughed and Darius and Marcel chuckled.

“And one who loves you,” Darius said.

“And I love him,” I said.

“So, where are you two going after the wedding?” Darius asked.

“Azazel said he’d take me wherever I wanted to go. I’m thinking of Japan. Always wanted to go there,” I said.

“You’ll love it,” Darius said.

“I’ll watch over Monique and call you if need be,” Marcel said.

“Thanks, buddy.” I hugged Marcel.

“I’ll see you out there,” Darius said.

I nodded and watched as Darius walked out of my bedroom to the living room where it had been rearranged a little to make room for our wedding. As much as I wanted to have it at the Guild, Azazel could only enter if we were bonded and Monique couldn’t enter at all. Azazel refused to get married at a church even though he could enter them. He just didn’t agree with organized religion and wanted no part of it. The vows we’d say were written by us and Darius had convinced the Archangel, Michael, to officiate.

To be honest, a wedding couldn’t get more blessed than that.

Darius took a seat beside Terri and her Archangel, Jeremiel, was sitting beside her. Like all Archangels he was handsome and I wondered why those two didn’t hit it off the way Darius and Michael did. Not my business, therefore, I never asked. So, my wedding had two Archangels in attendance. I was a little nervous because Azazel still butted heads with them even though we were considered legends after having killed Satan. At least both Azazel and I got a lot more respect among not only the celestial beings and the Guild, but also the demons. Didn’t mean demons didn’t test me, they did and I handled my business... or I let Azazel have some fun. But demons knew I was no longer a novice Guardian, not with Azazel's ancient wisdom and skills guiding me.

I couldn't wait to make that demon mine officially.

"I can't believe you're having a real freaking Archangel marry you and Michael no less! I'm so excited to meet him," Marcel said.

"I know, right? I had tried so hard to keep him at bay," I said, thinking about all of the times I had lied to myself trying to claim that I didn't want Azazel, that I didn't love him. What a waste that had been, all six months of it.

"Well, the best thing about your relationship is that you're always together. He doesn't have to leave this plane ever," Marcel said.

I smiled because I loved that. I'd hate if he was like the other Champions and had to return to Heaven. Or in his case, Hades. Nope, he was free from all of that tethering. "Let's go," I said when I saw the other bedroom door open and Monique walked out wearing a lovely pale pink dress with lace. Her hair was done up in curls and she wore just the right amount of make-up. She looked beautiful.

"Game time," Marcel said and he mimicked Monique as they both walked into the living room to stand at the archway that had been set up with red roses vining their way through the latticework. There was a fluffy, white rug in front of it where we were supposed to stand. Monique was Azazel's Best Young Lady for the honors.

My mouth dropped open when I saw Azazel emerge from the bedroom looking sinfully tempting and incredibly gorgeous in a black tux with a black shirt, red tie, and ruby brooch pinned on his lapel. A part of me wanted to bring him back to our bedroom, lock the door, and say to hell with the guests. I could control myself... I think. I met him at the archway and smiled up at my beautiful soon-to-be husband.

"You look extremely handsome," Azazel complimented.

I smiled. "You too. I mean, you look so damn good."

I heard a scoff from Jeremiel and a chuckle from Darius, but I ignored them. Darius called Michael and the Archangel appeared in front of him. He looked down at Darius with pure love in his expression. The two shared a kiss, then he took his place under the archway. He looked at me, then at Azazel.

“It’s only because you have proven to be a worthy Champion that I agreed to officiate your wedding,” Michael said. He was wearing an all-white tux.

Azazel smiled and before I could stop him, he did what he does. Talked shit.

“No one can doubt how big your balls are to be so daring.” Azazel’s gaze panned down at Michael’s crotch, then back up so that their eyes locked. “Figuratively speaking, of course.”

Michael did not look amused.

“Azazel, baby, it’s our wedding day,” I reminded him as my way of telling him to behave.

He gave me a boyish smile and I instantly forgave him. That demon made me weak.

“Let us begin,” Michael said with only a little attitude in his tone.

I went first with my vows, taking Azazel’s hands into my own. “Azazel, I love you, plain and simple. I want to spend eternity with you. I want to share my life and everything I love with you. You know I’m not much for words, I use my actions. So please know that I will forever cherish and love you for all time.”

Azazel smiled, now it was his turn. “Rai, when I was first branded with the Angel’s Kiss, I thought I’d been cursed to suffer human feelings forever. I thought I’d have nothing to live for after I’d been abandoned by my Empress. I raged, I fell into depression, and then I saw your photo. An innocent boy who’d need me one day. I

started to want to be your partner, Rai. I think I fell in love with the idea of you. Of someone who was made by God for me. What greater gift could anyone receive?"

"Oh my God," I gushed. Wow, Azazel had me at a loss for words. I could only grin from ear to ear.

"Rai, I promise to always love you, protect you, and share everything with you. I promise never to lie to you, never to deny you what you need and want. I promise to give everything I am, everything I have, to you."

"How the fuck did a demon come up with better vows than you?" Marcel taunted in my ear.

I shoved him away with my shoulder and he chuckled. Still, it was true. Azazel was poetic with his vows and I didn't think I could love him any more than I already had, but I did.

"That was surprisingly heartfelt coming from a demon," Michael said.

I squeezed Azazel's hands to make sure he didn't ruin the mood with a comeback. He winked at me and I nodded.

"With the celestial power vested in me, I now pronounce you married. You may now kiss to seal this unification," Michael said.

I grabbed the back of Azazel's head, bringing him down to me, and kissed him for all I was worth. Monique and Marcel cheered, then threw flower petals at us. Terri and Darius clapped as they smiled.

"Congratulations," Michael said, then he walked over to Darius and the two kissed.

I hugged everyone who came, Azazel simply shook hands, but he did hug Monique

and Marcel. This was the best day of my life. We were going to eat, dance, sing, and later... well later, I was going to have my way with my naughty, sexy demon on our honeymoon in Japan.

The End