



# Wicked Angel (Rite World: Fallen Angel #4)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** I thought the worst was over. I was dead wrong

With one of my enemies finally gone, I should be able to relax a little. Instead, Archangel Rhodes has the Scarlet Hex Dagger and is plotting something catastrophic. The kicker? My freshly recovered magic is trying to murder me.

Every time I use my power, it backfires spectacularly. My heart literally stops, and only my bond with Levi—the ridiculously hot higher demon whos become my lifeline—keeps me breathing. What started as magical necessity has become something deeper, and honestly? That scares me more than Rhodes does.

But were running out of time. Rhodes is moving his chess pieces, and whatever twisted plan he has for that dagger will obliterate everything Ive fought for.

With Levis darkfire backing me up and a motley crew of rebels, witches, and exiled angels, Im racing to save both myself and Elysium. Because if I cant get my act together, heavens screwed.

The war for paradise is coming, and this wicked angel refuses to go down easy.

**Total Pages (Source):** 35

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

I was dead.

I had to be. The darkness around me was too thick. Too quiet. Too absolute.

Then pain shot through my chest, radiating outward like a flame catching paper, and I knew I wasn't dead—nothing hurt in the afterlife, right?

I jerked upright, heart hammering in my chest, but a hand pressed firmly against my shoulder, easing me back onto the pillows.

“Easy, sweetheart. You're okay. You're safe.” Levi's voice wrapped around me, low and soothing, but it barely cut through the fog in my head.

I blinked, struggling to make sense of my surroundings. Shadows flickered across the ceiling, cast by the dim candlelight, and the air was thick with the scent of herbs, smoke, and old wood. My head pounded, and a dull ache throbbed deep behind my eyes.

“W-where...?” My voice came out rough, barely more than a whisper.

“The warlock's safe house,” Lacey said from somewhere near my bed.

Her voice sounded warm but tight with worry.

I turned my head, wincing at the pain that shot through my skull, and found her standing there, her face pale and drawn.

Behind her, Abbie paced across the rug, her arms crossed, her eyes darting between us like she was waiting for something to go wrong.

“What’s going on?” I asked, still a little out of it.

“You’ve been out for almost two days. Your heart... it stopped, Ariella.”

The words sank in slowly, hitting me like a blow to the chest. My heart had stopped? I turned my gaze to Levi, who was still holding my hand, his expression shadowed with something I’d never seen on him before—fear.

“I did what I could until Lacey got here,” he said, his voice uncharacteristically quiet. “Tried to keep you breathing.”

A flicker of something haunted crossed his face, and I realized his hands were trembling slightly. The thought of Levi—cocky, unflappable Levi—fighting to keep me alive sent a shiver through me.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice cracking. It felt so inadequate, but I didn’t know what else to say.

Levi’s expression softened, but before he could say more, Lacey stepped closer, her blue eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that made my skin prickle. “There’s something you need to know. When I was healing you... I sensed something strange inside you. A kind of magic I’ve never felt before.”

My brows furrowed, confusion cutting through the haze. “What are you talking about?”

Lacey exchanged a glance with Levi before turning back to me, her expression serious.

“It’s not just your magic, Ariella. I think that when you absorbed that energy from the dragons, you took in more than just their essence.

Paimon had been hoarding power—magic stolen from countless other supernaturals—and when you absorbed your magic from the dragons, all of that came with it.”

“But... I’ve had that magic for a while now. Why is this happening?”

“Rhodes’s attack threw everything off balance,” she said, her voice gentle but firm. “It’s like you were a dam, holding back a flood. Your own magic was the only thing keeping it all contained, but now it’s like the dam’s cracked. Everything’s mixing together—chaotic, unstable.”

The room seemed to tilt, and I clutched the edge of the blanket, trying to keep myself steady.

My magic churned inside me, a wild, whirlpool pressing against my ribs and burning beneath my skin.

I could feel it now—the way it strained against the boundaries of my body, too big, too wild to be contained.

It was like trying to breathe with lungs full of fire.

I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing myself to take deep, steady breaths. But with every inhale, the pressure built, as if I was drawing in more than just air. The foreign magic twisted through me like thorns, catching on every breath and tearing me apart from the inside.

“It feels... wrong,” I whispered. “Like there’s too much inside me. It’s crushing me

from the inside out.”

Levi’s grip on my hand tightened, grounding me, but I could hear the concern laced in his words. “You don’t have to push yourself right now, sweetheart. We’ll figure this out, but you need to rest first.”

I shook my head, even though the movement made me dizzy. “I can’t just lie here. We don’t have time for that.”

Ignoring the burning in my chest, I pushed myself up on my elbows, determined to sit up properly.

But the second I moved, a sharp, searing pain lanced through me, like a live wire sparking beneath my skin.

I gasped, clamping a hand over my chest as the magic inside me surged, slipping free of my control.

A wave of power pulsed out from me like a heartbeat, rattling the windows and knocking over a nearby candle. The flames flared, casting wild shadows across the walls as the pressure built higher and higher.

“Ariella!” Lacey’s voice cut through the noise, sharp with alarm.

Lacey and Abbie moved quickly, their hands weaving intricate sigils in the air. A shimmering barrier wrapped around me, pressing back against the wild magic crackling in the air, the energy snapping and sparking like a trapped storm.

The pressure eased, just enough for me to drag in a shuddering breath, but I could feel the bindings straining. They were like a flimsy bandage over a deep wound, barely holding back the magic that thrashed inside me, desperate to break free again.

“It won’t hold for long,” Abbie said, her brow furrowed with concentration. “This is only a temporary solution. We need something stronger, or it’s going to tear her apart.”

Frustration flared hot in my chest, mixing with the fear that lurked at the edges of my mind.

I’d fought so hard, survived so much, and now I was being undone by the very thing I had wanted back for so long.

My hands shook as I dragged them through my tangled hair, my breaths coming faster and more ragged.

“We don’t have time for this,” I said. “Rhodes has the dagger. He’s in Elysium.” I inhaled deeply. “Two days? I was out for two days? He could have done anything by now.”

“We haven’t heard any news from Elysium,” Levi assured me. “So far, Rhodes has been quiet.”

“Which means, we have time to help you,” Lacey said.

I opened my mouth to argue, but quickly shut it again. I was ready to shout that I would march to Elysium like this right now and to hell with my erratic magic.

But they were right, of course. I couldn’t go like this. If I did, I would only be another problem they would have to deal with.

“You don’t have to carry this alone, sweetheart,” Levi said softly.

For a moment, I leaned into his touch, letting the warmth seep through the layers of

fear and pain. But a dark thought lingered at the back of my mind, whispering fears I didn't want to acknowledge.

What if this was beyond fixing? What if the magic inside me was too much, too wild, and no one—not Levi, not Lacey, not even me—could stop it from tearing me apart? From tearing everyone around me apart?

I swallowed hard, shoving the thought back into the shadows where it belonged. I couldn't afford to think like that. Not now when we had so much on the line. This wasn't about me. This was about doing what was best for Elysium.

And right now that was to find a way to either control or take all of this crazy magic out of me so I could fight!

“All right, we'll fix this,” I said, forcing steel into my voice. “Somehow. But then we're marching into Elysium, no matter what.”

Levi's lips quirked into a small, crooked smile, but his eyes held shadows. “That's the stubborn angel I know.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

The next few hours blurred together, faces and voices swirling in a haze as everyone filtered in to check on me.

Keeran was the first, stepping into the dim room with his usual scowl, followed closely by Aspen, who glanced around like he couldn't decide whether he wanted to be amused or concerned.

Rage helped a weak Topaz cross the room toward me.

Erin, Rey, and the demon hunters stood by the window, always on guard.

And Farrah sat on the corner of my bed, with Wyatt standing behind him.

"How are you holding up?" Keeran asked, his tone light, but there was a tension in his eyes that betrayed his worry.

"Still in one piece," I muttered, though it felt like a lie.

Inside, everything was fraying, threads of magic snapping against each other, trying to break free.

I shifted on the bed, the cuffs they'd snapped onto my wrists earlier digging into my skin.

They were supposed to inhibit magic—similar to the ones the Nightshade pack had used when they had been prisoners in their own home—but I could feel my power thrumming just beneath the surface, restless and wild.



It wouldn't be long before the cuffs became useless.

Keeran didn't waste time on pleasantries. He glanced around at the assembled group before turning his gaze back to me. "This place isn't safe for you—or for us. Your magic is too unstable, Ariella. If it slips again, it could level the house and hurt everyone in it."

"So what, you want to kick me out?" I shot back, the words sharper than I intended. A bitter edge clawed at my chest, but I swallowed it down. This was the last place I wanted to be, but that didn't make the rejection sting any less.

Keeran's frown deepened, but Levi cut in before he could respond.

"They aren't kicking you out, sweetheart.

But he's right. We need somewhere isolated, where you don't have to worry about hurting anyone.

" He turned to the others. "I've got an empty warehouse in Houston—far enough from everything that even if her magic goes haywire, no one gets caught in the crossfire. "

Aspen tilted his head, considering. "That could work. I'll open a portal to get us there, and Keeran, Lacey, and I can set up a containment circle."

"I can help." Topaz stepped forward, disentangling from Rage.

Lacey shook her head. "No. You're still weak and should rest too. We can do this on our own."

Something like hurt flashed in her eyes, but Topaz just nodded and offered a flat

smile.

“If that’s what you want, then I’ll head back home.

I need to check if the Native American clans are still mad about the chaos we caused in their lands.

” She glanced at me. “Just try not to blow up the warehouse, all right?”

I tried to smile back, but it felt hollow. “No promises.”

Erin and Rey exchanged a glance. “Since we can’t help with that kind of magic, we should get back to the Blackthorn Hunters’ outpost,” Erin said. “Report in, gather reinforcements. We’ll be back when we have more information.”

“And Rage?” Aspen asked, raising an eyebrow.

Rage folded his arms, his expression unreadable. “I have business in the Underworld. But call if you need me, angel.”

With that, they all began to disperse, leaving the air feeling emptier, colder. Topaz vanished through a portal cast by Aspen, and the hunters slipped out the door.

After Levi locked with Aspen’s magic and showed him where the warehouse was located, the warlock opened another portal for us. “Ready when you are,” he said.

I forced myself to stand, even though every movement felt like my body was protesting. Levi’s arm was around my waist before I could stumble, steadying me. I hated how much I needed the support.

“Let’s get this over with,” I muttered, and together, we stepped through.

The world twisted, and then we were in a different kind of darkness—vast, open, and cold. The warehouse loomed around us, its high ceilings and bare concrete floors echoing every breath, every step. Dust motes swirled in the faint beams of moonlight that slipped through the high windows.

While Levi turned on some lights, Aspen, Keeran, Lacey, and Abbie moved quickly, their hands tracing symbols in the air, murmuring incantations that glowed with soft light.

Magic crackled around us, the air growing thicker as the containment circle took shape—layers of protection designed to keep me in and my magic contained.

The energy settled around me, a heavy, oppressive weight that pushed against my skin. I clenched my fists, fighting the urge to lash out against it, to test its strength. But I knew better than that.

Keeran lowered his hands, the final symbols fading into the air, and let out a breath. “That’s the best we can do. It’ll hold for a while.”

Aspen nodded, looking more worn than I’d ever seen him. “Call if you need us.”

Keeran glanced at Levi, then back at me. “Try not to get into much trouble.”

Levi’s expression didn’t change, but there was something hard in his eyes. “I’ve got it covered.”

With that, the rest of them left, one by one. Abbie and Lacey returned to the Grand Eternity Hall to research, and Aspen and Keeran vanished into another portal, leaving the warehouse eerily quiet.

Wyatt and Farrah slipped out last, promising to return with dinner. I barely had the

energy to acknowledge their departure.

When the door closed behind them, leaving only Levi and me, the silence pressed in on me, thick and suffocating. I sank down onto an empty crate, burying my face in my hands.

The cuffs felt like chains around my wrists, and the containment circle thrummed against my senses, a constant reminder that I was trapped.

Levi crouched in front of me, his hands gentle as he reached out to rub slow circles on my back. “I know this is hell for you, sweetheart. But you’re not alone, okay?”

The warmth of his touch seeped into my skin, easing the ache in my muscles. But my magic twisted at the contact, surging up with a ferocity that nearly made me cry out. It lashed out, a whip of energy that sliced through the air, and Levi barely managed to jump back in time.

The force slammed into the circle’s wall, exploding on contact. Levi and I flew in opposite directions, and the entire building shook.

I hit my back on the other side of the magical barrier and fell to my knees with a gasp, pain jarring my bones, and my breath failing me.

“Levi,” I whispered, trying to crawl to him.

But he was already up, shaking dirt from his dark clothes. “I’m okay, sweetheart.” His jaw worked hard. “You’ve got to be careful.”

I sucked in a shaky breath. “I didn’t mean to—I just?—”

“I know. Just... try to breathe, okay? Focus on something else.”

I nodded, even though it felt like my head was spinning. Sitting back on my feet, I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to focus on anything but the roiling chaos inside me.

After a moment, I heard Levi moving around the warehouse.

He pulled something heavy across the concrete floor, then the sound of fabric rustling reached my ears.

When I finally managed to look up, he was arranging an old, dirty set of chaise lounges—one on my side of the circle, the others just outside the line.

He also brought over crates of varying sizes.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my voice rough with exhaustion.

He shot me a quick smile, the familiar crooked one that almost made me forget how messed up everything was. “Trying to make this place a little less miserable. Figured if you’re stuck here, might as well be comfortable.”

I whispered, “Thank you,” and felt absolutely helpless while he did all the work.

Then, when he was done, Levi sat down on the closest chaise lounge, he said, “The curse with the book is broken.”

My eyes widened. “What? How?”

He shrugged. “I think it was when I went to the underworld and became ...” He pressed his lips into a thin line. “Abbie thinks the book thought I was dead and the curse broke.”

I frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you had died, and since then we haven’t really stopped.” He looked at me with those dark eyes. “But I’m telling you now, sweetheart.”

“So you can’t grant wishes anymore?”

He shook his head. “Thankfully.”

Before I could respond, the door creaked open, and Wyatt and Farrah slipped inside, carrying bags that smelled like hot food. “Dinner’s served,” Farrah announced, setting down the bags on one of the tables.

The scent of it—whatever it was—made my stomach growl, reminding me that I hadn’t eaten in... I wasn’t even sure how long.

“Thanks,” I murmured, grateful for the distraction.

We settled down on the chaise lounges, and for a few moments, we ate in relative silence. It almost felt like a normal evening—like we weren’t sitting in an abandoned warehouse, surrounded by magic circles and the constant threat of my own power breaking loose.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

I blinked, trying to shake off the fog of sleep, my body aching from the constant strain of magic simmering just beneath my skin, and sleeping in the chaise lounge.

It was comfortable for a chair, to be lounging on for a couple hours...

now, to sleep a whole night? My back would protest the rest of the day.

I glanced around and saw Lacey was the only one here. Last night, Farrah and Wyatt had gone to the Hall to sleep. However, Levi had stayed with me, and now he was nowhere to be found.

Lacey made her way to the crates over the lines of the witch's circle, where the crates created our very fancy makeshift dining area. Her expression was grim as she set a small bag of pastries on the table between us.

"I'm sorry you had to sleep there," Lacey said. "Maybe we can ask Levi to bring an actual bed."

I sat up. "If we continue bringing more stuff, we'll need to make the circle bigger."

"I mean, we can do that."

I shook my head. "It's fine like this." Because hopefully it wouldn't be for too long. "Any luck?"

She sighed. "Abbie and I spent all night digging through the Hall's archives. We found a few theories about suppressing chaotic magic, but nothing that will work

long-term. We're still looking."

I forced a small smile, trying to hide my disappointment. "I appreciate it, Lacey. I know you're doing everything you can."

She reached out and squeezed my hand, her touch warm against my cold skin. "We'll figure this out, Ariella. I promise."

Patience wasn't my strongest suit, but when I actually was able to stop and look back, I could see the pattern: we had had dozens of problems before, enemies who threatened our magic, our family, our existence ... and somehow, we had always made it.

We would make it again.

Right?

"Morning, sweetheart."

I turned to his voice and found Levi strolling from the office in the back of the warehouse toward me. His dark eyes locked on mine, and my breath caught. By the light, he was handsome.

As usual, he had black slacks, black shirt, and his hair was damp, revealing he just got out of the shower—without me.

And that suddenly made me very self-conscious ... I should take a shower soon.

"I've brought homemade breakfast burritos," Lacey announced as she opened a large brown bag and distributed the plastic containers to us.



“Thank you,” I said, getting mine.

Levi got his container and took one step into the circle. I instantly pulled away, afraid I would hurt him. But the damn man was impossible. He hooked one arm around my waist, pulled me to him, and pressed a quick kiss to my lips.

A second later, he let go and stepped back and outside the circle.

Lacey smiled at us.

“What?” Levi sat down on one of the chaise lounges and opened his container.

“Nothing,” she said, her smile widening.

I wouldn’t buy into this sibling conversation, so I too sat down and started eating, quiet in my corner.

“I know that look.” Levi took a bite of his burrito.

“If you know it, then why are you asking about it.”

“Lacey ...”

“What?” She stared at him with wide eyes. “Leave me be, you idiot.”

That made Levi’s eyes darken, and even though I knew he was trying to intimidate her, Lacey and I laughed.

The two of them continued bickering while we ate. After, Lacey went back to the Hall and Levi went with her, saying he would just check on their progress and be right back.

The silence they left behind settled heavily over me, and I found myself pacing the length of the warehouse, trying to ignore the constant hum of magic that pulsed beneath the cuffs on my wrists.

It was nearly thirty minutes later when Aspen arrived, stepping through a portal that rippled like purple water in the air.

He wasn't alone. Beside him stood a young angel, his hands bound with cuffs similar to mine. My breath caught in my throat as I recognized him.

"Ezekiel?"

He looked up at me with wide eyes, and for a moment, he seemed just as shocked to see me as I was to see him.

He was taller than I remembered, but his face was still the same—sharp features, high cheekbones, and a hint of boyishness that made him look younger than he probably was.

I did some math in my mind, and guessed he couldn't have been more than nineteen.

Aspen gave me a nod, his expression carefully neutral. "Found him poking around, asking for you. Figured you'd want to hear what he has to say."

I took a step closer, my eyes darting over the cuffs that bound Ezekiel's wrists. "You've got a lot of nerve, showing up here, Zeke. What are you doing on Earth? And why the hell are you asking for me?"

Ezekiel held my gaze, unflinching. "I came to warn you, Ariella. And to help—if you'll let me."

“Help?” I bit out the word, my mind racing. He had been close to my sister Adriel back in Elysium. Just thinking about my family made my chest ache with worry. “What about my family, Zeke? Adriel, my mother?”

“They’re fine,” he said. “They’re safe. Hurt, but safe. And?—”

My heart stuttered. “Hurt?”

“No, not physically. But you know, hurt as in sad, disappointed, defeated,” he explained.

I let out a long breath. “Ylena and Rhodes... they told everyone what you did, what happened that day. They’ve made you out to be some kind of monster.

It’s made things hard for them, but they’re hanging in there. ”

My fists clenched at my sides, anger boiling up inside me. “I know what they said about me.”

“But you don’t. Now, Rhodes is saying you killed Ylena in some vicious battle, and he had to retreat to prevent more casualties.” Ezekiel grimaced. “Ariella, most of Elysium believes them. Your record is getting darker by the second.”

I swallowed the bitter taste in my mouth. “And what do you believe, Ezekiel?”

“I don’t believe them,” he said softly. “Never did. Even before, during the first attack, even if you ran away, I knew something wasn’t right. I tried telling that to Adriel and your mother, and I think deep down they agree with me, but it’s hard when the rest of the kingdom says otherwise.”

I crossed my arms, trying to push back on the emotions surging within me. “And

what does that have to do with anything? Why have you come here?"

"Because I found proof."

I glanced at Aspen whose eyes widened. Yes, I was curious too. "Proof of what?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. But my pulse was racing, a wild hope unfurling despite my doubts.

Ezekiel's expression hardened, his gaze flicking toward the shadows of the warehouse, as if checking for eavesdroppers.

"I'm in Guardian Academy, top of my class.

My mentor is Haines, one of Rhodes's most trusted archangels.

Through him, I learned that most angels are divided, more than ever before.

Some of them agree with Rhodes—that humans and other supernaturals are beneath us, that angels shouldn't be their guardians. "

His words sank in slowly, cold dread pooling in my stomach. "And the others?"

"Some still believe in Adona's teachings, but they're afraid. Rhodes and his allies have power, influence. It's dangerous to speak against them."

"So far that proves nothing."

"I overheard a conversation between Rhodes and Haines," he continued. "They were talking about a special dagger, that it was finally with them. They said they could move the final pieces of their plan—that soon, Adona would be gone, and Elysium would be shaped to their liking."

A sharp gasp escaped me, and my hands flew to my mouth. “No,” I muttered. They wanted to weaken Adona with the Scarlet Hex Dagger and then kill her. I knew it. I knew they were planning something like this.

“They also said something about silencing you before it was too late.” Ezekiel shook his head once.

“I don’t know what the dagger does, what their plan is exactly, but something told me I had to find you.

Afterward, I tried asking Haines about you, pretending to hate you as much as they do.

I wanted to see if he would tell me something useful. ”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure he said some nice things.” I sounded more bitter than I intended.

Ezekiel winced. “Yeah, he said the same thing they always do. That you are dangerous, that you’d betrayed all of us.

But again, I knew it couldn’t be true, especially after hearing they needed to silence you.

I remembered you, Ariella. How you treated your sister Adriel, how you always tried to help people, how dedicated you were at the academy.

I couldn’t believe you’d turn into a monster overnight.

” One corner of his lips curled up. “You know, when I still tried to talk about this with Adriel, she would tell me that if she had to think about someone in your family becoming a monster, it would be her, not you. Never you.”

Something in my chest twisted painfully at his words. It had been so long since I'd seen Adriel, so long since I'd even let myself think about her. "What about her?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. "How's Adriel holding up?"

Ezekiel's face softened. "She's strong, like you.

But she's upset, hurt, bitter. It's hard to stand up straight when everyone points at her and your mother as if they had nurtured a traitor.

"His shoulders sagged. "And it's hard to go against the lies when it's all you hear.

At some point, the lies become all you know. "

Shit. I looked away, blinking back the burn in my eyes. I couldn't afford to think about that now. Not with so much at stake. I had to focus on the bigger picture—the dagger, Adona, stopping Rhodes before he could destroy everything I'd ever believed in.

Levi's voice cut through my thoughts, sharp and edged with skepticism. "And you just expect us to believe you, kid? You show up out of nowhere, spinning this story, and we're supposed to trust you?"

The three of us glanced to the side. Levi emerged from one of the Hall's portals. It closed behind him the moment he stepped out.

Ezekiel flinched under Levi's scrutiny, but he squared his shoulders, meeting the demon's gaze. "And who are you?"

"He's ..." I swallowed my words. My partner? My lover? My companion?

"I'm Ariella's mate," Levi said as he came to stand beside me, tall and regal as usual.

Ezekiel's eyes widened for a moment, but he recovered fast and continued, "I don't expect you to trust me.

I just want you to give me a chance to prove myself.

I'm willing to go back, to be your eyes and ears in Elysium, Ariella.

You need someone who can get close to Rhodes, someone who can pass information back to you. "

Levi narrowed his eyes. "That's a dangerous offer, kid. You sure you're ready for the fallout if you get caught?"

Ezekiel's face tightened with determination. "I don't care about the risk. I care about making things right. I care about Adriel and I care about stopping Rhodes before it's too late."

I studied Ezekiel's face, searching for any hint of deception. But all I saw was a young angel, scared but determined, desperate to do the right thing in a world that had turned upside down. And I knew, in that moment, that he wasn't lying.

I took a deep breath, forcing down the fear that curled in my gut. "Okay," I said, glancing between Levi and Aspen. "We let him help us. But we don't trust him blindly, and we don't take unnecessary risks."

Levi's jaw tightened, but he gave a sharp nod. "Fair enough."

Ezekiel's shoulders sagged with relief, and for a moment, he looked like the boy I used to see hanging around Adriel, tagging along with my sister like a shadow. "Thank you, Ariella. I won't let you down."

I managed a small, strained smile, but the weight of his words settled heavily in my chest. There was no turning back now, no time to second-guess our decisions. We had a chance—one slim, dangerous chance—to stop Rhodes before he could turn Elysium into a nightmare.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

I paced around the edge of the containment circle, my boots scuffing against the concrete floor.

The warehouse was quiet that evening and it was a relief, almost, to have the space to myself for once.

No one watching me with thinly veiled concern, no whispered conversations between Lacey and Abbie, trying to find a solution that never seemed to come.

Not that I didn't appreciate their efforts. But sometimes, their hovering felt like a chain around my neck, pulling tight with every passing second that I spent stuck in this circle. It made me feel like a caged animal, pacing back and forth with nowhere to go and nothing to do but wait.

Wait for my magic to settle.

Wait for a plan.

Wait for something, anything, that would give me a shred of control over my life again.

It was ridiculous, really. Even for something as simple as a bathroom break or a shower, I needed an escort. Lacey, Levi, or one of the others would walk me out of the circle, snap the cuffs back on my wrists, and watch me like I might explode at any second.

And I guess they weren't wrong.

During one of those breaks, the magic inside me had rebelled, flaring so sharply that pain exploded through my chest, and Lacey had blanched, whispering that my heart might stop again.

Levi had been there that time too. He'd grabbed me and rushed me back into the circle, ripping the cuffs off just as the pressure hit a breaking point.

The blast of magic that followed had sent Levi flying backward out of the circle.

He'd only managed to protect himself at the last second, one of his wings snapping out to shield him from the worst of it.

The scorch mark left behind on the warehouse wall had burned for hours after, a stark reminder of how dangerous I'd become.

Now, every time I thought about it, my stomach twisted with frustration and shame.

I didn't want to be a menace. I didn't want to hurt the people who were trying to help me.

But all this power, all this chaos—it was like trying to hold back a tidal wave with a flimsy dam.

And no matter how strong I tried to be, cracks kept forming.

I sighed, letting my gaze drift to the warehouse windows where the sky had turned deep violet, fading into the first hints of night.

Ezekiel's arrival earlier that day had given me a sliver of hope, but even that had its limits.

He hadn't been able to offer much—Rhodes and Haines didn't share their plans easily, and they were careful not to speak openly around others.

Ezekiel had promised to keep playing the role of the obedient student, to pretend to be interested in Rhodes's twisted vision.

But he'd been clear that the window for gathering information was closing fast.

"They're planning something big, and it's happening soon," he'd warned. "I'll find out more, I swear, but you need to be ready."

Ready. I let out a bitter laugh, the sound bouncing off the empty walls. How was I supposed to be ready for anything when I couldn't even control this damn magic inside me?

And while I was stuck here, pacing in circles like a trapped animal, my realm was on the verge of something terrible.

War? Destruction? I didn't even know the full details.

All I had were fragments of information and the hope that Ezekiel would find a way to crack open Elysium's gates when the time came.

When—if—he came back with more information.

Footsteps echoed through the warehouse, pulling me from my thoughts. Levi appeared, carrying a bag of takeout in one hand and a clean set of clothes draped over his arm. His hair was damp, and he looked freshly showered. The smell of whatever he'd brought made my stomach rumble.

"Got dinner," he announced, holding up the bag with a lopsided grin. "Figured you'd

be hungry after all the brooding you've been doing."

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips. "It's not brooding, it's thinking."

He smirked, setting the food down on what had become our main table—one of the medium sized crates. "Thinking, brooding. Tomato, tomahto. Either way, you're wearing a hole in the floor, sweetheart."

I joined him at the crate, sinking down onto one of the chaise lounges.

He handed me a steaming carton, and I took it gratefully, the warmth seeping into my hands.

The first bite tasted like heaven after so many days of tension and cold leftovers.

We ate in silence for a while, the quiet only broken by the sound of utensils scraping against takeout containers.

But eventually, the silence became too heavy, the weight of unspoken worries pressing down between us. I glanced up at Levi, catching the furrow in his brow, the way his gaze kept drifting to the containment circle that surrounded me.

"I don't like seeing you worried."

He straightened his back. "Who says I'm worried?"

"I do. And that's what's bugging me. You're usually very good at hiding your emotions, but lately, your worry has been seeping past your walls, which means you have way too much of it."

He stared at me for a few seconds. “I won’t bullshit you, sweetheart. Everything about this situation worries me, but that doesn’t mean much. Despite the worry, I’m one hundred percent sure we’ll figure this out.”

“It doesn’t feel like it, though. Actually, it feels like we’re just spinning our wheels.”

He sighed, raking a hand through his damp hair.

“I wish I had a better answer for you, sweetheart. I sent out some of my demons, asked them to check if anyone’s heard of a way to strip specific types of magic without harming the host. Abbie, Lacey, and the rest of the gang at the Hall are still digging through their books.

I know that Erin, Rey, and their friends are searching the Blackthorn Hunters Academy archives, and Rage is doing the same in the underworld.

Everyone is working to find a solution. It’s just a matter of time.”

“I know it’s cliché, but we don’t have much time.”

“Regardless, it’s not like we have a choice.”

I knew he was right, but damn, this was so hard.

Mentioning all of our friends reminded me of something else. “And the DuMoir Castle? Any news on that front?”

Levi’s expression darkened. “Not much. I only know two things. One, Zad was able to make it through the lockdown and is now inside the castle with the others. And two, Sarki was spotted on a town near the castle but disappeared quickly after that.”

I leaned back against the edge of the chaise, staring up at the high warehouse ceiling. “I wish we could finish this and help them out. Drake, Thea... they’ve done so much for us. I hate thinking of them stuck fighting their own battles while we’re here, floundering for answers.”

“We’ll get there,” Levi said quietly. “But first, we have to get you back on your feet.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Yeah, well, I’m not exactly holding my breath.”

Levi reached out, brushing a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “You’re doing better than you think, sweetheart. Don’t let this place get in your head.”

I turned my face away. “It’s hard not to think about everything I’m missing, Levi. My family... I used to think that I’d always be able to protect them, but look at me now. They’re stuck in Elysium, thinking I’m a murderer, and I can’t even tell them the truth.”

Levi leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Ezekiel seems to have a crush on Adriel. I’m sure he’ll keep her safe.”

“We grew up in this quiet little neighborhood outside the capital. Ezekiel is a year older than Adriel, and when they were kids, he used to tease her endlessly. Drove her crazy. But after a while, I realized it was just that ... a crush. He never acted on it, though. Never asked her out. And then I left, and I don’t know what happened between them. I don’t even know if they...”

My voice trailed off, and I swallowed hard. The thought of everything I’d missed, all the time that had slipped through my fingers, twisted something deep inside me.

“Perhaps it’s more than a crush now.”

I knew he was trying to lighten the mood, so I decided to join him. “Well, he better be good for her, or I’ll kick his ass.”

Levi showed me his trademark half-smile. “I’ll help you.”

I smiled back at him.

It was almost unbelievable that this higher demon, this evil creature, was my mate and seemed to care about me and everything that concerned me. It was touching in a way that made me breathless.

After dinner, we cleared away the empty cartons, and Levi turned to me with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “So... how about we share a bed tonight?”

I rolled my eyes, but a small smile tugged at my lips. “Nice try. But given how my magic reacted the last time you got too close, I’m thinking that’s a terrible idea.”

“Worth a shot,” he said, but there was a teasing edge in his voice. He pushed one of the chaise lounges closer to mine, until they were separated only by the circle’s line. “How about this, then? Close enough?”

I nodded, settling onto my own makeshift bed. Levi stretched out on his, and he reached out a hand, letting it slip through the edge of the containment circle. I hesitated, then reached out to take it, our fingers intertwining. His hand was warm, steady, a lifeline in the darkness.

And for a little while, I let myself hold on to that warmth, even as the shadows of uncertainty loomed over us.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

The next morning dawned gray and overcast. I barely slept, my mind spinning with too many what-ifs and unanswered questions.

Levi had woken up early, slipping out to scout around the perimeter, though I knew it was more to give me space than out of necessity.

I appreciated it. The warehouse had become a pressure cooker of worry and frustration, and we all needed the occasional breather.

But that breather didn't last long. As the sun tried to pierce through the thick cloud cover, the air in the warehouse shimmered, and a portal opened near the edge of the witch circle.

Keeran strode through, his expression as stern as ever, but it was the figure that followed him that caught my attention.

Almae, her long braid grayer than I had seen before, moved with a grace that spoke of years spent wielding magic far beyond what most witches could dream of.

At first glance, you would think she was just a nice old lady, but underneath her kindness was knowledge and power.

She glanced around the warehouse, taking in the circle that kept me confined, the makeshift furniture, the faded scorch marks on the walls.

Her lips curved into a faint, knowing smile.



“Well, it’s certainly no five star hotel,” she said, her tone dry. “But it’s functional.”

“Glad it meets your standards,” I replied, trying for humor but it didn’t feel right.

“Why are you here, Almae? I thought you were at the DuMoir Castle.”

“I was. But there wasn’t much I could do while in lockdown, so I requested to be excused. They didn’t want to break the lockdown for me, but it worked out well as Zadkiel used the same opportunity to join them.”

“Thea cast a mean shield around the castle,” Keeran said. “It was hard for us to break through it with her consent. I have to guess they are safe from Sarki in there.”

The sound of footsteps echoed through the warehouse and Levi reappeared from his office. He quickly approached us. “I heard there were sightings of Sarki around the castle.”

Almae nodded, her expression grim. “In a nearby town. She took the heart of a human. Drake sent vampires and witches after her, but she’s slippery.”

A chill crept up my spine. Memories of our encounter with Sarki in the underworld surfaced, unbidden—the way she’d toyed with us, the darkness in her eyes as she cast her curse on Drake’s daughter before slipping away.

The knowledge that we had set her loose gnawed at me, a reminder of how easily things could spiral out of control.

“I’m surprised they let you out,” I said. “Not just because of the lockdown, but because of your help.”

Almae tilted her head, offering a faint smile.

“Drake and Thea are strong, and they have a lot of supernaturals on their side, ready to help ... and judging from Sarki’s actions, it seems she wants to taunt them, dragging this out for who knows how long.

I couldn’t stay in the lockdown for weeks, perhaps months, without any other perspective.”

“We did promise to do what we can from the outside, though,” Keeran said. “After we help you, of course.”

“Any help is appreciated,” Levi said, his tone very sharp.

“Actually, I already reached out to the other witch queens,” Almae said. “Only Queen Rosalia and Queen Corvina got back to me so far and said they didn’t know of any spells that could extract only the unwanted magic from you. I’m suspecting the others will say the same.”

“But they will research about it,” Keeran added.

“In the meantime, I also talked to Francine,” Almae continued, “and she mentioned something interesting.”

“Who’s Francine?” Levi asked.

“A former Wildthorn witch who married a Blackthorn Hunter,” Keeran explained. “She lives in Chasseur Ville now.”

“She mentioned a legend, something buried deep in old lore,” Almae said, sounding a little hopeful. “She said her late husband used to work on some supersecret missions for the Blackthorn Hunters and once he told her a legend about a demon that could absorb magic from supernaturals.”

Levi and I exchanged a glance.

“A demon that can absorb magic?” Levi repeated, his brow furrowing. “How come I haven’t heard about this before?”

“It’s rare, even for demons,” Almae said.

“Most demons that absorb magic are unstable, dangerous even to those who summon them. But there are whispers of a few who can be more selective. Sometimes, if the conditions are right, they can take only the magic you want to get rid of, leaving the rest behind.”

My pulse quickened at the idea, but doubt quickly followed. “And we’re supposed to believe this demon would just leave me with my own magic intact? Sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

“It’s a risk,” Almae admitted. “But it might be the only option you have left.”

Keeran crossed his arms, studying the circle around me. “We need more information before we consider something like that. If there’s even a chance this could work, we have to find out everything we can about this demon.”

Levi turned to me, raising an eyebrow. “Ready for another round of calls, sweetheart?”

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. “We’ve got nothing but time, right? Let’s get started.”

Before we could call the hunters, Almae and Keeran told us they would leave for a while, so Almae could check on Unity—the town she had founded several years ago—but they would come back soon.

Then, we called Erin and Rey, hoping that as demon hunters, they might know something about the kind of demon we were looking for.

But the call went straight to voicemail, the telltale sign that they were in the middle of a mission or dealing with something at the Academy.

I bit back my frustration, leaving a message and hoping they'd get back to us sooner rather than later.

"Worth a shot," Levi said, hanging up. "They'll call back when they can."

He tapped away on his phone for a minute, then fished a coin from his pocket and I recognized it immediately.

It was one of the Great Eternity Hall's enchanted coins.

He closed his hand around it, a faint glow appeared between his fingers, and a moment later when he opened his hand, the coin was gone.

And a shimmering portal stood right beside him.

"Be right back," he said before stepping through.

I let out a long sigh, a little upset that I couldn't just go with him.

A moment later, he was back, with Lacey and Abbie in tow. Abbie had dark circles under her eyes, and Lacey's usually bright smile was dimmed with worry.

"What's going on?" Lacey asked.

I quickly explained what Almae had shared. "Do you think there's anything in the

Hall's archives that might help us track down this demon?"

Abbie exchanged a look with Lacey, then let out a heavy sigh. "I can't guarantee it, but we'll dig through whatever we can find."

Lacey placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. "Hang in there, okay? We're not giving up."

I managed a small, grateful smile, the warmth of their support easing some of the tension in my chest. "Thanks, both of you. I really appreciate it."

They disappeared back through the portal, and it winked out behind them, leaving the warehouse feeling strangely empty again. I stared at the spot where they'd stood, trying to keep my mind from racing ahead to all the ways this could go wrong.

The door at the far end of the warehouse creaked open, and Burgin stepped in. The demon was a stocky male with a serious expression. I had seen him before a couple of times and neither of those times had I liked him very much. Granted, our interaction had been brief, and back then I hated Levi.

At least, I thought I did.

Burgin stopped a good way from us and stared at Levi. "My lord, you summoned?"

Levi didn't waste any time. "There's talk of an old demon that can absorb magic from supernaturals. I need you to reach out to our contacts, find out if there's any truth to it. Locations, lore, anything."

Burgin inclined his head, his voice a low rumble. "As you command, my lord. I will return with whatever I discover."

With a final nod, Burgin turned and exited through the door, his heavy footsteps echoing through the space as he left.

I let out a slow breath, running a hand through my hair. “And now we wait?”

Levi leaned against the edge of the containment circle, folding his arms across his chest. “Seems like waiting is all we do these days.”

I huffed out a breath, feeling the frustration twist in my gut. “I hate it, Levi. I hate sitting here, feeling like I’m wasting time while everything’s falling apart. Elysium, Sarki, my family—I’m stuck in this damn circle while everyone else is out there, doing something.”

His expression softened, but his voice remained firm. “You’re not useless, sweetheart. And you know that if there was a way to get you out of here safely, I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

I met his gaze, the sincerity in his eyes cutting through some of the bitterness. “I know. I just... I can’t help feeling like we’re running out of time.”

Just then, my phone buzzed, and I glanced down at the screen. “It’s Erin.”

I put the call on speaker, and I heard Erin’s familiar voice crackle through the line. “Hey, sorry it took us a bit to get back to you. What’s this about a magic-absorbing demon?”

Levi quickly filled her in, explaining the potential lead.

There was a pause on the other end before Erin sighed.

“Honestly, this is new to us. Rey’s never come across anything like it in the

Blackthorn Hunters' records either.

But we'll start digging, see if we can find anything. It might take a while."

I squeezed my hands into fists, trying not to let my disappointment show. "Thanks, Erin. Anything you can find would be a huge help."

"We'll get back to you as soon as we have something," she promised before hanging up.

Levi looked at me, a half-smile tugging at his lips. "So, now we wait. Again."

I let out a small, wry laugh, shaking my head. "Story of our lives, isn't it?"

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

Three days passed, and every one of them was a slow descent into madness.

The warehouse air felt like it was thickening, the witch circle becoming a prison I couldn't escape.

The air inside it always seemed a little warmer, a little heavier, making every breath feel like I was inhaling smoke.

My skin prickled constantly, the wild magic inside me pressing against the boundary, looking for any chance to break free.

But at least I wasn't alone in this empty warehouse anymore.

Lacey, Abbie, and even Maggie and Gwen had set up a research station around the edge of the containment circle.

They'd dragged in tables and chairs, piling them high with books and scrolls.

Abbie and her sisters had even brought several table lamps to give us more light.

The scent of old paper mixed with the ever-present tang of magic, making the air feel both comforting and stifling.

Inside the circle, they'd set up a small table and chair for me, so I could join in the research, even if I couldn't move around freely. It was better than pacing the circle like a restless ghost, but every hour that ticked by without progress made the weight on my shoulders grow heavier.



We combed through book after book, looking for anything that could help—spells to absorb or control magic, mentions of demons that could steal power, stories of artifacts that might give us an edge.

But every time we thought we had something, it turned out to be another dead end.

More stories of supernaturals who could absorb magic, sure, but always all of it. Nothing precise enough to help me.

I tried calling Kaz again, but the calls went directly to his voicemail.

Of course, I left him messages, but I doubted he would ever listen to those.

He was either really averse to technology and ignored his phone most of the time, or he was trying to protect the little dragons. Either way, I couldn't blame him.

“Come on, there's got to be something in here,” I muttered one afternoon, flipping through a dusty tome that crumbled around the edges. My fingers ached from turning pages, my head buzzing with exhaustion.

Lacey shot me a sympathetic look from across her table. “We'll find it, Ariella. Just keep going.”

I nodded, but it was hard to keep believing that when this foreign magic thrashed beneath my skin, reminding me that time wasn't on our side.

Just when I thought I couldn't take another minute of it, Abbie's voice cut through the quiet, making all of us look up.

“Wait a second. I think I found something.”

She held up a worn, leather-bound book, her eyes scanning the yellowed pages. “There’s a reference here to a magical crystal that can be bound to a specific type of magic. It doesn’t go into much detail, but what if it’s enough to secure Ariella’s magic while allowing the demon to absorb the rest?”

A spark of hope flared in my chest, but it was quickly dampened by doubt. “Where is this crystal?”

Abbie’s expression faltered, and she flipped through a few more pages before letting out a frustrated sigh. “No location. Just mentions of its existence.”

“So, we’re back to square one?” Lacey asked, her shoulders slumping.

“Not entirely,” I said, forcing myself to sound more optimistic than I felt. “If this crystal is real, we just have to find it. It’s got to be here in one of these books somewhere.”

Before anyone could respond, the door to the warehouse creaked open, and I turned to see Erin and Rey stepping inside, a third figure trailing behind them.

The newcomer was tall, with a lean, muscular build and an air of quiet authority.

He carried himself like he was used to being in charge, but there was a wariness in his eyes that caught my attention.

“This is Max,” Erin introduced, gesturing to the stranger. “He’s one of our best. He specializes in special missions.”

“Special as in secret,” Rey said in a low voice.

Max nodded, offering me a tight-lipped smile. “Ariella, Levi. I’ve heard a lot about

you.”

“Naughty things, I hope,” Levi said dryly, but his gaze was sharp, assessing.

Max ignored the attempt at humor, focusing instead on the circle that held me. “I hear you’ve got a demon problem. Or rather, you need a demon that can solve your problem.”

“Yeah, but so far all we’ve got is rumors and old stories,” I replied, folding my arms. “You know something we don’t?”

Max glanced at Erin and Rey, who both nodded in encouragement, before turning back to me.

“There’s a reason they called me in. A few years back, we came across a higher demon that did exactly what you’re looking for.

It could steal magic from supernaturals—sometimes all of it, sometimes just a part.

We don’t know why it worked that way, but it did. ”

My heart thudded in my chest. “You’re saying this demon could take the foreign magic from me?” Max nodded. “So, where is this demon now?”

“We couldn’t kill it,” Max said bluntly. “So we trapped it. Sealed it inside a cave deep in a canyon, where no one goes. Every so often, one of us checks to make sure it’s still there. And so far, it hasn’t gotten out.”

Levi frowned. “Can you bring this demon to us?”

Max shook his head. “That would be like playing with a lit match in a room full of

gasoline. If the demon escapes or decides it wants more than just Ariella's excess magic, we'd have a disaster on our hands. It's safer if we bring Ariella to the demon."

"But that means moving her," Lacey said, "which is a problem with her unstable magic."

I clenched my fists, my frustration rising again. "And you still don't have a way to make sure the demon won't take all of my magic, right?"

Max shook his head again. "That's the risk. We need a way to protect your core magic before we can even think about bringing you near the demon."

Maggie, who had been listening quietly up until now, flipped another page in the thick tome she'd been studying.

She had a serious expression that made her seem older than her nineteen years.

Her sister, Gwen, hovered nearby, fidgeting with a pen.

Just as Max finished speaking, Maggie stiffened, her hand going slack against the page.

Her eyes glazed over, turning blank and distant. I recognized the look immediately—Maggie was having a vision. Abbie moved to her side, resting a hand on her shoulder, guiding her through the trance.

"Maggie?" Abbie asked gently. "What do you see?"

Maggie's voice was monotone, distant. "A cave. In the northern U.S. A dragon shifter guards it, hoarding treasures... among them, a crystal. The one we need."

My breath caught, hope flaring anew. “You’re sure, Maggie?”

Maggie nodded slowly, the vision still holding her in its grip. “And I see you... speaking with the dragon. He gives you the crystal.”

Her words faded, and she blinked rapidly, coming back to herself. Abbie patted her shoulder gently and Maggie let out a shaky breath.

Lacey pressed her lips in a thin line. “But that means you’ll have to leave the circle for that too, Ariella. You’ll have to go to him.”

I exchanged a look with Levi, who wore a thoughtful expression. “That’s twice you’ll need to step out of this circle, sweetheart. It might be too much.”

“I don’t think we have another choice,” I said, feeling a tiny thread of hope igniting inside me. “We can use the cuffs, right?”

“Those won’t hold the unstable magic for long,” Abbie said. “But we can try reinforcing them every hour, or every half an hour. If we are fast, we might get lucky.”

“Are you sure about that?” The stoic and cocky Levi seemed a little worried to me and that look pulled at my heartstrings.

I nodded.

He let out a breath and looked at Max. “What’s the demon’s name?”

“Thrallgon,” Max answered. “He’s extremely dangerous, and I can’t guarantee any of this will work.” His eyes darkened. “He might try to kill you while taking your magic. He has done it before, when he said the magic was too irresistible.”

Levi let out a groan and I stilled.

“So, we need to make sure this Thrallgon doesn’t kill me, but takes all the unwanted magic away,” I muttered. “It just keeps getting better, doesn’t it?”

Max’s lips quirked into a grim smile. “Welcome to my world.” Then his smile was gone. “One more thing: Thrallgon will surely try to escape while we’re dealing with him. We need to prepare to either secure his prison or kill him, somehow.”

“You said you weren’t able to kill him before,” Abbie observed.

Max nodded. “Yes. He was too strong.” He glanced around the room. “But I think that we just might be stronger this time. If anyone can find a way to take him down, it’s this group.”

For a moment, silence settled over us, broken only by the rustle of pages and the distant hum of the city outside. My mind raced through the possibilities, trying to fit together the pieces of this impossible puzzle.

Then an idea sparked, small but insistent, and I turned to Levi.

“What if we called Jasmin?”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

After we came up with a plan, the demon hunters left. We agreed to call them back when we had the crystal.

Levi, Lacey, Abbie, and even Maggie and Gwen started talking about the crystal and the demon, and researching more, and finding a way to make the cuffs stronger.

“We have to do this now,” I blurted out.

They all turned to me and I glanced around the dim warehouse, meeting each of their eyes in turn.

“But the cuffs—” Abbie started.

“Just infuse more magic in it right now,” I said.

“And—”

I lifted a hand. “I’m serious. I’m tired of sitting here and just researching and waiting. We finally have something tangible in front of us, a real something to do that will move the needle forward. Please, don’t make me wait.”

The shine in their eyes showed me they understood my plea.

Levi crossed his arms. “All right, but we need to do a quick plan.” I opened my mouth to argue. “No, I mean it, sweetheart. We need to find out exactly where we are going, what we will encounter, and how long it might take. We need to eat and pack.”

“He’s right,” Lacey said. Of course she would back her brother on this. “Thirty minutes. One-hour tops. Then we can get going.”

Abbie nodded.

Maggie nodded too. Abbie groaned as she turned to Maggie. “No. I know that look. You’re not coming, Maggie. It’s too dangerous.”

“I have to,” Maggie insisted, her voice sharper than I’d ever heard it. “It’s my vision. I saw the cave, the path, the crystal. You need me to guide you. I can do this, Abbie.”

Abbie’s frown deepened, and she turned to me, a silent plea in her eyes.

But I shook my head. “Sorry, Abbie, but I think Maggie is right. If she really saw the path there, we need her ... she should come with us.”

“Fine,” Abbie said, but her tone was tight with worry. “But you promise me this, Maggie: if things go bad, you stay back. Run to safety. No arguments.”

Maggie hesitated, then nodded. “I promise.”

Abbie let out a shaky sigh, and we moved into action.

Well, they acted. I just watched from the circle, itching to help.

Abbie sent a protesting Gwen back to the hall, then she helped Lacey and Abbie fortify the cuffs.

Meanwhile, Levi called the warlocks to see if anyone of them could come to open a portal for us.



About thirty minutes later, we were almost ready. Aspen and Boise had arrived and talked to Maggie and Levi about locating the place in her vision. After some spells, Aspen and Boise were pretty sure they could take us there—wherever there was.

When everyone was really ready, Lacey came to the circle with the cuffs. “Sorry. I know they are uncomfortable.”

I extended my arms to her. “Better than exploding my friends.”

She winced and I sighed, hating my failed joke.

With the cuffs secure around my wrists, I started taking my first step over the circle and hesitated. What if the moment I crossed over, the magic surged up and I couldn’t control it?

Levi stood tall, his sure eyes on mine. He tipped his chin once. His trust in me was all I needed. With a deep breath, I crossed the circle and almost did a shimmy dance when nothing happened.

Just the constant hum of that strange power taunting me.

“Everyone ready?” Aspen asked.

All six of them looked at me.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I replied, my voice steady despite the sudden growing jittery feeling in my chest.

As if a switch had been turned on, my magic started thrashing beneath the surface, eager to break free, but I shoved it down, focusing on the task at hand. We had one shot at this, and I couldn’t afford to lose control now.

With a murmur of words, Aspen opened the portal. The air shimmered, and a purple sheet of magic appeared. I took a deep breath, then stepped forward into the portal, feeling the world twist and bend around me.

We emerged in a dense forest, the air thick with the scent of pine and wet earth. The ground beneath my boots was soft, covered in a thick layer of fallen leaves. Above us, the canopy was so thick it blocked out most of the sky, casting long shadows across the forest floor.

Maggie adjusted the straps of her backpack, looking around as if comparing the scenery to what she'd seen in her vision. "We need to head east," she said, pointing toward a trail that wound through the underbrush. "It'll get steeper before we reach the clearing."

We fell into formation, with Levi leading the way and Maggie close behind him. Because of my unstable magic, I was put in the middle, while Aspen carried the rear, keeping an eye on the shadows that moved between the trees.

There was a sense of unease in the air, the kind that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I could tell the others felt it too—every snap of a twig had us on edge.

As we hiked deeper into the forest, the trees grew closer together, their trunks twisted and gnarled as if some unseen force had shaped them.

Mist curled around our ankles, thickening with every step until it swallowed the ground beneath our feet.

The air grew cooler, carrying with it a faint, metallic scent that reminded me of old blood.

"This place isn't natural," Lacey murmured, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“It’s like someone doesn’t want us here.”

“No kidding,” Levi muttered. “Stay sharp, everyone. We’re not alone.”

I tried to ignore the way my heart pounded in my chest. My magic shifted inside me, reacting to the unease that settled over the group, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep it in check. Now wasn’t the time to lose control.

After what felt like an eternity, we reached a clearing where the mist thinned, revealing a large, moss-covered stone half-buried in the earth.

Maggie paused, staring at the stone, then turned to a tree nearby, its trunk twisted into a shape that almost resembled a clawed hand. Her breath quickened, and she nodded.

“This is it. The cabin should be close.”

We pressed forward, pushing through a dense thicket until the outline of a cabin emerged from the shadows.

It was small and weathered, its wooden boards warped and darkened with age.

Vines crept up the walls, curling around the windows like fingers.

The air around it felt heavy, like it was pressing down on my shoulders.

Levi stepped forward, testing the door, which swung open with a creak that echoed through the clearing. “Anyone home?” he called, his voice cutting through the silence. “We’re here for a chat about magical crystals and hidden caves.”

When no response came, we cautiously entered the cabin, checking each room. Dust coated every surface, and the furniture was covered in a layer of grime, as if no one

had set foot inside for years.

“Looks empty,” Boise said, wrinkling his nose as he brushed cobwebs away from a bookshelf.

“Well, we’re not here for the decor,” Aspen replied. He glanced at Maggie, who had wandered to the back of the cabin, her eyes distant. “What else did you see?”

Maggie’s expression sharpened, and she pointed toward a narrow door at the back of the cabin. “Through here. There’s a path behind the cabin that leads to the cave.”

We followed her out the back door and into the thick undergrowth beyond.

True to her vision, there was a hidden path, barely visible beneath layers of tangled roots and overgrown foliage.

The air grew colder, a chill seeping through my jacket and into my bones.

It wasn’t just the temperature—it was the sense that something ancient and powerful lurked nearby.

The path opened into a rocky hillside, where a jagged cave mouth gaped in the earth like a wound. Moss and ferns hung down over the entrance, hiding it from view, but Maggie’s hand was steady as she pointed at it.

“This is it. The crystal is inside.”

Just as we stepped toward the cave entrance, a shadow passed over us, blotting out what little light seeped through the trees. My head snapped up, and my blood ran cold.

There was our dragon.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

The dragon's massive form descended from the clouds, wings beating the air with a sound like thunder.

Scales the color of molten gold caught the pale light, and its eyes glowed with a fierce, predatory intelligence.

It landed heavily in front of the cave, blocking our path, and its lips curled back in a snarl that revealed rows of razor-sharp teeth.

The ground trembled beneath us, and I stumbled back, my heart hammering in my chest. "Everyone, get back!" I shouted, my voice rough with panic.

The dragon reared up, its wings spreading wide, casting long shadows over the clearing. It let out a roar that shook the trees, a sound that reverberated through my skull and rattled my bones. My magic flared in response, surging toward the surface like a wild animal straining against its cage.

I raised my hands in a sign of peace. "We're not here to harm you or create trouble. We just?—"

But I never got to finish the sentence. The dragon lunged, fire pouring from its mouth in a searing wave.

Lacey barely managed to throw up a protective barrier, but the flames licked around the edges, scorching the trees behind us. The heat singed our skin, even through the magic, and beside me, Lacey gritted her teeth, struggling to keep the barrier intact.

“Keep moving!” Levi shouted, his voice cutting through the roar of the flames.

He spun to the side, darkfire crackling around his hands as he launched a bolt of it at the dragon—not to harm, just to distract.

The flames swirled around the dragon’s scales, harmlessly deflecting off its molten-gold hide.

It snapped its jaws, letting out a guttural snarl, and turned its glowing eyes toward Levi.

Aspen and Boise moved in sync, casting spells to reinforce Lacey’s barrier and direct the dragon’s attention away from the cave entrance. Abbie and Maggie were right behind them, waiting for an opportunity to act.

“You have to listen to—” I tried shouting, but had to quickly shut my mouth and duck as the dragon’s tail swung through the air, smashing into the trees beside us.

Wood splintered, and I heard Maggie gasp as branches cracked and rained down around us.

I couldn’t risk letting my own magic out. If I lost control, I’d become a danger to all of us. So, I focused on staying light on my feet, dodging and weaving through the chaos as the others kept the dragon occupied.

The ground shook with every impact of the dragon’s claws, each tremor sending leaves cascading from the canopy above.

Aspen flicked his wrist, sending a stream of magical rays toward the dragon’s side. It barely flinched, the electricity crackling harmlessly over its scales. “This isn’t working!” he growled, frustration clear in his voice.

“We can’t hurt him!” I called back, ducking another sweep of the dragon’s tail. “We need the crystal! If we make him angry?—”

“He’s already angry!” Levi cut in, his darkfire wrapping around the dragon’s foreleg like chains, barely managing to slow its movements. The dragon let out another ear-splitting roar, its eyes blazing as it strained against the darkfire’s hold.

“Enough!” the dragon bellowed, and for a split second, the air seemed to tremble with the weight of his voice. He broke through Levi’s restraints with a twist of his massive body, snapping his head toward me. I froze, caught in the intensity of his gaze, and my breath hitched in my throat.

But then the dragon paused, nostrils flaring as he scented the air. His eyes—glowing with that molten gold—narrowed on me, his head tilting slightly. For a moment, I thought he would attack again, but instead, he drew in a long breath, and the tension in the air shifted.

“I smell dragon magic on you,” he rumbled, his voice like thunder rolling through the forest. He straightened slightly, his wings folding against his sides, though the wariness never left his gaze. “You are tainted with it. Explain.”

Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward, my hands raised in a gesture of peace.

“My name is Ariella,” I began, my voice as steady as I could make it.

“A prince of the underworld stole my magic and several others, including dragon magic. Later, all of that magic ended up inside baby dragons—newborns. They gave me my magic back, but... they gave me more than that. Now I have my own magic, and all this other power I never wanted.”

The dragon’s eyes narrowed further, but he didn’t attack. He studied me, his gaze



piercing, as if he could see straight through to my soul. “You speak of new dragons?” he asked, a strange note in his voice. “I have been without contact with the outside for many years. Is this true?”

“Yes, it’s true,” I said, my heart still hammering in my chest. “They’re growing and well protected. But people around me aren’t. I need that crystal in your cave to help me shed the magic that doesn’t belong to me.”

The dragon huffed out a breath, steam rising from his nostrils.

“Dragons are rare. There are too few of us left. The return of more is a good thing.” He studied me for another long, tense moment, and then his gaze flicked over to Levi and the others, still poised to strike if the dragon made any sudden moves.

I dared to take another step closer, lowering my hands slowly. “You don’t have to fight us. We just need the crystal, and I promise, we’ll return it once we’ve used it. We mean you no harm.”

The dragon’s form shimmered, his massive body shrinking and contorting until he stood before us in human form.

His human appearance was rugged, weathered, like a man who had spent decades living in the wild.

He looked to be in his fifties or sixties, with sharp blue eyes and a thick beard streaked with gray.

Despite his age, he had the kind of presence that filled the clearing, the power of his dragon form still thrumming beneath his skin.

“What crystal?” His voice was low, rough with age and suspicion.

“One that holds on to magic,” I said, not really sure. I glanced at Maggie. She had seen it in her vision. I had no idea what it was or what it looked like.

“Hm, t-the green one,” she stammered.

The dragon let out a huff, smoke coming out of his huge nostrils. “You think I’d lend such a treasure to strangers?”

I met his gaze head-on, my heart pounding.

“I understand why you wouldn’t trust us.

Who are we, right? Strangers invading your space and asking for one of your treasures?

But we have no other choice. Without that crystal, I can’t control this power, and it could destroy everything I’m trying to protect. We just need a chance.”

The dragon shifter’s expression changed, a flicker of something softer passing through his eyes. He glanced toward the cave, then back at me, a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth. “And what will you do once you’ve freed yourself of the extra power?”

I hesitated, but only for a moment. “I’ll fight for my home, Elysium. My realm is at the brink of war and I think I can stop it.”

He studied me for a long moment. “I know what it is to want to protect your home ... and to lose it.” He nodded slowly.

“You have the eyes of a warrior... even if you carry a burden too heavy for one so young. Very well. But I will not simply hand over the crystal. We will seal our

agreement with a blood promise.”

I blinked, surprise flickering through me. I hadn’t expected him to offer so easily. “What kind of promise?”

He stepped closer, pulling a small, ornate knife from the belt at his waist. “We cut our palms, let our blood mingle. You will return the crystal when your task is complete, or you will bear the weight of breaking the bond.”

“And what is the weight of breaking the blood bond?” I asked, my voice low.

“After a week without returning the crystal, you’ll experience growing pain that will only increase, to the point of madness.”

I stilled. That was a serious thing, but I had no reason to keep the crystal.

Levi cleared his throat and I glanced at him. “I don’t like this, sweetheart.”

“It’s not like we have a choice.” Taking a deep breath, I held out my hand to the dragon shifter.

He nodded approvingly and made a small cut across his own palm before offering me the knife. I followed suit, wincing slightly as the blade bit into my skin, and pressed my bleeding hand against his.

The moment our blood touched, I felt a rush of magic course through me, binding our promise like a thread of flame. The dragon shifter’s eyes flared with a brief flash of golden light, and then it faded, leaving behind the weight of the bond between us.

“It is done,” he said, stepping back and tucking the knife away. “Follow me.”

He led us into the cave, and I had to admit, it was impressive.

Treasures were piled high on every surface—gems and gold, ancient artifacts that glimmered in the faint light filtering through the entrance.

The air was thick with the scent of earth and old magic, the walls of the cave humming with latent power.

The dragon shifter rummaged through a chest covered in dust, muttering to himself as he searched. Finally, he pulled out a green gem the size of my fist, its surface smooth and shaped like a delicate shell.

“This one?” he asked.

Maggie nodded, her eyes transfixed on the gem. “Yes. That’s the one.”

He held it out to me. “The Stelen Stone.”

I reached out, my fingers brushing against the crystal. The moment I touched it, a pulse of energy shot through my hand, and I gasped, feeling the power contained within the stone. It was like touching a living thing, thrumming with ancient magic.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice barely more than a whisper. “I promise, I’ll return it.”

The dragon shifter nodded, his expression somber. “See that you do.”

We left the cave and the dragons stayed by its mouth.

I glanced at him. “I don’t know your story, or how you came to be here, but the dragons and dragon shifters live in a hidden island nowadays.

I know a dragon shifter, Kazrath. He's hard to get ahold of, but I can give you his contact number if you want. "

The dragon shifter's nostrils flared. "No."

He turned and entered the cave again.

I stayed there for another moment, watching the dark cave. There was a story here, but I didn't have time to dig through it, and apparently that wouldn't be welcomed. So I followed the others to the forest's edge, where Aspen prepared to open a portal.

Aspen's portal shimmered to life, and we crossed back to the warehouse, where the air was thick with tension. Even though I felt more control than I had in the last couple of hours, I rushed to the witch's circle.

Everyone stood just outside the circle's line, looking at the gem in my hand.

"We did it," Lacey said.

"Good job, Maggie." Abbey nudged the shoulder of her sister, who blushed instantly.

I looked at them all. "Thank you."

"Step one down." Levi pulled out his phone. "Now for step two."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

We arrived back at the warehouse late last night, exhausted and covered in dirt from our trek through the forest and our fight with the dragon shifter. My muscles ached, my head throbbed, and my magic still buzzed inside me, but all I could think about was sleep.

Aspen and Boise had left, and the witches had returned to the Great Eternity Hall for the night.

Taking another chance, I went to Levi's apartment for a much needed shower, and immediately returned to the witch's circle. Later, Levi had brought us a quick meal and we collapsed onto the chaise lounges.

Now, morning light filtered through the warehouse windows, casting a pale glow across the concrete floor. I watched the shadows shift as I reached for the cuffs. I usually didn't wear them when inside the circle, but soon, I would need them.

Levi brought a small crossbody bag for me to put the crystal inside. I picked it up from the crate I had left it on last night and stared at it. Its green surface gleamed, shaped like a delicate shell, and for a moment, I let myself hope that this insane plan might actually work.

No, I couldn't think like that. It would work!

With a sigh, I placed the crystal inside the bag and slung it around my shoulders.

I glanced around the warehouse. "Where's everyone else?"

Last night, right after we came back from the forest, Levi had called Max and told him we were ready for the next step in our plan. Though he had insisted on going right away, Max argued it was late and we were probably tired and needed to rest.

Not that I would admit that out loud, but the demon hunter was right, of course.

“They should be here any minute now,” Levi said, glancing to the warehouse’s side entrance.

As if they had heard us, a shimmering portal appeared to our right and a moment later, a purple portal showed up on our left. Abbey, Lacey, Farrah, and Wyatt came from one, and Aspen, Boise, Max, and Rage came from the other one.

I expected the portal to close the moment they all came through, but it stayed open for a little longer ... and someone else came through.

Jasmin.

Even when crossing the portal, she looked as regal and as bored as ever. The princess of the underworld made her demon hunter uniform seem like a dressing gown as she flipped her long red hair over her shoulder.

The portal faded and she looked at me. “I’m here.”

I almost rolled my eyes at her. “Thank you for coming.” I glanced at all of my friends. “To all of you.”

“No need to thank us,” Farrah said with a smile.

Max looked at Aspen. “I think we’re all here.”

Aspen nodded. “Everyone ready?”

“One moment,” Lacey said as she turned to me. She handed me the cuffs and I sighed as I took them and clasped them around my wrists. Their weight felt oppressing. “Now, we’re ready.”

Aspen waited for my confirmation. When I nodded at him, the warlock moved his hands and opened a new portal for us.

As the others moved to the portal, Levi gave my hand a quick squeeze before releasing it. I took a deep breath, focusing on keeping my magic in check, and stepped into the portal alongside the others.

The world shifted around us, bending and twisting as the magic carried us through space.

We emerged at the mouth of a vast canyon, the air dry and cool, carrying the faint scent of sagebrush.

Towering cliffs loomed on either side, their craggy surfaces casting long shadows that stretched across the rocky ground.

The cuffs on my wrists felt tighter, almost as if my magic knew what lay ahead and was fighting against its restraints.

Max took the lead, guiding us down a narrow trail that wound through the canyon floor. He moved with the ease of someone who had walked this path many times before, but his shoulders were tense, his steps measured.

As we walked, he spoke quietly, his voice carrying just enough to reach us over the wind that swept through the canyon.



“Thrallgon is not like any demon you’ve encountered before.

He’s absorbed magic from dozens of supernaturals—shapeshifting, fire, ice, illusions, telekinesis. You name it, he’s probably got it.”

“Sounds like a real charmer,” Levi muttered. “How did you manage to trap him?”

Max shot him a grim look. “With the help of many witches and magical stones.”

“It probably needs to be recharged every once in a while,” Abbie observed.

“Correct,” Max said. “Actually, we’re due for a recharge at the end of the month.”

“So the barrier is weaker now?” I asked. “Isn’t that more dangerous?”

“It is, but it also means the spell you want him to do will be easier,” Max said.

Levi glanced at me, his dark eyes hard, full of concern.

“What else can you tell us about him?” Farrah asked as she stepped over a loose stone the size of my head.

“He’s a trickster, that’s how he was able to steal so much magic,” Max explained. “If given the opportunity, he’ll try to trick us, to find a way out of the barrier.”

“Great,” Wyatt muttered.

“That’s why we need to keep him focused on Ariella,” Max continued. “If we can make him lust after your magic and only that, he won’t have time for any tricks.”

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of the plan settle on my shoulders. “And if it

doesn't work?"

"Then we improvise," Max said, but the tightness in his jaw told me he knew just how dangerous that could be.

The trail narrowed, forcing us to walk single file through a jagged crevice. My breath came quicker as the walls pressed in around us, and I fought back the rising panic. If I lost control now, if my magic slipped free, I could bring the entire canyon down on us.

After what felt like an eternity, the path opened into a small cave, dimly lit by the glow of phosphorescent fungi clinging to the walls. Max stopped at the entrance, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "This is it. Everyone ready?"

A chorus of affirmations answered him, and I steeled myself for what was to come.

We moved forward, navigating a maze-like series of tunnels, each twist and turn leading us deeper underground.

The air grew colder, stale with the weight of centuries, and the darkness pressed against us like a living thing.

After nearly half an hour of walking, the tunnel widened into a small chamber. But when we reached the end, there was nothing but a solid wall of rock in front of us.

"What the hell?" Levi muttered, his frustration evident.

Max shook his head. "Watch."

He raised his hand, brushing his fingers over the stone. The air shimmered, and the rock wall dissolved like mist, revealing a hidden archway leading into a larger, open

space. A faint, pulsing barrier shimmered over the archway, casting a sickly green glow across the chamber beyond.

And there, in the center of the room, sat Thrallgon.

The demon was slumped over, almost human in appearance, but with skin that clung too tightly to his bones, his face half-hidden beneath the tattered hood of a filthy brown robe.

His head was nearly skeletal, the skin stretched over sharp cheekbones, with empty eye sockets that seemed to drink in the darkness.

He looked up as we approached, a grin spreading across his gaunt face, revealing rows of jagged teeth.

“Well, well,” he rasped, his voice echoing off the cavern walls. “It’s been a long time, Max. And you’ve brought friends.”

“Keep your focus,” Max said under his breath. He didn’t give Thrallgon any information, just a cold smile. “We have something you’ll want.”

Thrallgon’s gaze flicked over our group, his eyes lingering on each of us before settling on me. A shiver ran through me as his grin widened. “Oh, I see. A tasty morsel you’ve brought me. So much magic, so raw.”

“Here’s the deal,” Max said, his voice cold. “We give you a chance at her magic. You cooperate, we let you live. If you don’t ...”

Thrallgon let out a wheezing laugh, but the hunger in his gaze was clear. “You’ll kill me? Come on, Max, we all know you can’t.”

“Look around, Thrallgon.” Max spread his hands wide. “I think with this group, we can.”

The demon glanced around us, taking us all in. I imagined he had some kind of special power that let him sense everyone’s magic.

He grimaced. “Very well.”

Max motioned for us to prepare, and the witches and warlocks stepped forward, forming a semi-circle around me.

I handed the crystal to Lacey, who placed it in the center of their formation, murmuring a spell to activate it.

The gem flared with a bright green light, sending ripples of energy through the air.

Max gestured toward the barrier, and it shimmered before pulling apart, creating an opening just large enough for me to step through. My heart pounded in my chest as I crossed the threshold, every instinct screaming at me to run.

But there was no turning back now.

Thrallgon’s expression shifted from amusement to ravenous hunger as I stepped closer.

He raised a bony hand, and I felt a sickening pull, like something was reaching inside me and tugging at my core.

My knees buckled, and I gasped as the foreign magic began to seep out of me, drawn toward him like iron to a magnet.

The witches chanted, focusing on the crystal as it began to glow brighter, its light turning into a shield around me. I could feel the crystal trying to hold on to my true magic, but the strain was immense, like trying to stop a flood with a thin wall of glass.

“He’s too strong!” Abbie shouted, her voice trembling with effort. “I’m not sure the crystal can hold him off!”

Levi’s eyes flashed with determination. “Take my power. Use whatever you need.”

Farrah stepped closer, adding her voice to the chant. “Mine too. Just hold on.”

A surge of energy flowed into the crystal, bolstering its power, and I felt the strain ease slightly.

But Thrallgon’s pull grew stronger, his mouth twisting into a triumphant sneer.

The cave walls trembled, and I bit back a scream as the last of the foreign magic tore free from my body, leaving only my own power behind.

“Now!” Levi shouted, reaching for me. The witches and warlocks pulled me out of the barrier just as Thrallgon’s eyes blazed with darkfire. He thrust a hand toward me, and a bolt of black flames shot through the air.

It struck the crystal, which flared one last time, absorbing the impact before fizzling out, its glow extinguished. The crystal fell to the ground, lifeless, its power spent.

Thrallgon’s laughter filled the cavern, a deep, echoing sound that sent chills through me. He raised his arms, and the barrier around the chamber cracked, then shattered like glass.

“With all this magic, you thought you could contain me?” he sneered, his voice filled with malice. “Now you will all burn.”

Fire and ice rained down from above, the air filled with illusions that twisted the space around us.

Darkfire seared through the air, barely missing me as I ducked.

I summoned a bolt of light and hurled it at him, the energy crackling in my palms before launching forward.

It struck Thrallgon in the chest, sending him staggering back.

Levi was on him in an instant, tackling the demon to the ground, but Thrallgon shifted beneath him, transforming into a massive wolf. He lunged at me, fangs bared, but Levi intercepted, grappling with the creature.

Max appeared out of nowhere, moving with blinding speed. He brought his Dawnblade down on the demon’s back, and Thrallgon howled in pain, his form shifting back to his human shape.

“It won’t stop him for long!” Max warned, his voice tight.

Jasmin stepped forward, her eyes gleaming with a predatory hunger. She knelt beside the demon, her hands glowing with a dark, swirling energy.

“Let’s see if you taste as foul as you look,” she murmured, before pressing her hands against Thrallgon’s chest.

A ripple of power surged through the air as she began to drain the demon’s essence. Thrallgon’s mouth twisted into a silent scream, his body convulsing as his soul was

ripped from him, bit by bit. I watched, my breath held, as Jasmin's expression shifted from focus to strain, her skin paling.

"Are you okay?" Lacey called, her voice edged with worry.

Jasmin gasped, her body shuddering as she continued to draw in the demon's power. "It's... a lot," she managed, her voice tight with effort. "I just need to?"

The demon's body went slack beneath her hands. Without wasting a second, Max brought down his Dawnblade, piercing the demon's chest. Its form crumbled like ash.

Jasmin fell back, practically drunk on the power she had taken in. Rage was at her side in an instant, supporting her as she swayed. "I'll take care of her."

Max knelt beside the remains, sprinkling a silvery powder over them. The demon's body dissolved into smoke, disappearing into the air, leaving behind nothing but silence.

It took a moment for the realization to sink in. Thrallgon was dead. The threat was gone.

And I had only my magic!

A laugh bubbled up in my chest, wild and giddy. I looked around at the others—our unlikely, exhausted group of warriors—and felt a surge of gratitude and relief. "We did it."

"We sure did," Abbie said with a smile.

"If we're done here, we should go," Max said, his voice tight, as if something was bothering him.

Even though we had defeated Thrallgon and the barrier was gone, Max said the chamber was still full of magic and it would be easier to portal outside the cave. So for the next thirty minutes, we made our way through the tunnels.

When finally out, Aspen stepped forward and opened a portal to the warehouse, and everyone began to filter through.

Levi wrapped an arm around my shoulders, his warmth seeping into me. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get home.”



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

We stumbled back through the portal into the warehouse, the air inside feeling cooler, cleaner, a stark contrast to the stifling darkness of the demon's cave.

My breath came in shaky bursts, but it was from relief, not fear. For the first time in what felt like forever, my magic thrummed beneath my skin, stable, no longer threatening to tear me apart from the inside.

The others followed, filtering through the portal one by one. I turned to face them, letting the gratitude that had been building inside me spill over. "Thank you. All of you. I don't think I'd be here without your help."

Lacey, Abbey, and Aspen circled around me, as if performing an x-ray of my insides with their eyes. I held still, and everyone around us seemed to be just as tense.

Aspen nodded first. "I say it worked."

"Me too," Abbie agreed.

Instead of words, Lacey let out a sigh and pulled me into a tight hug, and Abbie patted my back before pulling away with a small smile.

"We're just glad you're all right, Ariella," Lacey said softly. "And that this whole ordeal didn't end in a disaster."

Max nodded, his expression serious as ever, though I caught the hint of a smile at the corner of his lips. "Glad it all worked out."

Everyone looked as relieved and elated as I did. Everyone except Jasmin, who leaned heavily on Rage's arm.

"Are you okay?" I asked, suddenly worried.

She waved me off. "Just tired. That freak had one strong soul."

"She needs to rest," Rage said, sounding protective. "If I can get a portal, I would like to take her back to the underworld."

"Of course," Aspen said, opening a new portal for them.

Jasmin gave me a wink, her usual smirk softened by exhaustion. "Try not to get into too much trouble without me, Ariella."

I laughed, the sound lighter than it had been in weeks. "No promises."

She and Rage disappeared through the portal, and soon everyone else left too, until it was just Levi and me standing in the middle of the empty space.

The quiet settled over us, broken only by the distant hum of the city outside. Levi turned to me, his eyes gleaming in the dim light.

"Looks like you don't need to be locked up in here anymore," he said, his tone teasing but his expression soft. "How does it feel to be free again?"

I exhaled slowly, letting the tension drain from my shoulders. "It feels good. Really good."

Levi's lips twitched into a smile, and he reached for my hand. "Come on, sweetheart. I think you've had enough of this place."

He led me to his office, where a magical door led to his apartment in a fancy neighborhood in Houston. We stepped through it and I glanced around, taking in the familiarity of the place.

It was an open space of concrete and metal, not very dissimilar to the warehouse, but it had Levi's furniture, a very sleek kitchen, and most importantly: his heady scent filled the air.

Levi turned to me, his gaze intense, and something deeper than just relief flickered in his eyes. "Are you hungry, sweetheart?"

"Not really."

He reached out, brushing a strand of hair away from my face. "Are you too tired?" he asked, his voice low, rough with emotion.

I tilted my head, pretending to think about it. "Too tired for what?"

His lips curved into a smirk, but his eyes burned with a heat that sent shivers racing down my spine. He stepped closer, his hands settling on my waist, his breath warm against my ear. "For this."

Before I could respond, he pulled me against him, his mouth crashing into mine with a fierce hunger.

I melted into the kiss, my hands tangling in his hair as he backed me toward the bedroom.

Each touch, each press of his lips against mine, sent sparks of electricity through my veins—my magic dancing in time with my heartbeat, but for once, entirely under my control.

His strong arms moved from my face and down my sides before he gripped my waist, electricity coursing through me with each little touch.

I gasped as his hands firmly grasped behind my legs as he lifted me in the air. Instinctively, I wrapped my legs around his waist, letting him carry me toward the bedroom, never breaking our lips apart as his tongue continued to electrify mine.

My heart beat wildly as he set me down on the bed, our bodies still entwined as he hovered over me, his mouth trailing down my jaw and to my neck.

“Sweetheart,” he breathed as his fingers swept between us, his touch hot and burning into my skin even over my shirt. “Do you know just how beautiful you are? Your magic is flowing through you, making you glow so perfectly.”

I swallowed hard, opening my eyes slowly to meet his darkened ones. “Am I really glowing?”

I looked over his shoulder at my hand, expecting it to be shimmering in the soft lamp light. But it looked normal, just like it had before I got my magic back.

He laughed, his chest rumbling against mine. “No, sweetheart. It’s not something I can see, but feel.”

With his words, his hand trailed down my chest until it lay between my breasts, my heart beating wildly against his palm.

His eyes stayed on mine as his digits tiptoed down my stomach and then lay between us on my core, already heated even with my jeans between us.

He smirked, a look I’d known so well, and the only warning before he leaned back on his knees and quickly gripped my leg, tossing it over my body as he slid behind me,

my back now pressed against his chest so I could feel the hard contours of him against me.

“Do you want to watch yourself glow, Sweetheart?” he whispered as his hands went back to my stomach, then dipped lower, pressing just against the waistband of my jeans.

I breathed hard, following his darkened gaze to the--by the bed, framing both of our flushed bodies.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't even speak, just let the pleasure flow through me as he slowly dipped his fingers, brushing the lace of my panties.

The magic already flowing in my veins now pulsed through my body, my heart beating wildly as I stared at our reflection.

I watched as he unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans, pulling them free so I sat in nothing but my panties, legs spread before the mirror.

His palm pressed against my center, giving just enough pressure that I let out a small gasp before he pulled away.

I whimpered at the loss of his touch, which elicited a chuckle as he trailed kisses down my shoulder.

“Relax, Sweetheart,” he murmured, his fingers slowly trailing my thighs before hovering just above my center.

My body heated. Frantic. It took everything I had not to push my hips forward and will his expert fingers to exactly where I wanted them.

He laughs again, his breath tickling the sensitive skin where my shoulder meets my neck. But that's not the only sensation that has me breathing heavier as he pushes aside the lace of my panties, arousal already dripping from my center as he dips a finger inside of me.

My center throbs, begging for more as he moves slowly. Too slowly for my heated body.

I push my hips closer, causing him to stop his movements and laugh as he kisses my shoulder.

"Just enjoy the show, Ariella. Breathe," he rasps, picking up the movement of his expert fingers, swirling inside of me.

I gasp, my thighs shaking as my eyes drift closed, ready to do nothing but let my orgasm take hold.

"Eyes on the mirror, Sweetheart," he commands, his voice tight.

His hard length presses against my back, his voice ragged as he continues swirling his digits inside of mine as if he's trying to hold his pleasure to release mine.

My eyes slowly slide open as I watch my body light up to his, pulsing as my orgasm finally takes over and I moan, calling out his name as my body shudders against his fingers.

"That's it, Sweetheart," he growls, rubbing me through my aftershocks.

I tilt my head back to his, taking his lips in mine as I kiss him again, this time even more frantically.

I need him more than I ever have, pulling him back to me as I quickly free him of his shirt, the rest of our clothes disappearing in a flurry between our desperate kisses.

As I lay down, watching as Levi positioned himself between my thighs, something new blossomed in my chest.

Something I had felt for so long, but was too afraid to say.

I knew how, every time he was near me, it was as if my heart beat faster and slower at the same time, and not just because he was inside of me.

It was everything about him—how he surrounded me with comfort and protected me. Treated me like the Goddess I was.

And as our bodies joined together, a burst of pleasure shot through me, stronger than my first orgasm, my body shaking against his.

He held me close, our breathing mixed as one as we moved together, frantic as if we needed more of each other.

I clung to him as if I never wanted the moment to end. I didn't know where I began and he ended. I'd been so lost until he found me, and now I never wanted to let him go.

With each movement of my hips and breathy kisses, I tried to say what words couldn't. How he kept the magic alive in me even when I didn't think it was possible. How everything about him sparked something new in me.

When his eyes met mine, his breathing ragged, and I felt him pick up the pace against me, I knew he was close. That I wanted us to finish together.

He moved his hand between us, rubbing my sensitive area as I gasped, my whole body now on fire as I screamed out his name.

He shuddered soon after, before collapsing onto my chest.

We didn't say anything, our breathing in sync as we lay with our bodies tangled together.

I wanted nothing more than to remember that moment forever or for as long as he'd have me.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

I woke up to sunlight streaming through the windows of Levi's apartment, painting the exposed concrete walls with a golden glow. For a moment, I just lay there, savoring the feel of the soft sheets against my skin and the warmth of Levi's arm draped around my waist.

It was the first time in weeks that I'd slept through the night without waking up in pain or panic. My magic hummed beneath my skin, calm and steady like a heartbeat, no longer fighting for dominance with foreign power. It felt right—like coming home after being lost for far too long.

I shifted slightly, careful not to wake Levi, and ran a mental inventory of my body. No tightness in my chest. No pressure behind my eyes. No feeling like I might explode at any second. Just me, just my own magic, perfectly in balance.

"Stop thinking so loudly," Levi murmured, his voice rough with sleep. His arm tightened around me, pulling me closer against his chest. "It's too early for that, sweetheart."

I laughed softly, turning to face him. His hair was tousled, his eyes still heavy-lidded, and something warm bloomed in my chest at the sight. "I can't help it. I feel normal again."

"Normal?" He quirked an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at his lips. "I wouldn't go that far."

I rolled my eyes and shoved at his shoulder, but there was no real force behind it. "You know what I mean."

He caught my hand, bringing it to his lips. “I do.” His expression softened, something serious flickering in his eyes. “How's the magic?”

I closed my eyes, focusing inward, searching for that familiar well of power. It responded instantly, a gentle pulse of energy that felt as natural as breathing. “Good. Calm. Like it’s been waiting for me to come back to it.”

“Good.” His thumb traced circles on the inside of my wrist, his touch sending shivers across my skin. “Now, can we go back to sleep?”

“No way,” I said, pushing myself up to sit against the headboard. “We’ve got work to do. Rhodes is still out there with the dagger, and we don't have a clue what he's planning.”

Levi groaned, dragging a hand down his face. “Couldn't we at least have one day of peace before diving back into the apocalypse?”

I gave him a wry smile. “Since when did you become the optimist between us?”

“I’m not an optimist,” he grumbled, sitting up beside me. “I’m just tired of chasing shadows. We don't even know where to start.”

He was right, of course. We had the crystal from the dragon shifter—which I now needed to return before the blood oath started to take effect—and I had my magic back, but we were still no closer to finding Rhodes or figuring out his plan for Elysium.

“We start with what we know,” I said, reaching for my phone on the nightstand. “Let's call everyone, see if anyone’s heard anything.”

Over the next few hours, we cycled through calls to every contact we had.

I spoke with Erin, Rey, Shane, Raika, Hazel, Almae, and even tried Drake's private line, but the answer was always the same: nothing.

Elysium had gone quiet. No angels spotted on Earth, no disturbances, no hints of what Rhodes might be planning next.

"It doesn't make sense," I said, tossing my phone onto the coffee table where Levi and I had set up a makeshift command center. "He has the dagger. Why isn't he making a move?"

Levi leaned back on the couch, his expression thoughtful. "Maybe he already did, and we just don't know it yet."

A chill crept up my spine at the thought. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it, sweetheart. If Rhodes wanted to use the dagger on Adona, he wouldn't announce it to the whole realm. He'd do it quietly, take over with minimal resistance."

"But Ezekiel would have told us if Adona was gone," I argued. "He has eyes inside the castle."

"Unless he doesn't know either." Levi stood and started pacing the length of the living room. "We're missing something here."

Frustration welled up inside me, and I could feel my magic responding, crackling beneath my skin like static electricity. I clenched my fists, trying to keep it in check, but it had been weeks since I'd used my powers freely, and the urge to release it was overwhelming.

Levi noticed, his gaze sharpening as he watched me. "Come on," he said, grabbing

his keys from the counter. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Where are we going?”

A smirk played at the corner of his mouth. “You need to blow off some steam, sweetheart. And I know just the place.”

Two minutes later, we were back at the warehouse, but this time, it wasn’t a prison. Levi had used his magic to erect shadowy dummies along the far wall.

“Really?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “This is your grand plan?”

“It’s been a while since you’ve used your magic,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “Need to make sure you’re still in fighting shape.”

I rolled my shoulders, feeling the magic pulse beneath my skin, eager and ready. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Taking a deep breath, I centered myself, focusing on the first target. I called the magic, letting it well up from my core and flow down my arm. It came willingly, a rush of warm, golden energy that danced across my fingertips.

With a flick of my wrist, I sent a bolt of light hurtling toward the target. It struck true, right in the center of the dummy's chest, exploding in a shower of sparks. The impact knocked the target back against the wall, where it shuddered before righting itself.

A laugh bubbled up from my chest, pure exhilaration coursing through me. “It still works!”

“Did you think it wouldn’t?” Levi asked, his voice low and teasing.

I shrugged, already focusing on the next target. “After everything that’s happened, I wasn’t sure.”

One by one, I worked through the targets, my magic flowing more smoothly with each blast. It felt incredible, like stretching a muscle after being cramped for too long.

By the time I reached the last dummy, I was breathing hard, sweat beading on my forehead, but I felt more alive than I had in weeks.

“Show-off,” Levi said as I sent a particularly flashy burst of light through the final target, spinning it like a top before it crashed to the floor.

“You’re just jealous,” I shot back, grinning at him.

His eyes darkened, and he took a step toward me. “Jealous? Of what?”

“That I make it look so good.”

A low chuckle rumbled from his chest, and suddenly, he was right in front of me, his hands settling on my waist. “You know what else you make look good?”

“What?” I asked, my voice breathier than I intended.

His lips curved into a smirk, and he leaned in, his breath hot against my ear. “Everything.”

Before I could respond, his mouth was on mine, hot and demanding. The magic still humming beneath my skin seemed to respond to his touch, warming and spreading like wildfire. I melted into him, my hands sliding up his chest and into his hair.

He backed me up against one of the chaise lounges—remnants from my time trapped

in the circle—and pressed me down onto it, his body covering mine. His lips traced a burning path down my neck, and I arched into him, all thoughts of Rhodes and Elysium momentarily forgotten.

“Levi,” I gasped as his hands slid under my shirt, his touch setting my skin on fire.

He pulled back just enough to look at me, his eyes dark with desire. “Yes, sweetheart?”

“Don't stop.”

His smile was wicked, full of promise, and as he lowered his mouth to mine again, I surrendered to the feeling, letting the world fade away until there was nothing but us, tangled together in the quiet of the warehouse.

\* \* \*

Another day passed, and the restlessness only grew. I spent the morning curled up on an armchair, trying to read an actual fiction book, not one for research, but my mind couldn't focus on the words on the page.

Levi watched me from the couch, amusement flickering in his eyes as I turned another page.

“You know, there are more productive ways to relax,” he drawled, a suggestive note in his voice.

I shot him a look, but I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips. “We can't just stay in bed all day.”

“Why not? I'm a demon. Sloth is kind of our thing.”

“And I'm an angel. We're supposed to be virtuous.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That ship sailed a long time ago, sweetheart.”

I tossed the book aside with a sigh, and moved to the couch with him. “I just can't stop thinking about Ezekiel. What if he was caught? What if Rhodes figured out he was spying for us?”

Levi's expression sobered. “He knew the risks when he offered to help.”

“That doesn't make it any better.” I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “If we don't hear from him in another day or two, I'm going in.”

“Going in where, exactly?”

“Elysium,” I said, my voice steady despite the flutter of anxiety in my chest. “I need to see what's happening for myself.”

Levi's jaw tightened. “That's a suicide mission, sweetheart.”

“I'm not asking for your permission, Levi.” I met his gaze head-on, refusing to back down. “I'm not going to sit here while Rhodes dismantles everything I've ever believed in.”

For a moment, I thought he might argue, but instead, he just shook his head. “You're going to get yourself killed.”

“Maybe. But at least I'll have tried.”

He studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. “Well, if you're determined to walk into the lion's den, I'm not going to stop you. But I don't have to

like it.”

I reached for his hand, twining my fingers with his. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For understanding.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up in a wry smile. “Don't thank me yet, sweetheart. If you get yourself killed, I'm going to be very annoyed.”

Before I could respond, a sharp beep cut through the air—the alert from the warehouse's motion sensors. Levi was on his feet in an instant, his expression shifting from relaxed to alert in the blink of an eye.

“Stay here,” he said, moving toward the office where the magical door connected to his apartment.

“Not a chance,” I replied, following close behind him.

We slipped through the door, stepping into the main area of the warehouse. At first, I saw nothing but shadows and dust motes dancing in the beams of sunlight that filtered through the high windows. But then, a movement caught my eye—a figure emerging from behind a stack of crates.

“Ezekiel?” I called, relief washing over me.

The young angel stepped forward, his face drawn with exhaustion. “Sorry it took me so long.” His voice was hoarse, like he hadn't slept in days. “Things are intense up there.”



Levi gestured for him to come closer. “You look like hell, kid.”

“Thanks,” Ezekiel said dryly. He glanced between us, his brow furrowing slightly. “You look better, Ariella. Were you able to fix your magic?”

I nodded. “I’m okay now. What about you? What’s happening in Elysium?”

Ezekiel ran a hand through his disheveled hair. “Rhodes and Haines are up to something big. They’ve been pulling guardians from their posts, bringing them to the castle—only the ones they trust completely.”

A cold weight settled in my stomach. “And the others?”

“There’s an archangel who disappeared a day ago,” Ezekiel said, his voice dropping to just above a whisper. “Sabriel. He was outspoken about his concerns regarding Rhodes’s leadership.”

“You think they killed him?” Levi asked bluntly.

Ezekiel nodded, his expression grim. “I can’t prove it, but the timing is suspicious. And he’s not the first to vanish after questioning Rhodes.”

I swallowed hard, trying to push back the surge of anger that rose in my chest. “What else?”

“I might have found a way for you to get into Elysium,” Ezekiel said, his voice lifting slightly. “There’s a garden behind the castle—the Light Garden. The golden lilies that grow there, they’re special.”

“Special how?” I asked, leaning forward.

“They're used to make an elixir,” he explained. “It grants other supernaturals the ability to cross the gates temporarily. It's only used for special events and meetings, and it hasn't been used in years, but it exists.”

Hope flickered to life inside me. “How did you find out about this?”

A ghost of a smile crossed Ezekiel's face. “I asked a high ranked professor. Tried to be casual about it—said I was studying the history of supernatural relations with Elysium for a class. He didn't suspect anything.”

“And you think you can get some of these lilies?” Levi asked, his tone skeptical.

Ezekiel nodded. “The garden isn't heavily guarded. It's mostly ceremonial these days. If I'm careful, I can sneak in and take what we need.”

I exchanged a glance with Levi, a plan already forming in my mind. “We have witches who could work with the lilies, make the elixir.”

“They wouldn't know how to make the elixir,” Levi said, though I could tell by the gleam in his eyes that he was already on board.

“It'll be trial and error,” I replied. “But this is the best shot we have.”

Ezekiel shifted his weight, looking suddenly nervous. “I should head back before anyone notices I'm gone.”

I caught his arm before he could turn away. “Ezekiel, wait.” His eyes met mine, questioning. “My sister, my mother ... You're keeping an eye on them, right?”

“Always.”

“If anything seems wrong, if you think they're in danger, or things are escalating, get them out of there. Hide them if you have to.”

“I will,” he promised, his voice solemn. “I care about them too, Ariella.”

The sincerity in his eyes made my throat tighten. “I know.”

He stared at me, his jaw set with determination. “I'll be back with the lilies as soon as I can.”

As he turned to leave, I called after him, “Be careful, Zeke.”

He glanced back at me, a small smile tugging at his lips. “Always am.”

We watched him go, slipping out through the warehouse doors and into the sunlight beyond. For a long moment, neither of us spoke, the weight of what was to come settling heavily between us.

“So,” Levi finally said, breaking the silence. “Looks like we're going to Elysium after all.”

I nodded, my mind already racing with plans and possibilities. “We need to call Abbie, Lacey, and the others. If Ezekiel comes through with the lilies, we need to be ready.”

Levi's hand found mine, his grip steady and warm. “Why call when we can visit?” He flipped one of the coins in his other hand.

I smiled at him. “Even better.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

Three days crawled by like eternity. Each morning, I woke up expecting news, a message, something—anything to break the endless cycle of waiting. But Ezekiel remained silent, the angels stayed hidden, and the rest of the supernatural world seemed to be holding its breath.

To keep from losing my mind, I threw myself into training.

Levi and I spent hours at the warehouse, working with my magic, making sure it was truly stable.

Day by day, my confidence grew. My light bolts flew true, my shields held strong, and for the first time in months, I felt like myself again—an angel with purpose and power.

“Your aim's getting better,” Levi observed one afternoon as I hit the center of a target for the fifth time in a row.

A thin sheen of sweat covered his skin, his shirt discarded hours ago.

Even after endless rounds of sparring, he barely looked winded—just one of the many perks of being a higher demon, I supposed.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead, grinning despite my exhaustion. “Was that a compliment? From the great Leviathan himself? I'm honored.”

He rolled his eyes, but I caught the small smile tugging at his lips. “Don't let it go to your head, sweetheart.”

I summoned another light bolt, letting it dance across my fingertips before hurling it at a moving target Levi had rigged up. The bolt struck with perfect precision, sending the target spinning wildly.

“Too late,” I called over my shoulder as I headed for the water bottles we'd set aside. “I'm already planning to put that on my résumé. 'Ariella: Kicker of ass, so impressive even Leviathan noticed.'”

Levi laughed, the sound echoing through the warehouse. “You're impossible.”

“And yet, here you are.” I tossed him a water bottle, which he caught with ease.

Our eyes met, and for a moment, everything else faded away—Rhodes, the dagger, the looming threat of war. All that remained was the two of us, breathing hard in the dim light of the warehouse, connected by something deeper than magic or fate.

“Here I am,” he agreed softly.

We didn't always train with magic. Some days, we traded energy bolts for blades, sparring with the practiced ease of two warriors who had spent their lives in battle.

Other days, when even the warehouse felt too confined, we ventured out to a nearby park, running for miles along winding trails that cut through the heart of Houston.

Those were the moments I treasured most—the sun on my face, the rhythm of our footsteps matching as we pushed ourselves harder, faster. Sometimes, I could almost pretend we were normal. Just two people, living ordinary lives, without the weight of realms resting on our shoulders.

But we weren't normal, and the constant absence of news was a reminder that our brief interlude of peace wouldn't last.

“Maybe we should go somewhere else,” I suggested one evening as we cooked dinner together in Levi's kitchen. He was chopping vegetables with quick, precise movements while I stirred a pot of pasta sauce. “Somewhere with better access to information.”

Levi glanced at me, his expression thoughtful. “Where exactly?”

I shrugged, frustrated by my own restlessness. “I don't know. Maybe the Great Eternity Hall. Anywhere might be better than just sitting here, waiting.”

“We're not just sitting around,” Levi pointed out, sliding the chopped vegetables into a pan where they sizzled in hot oil. “We're preparing. Getting stronger. And the Hall hasn't exactly been a wellspring of useful information lately.”

He was right, of course. We'd visited the Hall every day, spending hours combing through ancient tomes and scrolls, searching for any mention of the Scarlet Hex Dagger or alternative ways to enter Elysium.

But each visit ended the same way—with more questions than answers, and a growing sense that we were running out of time.

“I know,” I sighed, setting the wooden spoon aside. “I just feel like we're missing something important. Like the answer is right in front of us, but we can't see it.”

Levi moved behind me, his hands settling on my shoulders, kneading the tension away. “Relax, sweetheart.”

“Easier said than done.” I leaned back against him, drawing comfort from his warmth. “I just wish Ezekiel would contact us. What if something happened to him?”

“He's smart, he's careful,” Levi said, his voice steady and reassuring. “And if he can't

get to us, we'll find another way.”

I turned in his arms, looking up at him. “Does being a higher demon incur sudden increasing wisdom?”

A smirk tugged at his lips. “Ha, I wish.”

I laughed, some of the tension easing from my shoulders. “Right? If that was a thing, I would love to learn it.”

“Now,” he said, stepping back to check on the vegetables, “are we going to eat, or keep talking about depressing scenarios all night?”

When the food was ready, we sat down on the long, glass table, Levi at the head, and me on his right side.

I frowned as I served myself. “Hopefully this isn’t depressing scenarios or subject, but ...

what about your business? From before you met me?

All of your demon related dealings, and the wishes, and whatever else you did?

” I honestly didn’t know exactly what he did before, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. “How’s that going?”

He stared at me, his dark eyes gleaming. “Well, since you asked, I should tell you that since you saved me from being a mindless demon, I lost the connection with the wishing book.”

My mouth fell open. “What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We had plenty on our plates with your death, the foreign magic, Rhodes, and Elysium.” He shook his head. “It never seemed like the right time, and it isn’t important.”

“Of course it is important,” I said, still shocked. “That’s a good thing, right?”

He nodded. “Mostly. I don’t have an advantage now when I want a favor or knowledge, but those days are behind me.”

“What do you mean?”

He reached across the table and took my hand in his. “I don’t want to live that life anymore, sweetheart. I say, after all of this is done, we take my fortune and retreat to Maldives or Bora Bora.”

My chest expanded with such a powerful feeling. Here was a higher demon who had been in the morally gray space for most of his life, and he was telling me he was ready to abandon everything—that he already had!—to live a quiet life with me.

I didn’t know what to say. The words escaped me and if I tried saying anything, I would babble like a kid with a new toy, or I would choke.

So instead I squeezed his hand and ate dinner.

After, we curled up on Levi's couch to watch a movie—some action thriller that was more explosion than plot. But even though I tried, I couldn’t really pay attention.

My thoughts kept drifting back to Elysium, to Rhodes, to my family.

I wondered if my mother was worried about me.



If Adriel still believed I was a traitor. The thought made my chest ache.

“You're thinking too loudly again,” Levi murmured, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my arm.

I smiled faintly. “Sorry. Occupational hazard of being me, I guess.”

“Want to talk about it?”

I considered for a moment, then shook my head. “Not really. Just the usual doom and gloom.”

He studied me, his dark eyes searching. “You know, it's okay to enjoy this”—he gestured between us—“even with everything else going on. You're allowed to have moments of peace, sweetheart.”

A lump formed in my throat at the gentleness in his voice. “I know. It's just strange.”

“What is?”

“This.” I waved my hand, indicating the apartment, the movie, the comfortable domesticity of it all. “Playing house, pretending we have normal lives. We never will, you know. Not really.”

Levi was quiet for a long moment, his gaze thoughtful. “Maybe not. But that doesn't mean we can't have this, sweetheart. Moments stolen between battles. It's more than a lot of people get.”

I looked at him—really looked at him—and felt something shift inside me. Levi, who had been through centuries of war and darkness, had found a way to carve out these small pockets of joy.

Maybe I could learn to do the same.

“You're right,” I said softly. “And for what it's worth, I'm glad we have this.” I gestured between us. “Whatever it is.”

His lips curved into a smile, and he pulled me closer. “So am I, sweetheart. So am I.”

The following day, we visited the Great Eternity Hall again. This time, though, their grandmother insisted we stayed longer and eat lunch with her.

“So glad you could join us today,” Belinda said warmly as we settled around the familiar dining table.

Despite her advanced years, her eyes still sparkled with life as she gestured for us to help ourselves to the food that had appeared magically before us.

“I've asked Myg to prepare all my best recipes.”

The little goblin housekeeper looked bored as she disappeared back to the kitchen.

“As if we'd turn down free food,” Levi replied with his usual smirk, already reaching for a platter of perfectly roasted duck.

“Some of us have manners, demon,” Magnus muttered from the far end of the table, though his perpetual scowl had long since lost its effect on Levi.

“And some of us are still waiting to find theirs,” Abbie countered smoothly, shooting her uncle a pointed look.

Trent slumped in his chair, pushing his potatoes around his plate with disinterest. “Can we not talk about manners? I've had enough lectures for one day after that

disaster with the elemental binding spell.”

“It wasn't that bad,” Gwen offered, though her attempt at comfort fell flat.

“You only flooded half the library,” Britt added with a sympathetic grimace. “Last month when I tried it, I somehow managed to summon a minor dust storm that took three days to clean up.”

“That's because neither of you concentrate properly,” Magnus grumbled between bites.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

Belinda waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, hush, Magnus. I recall a certain young warlock who once turned all the books in the east wing into butterflies because he couldn't pronounce a simple transformation reversal.”

The table erupted in laughter as Magnus's ears turned pink, and even Trent cracked a smile.

I felt a warmth spreading through me that had nothing to do with the excellent food.

These moments of everyday family life—the teasing, the shared history, the comfortable chaos of it all—had become precious to me in ways I couldn't quite explain.

The delicious dessert appeared in front of us and I reached for my spoon. A low beeping started and I glanced at Levi. He fished his phone from his pocket and stared at the screen.

“The motion detectors,” he said.

Shit. Mourning the loss of such amazing looking dessert, Levi and I got up from the table and started saying goodbye to everyone.

Abbie and Lacey stood too and said they would come with us.

I was ready to tell them it wasn't necessary when I remembered that if Ezekiel was here, if it was him, then it meant he had the flowers ... hopefully.

Abbie used one of the coins to open a portal and we all went back to Levi's apartment.

From there, we crossed the magical door to the warehouse.

Sure enough, Ezekiel stood in the center of the cold, dark building.

"There you are," I said, rushing toward him. Up close, I could see the exhaustion in his face, the circles under his eyes. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, though his movements were stiff. "I'm fine. Just it's been a long few days."

Levi approached, his expression guarded. "Did you get them?"

In answer, Ezekiel reached into his jacket, pulling out a small cloth bundle. With gentle movements, he unwrapped it, revealing a handful of lilies so brilliantly golden they seemed to glow from within.

"I couldn't get many," he said, his voice tinged with apology. "The garden is more heavily guarded than I expected. This was all I could take without raising suspicion."

I stared at the flowers, hardly daring to hope. "Is it enough?"

"I don't know," Ezekiel admitted. "I've never seen the elixir made. But it's all I have."

"We'll see what we can come up with," Abbie said. Ezekiel offered her the lilies and she carefully took them. "Hopefully this will be enough to get at least a handful of us in."

My mind raced with possibilities. If the witches could come up with an elixir and it

worked, if we could actually cross into Elysium, we might have a chance to stop Rhodes before he could use the dagger.

We could warn Adona, rally those still loyal to her, maybe even end this before it became a war.

“How long will it take to make the elixir?” I asked, turning to Abbie.

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “I’ll need to analyze the flowers, figure out their properties. It could be days.”

Ezekiel shifted his weight, glancing anxiously toward the entrance. “I can’t stay long. If someone notices I’m gone”

“Of course,” I said quickly. “Go back. Stay safe.”

He hesitated, his gaze flickering between me and the door. “There’s something else you should know. Rhodes has scheduled some kind of ceremony for five days from now. Something big, with all his closest allies in attendance. I don’t know what it is, but...”

My blood ran cold. “The dagger. He’s going to use it on Adona.”

“That’s my guess,” Ezekiel agreed grimly. “I’ve been trying to find out more, but they’re keeping the details close.”

“Five days,” Levi murmured. “That’s not much time.”

“We’ll make it work,” I said, more confidently than I felt. I turned back to Ezekiel, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Before you go, I need you to do something for me.”

He nodded. “Name it.”

“My mother, my sister—they need to be away from the capital when this happens. If you can convince them to come with you, bring them here. If not, get them to the countryside, somewhere safe.”

“Adriel won't be easy to convince,” Ezekiel warned. “She's stubborn.”

I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips. “It runs in the family. But try. Please. They need to be safe when the fighting starts.”

“I will do my best,” he promised.

“I know you will.” I squeezed his shoulder gently. “That's why I'm asking you.”

He nodded, his expression solemn. “I should go.” His gaze shifted to the lilies in Abbie's hands. “Make good use of those. They're not easy to replace.”

“We will,” Abbie assured him. “Thank you, Ezekiel.”

With one last nod, he turned and walked out the door.

For a moment, we all stood in silence, the weight of what lay ahead settling over us like a shroud. Five days until Rhodes made his move. Five days to figure out how to make the elixir, how to get into Elysium, and how to stop a war before it began.

“Well,” Levi said, breaking the silence, “looks like our vacation's over.”

I shot him a look, but there was no real annoyance behind it. “It was a good run while it lasted.”

“So,” Abbie said, carefully counting the golden lilies, “who's going to Elysium?”

“Me, obviously,” I said without hesitation. “But I don’t need the elixir. I think Levi won’t need it either.”

He nodded.

“I’m going,” Lacey said, her tone leaving no room for argument.

“Me too,” Abbie said. “So with me, we need at least two doses,” Abbie said. “I might be able to work with that.”

Levi frowned. “I’m sure more of our friends will want to come if we ask.”

“Let’s see how much I can get done with this first,” Abbie said.

I nodded. “I hate to push it, but we don’t have much time.”

Abbie nodded. “Right. I’ll be going back to the Great Eternity Hall right now. I’m sure Maggie and Gwen will love to help with this.”

“And me too,” Lacey said.

Abbie smiled at her. “Of course.”

She opened another portal for her and Lacey. I almost went with them, but I knew I would just hover over their shoulder, make them more nervous, and wouldn’t help at all.

When the girls were gone, I let out a long sigh.



Levi stepped in front of me and wrapped his big arms around me, pulling me tight against him. “I can feel your tension, sweetheart.”

“I can’t help it,” I said, my cheek pressed against his chest.

“I know.” He kissed the top of my head. “Just remember, you’re not alone anymore. You have me and you have all of your friends.”

I squeezed him harder, thankful for his words, for his warmth, for his strong, stable presence.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

The warehouse had become a familiar second home over the past few days. Levi and I had settled into a rhythm, training every morning, pushing each other to our limits, making sure we were ready for whatever waited for us in Elysium.

I had just finished a particularly grueling session with my Celestial sword when the warehouse door creaked open, letting in a thin stream of sunlight. I lowered my blade, sweat trickling down my temple, and watched as Almae and Keeran stepped inside.

“Don't stop on our account,” Almae said, a small smile playing at her lips. “It's been a while since I've seen an angel wield a sword like that.”

I sheathed the blade, wiping my forehead with the back of my hand. “Just trying to stay sharp. We don't have much time until we infiltrate Elysium.”

“Speaking of which ...” Almae frowned. “Any news on the elixir?”

Levi expression was grim. “It's complicated. Abbie and Lacey are working around the clock, but the lilies are proving more intricate than anticipated. The magic is ancient, layered. It's not something they can rush.”

It had been a lot more complex than we had hoped for. Lacey and Abbie had recruited Hazel, Anna, and Brita to come help, and they also had called Lavinia and Thea at the DuMoir Castle, asking for any ideas.

So far, nothing was working.

“That’s not my area of expertise, but if you want, I can come take a look,” Almae suggested.

Keeran nodded. “Same.”

“That would be great, actually,” I said, a sliver of hope twisting itself around my chest.

“But we’re not here for that,” Keeran said.

I tensed. “What happened?”

“One of my scouts found something interesting,” he said, shifting his weight. As the Warlock Lord, Keeran had scouts and spies working around the country, around the whole world. “Something we stumbled upon while searching for information on Rhodes.”

“And on Sarki,” Almae added.

My interest piqued. “What did you find?”

Keeran gestured to the makeshift seating area we'd set up for when I was staying in the warehouse. “Mind if we sit? It's a bit of a story.”

We settled onto the chaise lounges, and Keeran passed a hand over the crates that had served as tables between us.

A shimmering map appeared, hovering in the air—a detailed projection of what looked like a rural area, with small clusters of buildings surrounded by vast stretches of forest and farmland.

“What are we looking at?” I asked, leaning forward to study the map.

“Pinewood Valley,” Keeran said. “A small town about three hours north of here. Population barely four hundred, mostly human. But it's known in certain circles as a sanctuary for hidden supernaturals.”

Levi's brow furrowed. “What kind of hidden supernaturals?”

“The usual mix,” Almae said. “A handful of witches who prefer isolation, a couple of shifters, a few vampires who've settled down to live quiet lives away from the politics of the covens.” She paused, her eyes meeting mine. “And, apparently, angels.”

My head snapped up. “Angels? On Earth? Not just visitors, but living here?”

Keeran nodded. “A group calling themselves the Lost Legion. Led by an exiled archangel, from what our sources could gather. Very secretive. When one of my scouts tried to make contact, they were warned—rather forcefully—to stay away.”

My mind raced with possibilities. Angels who lived on Earth, separate from Elysium. Angels who might know alternative ways in and out of the realm. Angels who might be willing to fight against Rhodes, if they had already been exiled.

“How did you find them?” Levi asked, a note of skepticism in his voice.

“Pure chance,” Keeran admitted. “We've had scouts all over, looking for traces of Sarki and gathering any information on angelic activity. Two of them spotted a pair of angels in Pinewood Valley, running what looked like errands. They tried to approach them, but the angels vanished before they could make contact.”

“Later,” Almae continued, “one of them overheard a conversation at a local diner.

A witch mentioned the 'winged ones' who occasionally come to town for supplies.

According to her, they keep to themselves, living somewhere deep in the surrounding forest, but they're known to help the town's supernatural residents when needed."

I stood, unable to contain my restless energy. "We need to find them. They could be valuable allies, especially now that we're short on the elixir. They wouldn't need it to enter Elysium—they could just cross the gates like any other angel."

"Assuming they want to help," Levi pointed out. "If they've been exiled, they might have their own reasons to stay away from Elysium."

"Or their own reasons to want to bring Rhodes down," I countered. "We won't know until we talk to them."

Keeran nodded slowly. "That's why we came to you. My scouts have been watching the town for days, but there's been no sign of the angels returning. We thought maybe you, as an angel yourself, might have better luck finding them or convincing them to help."

I exchanged a glance with Levi, and saw the resignation already settling on his face. He knew as well as I did that this was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"When do we leave?" I asked, turning back to Keeran.

"As soon as you're ready," he said. "I can open a portal for you right now."

Levi stood, stretching his tall frame with a casual grace that belied the tension I could feel radiating from him. "I'll get some supplies."

As he moved toward the adjacent office, I turned to Almae. "Any other details we

should know about these angels? Anything that might help us find them or convince them to join us?"

The old witch's eyes clouded with uncertainty.

"Very little, I'm afraid. The people of Pinewood Valley are protective of their secrets. All we know is that the Lost Legion has been there for years, possibly decades. They rarely interact with outsiders, and they seem to have some kind of arrangement with the town."

"What kind of arrangement?"

"Protection," Keeran said. "The town has remarkably few supernatural incidents for a place with so many hidden residents. The locals attribute this to the 'guardian spirits' who watch over them."

"Angels acting as guardians," I murmured, a wistful smile tugging at my lips. "Just like it used to be, before everything got so complicated."

Almae reached out, her weathered hand covering mine. "Be careful, Ariella. Exiled supernaturals can be unpredictable. Whatever drove them from Elysium might have left scars. Don't expect them to welcome you with open arms."

"I won't," I promised, though hope still fluttered in my chest like a trapped bird. "But I have to try. If they can help us stop Rhodes, it's worth the risk."

Levi returned, a sleek black duffel bag slung over his shoulder. "Ready, sweetheart?"

I nodded, drawing strength from his steady presence. "Let's go find some angels."

Keeran opened a portal that would take us to the outskirts of Pinewood Valley.

Before stepping through, I turned to Almae. “Thank you for offering to help Abbie and Lacey. Even if we find these angels and convince them to help us, we'll still need the elixir as a backup plan.”

“Of course,” she said. “And Ariella? Trust your instincts. If something feels wrong...”

“We'll get out,” I assured her. “I'm not looking to add more problems to our list.”

The portal shimmered before us, a window into a world of muted greens and browns.

I took a deep breath, feeling the weight of responsibility settle on my shoulders once more.

Three days until Rhodes made his move. Three days to find these exiled angels, convince them to join our cause, and somehow formulate a plan to stop a war before it began.

Levi reached over and clasped his hand around mine. Together, we stepped through the portal, leaving behind the safety of the warehouse and venturing into the unknown once more.

The air on the other side was crisp, heavy with the scent of pine and damp earth. Birds called to each other in the canopy overhead, and somewhere in the distance, a stream gurgled over rocks.

“Quaint,” Levi remarked, surveying the dense forest surrounding us. “You think the angels have the good sense to stay somewhere with actual civilization?”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips. “They're angels, not party animals. The isolation probably appeals to them.”

We set off down a narrow dirt path that wound through the trees, heading in the direction of Pinewood Valley. According to Keeran's map, the town was about half a mile east of our position.

“So, what's the plan?” Levi asked as we walked. “Wander into town and ask the locals where we can find the secret angel hideout?”

“I was thinking we'd be a bit more subtle than that,” I said. “We start at the diner where the witch mentioned the 'winged ones.' See if we can get any more information.”

“And if that doesn't work? Can I torture some witches?”

The teasing was heavy on his tone, but I still gave him a reprimanding look. “I thought you had left your evil days behind.”

He shrugged. “Bad habits die hard, sweetheart.”

I glanced up at the sky, visible in patches through the dense canopy of trees. “If that doesn't work,” I said, going back to his question, “then we do what we can. We fly, we look, we find.”

“So no torturing. Got it.”

A smile tugged at my lips. Leave it to Levi to be joking at a time like this.

A few minutes later, the trees thinned ahead of us, revealing the first outlying buildings of Pinewood Valley. The town was exactly as I'd imagined it—small, picturesque, with wooden buildings lining a main street that couldn't have been more than a quarter mile long.



“Looks like something out of a postcard,” I murmured. “Hard to believe there are supernaturals hiding here.”

“That's the point,” Levi said. “The best place to hide is somewhere no one would think to look.”

As we approached the town, I felt a strange prickling along my skin—a subtle shift in the air that wasn't quite natural. I slowed my steps, scanning our surroundings with new awareness.

“Do you feel that?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

Levi nodded, his expression suddenly alert. “Wards. Strong ones. We're being watched.”

I reached out with my senses. I didn't have the gift of sixth sense or magical detection, but if this was done by an angel, perhaps I could tell the difference?

I felt a faint but complex weave of magic that surrounded the town.

It wasn't hostile, exactly, but definitely protective—a barrier designed to alert rather than repel.

“They already know we're coming,” I realized.

Levi's hand moved to rest on the small of my back. “Good. Saves us the trouble of introducing ourselves.”

Together, we continued toward Pinewood Valley, our steps more cautious now. Somewhere in this unassuming town, angels were hiding—angels who might hold the key to saving Elysium, if only we could find them and convince them to help.

The hunt for the Lost Legion had begun.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

Pinewood Valley looked like something out of a greeting card—quaint wooden storefronts, hanging flower baskets, and a main street so clean it practically sparkled in the morning light.

But beneath the picturesque facade, I could feel the subtle pulse of supernatural energy. The wards around the town had recognized us as outsiders, and though they weren't actively hostile, there was a watchfulness to them that set my nerves on edge.

“So much for the element of surprise,” I muttered as we made our way down the main street. Humans passed us with friendly nods, completely oblivious to the tension in the air. “Where should we start?”

Levi's gaze swept the storefronts, assessing each one with the careful attention of a predator scanning for prey.

“There,” he said, nodding toward a small café with a hand-painted sign reading “Maple Leaf Diner.” “That matches the description Keeran gave us. The place where the witch mentioned the angels.”

The bell above the door chimed as we entered, drawing the attention of the handful of patrons scattered among the red vinyl booths.

Most turned away after a brief glance, but I caught the lingering gaze of an elderly woman in the corner, her fingers wrapped around a mug of steaming tea.

There was something about her eyes—a sharpness that didn't belong to a typical human of her age.

“That's her,” I whispered, sliding into a booth with a clear view of the woman. “The witch.”

A harried-looking waitress approached, her pen poised over a small notepad. “What can I get you folks?”

“Just coffee,” I said, not taking my eyes off the witch. “Both of us.”

The waitress huffed but didn't argue, hurrying away to the next table.

“Subtle,” Levi drawled, leaning back against the booth. “Why don't you just go over and introduce yourself?”

I shot him a look. “Because we don't know if she's friendly, and I'd rather not cause a scene in a human establishment.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Since when are you so concerned about human sensibilities?”

“Since we need information more than we need trouble.” I accepted the mugs of coffee the waitress set down, offering her a quick smile. “Thank you.”

As the waitress moved away, I saw the witch rise from her seat, leaving a few bills on the table. She adjusted her cardigan, cast one last knowing look in our direction, and headed for the door.

“She's leaving,” I hissed, already sliding out of the booth.

Levi caught my wrist. “Wait. Let her think she's escaped, then follow. Less obvious that way.”

I reluctantly settled back, watching as the old woman exited the diner with surprising

agility for someone who appeared to be in her eighties. We gave her a thirty-second head start, then left our coffee untouched with a twenty-dollar bill, and followed.

Outside, the street was busier now, with locals going about their morning routines. I spotted the witch turning down a side street, her gray hair visible between the pedestrians.

“There,” I said, nudging Levi with my elbow.

We followed at a discreet distance, weaving through the crowd. The side street was narrower, lined with small, independent shops—a bookstore, a bakery, and at the end, a modest building with a sign that read “Herbal Remedies & Teas.”

“Predictable,” Levi muttered.

The witch disappeared into the shop, the door closing behind her with a soft jingle of bells.

We approached cautiously, peering through the window at the interior—shelves lined with glass jars of dried herbs, crystals hanging from the ceiling, and the old woman now behind a wooden counter, arranging dried flowers in a basket.

I pushed open the door, triggering another cheerful chime from the bells overhead. The shop smelled of lavender and sage, with undertones of something sharper, more magical. The witch didn't look up, continuing to arrange her flowers as if we weren't there.

“We know what you are,” I said softly, moving closer to the counter. “And we know you've seen the angels.”

Her hands stilled, but she didn't seem surprised. “Took you long enough,” she said,

her voice raspy with age but edged with steel. “I was beginning to think you were as slow-witted as you are obvious.”

Levi snorted. “At least we're not hiding behind protection wards and pretending to be a harmless old lady.”

She finally looked up, her eyes a startling violet—a color no human could possess. “Who says I'm pretending? I am old. I am a lady. And I'm only harmful when provoked.” She set aside her flowers, wiping her hands on her apron. “Now, what do you want with the winged ones?”

“To talk,” I said simply. “It's important.”

“It always is, with your kind.” Her gaze flicked from Levi to me. “A demon and an angel. But you're not like the others.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She shrugged. “What really matters is that they keep to themselves. Don't stir up trouble.”

“I'm not here to stir up trouble,” I insisted. “But there's a storm coming, and they need to know about it. It affects all angels, even those who think they've left Elysium behind.”

The witch considered me for a long moment, her ancient eyes seeming to peer directly into my soul. “They won't like outsiders poking around. Especially not one with a demon in tow.” She nodded toward Levi, who offered her a mocking bow in return.

“We just need to speak with their leader,” I pressed. “That's all I'm asking. Where can

we find them?”

She turned away, busying herself with a jar of dried leaves. “I don't know.”

“You mentioned them at the diner,” I said. “Someone overheard you talking about the 'winged ones' who come to town.”

“Gossip,” she dismissed. “Nothing more.”

Levi stepped closer, his presence suddenly more imposing, more demonic. “Listen, witch. We're not here to play games. People will die if we don't find these angels. Important people. Maybe even your precious 'winged ones.' So cut the crap and tell us what you know.”

The witch's eyes narrowed, and for a moment, I thought she might cast a spell.

But then she sighed, the tension draining from her shoulders.

“I truly don't know where they live. No one does, except those they choose to tell. All I know is they come to town occasionally for supplies, and they help when supernatural trouble brews.” She pointed toward the window.

“Try Remy at the auto shop. He's a demon like your friend here. He fixed something for them once—a generator, I think. Maybe he knows more.”

I exchanged a glance with Levi, who nodded slightly. “Thank you,” I said, turning to leave.

“Angel,” the witch called after me. I paused at the door, looking back. “Be careful what you wish for. The ones who live in the mountains... they left Elysium for a reason. They might not thank you for dragging them back into its politics.”

I opened my mouth to ask how the hell she knew about all of that, but Levi just grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the shop.

Her warning followed me like a shadow as we stepped back into the sunlight.

“That was ominous,” I said.

“Don’t tell Lacey this, but here is the truth: witches are the kind of supernaturals I trust the least.”

I stared at him with wide eyes. “Never thought I would hear that from you.”

“I know.” Levi was already scanning the street, looking for the auto shop. “There.” He pointed to a building at the far end with an open garage bay. The sign above it read “Remy's Auto & Body.” “I can sense him from here. Definitely a demon, though not a higher one.”

“Let's hope he's more helpful than our witch friend.”

The auto shop was filled with the sounds of machinery and the sharp scent of oil and metal. A man—or at least, something that looked like a man—was bent over the engine of an old pickup truck, his hands moving with inhuman speed as he adjusted something deep within the machinery.

“Remy?” I called out.

The demon straightened, wiping his hands on a rag. He was tall and wiry, with dark skin and eyes that flashed red when he turned toward us. Recognition and wariness crossed his features in equal measure.

“Well, well,” he drawled, tossing the rag aside. “An angel and a higher demon walk



into my shop. Sounds like the start of a bad joke.”

Levi stepped forward, extending his hand. “Leviathan. This is Ariella.”

Remy's eyes widened slightly. “Leviathan? No shit. What's a big shot like you doing in a backwater town like Pinewood?” He reluctantly shook Levi's hand, then turned to me with a respectful nod. “Ma'am.”

“We're looking for the Lost Legion,” I said, deciding directness was our best approach. “The angels who live near here.”

Remy's expression shuttered immediately. “Don't know what you're talking about.”

“Save it,” Levi said. “We already know they exist. The witch at the herbal shop said you might know where to find them. Something about fixing a generator for them.”

Remy shot a glare in the direction of the herbal shop.

“Old bat needs to learn to keep her mouth shut,” he muttered.

He moved to the workbench, busying himself with a set of tools.

“Look, I don't know where they live. They brought a couple of generators here, I fixed them, they took them away. End of story.”

I stepped closer, lowering my voice. “Please. It's important. There's trouble brewing and I'm afraid it'll involve these angels.”

“And everyone else,” Levi added.

“We're safe here,” the demon insisted.

“Not from this,” I said, trying to inflict as much conviction as I could in my voice. “If this trouble spills over, it’ll affect everyone ... every human and every supernatural in the entire world.”

The demon stared at me for a moment, probably hoping to see a crack in my expression. He wouldn’t find any.

“Shit,” he muttered.

“Yeah. Shit. Now, will you help us find these angels, or are we going to waste more time while the clock ticks down?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

Remy glanced between us, conflict clear on his face.

Finally, he sighed. “I can't tell you where they are.

I honestly don't know. But...” He hesitated.

“There's a clearing in the woods, about two miles north of town.

Sometimes, when they need something fixed that's too big to bring here, they meet me there. It's where the wards are thinnest.”

I felt a surge of hope. “Thank you.”

“Don't thank me yet,” Remy warned. “They might not show. And even if they do, they might not be too happy to see you.” He turned to go back to his work, then paused.

“For what it's worth, they're good people.

Angels. Whatever. They've protected this town when they didn't have to.

Remember that when you're asking them to risk their necks.”

We left the auto shop with something resembling a lead, heading north toward the edge of town. The forest grew denser as we moved away from the buildings, the path narrowing until it was barely visible among the underbrush.

“You think this demon was telling the truth?” I asked, pushing aside a low-hanging branch. “Or sending us on a wild goose chase?”

“He was telling the truth,” Levi said confidently. “He was genuinely worried about the angels. Whatever relationship they have, it's built on mutual respect.”

I made a noncommittal sound. “Let's hope these angels are as reasonable as Remy seems to think. I'm not in the mood for another fight.”

We walked for what felt like hours, the sun climbing higher in the sky, filtering through the canopy in dappled patterns.

The clearing Remy had mentioned wasn't easy to find—it was small, hardly more than a break in the trees, with a circle of flat stones arranged in the center like a crude meeting place.

“Now what?” I asked, glancing around the empty space.

Levi leaned against a tree trunk, arms crossed. “Now we wait. They know we're here.”

I groaned. “Great. More waiting. My favorite.”

We spent the afternoon in the clearing, taking turns exploring the perimeter while the other kept watch. The sun began its slow descent, casting long shadows across the forest floor. My frustration grew with each passing hour.

“This is ridiculous,” I finally said, pacing the circle for what felt like the hundredth time. “We're wasting valuable time.”

“Patience, sweetheart,” Levi said, though I could tell his own was wearing thin.

“They'll show, or they won't. Either way, standing around complaining won't change anything.”

I was about to snap back when a rustle in the trees caught my attention. My hand went to my sword automatically, but Levi shook his head, his posture deceptively relaxed.

“We have company,” he murmured.

A figure stepped into the clearing, moving with the silent grace only an angel could possess. He was tall and lean, with deep brown skin and a stern expression.

“You've been asking about us,” he said, his voice cold. “Making a nuisance of yourselves in town.”

I straightened, meeting his gaze directly. “We need to speak with your leader. It's urgent.”

“So I've been told.” His eyes flicked to Levi, narrowing. “You bring a demon to our doorstep and expect a warm welcome?”

“I bring the truth,” I countered. “About what's happening in Elysium. About what's coming. Your leader needs to hear it.”

The angel studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. “She said you'd be persistent.”

“She?” I asked, confusion flickering through me.

“My commander,” he clarified. “She knew you'd keep pushing until you got what you wanted. Said it would be easier to just bring you in than let you keep disrupting the

town.”

Relief washed over me. “Then you'll take us to her?”

“Against my better judgment, yes.” The angel didn't look pleased about it. “But you'll come on foot. No flying, no shortcuts.”

Levi pushed away from the tree, arching an eyebrow. “Any particular reason for the scenic route?”

The angel's expression didn't change. “Security. The path is warded against those who mean us harm. If you try to fly over it, the wards will interpret that as hostile intent.”

“Fine,” I agreed quickly, before Levi could argue. “We'll follow your lead.”

The angel—who declined to give his name—set a punishing pace through the forest. What had been a difficult hike before now became a grueling trek, with steep inclines and narrow paths that seemed to wind in circles.

Several times, I felt the telltale tingle of magic as we passed through layers of protective spells, each one more complex than the last.

The sun set completely, plunging the forest into darkness. Our guide seemed unbothered, moving with the same sure-footed confidence as before. Levi and I kept pace, though I could feel the strain in my muscles. It had been a long day, and even with angelic endurance, I was reaching my limits.

“How much further?” I finally asked, as we scaled yet another rocky incline.

“We're here,” the angel replied, stopping so suddenly I nearly collided with him.

I looked around, confused. All I could see were trees and the looming shadow of a mountain. “Where exactly is 'here'?”

The angel placed his hand on a seemingly ordinary boulder.

The air shimmered, and the forest before us melted away, revealing a structure built directly into the mountainside.

It looked like a simple cabin from the outside, its wooden exterior weathered and unremarkable.

But I could feel the power emanating from it—layers upon layers of protective magic, older and stronger than anything I'd encountered before.

“The Lost Legion,” our guide said, gesturing to the cabin. “Our home for the past twenty years.”

He led us to the door, which swung open at his touch.

Inside, the cabin revealed its true nature—a vast network of rooms and hallways carved directly into the mountain.

The walls were a seamless blend of natural stone and polished wood, and the space was lit by orbs of soft light that floated near the ceiling.

A handful of angels moved through the corridors, some in their battle armor, others in simple clothing.

All of them turned to watch as we passed, their expressions ranging from curiosity to outright hostility.

I could feel their power, their collective strength.

These weren't ordinary angels—they were warriors, veterans, survivors.

We were led deeper into the mountain, down winding staircases and through grand halls that could have housed hundreds. Finally, our guide stopped outside a massive wooden door, intricately carved with symbols I recognized from the oldest texts in Elysium's archives.

“She's waiting for you,” he said, pushing the door open.

The room beyond was circular, with a high, domed ceiling and walls lined with maps and weapons.

A long table dominated the center, surrounded by simple wooden chairs.

And at the head of the table, seated in a throne-like chair carved from a single piece of ancient wood, was an angel unlike any I'd ever seen.

She was tall, with silver-white hair cropped short against her scalp, and piercing eyes that shifted color like sunlight through leaves.

One arm rested in a sling across her chest, but there was nothing weak about her posture.

Power radiated from her in waves, ancient and immense, the kind that could only belong to one of the oldest archangels.

“Ariella,” she said, her voice carrying the weight of centuries. “I've been expecting you.”



I stepped forward, my heart pounding. “You know who I am?”

“I know of you,” she corrected. “The fallen angel accused of murdering her squadron. The angel hunted by Rhodes and his followers.” Her gaze shifted to Levi. “And you've brought a higher demon into my stronghold. Bold move.”

“He's with me,” I said firmly. “We're here because?—”

“Because Rhodes has the Scarlet Hex Dagger and plans to use it on Adona in two days,” she finished for me. “Yes, I'm aware.”

I blinked, taken aback. “How do you know that?”

“I have my own sources in Elysium. Just because we left doesn't mean we stopped watching.” She gestured to the chairs around the table. “Sit. We have much to discuss.”

We sat, the air between us charged with tension and unspoken questions.

“If you knew about Rhodes and the dagger, why haven't you done anything?” I asked.

The archangel's expression hardened. “Until a few months ago, my priority was protecting the angels under my command. We left Elysium for a reason, Ariella. We wanted nothing to do with its politics or its wars.”

“And now?”

“Now I'm reassessing that position.” She leaned forward slightly, her injured arm shifting in its sling. “When I first heard about a fallen angel who had supposedly killed her entire squadron, I dismissed it as internal politics gone wrong. It wasn't our concern.”

“But it was a lie,” I said, my voice tight. “Rhodes and Ylena set me up. They've been planning this coup for years.”

“So I've discovered.” She studied me intently. “What I don't understand is why you're here, seeking me out. You didn't even know who I was until you walked through that door.”

I held her gaze, unflinching. “I knew there were exiled angels living near Pinewood Valley. I hoped they—you—might help us stop Rhodes. Especially since you wouldn't need an elixir to enter Elysium.”

“An elixir?” She raised an eyebrow.

“From golden lilies that grow in the Light Garden,” I explained. “It's our backup plan for getting non-angels into Elysium.”

The archangel nodded slowly. “And you're doing the elixir from scratch? Ambitious. But why would I risk my people, my Legion, to fight a battle I deliberately walked away from decades ago?”

“Because if Rhodes succeeds, nowhere will be safe,” I said. “Not Elysium, not Earth, not even this mountain stronghold you've built. He wants to reshape everything, and he won't stop until all of reality bends to his vision.”

For a long moment, the archangel was silent, her gaze distant, as if seeing something beyond the room. Finally, she refocused on me. “You still haven't asked the obvious question.”

“Which is?”

“Who I am. Why I know about you.” A ghost of a smile touched her lips. “Or rather,

why I know of your father.”

My heart stuttered in my chest. “My father? You knew my father?”

“I fought alongside him,” she said simply. “Many years ago, before you were born. Before I was exiled.”

The room seemed to spin around me, the implications of her words sinking in. “You’re?—”

“Kadriel,” she said, her name hanging in the air like a thunderclap. “Former commander of the First Sphere, archangel of the western realms, and once the right hand of Adona herself.”

I stared at her, speechless. Kadriel was a legend in Elysium, one of the most powerful archangels ever to serve. She had disappeared decades ago, after a mission gone wrong. It was said she was killed in battle, though no body was recovered.

Or at least, that was the story I’d grown up hearing in whispers, never spoken aloud.

“Kadriel,” I breathed, the name a prayer and a question in one. “You’re alive.”

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“Kadriel,” I repeated, my voice barely above a whisper.

The name stirred something deep in my memory—a fleeting image of a tall, silver-haired angel with fierce eyes, standing beside my father in our family's garden.

I had been young, too young to understand the significance of the archangel visiting our home, but I remembered how my father had laughed at something she said, his hand resting companionably on her shoulder.

“You remember,” Kadriel observed, her piercing gaze assessing my reaction.

“Not much,” I admitted. “Just glimpses. You visited our home a couple of times. You and my father were laughing.”

A flicker of softness crossed her face, so brief I almost missed it. “Your father had a talent for finding humor even in the darkest times. It was what made him such a good commander.”

“You knew him well,” I said. It wasn't a question.

“We fought side by side for nearly a century,” she confirmed. “He was my most trusted lieutenant, and later, one of my few true friends.” Her gaze drifted to the maps on the wall, as if seeing battles long past reflected there. “His death was a blow I never expected.”

My chest tightened. “They told us he died honorably in battle. Fighting demons at the eastern gate.”

Kadriel's eyes snapped back to mine, suddenly sharp with anger. "Is that what they told you? A hero's death, clean and noble?"

I nodded, confused by her reaction. "That's what everyone said. What my mother believed."

"Lies," she spat, her injured arm shifting in its sling as she leaned forward. "Your father didn't die in battle, Ariella. He was murdered. By Ylena."

The words hit me like a physical blow, driving the air from my lungs. "What? No, that can't be?—"

"He discovered her plans," Kadriel continued, her voice tight with controlled rage. "Not all of them, but enough to know she was working against Adona. Against everything we stood for. He confronted her, thinking he could reason with her. He was always too trusting."

I stared at her, my mind struggling to process what she was saying. "Ylena killed my father? But she was my mentor."

And Levi's mother. Beside me, he was rigid.

"She took you under her wing to keep an eye on you," Kadriel finished grimly. "To make sure you never learned the truth. And later, when you showed promise, to groom you as an ally."

A sickening wave of betrayal washed over me. Ylena had been more than my mentor—she had been a surrogate parent after my father's death, guiding me, shaping me. And all the while, his blood had been on her hands.

"How do you know this?" Levi asked, speaking for the first time since we'd entered

the room. His voice was calm, but I could sense the tension beneath it.

Kadriel's eyes shifted to him, narrowing slightly.

“Because I confronted her afterward. I suspected her involvement, and when I pressed her, she attacked me.” She gestured to her injured arm.

“This was her parting gift. A permanent wound that should have killed me, but I managed to escape to Earth before she could finish the job.”

“And you've been here ever since,” I said softly. “Building the Lost Legion.”

She nodded. “At first, it was just survival. But over time, others joined us—angels who saw the corruption in Elysium, who refused to be part of what it was becoming. We found this place, warded it, made it home.” She gestured vaguely to the surrounding structure.

“We have seventeen now, counting myself. Some have formed bonds with the supernaturals in town, others with each other. But mostly, we keep to ourselves.”

“No children?” I asked, noticing the absence of younger angels in the halls we'd passed.

“No.” Kadriel's expression hardened. “We chose not to bring children into exile. It wouldn't have been fair.”

I sat back, trying to absorb everything she'd told me.

My father, murdered by the archangel I'd idolized—another negative tally on the growing list. Kadriel, not dead as everyone believed, but building a sanctuary for those who opposed the very forces I was now fighting against. It was almost too

much to take in.

“Six months ago,” Kadriel continued, “I learned of your fall from grace. The accusations against you were familiar. Too similar to what they said about me before my exile.”

“You knew it was a setup,” I guessed.

“I suspected.” She tapped her fingers against the table, a rhythmic pattern that betrayed her tension. “I considered reaching out to you then, but there were complications. And I wasn't certain where your loyalties truly lay.”

“And now?” I asked. “I'm here, asking for your help. Ylena is dead, but Rhodes has a powerful dagger, and he's planning to use it on Adona in two days. We're running out of time.”

Kadriel studied me, her ancient eyes seeming to look beyond the surface. “Your determination is admirable, Ariella. But I can't risk my people, not without being certain.”

“Certain of what?” Levi asked, a dangerous edge to his voice.

“Of her heart,” Kadriel replied simply. “Of her purpose. Of whether this cause is truly worth dying for.” She paused.

“We've been through too much and we would rather stay here and live quietly than to risk everything for nothing.

” She glanced toward the door, where a figure had silently appeared. “Maeve. Join us.”

A woman stepped into the room, her movements graceful despite her obvious age. She was human in appearance, with skin like weathered parchment and hair white as fresh snow. But her eyes were what caught my attention—entirely white, without iris or pupil, like twin moons set in her lined face.

“This is Maeve,” Kadriel said, her tone softening slightly as the woman moved to stand beside her chair. “My partner, and our seer.”

Maeve's blind eyes seemed to fix on me with unnerving accuracy. “You carry many burdens, young angel,” she said, her voice melodious despite its age. “So many paths converging within you.”

I shifted uncomfortably under her sightless gaze. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Kadriel said, “that before we commit to your cause, before we risk everything we've built here, we need to know the truth. All of it. Not just what you choose to tell us.”

A chill ran down my spine. “What kind of truth?”

Maeve smiled, a gentle expression that somehow did nothing to relieve my growing unease. “The kind that can only be revealed through trial. I have the gift of sight beyond sight, of peering into a soul's true nature and the paths that lie before it.”

“A trial?” Levi's posture shifted subtly, becoming more protective. “What exactly does that entail?”

“Nothing physical,” Maeve assured him. “But it will not be pleasant. The spell requires Ariella to relive her most defining moment—the day she lost her wings and took the dagger. We will all witness it as it truly happened, not as she remembers it or as she might tell it.”



“No,” Levi said flatly. “Absolutely not.”

I placed a hand on his arm, stopping his protest. “It's okay, Levi.”

“The hell it is,” he growled. “They're asking to rummage through your head, to force you to relive one of the worst days of your life, all to satisfy their curiosity? No.”

“It's not curiosity,” Kadriel interjected, her tone sharp. “It's survival. I won't lead my people into a war without knowing exactly what we're fighting for—and who we're fighting alongside.”

I met her gaze steadily. “I understand. And I'll do it.”

“Ariella—” Levi began, but I cut him off.

“We need them, Levi. If reliving that day is the price for their help, then I'll pay it.” I turned back to Kadriel and Maeve. “What do I need to do?”

Kadriel seemed to approve of my decision, though she kept her expression carefully neutral. “Follow Maeve. She'll prepare you for the trial.”

Maeve held out her hand, and after a moment's hesitation, I took it. Her skin was cool and dry, but I could feel the power thrumming beneath its paper-thin surface.

“The rest of us will join shortly,” Kadriel said, rising from her chair. “This is not a spectacle to be witnessed lightly.”

Maeve led me from the room and down a winding corridor that descended deeper into the mountain.

Levi followed close behind, his disapproval radiating from him in waves, but he

didn't try to stop me again.

After several minutes, we reached a small, circular chamber lit by seven floating crystals that cast prismatic light across the polished stone walls.

In the center of the room was a shallow basin carved directly into the floor, filled with what looked like clear water but reflected no light or image. Around the basin's edge were strange symbols etched into the stone—not angelic script, but something older, more primal.

“The Reflecting Pool,” Maeve explained, releasing my hand. “It shows truth as it was, not as we remember it or wish it to be.”

I stared at the pool, apprehension building in my chest. “Will it hurt?”

“Not physically,” she said. “But memories often carry their own kind of pain.”

The chamber door opened again, and Kadriel entered, followed by several other angels. They positioned themselves around the room, their faces solemn and watchful. This, I realized, was to be a public trial—my worst moment laid bare before strangers.

Maeve moved to the edge of the pool and gestured for me to join her. “Remove your shoes and step into the water,” she instructed.

I did as she asked, slipping my boots off and stepping gingerly into the pool. The liquid—if it was liquid at all—felt neither warm nor cold, but somehow alive, tingling against my skin.

“Close your eyes,” Maeve said, her voice lowering to a whisper. “Think back to that day. See it in your mind. The moment everything changed.”

I closed my eyes, letting the memory surface—the trap, the betrayal, the searing pain as my wings were severed, the terror and determination as I fled with the dagger.

“Are you ready?” Maeve asked, her voice seeming to come from very far away.

I took a deep breath and opened my eyes, meeting Maeve's sightless gaze. “I'm ready.”

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The water beneath my feet began to glow, shifting from clear to a luminous silver that crept up my ankles like living mercury. Maeve's chanting grew louder, her words taking on a hypnotic rhythm that seemed to resonate with something deep inside me.

“Remember,” she urged, her blind eyes fixed on me with uncanny precision. “Return to that day. See it as it was. Feel it as it was.”

The chamber around me started to blur, the faces of the watching angels melting into streaks of light. Levi's voice called my name, sharp with concern, but it sounded distant, as if he were speaking to me from across a vast canyon.

Then the world dissolved completely, and I was falling?—

—into memory.

\* \* \*

Sunlight glinted off polished armor as our squadron assembled at the edge of Elysium.

I stood at attention, pride swelling in my chest as I took my place among the twelve chosen for this mission.

Two archangels, four Seraphim, and six Cherubin including myself.

My wings rustled with nervous energy, the feathers shifting like whispers against my back.

“Ariella!” Rachel's voice, bright with excitement, reached me from a few paces away. Her red hair was pulled back in a tight braid, her green eyes sparkling with anticipation. “Can you believe we made it? Our first real mission!”

I smiled, trying to appear more confident than I felt. I hadn't been chosen outright. I was actually a replacement. “It's surreal.”

Rachel nodded enthusiastically. “Just think—when we get back, everyone will be talking about us. The youngest Cherubin ever sent to track down a traitor.”

“If we succeed,” I reminded her, though I couldn't suppress my own thrill at the thought.

“We will,” Jeremiah said, joining our conversation.

Tall and golden-haired, he moved with the natural grace that had made him top of our class at the Academy.

My crush on him had been a poorly kept secret among our friends, though he'd never seemed to notice.

“With Archangels Rhodes and Soren leading us, how could we fail?”

I glanced toward the front of our formation, where the two archangels stood in deep conversation. Rhodes, tall and imposing with his silver armor and wings that shimmered with an almost metallic gleam. And beside him, Soren—older, with kind eyes that had always seen more than they revealed.

My mentor, Archangel Ylena, had warned me against volunteering for this mission. “You're not ready, Ariella,” she'd said, her voice stern with disapproval. “This isn't a training exercise. Earth is dangerous, and rogue angels even more so.”

But Rhodes had countered her concerns with praise for my potential, and in the end, I'd been chosen when another Cherubin couldn't. Now, standing at the threshold of Elysium with my squadron, I was determined to prove Ylena wrong and Rhodes right.

"Formation!" Rhodes called, his voice cutting through our chatter. Immediately, we arranged ourselves in the practiced pattern—archangels at the front, Seraphim flanking, Cherubin bringing up the rear.

Soren stepped forward, his ancient eyes scanning our faces. "Remember your training," he said, his voice resonating with power. "The traitor is dangerous, and if Molraz is with him, doubly so. We contain, we capture, we return to Elysium. No heroics."

"Yes, Commander," we answered in unison.

Rhodes lifted his hand, and the portal between realms shimmered into existence before us—a vast, swirling doorway of light and energy between two silver pillars. "For Elysium," he said, his voice solemn.

"For Elysium," we echoed, and as one, we stepped through the portal.

The transition was always disorienting—the sudden shift from Elysium's perfect light to Earth's dimmer glow, the weight of mortal air pressing against our wings. We emerged on a mountainside, the night air cool and fragrant with pine.

"Spread out," Rhodes commanded. "Search the area. The traitor was last seen near here."

For two days, we combed the wilderness, following what seemed to be a trail of angelic energy. I flew with Rachel and Jeremiah, our eyes scanning the forests below

for any sign of the rogue angel.

“What do you think would make an angel betray Elysium?” Rachel asked on the second night, as we rested beside a quiet lake. “To work with a demon, no less?”

“Power,” Jeremiah suggested, his expression grim. “Or disillusionment. Some angels grow weary of guardianship, of watching over humans who rarely appreciate their protection.”

“It still doesn't make sense to me,” I said, staring up at the stars. “Our purpose is sacred. How could anyone turn their back on that?”

“Not everyone shares your dedication, Ariella,” Jeremiah said with a small smile. “That's why you'll make a great guardian one day.”

His words warmed me. The truth was, ever since demon hunters had come into the picture, guardians had become less hands on. We mostly observed from afar, only interfering when really needed.

Suddenly, a cry echoed through the night. One of the Seraphim, flying above, had spotted something.

“Movement at the abandoned mine,” he reported, hovering before Rhodes. “Definite angelic signature, but strange. Corrupted somehow.”

Rhodes's face hardened. “That's him. Let's move.”

We flew in tight formation, following Rhodes toward a yawning cave mouth cut into the mountainside. The entrance to an old human mine, abandoned decades ago. Darkness seemed to pool around it, unnaturally thick and shifting with strange currents.

“Something's wrong,” Soren muttered, his wings flexing with tension. “This feels?—”

Rhodes cut him off. “We have our target. Seraphim, take the flanks. Cherubin, guard the entrance. Soren and I will confront the traitor.”

We moved into position, my heart pounding against my ribs. This was it—the moment I'd prove myself worthy of the mission.

We'd barely settled into formation when a man emerged from the shadows of the cave. He was tall and wide, with a short black hair and a trimmed beard. His intense blue eyes stared at us with curiosity.

And malice.

“Who are you?” Soren asked, tensing.

“Molraz,” the man said, his lips curling in a wicked grin.

My stomach dropped. He wasn't a man. He was a freaking higher demon.

“What's going on?” Soren sputtered.

“Angels,” Molraz purred, his voice like gravel sliding over bone. “How kind of you to join us.”

More demons appeared behind him, dozens of them, filling the mouth of the cave and spilling out onto the mountainside. My stomach dropped, and beside me, Rachel gasped.

“It's a trap,” she whispered.



Soren whirled toward Rhodes, his face contorted with sudden understanding. “You brought us here deliberately. You're working with him!”

Rhodes's expression shifted, the mask of righteousness falling away to reveal something cold and calculating. “The old ways are dying, Soren. Elysium must evolve or perish. Adona is too weak to lead us into the future.”

“Traitor!” Soren spat, his Celestial sword materializing in his hand—a blade of pure light that cut through the darkness like a star.

Molraz stepped forward, and in his now clawed hand, he held a gleaming dagger with a scarlet gem set in its hilt. “The Scarlet Hex Dagger,” he announced, his voice laced with triumph. “The key to reshaping Elysium.”

Soren's face went ashen. “No,” he breathed. “That can't be. It was hidden in a secure location.”

“Yes. And now it's here, ready to fulfill its purpose.” Rhodes held out his hand, and Molraz passed him the dagger.

Everything happened at once after that. Soren lunged for Rhodes, his sword flashing. Two Seraphim—who must have been in league with Rhodes all along—moved to intercept him. And the demons surged forward, overwhelming our formation.

Chaos erupted around us. Angels and demons clashed in a frenzy of light and shadow. I summoned my sword, the familiar weight of it steadying my trembling hands, and threw myself into the battle.

Rachel fought at my back, her magic flashing in brilliant arcs that pushed the demons back. Jeremiah cut through their ranks with fierce determination, his wings a blur of motion as he dodged and struck.

Through gaps in the fighting, I caught glimpses of Soren and Rhodes locked in combat. Despite Rhodes's betrayal, Soren was the more skilled warrior, and for a moment, it seemed as though he might prevail.

Then Rhodes drove the dagger into Soren's side.

The archangel's cry of pain tore through the battlefield, momentarily freezing the combat around us. Rhodes twisted the blade, his face contorted with a cold satisfaction that chilled me to my core.

But Soren wasn't finished. With a final, desperate surge of strength, he wrenched the dagger from Rhodes's grip and threw it—straight at me.

“Run!” he commanded, his voice ringing with power even as blood spread across his silver armor. “Take it and run, Ariella! Don't let them have it!”

The dagger landed at my feet, its blade gleaming with Soren's blood. I stared at it, paralyzed with shock and horror.

Rhodes roared with fury and charged toward me. But Rachel and Jeremiah moved to block his path, their swords raised.

“Go, Ariella!” Rachel shouted. “We'll hold them off!”

I hesitated, torn between duty and loyalty. How could I leave them?

“GO!” Jeremiah's voice cracked like thunder. “If Soren died for that dagger, it can't fall back into their hands!”

With shaking hands, I picked up the dagger, tucking it into my belt. Then I turned and fled, wings pumping frantically as I launched myself into the night sky.

Behind me, I heard the clash of swords, the cries of the wounded and dying. And then, rising above it all, Rachel's scream—a sound of such pure agony that it nearly stopped my heart.

I faltered, looking back. Through the chaos, I saw Jeremiah fall, Rhodes's sword emerging from his chest. And Rachel, beautiful, brave Rachel, charging at the archangel with grief and fury etched on her face.

She never stood a chance.

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I couldn't watch. Couldn't bear to see another friend die. I turned away, tears streaming down my face, and flew harder, faster, deeper into the night.

But I wasn't alone for long. Heavy wingbeats thundered behind me, and a chill ran down my spine. I didn't need to look to know who pursued me.

Molraz, now transformed in his full demon self.

I dove toward the forest, hoping to lose him among the trees, but he was faster than I'd anticipated. A blast of darkfire caught the edge of my wing, sending me spiraling through the air. I managed to right myself, but another blast followed, this one clipping my shoulder.

Pain lanced through me, but I pushed on, breaking through the tree line and racing above the forest canopy. The dagger felt like a brand against my hip, burning with the weight of its importance.

I had to protect it. Had to get it somewhere safe, away from Rhodes and Molraz and whatever terrible purpose they intended for it.

The forest gave way to rocky terrain, and ahead I could see the edge of a cliff, with the ocean pounding against the rocks far below. I veered toward it, hoping to find a new direction, but Molraz was too close now.

With a savage cry, he caught up to me, his clawed hand closing around my wing. Pain exploded through me as he wrenched me backward, his grip tightening until I felt feathers tear.

We crashed to the ground in a tangle of wings and limbs, skidding across the rocky earth until we came to a stop mere yards from the cliff's edge. I scrambled to my feet, drawing my sword with trembling hands.

Molraz rose before me, towering and terrible, his eyes blazing with demonic fire. He had emitted an evilness about him as a man, but now as a demon, in his tall, twisted form, with huge bat-like wings, dark skin, and blazing eyes, he was terrifying.

“The dagger, little angel,” he growled, his voice deep. “Give it to me, and perhaps I’ll make your death quick.”

“Never,” I gasped, though my voice quavered with fear.

He lunged, faster than I could react. His claws raked across my arm, drawing blood and taking my sword from me. He closed his claw around the hilt, and darkfire surround it. A second, my sword was there. The next, it was a cloud of ashes.

I staggered back, clutching my wounded arm, my wings flaring instinctively for balance. Molraz's gaze fixed on them, and a cruel smile spread across his face.

“No wings,” he said, “no escape.”

He moved with terrifying speed, his hands clamping around the base of my right wing before I could dodge. Pain like nothing I'd ever known tore through me as he pulled, the sickening sound of ripping flesh and breaking bone filling my ears.

I screamed, the world going white with agony. My knees buckled, but Molraz held me upright by my wing, prolonging the torture. With a final, savage wrench, he tore it free.

The pain was unimaginable. Beyond description. Beyond comprehension. I collapsed

to the ground, blood pouring from the ragged wound where my wing had been. Through a haze of agony, I saw Molraz toss the severed wing aside like garbage.

He reached for the other one.

I was too dazed with pain to fight, and in an instant, he ripped off the other wing as well.

“Too easy,” he snarled. “Where’s the fun in that?”

Desperation gave me strength I didn't know I had. I rolled away from him, my body screaming in protest, and scrambled toward a broken branch. Not thinking straight, I grabbed it and pointed the sharpened end at him.

Molraz laughed, the sound like stones grinding together. “Still fighting, little angel? How admirable. How futile.”

In the distance, I could see Rhodes approaching, flanked by his loyal Seraphim. Time was running out.

With a cry that was half rage, half despair, I called on my light magic—the pure energy that resided at the core of every angel. It flared around me, brilliant and blinding, momentarily forcing Molraz back.

It wouldn't last long. I knew that. But it might give me the seconds I needed.

I staggered to the cliff's edge, blood trailing behind me, the dagger still secure in my belt. Below, the ocean crashed against jagged rocks, dark and forbidding.

Molraz recovered quickly, advancing on me with fury etched into his demonic features. “There's nowhere to go, angel. Give me the dagger.”

I looked at him, then at Rhodes approaching in the distance, then back at the churning river below.

“No,” I said simply, and stepped backward off the cliff.

The fall seemed to last forever. The wind tore at my face, and the river rushed up to meet me with deadly promise. I closed my eyes, clutching the dagger to my chest.

If this was death, at least I'd die knowing I'd kept the dagger from their hands.

The impact with the water was like hitting solid stone. Pain exploded through me, and then darkness swallowed everything.

\* \* \*

I gasped, the memory so vivid that for a moment, I swore I could feel the saltwater burning in my lungs, the agony of my torn wings blazing across my back.

The Reflecting Pool churned around my ankles, the water no longer silver but a deep, turbulent blue that seemed to be responding to my distress.

“By the light,” someone whispered from the edge of the circle. One of Kadriel's angels, his face pale with shock.

But the memory wasn't finished with me yet. The water surged, and I was falling again?—

\* \* \*

Consciousness returned slowly, painfully. I was on a beach, the sand beneath me wet and cold, my body broken and bleeding. Every breath was agony, every heartbeat a

struggle. But I was alive.

The dagger was still clutched in my hand, its blade gleaming despite everything it had been through. I tried to move, to push myself up, but my body refused to cooperate. The wound where my wings had been continued to weep blood into the sand.

I was going to die here, I realized. Slowly, painfully, but still having accomplished the one thing Soren had asked of me: I had kept the dagger from Rhodes.

Footsteps approached, crunching on the wet sand. I tensed, expecting Molraz or one of his demons, come to finish what they'd started.

But it was an old human woman, her weathered face creased with concern as she knelt beside me. No, not human—my fading senses could detect the subtle magic that surrounded her.

A witch.

“Easy, child,” she murmured, her hands gentle as she assessed my wounds. “You're safe now.”

I tried to speak, to warn her about the demons that might still be searching for me, but all that came out was a pained whimper.

“Save your strength,” she advised, her fingers hovering over the worst of my injuries. “I'm going to help you, but we need to move quickly. They'll be looking for you.”

With unbelievable strength, she helped me to my feet, supporting most of my weight as we staggered away from the shore. The dagger was still in my hand, and she eyed it with wary suspicion.



“I take that dagger is special,” she said. Not a question.

“It’s cursed,” I said, my voice coarse.

After the most painful walk of my life, we went down a sharp hill and reached a small cabin hidden behind it. The witch guided me inside, helped me to a narrow bed that smelled of herbs.

“Rest now,” she said, taking the dagger from my rigid fingers. “I’ll keep this safe until you’re strong enough to decide what to do with it.”

I tried to protest—the dagger was my responsibility, my burden—but darkness was already pulling me under, my body surrendering to the exhaustion and trauma of the day.

As consciousness slipped away, I heard her final words, soft with a compassion I hadn’t expected:

“Sleep, Ariella. The fight isn’t over, but you’ve won this battle. Sleep.”

\* \* \*

The Reflecting Pool calmed suddenly, the turbulent blue fading back to silver, then to clear, still water.

I staggered, my legs nearly giving out beneath me as the memory released its grip.

Strong hands caught me before I could fall—Levi, who had apparently moved to the edge of the pool during the trial.

“That’s enough,” he growled, his eyes blazing with protective fury as he glared at

Maeve. “She's done. You've seen enough.”

The witch looked shaken, her blind eyes wide, her hands trembling slightly. “Yes,” she agreed softly. “More than enough.”

I let Levi help me from the pool, my legs unsteady, my mind still half-trapped in the vivid replay of that terrible day. Every sensation had been exactly as I remembered it—the pain, the fear, the crushing weight of failure and loss.

“Ariella.” Kadriel's voice cut through the fog in my mind. She had moved closer, her expression solemn but somehow gentler than before. “Are you all right?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak yet. Levi's arm around my waist was the only thing keeping me upright, his warmth a lifeline pulling me back to the present.

Maeve approached slowly, her blind eyes somehow finding mine with unerring accuracy. “I have seen many truths in this pool,” she said, her voice soft but carrying in the silence of the chamber. “Many souls laid bare. But never one like yours, Ariella.”

“What does that mean?” Levi demanded, still on edge, still protective.

“It means,” Maeve said, turning to address the watching angels, “that her intentions are pure. Her heart is true. She fights not for power or revenge, but for what is right.”

Murmurs ran through the gathered angels, some skeptical, others thoughtful.

“Can she win?” one called out. “Against Rhodes and his followers?”

Maeve hesitated, her ancient face troubled.

“The future is never certain,” she admitted.

“I cannot guarantee victory. But I can tell you this: in all the paths I've seen, in all the futures that might be, she represents our best hope. Perhaps our only chance for a better future—for angels, for Earth, for all realms.”

Kadriel studied me, her eyes measuring and assessing. “You're asking a lot,” she said finally. “For us to return to Elysium, to face the very powers that exiled us.”

“I know,” I managed, my voice hoarse. “But Rhodes has to be stopped. And I can't do it alone.”

“No,” she agreed. “You can't.” She was silent for a long moment, the weight of decision heavy in the air between us. Then she straightened, her injured arm shifting in its sling as she stood taller. “Very well, Ariella. The Lost Legion will follow you into battle.”

Relief washed through me, so powerful it nearly brought me to my knees again. “Thank you,” I whispered.

Kadriel's expression remained grave. “Don't thank me yet. This won't be an easy battle.”

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The journey back to Houston was a blur. Kadriel had insisted on sending one of her angels to escort us safely through the forest, but I barely registered the trek.

My mind was still trapped in the Reflecting Pool, replaying the horrors I'd lived through over and over again.

The weight of it pressed down on me, making each step heavier than the last.

Levi tried to speak to me several times during the trip, his voice gentle with concern, but I couldn't find the words to respond.

What could I say? That I was fine, when the memory of Molraz ripping my wing from my body felt as fresh as if it had happened yesterday?

That I was okay, when I could still hear Rachel's final scream echoing in my ears?

At some point, Levi had called Aspen, who had opened a portal for us to go back to Houston, and even though we crossed the portal, I didn't remember seeing Aspen.

By the time we reached Levi's apartment, exhaustion had settled deep in my bones. I moved mechanically through the motions of showering, of changing into clean clothes, of pretending to be whole when I felt shattered inside.

"Sweetheart," Levi said, hovering in the doorway of the bedroom as I sat on the edge of the mattress, staring at nothing. "Talk to me."

I looked up at him, wishing I could explain the storm raging inside me. "I'm just

tired,” I managed, the words sounding hollow even to my own ears.

He didn't believe me—I could see it in his eyes—but he didn't push. Instead, he crossed the room and sat beside me, taking my hand in his. “Then rest. I'll be right here.”

I nodded, allowing him to guide me under the covers. The weight of his arm across my waist felt like an anchor, keeping me from drifting too far into the darkness that lurked at the edges of my mind. I closed my eyes, surrendering to exhaustion, and slipped into unconsciousness.

But sleep offered no escape.

In my dreams, I was back at the clifftop, Molraz's claws digging into my wings.

But this time, instead of falling into the ocean, I was trapped in an endless loop of pain, unable to escape, unable to die, forced to feel my wings being ripped away again and again.

Rachel and Jeremiah appeared, bloody and broken, asking why I had abandoned them.

And behind them all stood Rhodes, holding the dagger, his smile cold and triumphant.

I woke with a gasp, my body drenched in sweat, my heart hammering against my ribs. The room was dark, quiet except for the soft sound of Levi's breathing beside me. I tried to steady myself, to push back the panic clawing at my throat, but the nightmare clung to me like a shroud.

“It's not real,” I whispered to myself, pressing my palms against my eyes. “It's over.

It's in the past.”

But it didn't feel over. It felt like the wound had been reopened, raw and bleeding, every detail sharpened by the magic of the Reflecting Pool. I wondered if I would ever sleep peacefully again, or if these memories would haunt me forever.

A strangled sob escaped me before I could stop it.

Levi stirred, instantly alert. “Ariella?” His voice was rough with sleep, but his eyes were clear as they found mine in the darkness. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” I tried to say, but another sob betrayed me. “I just—I can't?—”

He didn't need me to finish. In one fluid movement, he pulled me against his chest, his arms wrapping around me like a shield against the world. “It's okay,” he murmured into my hair. “I've got you. You're safe.”

I clung to him, my body trembling. “It felt so real,” I whispered. “Like it was happening all over again.”

“I know, sweetheart.” His hand moved in soothing circles on my back. “But it's over. You survived. You're here, with me.”

“I can still feel it,” I admitted, my voice breaking. “The way my wings tore, the sound it made. Rachel and Jeremiah dying while I ran. All of it.”

Levi's arms tightened around me. “You didn't run, Ariella. You did exactly what Soren asked you to do—you protected the dagger. And it nearly killed you.” His voice hardened with anger. “What that witch made you relive... I wanted to tear the place apart when I saw what it was doing to you.”

I looked up at him, catching the fierce protectiveness in his eyes. “You couldn't have stopped it. I chose to do the trial.”

“Doesn't mean I had to like it.” He brushed a strand of hair from my face, his touch impossibly gentle. “You're the strongest person I've ever met, sweetheart. But even you don't have to carry this alone.”

I let out a shaky breath, resting my forehead against his chest. “I don't know if I can do this, Levi. Face Rhodes again, knowing what he did. Knowing what he's capable of.”

“You can,” he said, his voice steady with conviction. “Because you won't be facing him alone. You have me. You have the Lost Legion. You have all our friends.”

He held me until the trembling stopped, until my breathing evened out, until the horrors of the past receded just enough to let exhaustion pull me back toward sleep.

“Don't leave,” I murmured, already drifting.

“Never,” he promised, and the word followed me into dreamless oblivion.

\* \* \*

I blinked awake slowly, my body aching but my mind clearer than it had been since the trial.

Levi was already up, the scent of coffee drifting from the kitchen.

I stretched cautiously, taking inventory of myself.

The nightmares had retreated for now, though I suspected they were merely waiting

for nightfall to return.

“Look who's finally awake,” Levi said, appearing in the doorway with two mugs in hand. He crossed to the bed, offering one to me. “How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

“Better,” I said, and was surprised to find it wasn't entirely a lie. I accepted the coffee, letting its warmth seep into my palms. “Thank you. For last night.”

He settled beside me, his hip brushing mine. “Anytime, sweetheart.”

We sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, sipping our coffee, the sounds of the city filtering in through the partially open window. It felt almost normal, almost peaceful.

“I sent messages to Abbie and the others this morning,” Levi said eventually. “Letting them know about the Lost Legion.”

I nodded, gratitude warming me more than the coffee. He'd taken care of it without me having to ask, giving me the space I needed. “What did they say?”

“Abbie's thrilled. Lacey too. They're making good progress on the elixir, by the way.” He took another sip from his mug. “And Kadriel reached out.”

That caught my attention. “She did? Already?”

“Apparently, she knows how to make the elixir from the golden lilies. She's offered to help, says she just needs to refresh her memory on some of the details.”

“That's... unexpected.” Though perhaps it shouldn't have been. Kadriel had been one of Adona's most trusted archangels. It made sense that she would know about the elixir used to let other supernaturals in for special events.



“She's sending one of her angels to the Hall today to work with Abbie and Lacey. With her help, they should have the elixir ready soon.” Levi's expression turned thoughtful. “It won't be much, but it's better than nothing.”

“It's more than we had yesterday,” I pointed out, feeling a flicker of hope ignite in my chest. “And with the Lost Legion on our side...”

“Our numbers are looking better,” Levi agreed. “Still not great against what Rhodes has in Elysium, but it's a start.”

My phone buzzed with an incoming message. I reached for it, expecting another update from Abbie or perhaps Kadriel. But the name on the screen made my heart leap into my throat.

“Ezekiel,” I breathed, quickly opening the message.

I have your mother and sister. They won't go further without knowing what's happening. Meet us just outside the eastern gate of Elysium. Come quickly.

My hands trembled slightly as I showed the phone to Levi. “He did it. He actually got them out.”

Levi's brow furrowed as he read the message. “Eastern gate? That's one of the minor entrances, isn't it?”

I nodded, already sliding out of bed, my mind racing. “It's less guarded, easier to slip through unnoticed. Smart of him.” I paused, a thought striking me. “I wonder how he convinced them to leave. Especially Adriel. She can be stubborn.”

“Runs in the family,” Levi muttered, but his eyes were serious. “Should we call Abbie, have them send a portal to the Hall first?”

I shook my head. “No time. We need Aspen to open a portal directly to the gate.” I was already dialing his number, my heart pounding with a mixture of anxiety and anticipation.

After everything I'd been through, the thought of seeing my mother and sister again—of bringing them to safety—was almost overwhelming.

Aspen answered on the third ring, his voice tense. “Ariella? Is everything okay?”

“I need a portal,” I said without preamble. “Again. Sorry.”

“No worries. Where?”

To the eastern gate of Elysium. Ezekiel has my mother and sister there, and we need to get them before Rhodes's people notice they're missing.”

There was a brief pause, then, “I'll be at Levi's apartment in ten minutes.”

“Thank you,” I said, relief washing through me. “We'll be ready.”

I ended the call and turned to find Levi already dressed. “Aspen's on his way,” I told him, moving to get dressed myself.

“Good.” Levi's voice was carefully neutral. “And you're sure about this? Meeting right at the edge of Elysium?”

I paused, one arm through the sleeve of my jacket. “What do you mean?”

“It's risky,” he said, checking the edge of a blade before sliding it into his boot. “Very close to enemy territory.”

“I know, but Ezekiel said they wouldn’t go any further.” Which was understandable. My mother and sister had probably never left Elysium before. They would be suspicious of everything.

Hopefully they would listen to me, forgive me, and let me hide them for the time being.

Levi nodded, though something in his expression remained troubled. “Just stay alert, sweetheart. I don't like how exposed we'll be.”

“I always stay alert,” I reminded him with a small smile.

By the time Aspen arrived, we were both dressed and ready.

I told him the location, and he frowned as his hands began to weave the complex pattern of the portal spell.

The air shimmered and split, revealing a swirling purple doorway of magic.

We walked through the portal, to the forest where one of the gates to Elysium was located. Because the portal was protected, we emerged half a mile away from it.

Even though I hadn’t been here in while, I remembered the way, so I led our party. With every step we took, I tensed a little more. We were walking toward Elysium, toward my mother and my sister ... and I worried how our reunion would be.

Finally, the trees became more spaced—not an actual clearing, but enough space for the two tall white pillars that stood against time among the trees.

The portal.

I looked around, expecting to see Ezekiel waiting with my mother and sister. But the space was empty, silent except for the rustle of leaves in the gentle breeze.

“Something's wrong,” Levi said, his voice low, his body already tensing for a fight.

Too late, I realized he was right. The clearing was too quiet, too still. No birds sang in the trees, no small creatures moved in the underbrush. It was as if the entire area was holding its breath, waiting.

“Ezekiel?” I called, though instinct was already screaming at me to run.

A figure stepped from the shadows of the trees—Ezekiel, his face pale, his eyes wide with something that might have been fear or regret. “Ariella,” he said, his voice strangely flat. “You came.”

“Where are my mother and sister?” I demanded, my hand moving to the hilt of my sword.

Ezekiel's form flickered, like a reflection on disturbed water. “I'm sorry,” he said, and then his image dissolved completely, revealing nothing but empty air where he had stood.

An illusion. A trap.

“Aspen, open the portal!” I shouted, but even as the words left my mouth, I knew it was too late.

Angels materialized around us, emerging from the trees with weapons drawn and wings spread wide. Not just any angels—Archangel Haines, Rhodes's right hand, stood at their center, his cold eyes fixed on me with predatory satisfaction.

“Ariella,” he said, his voice silky with triumph. “So good of you to join us. Rhodes will be most pleased.”

“I doubt that,” I growled, my sword appearing in my hand with a flash of light. Beside me, Levi's darkfire crackled to life, casting eerie shadows across the clearing. “Where are my mother and sister?”

Haines laughed, the sound devoid of any genuine humor. “Safe in Elysium, where they belong. Unlike you, they remain loyal to the true vision of our realm.”

“You mean Rhodes's twisted version of it,” I shot back, trying to buy time as I assessed our situation. There were at least a dozen angels surrounding us, all armed, all ready for battle. Not impossible odds, but not favorable either.

“You still don't understand, do you?” Haines shook his head, a mockery of pity in his expression. “Rhodes is saving Elysium. Adona's leadership has made us weak, vulnerable. The old ways are dying, Ariella. Join us, and you can be part of the new order.”

“I've seen what your 'new order' looks like,” I said, my voice tight with controlled fury. “No thanks.”

Haines sighed, as if I'd disappointed him. “I expected as much. Rhodes thought you might still be reasoned with, but I knew better.” He gestured to the angels flanking him. “Take them. Alive, if possible. Rhodes wants to deal with the traitor personally.”

The angels moved forward in perfect synchronization, their weapons gleaming in the dappled light filtering through the trees. I shifted my stance, prepared to meet their charge.

“Any suggestions?” I muttered to Levi, who had positioned himself back-to-back

with me.

“Fight like hell,” he replied, darkfire dancing between his fingers.

Aspen moved to complete our triangle, his magic already weaving complex patterns in the air around us. “I can get us out of here,” he said, his voice tight with concentration, “but I need time to reestablish the portal. Cover me.”

I nodded, gripping my sword tighter as the first wave of angels closed in. “Be quick.”

The angels charged, and the clearing erupted into chaos.

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The first angel came at me with a blade of pure light, swinging with the precise form taught in Elysium's training grounds.

I parried the strike, my own sword ringing against his, and countered with a slash that forced him back.

But there was no time to press the advantage, as two more angels immediately filled the gap, their weapons flashing in the filtered sunlight.

“There's too many!” I called to Levi, ducking under a sweeping blade and driving my shoulder into an angel's midsection. He grunted, staggering backward, but another took his place almost instantly.

Levi was a blur of deadly motion behind me, his darkfire cutting through the air in arcs of black flame. Three angels lay motionless at his feet already, but the others were learning, attacking him in coordinated waves that kept him constantly on the defensive.

“Aspen, how's that portal coming?” I shouted, parrying another strike and twisting to avoid a blast of light magic that would have taken my head off.

“It's no good!” The warlock's voice was strained, his hands moving in increasingly complex patterns as he tried to weave a path through the magic surrounding us. “With the barrier, I can't cast one from here!”

“Then we need to get beyond the barrier!” I called, my voice nearly lost in the clash of weapons and the crackle of magic. “Back through the trees, toward the clearing we

came in from!”

An angel lunged at me, her sword aimed for my heart. I spun away, my blade catching her arm, drawing a line of blood that spilled from the wound. She cried out, retreating, but two more took her place.

They were herding us, I realized with growing dread.

Each time we tried to move toward the edge of the clearing, the angels would thicken their ranks, forcing us back toward the center.

They were buying time, keeping us pinned down until reinforcements arrived—or until Rhodes himself decided to make an appearance.

“This isn't working.” Levi growled, his back pressed against mine as we rotated to face new attackers. “We need to break their formation.”

I knew he was right, but the angels moved with the practiced precision of centuries of training. They attacked in waves, never giving us more than a moment's respite, their swords and light magic a constant, overwhelming barrage.

A blade sliced across my shoulder, scoring a shallow cut that burned like fire. I hissed in pain but kept moving, my sword flashing as I parried and countered, desperate to create an opening. But for every angel I knocked back, two more pressed forward, relentless and coordinated.

Haines watched from the edge of the clearing, his expression cold and calculating. “Surrender, Ariella,” he called. “There's no escape this time.”

“Go to hell,” I spat, ducking under a sword swing and kicking out at an angel's knee. It connected with a satisfying crack, and the angel went down, but another



immediately took his place.

“Such language,” Haines tsked. “And here I thought all guardians were supposed to be virtuous.”

I didn't waste breath responding, too focused on staying alive as the circle of angels tightened around us.

Aspen had abandoned his attempt at creating a portal and was now actively fighting alongside us, his warlock magic cutting through the air in bursts of purple energy.

But even with his added firepower, we were being steadily overwhelmed.

An angel managed to slip past my guard, his blade catching me across the ribs.

I stumbled, pain blossoming along my side, and nearly fell.

Levi snarled, darkfire exploding from his hand to engulf the angel who had struck me, but the momentary distraction cost him.

Another angel's sword slashed toward his exposed back.

“Levi!” I shouted in warning, but I was busy, my own attackers pressing in, preventing me from reaching him.

The sword connected, drawing a line of dark blood across Levi's shoulder blade. He roared with pain and fury, spinning to face his attacker, his eyes flashing with an anger I hadn't seen since our days in the underworld.

Something changed in that moment—a subtle shift in the air, a darkening of the shadows around him.

Levi's form blurred, his outline becoming less distinct, more fluid.

His shoulders broadened, his height increasing by several inches.

The darkfire around his hands intensified, crawling up his arms like living shadows.

“Levi?” I called, uncertainty joining the fear already coursing through me.

He didn't answer. Instead, a low, inhuman growl rumbled from his chest, vibrating through the clearing with enough force to momentarily halt the fighting. The angels nearest to him hesitated, their expressions shifting from determination to unease.

Then, with a roar that seemed to shake the very trees around us, Levi transformed.

At first, he shifted into his demon self. Seven feet tall, wide as a bear, curled horns atop his head, black eyes, pale skin that turned black from the elbow down. His hands were now sharp claws, and his large bat-like wings spread behind him.

But then, he curved in the middle and the transformation didn't stop there.

His grew larger, his horns longer, his skin darkened, and his wings became twice their size.

He was back to the demon version of himself from when he had gone to the underworld.

The angels surrounding him faltered, their disciplined formation breaking as instinctive fear overcame their training.

Levi—or the creature that had been Levi—didn't give them time to recover.

He moved with a speed that defied comprehension, his clawed hands tearing through angelic armor as if it were paper.

The first angel fell before he could even raise his sword, his chest torn open by a single swipe of those deadly claws. The second managed to parry once before Levi sent his darkfire out toward him like a livewire that pierced him through the chest and electrocuted him.

“Fall back!” one of the angels shouted, his voice high with panic.

But retreat wasn't so simple. Levi moved among them like a hurricane of shadow and flame, his claws striking with terrible precision.

Angels fell screaming, their bodies torn apart by the savage fury of his attack.

Those who tried to fly were dragged back down by tendrils of darkness that extended from his wings, wrapping around limbs and necks like hungry serpents.

I stood frozen, watching the carnage unfold with a mixture of horror and awe. This was Levi unleashed, the full terrible potential of what he truly was. No longer the controlled, sarcastic demon I'd come to love, but a primordial force of destruction.

“Ariella!” Aspen's voice cut through my shock. He was at my side, his face pale but determined. “We need to move! Now!”

I nodded, forcing myself to focus on the immediate danger rather than Levi's transformation. With the angels' attention divided between self-preservation and the demon in their midst, we had a chance to break through their lines and escape the barrier.

We ran, ducking and weaving through the chaos of the battlefield. Angels scattered

before us, too focused on the demon tearing through their ranks to worry about two fleeing prisoners. I glanced back once, just in time to see Levi tear an angel's wing from his body with a single, savage motion.

The angel's scream pierced the air, high and agonized, and something twisted in my chest. I knew that pain, had felt it myself. No one deserved that, not even my enemies.

“Levi!” I called, my voice cracking with the force of my shout. “Levi, stop!”

But he either couldn't hear me or couldn't understand, lost in the frenzy of his demonic nature. He continued his rampage, his claws dripping with blood, his eyes burning like twin infernos in his transformed face.

Haines, seeing his forces decimated, finally abandoned his position at the edge of the clearing.

With a flash of his wings, he took to the air, shouting orders for his remaining angels to retreat.

They didn't need to be told twice. Those who could still fly took off, carrying their wounded comrades.

Those too injured to move were left behind, sacrificed to the demon's fury.

“We're almost at the barrier!” Aspen shouted, pulling me forward as I continued to look back at Levi. “I can feel it! Just a few more yards!”

I forced myself to keep moving, though every instinct screamed at me to go back for Levi. We pushed through a line of dense underbrush, emerged into a smaller clearing, and suddenly the air felt different—lighter, less constrained.

“This is it!” Aspen's hands were already moving, weaving the spell for the portal. “We're outside the barrier!”

But I couldn't leave, not without Levi. I turned back toward the battlefield, my heart pounding in my chest. “Levi!” I shouted again, pouring all my strength into the call. “LEVI!”

For a moment, there was nothing but the sounds of the forest and the distant cries of retreating angels. Then, through the trees, a massive shape emerged—Levi, still in his transformed state, his wings spread wide, his claws and face stained with angelic blood.

He moved toward us with predatory grace, his glowing black eyes fixed on us with an intensity that raised the hair on the back of my neck. There was no recognition in that gaze, no hint of the demon I'd come to know. Only hunger, and rage, and ancient, primal power.

“Aspen,” I said, my voice low and steady despite the fear coursing through me. “Get the portal ready, but stay back.”

“Ariella, I don't think?—”

“Stay. Back.” I moved forward slowly, my hands open at my sides, my sword sheathed. No sudden movements, nothing that could be interpreted as a threat. “Levi,” I called softly. “It's me. It's Ariella.”

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

The demon growled, a sound that resonated in my bones.

He stepped closer, his massive form blocking out the light filtering through the trees.

Up close, the transformation was even more shocking, a little different than the last time I had seen him like this—his face was barely recognizable, his features sharpened and twisted into something inhuman, his mouth filled with razor-like teeth.

“Sweetheart,” I said, using the term of endearment he so often used for me. “Come back to me. The fight is over. We're safe now.”

Something flickered in those glowing eyes—a hint of recognition, quickly subsumed by the raging demon. He growled again, lower this time, and stepped closer. His clawed hand rose, poised to strike, and I braced myself for the blow.

But I didn't retreat. Didn't flinch. Just held his gaze steadily, letting him see that I wasn't afraid—not of him, never of him.

“I know you're in there,” I said softly. “I know you can hear me. Come back, Levi. Come back to me.”

His hand trembled, caught between striking and reaching out. The growl that rumbled from his chest sounded almost pained now, conflicted.

Slowly, carefully, I raised my own hand, palm up, offering it to him. “That's it,” I encouraged. “Focus on my voice. On us.”

His clawed fingers hovered over my palm, razor-sharp and capable of tearing through flesh with minimal effort. I waited, my heart hammering in my chest, but my hand remained steady.

“Please,” I whispered, looking directly into those burning eyes. “Come back.”

For a long, terrible moment, nothing happened. Then, with a shudder that seemed to pass through his entire massive frame, Levi's hand moved to touch mine. The contact was gentle, almost hesitant, his claws carefully curled away from my skin.

The change started slowly—the glow in his eyes dimming, the horns receding into his forehead, his wings folding and shrinking back to their normal size. His skin lightened, the molten veins fading, his features softening back into the familiar contours of his face.

Within moments, Levi stood before me, fully himself again, though his eyes remained haunted, filled with the horror of what he'd just done.

“Ariella,” he rasped, his voice hoarse as if he'd been screaming. “I?—”

“It's okay,” I said quickly, squeezing his hand. “You're back. That's all that matters.”

He pulled away, disgust twisting his features as he looked down at his blood-covered hands. “I lost control. I became that thing again.”

“You saved us,” I insisted, though I knew the cost of that salvation would weigh heavily on him. “We were outnumbered. They would have captured or killed us.”

“Portal's ready,” Aspen called, his voice tight with strain. Behind him, the swirling doorway of magic pulsed with unstable energy. “We need to go. Now.”

I looked back toward the battlefield, thinking of Ezekiel, of my mother and sister still trapped in Elysium. The urge to go after them, to storm the gates and demand their release, was almost overwhelming.

But I knew it would be suicide. We'd barely escaped this trap. Charging into Elysium now, without a plan, would only get us killed or captured—and then we'd be no help to anyone.

“Ariella,” Levi said softly, reading my thoughts in my expression. “We can't help them if we're dead.”

I nodded, the bitter taste of failure filling my mouth. “I know. Let's go.”

Together, we stepped through the portal, leaving behind the blood-soaked clearing and the echoes of Levi's rampage. The magic swirled around us, disorienting and cold, before depositing us back in the warehouse with a jarring sense of displacement.

Aspen stumbled as he emerged behind us, his face pale with exhaustion. Creating a portal under pressure, so close to Elysium's barriers, had clearly taken a toll on him.

“Are you both okay?” he asked, his eyes scanning us for injuries.

I nodded, though “okay” felt like a stretch. My side ached where the angel's blade had caught me, and my shoulder burned from the shallow cut I'd received earlier. But the physical pain was nothing compared to the knot of fear and guilt twisting in my chest.

“I should go,” Aspen said after a moment, his gaze lingering on Levi, who stood silently by the window, his back to us. “I need to alert the others about what happened. We'll need to regroup, come up with a new plan.”

“Thank you,” I said, meaning it. “For everything. I don't think we would have made it



out without you.”

He offered a tired smile. “All part of the service.” His expression sobered. “I’m sorry about your family, Ariella. And about Ezekiel. We’ll find a way to help them.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Aspen squeezed my shoulder briefly, then murmured the words for a new portal. A moment later, he was gone, leaving Levi and me alone in the suddenly too-quiet warehouse.

Without a word, Levi marched to the office and crossed the magical door into his apartment.

I followed him and moved directly to the kitchen, where I wetted a clean cloth with warm water. “Let me see your wound,” I said, approaching Levi cautiously.

“Don’t,” he said, his voice flat. “Just don’t.”

“Levi—”

“I killed them, Ariella.” He finally turned to face me, his eyes dark with self-loathing. “Not in battle, not in self-defense. I tore them apart like animals. And that version of me ... I enjoyed it.”

I swallowed hard, remembering the savage glee I’d glimpsed in those glowing eyes as Levi had rampaged through the angels’ ranks. “You weren’t yourself.”

“Wasn’t I?” He laughed, a harsh, bitter sound. “I’m not so sure anymore, sweetheart. I thought I was rid of that creature. That I would never transform into it again.” Neither did I. “Perhaps that’s what I am, what I’ve always been, underneath it all.”

“No,” I said firmly, setting the cloth aside and stepping closer to him. “That’s not all

you are. You're more than your demonic nature, Levi. Just like I'm more than my angelic one."

He shook his head, backing away from my approach. "You don't understand. I could have hurt you. I almost did."

"But you didn't," I reminded him. "Just like before. When it mattered, when I called to you, you came back. You controlled it."

"Barely," he whispered. "And what about next time? What if I can't pull back? What if I hurt you, or Lacey, or anyone else I—" He stopped abruptly, turning away again.

I closed the distance between us, gently placing my hand on his arm. "Look at me, Levi."

Reluctantly, he did, his eyes meeting mine with a vulnerability I'd rarely seen in him.

"I'm not afraid of you," I said softly. "I never have been, not really. Even when you were at your most demonic, even when you were trying to intimidate me... I saw more in you. I still do."

His expression cracked, the carefully maintained facade of control shattering to reveal the raw pain beneath.

"My father was like that," he admitted, his voice barely audible.

"Molraz. In the end, the demon consumed everything else.

There was nothing left of whoever he'd been before. Just the monster."

Understanding dawned. This wasn't just about what had happened in the clearing.

This was about a fear Levi had carried for centuries—the fear of becoming like his father, of losing himself to the darkness within.

“You're not Molraz,” I said, sliding my hands up to frame his face, forcing him to maintain eye contact.

“You're Levi. You're stubborn, and sarcastic, and sometimes infuriating.

You're loyal to a fault, and braver than you'd ever admit.

You're the demon who risked everything to save his sister, who stayed with me even when I tried to push you away, who makes me feel safe in a world that's falling apart.”

Tears shimmered in his eyes, though he blinked them back before they could fall. “Ariella...”

“I'm not going anywhere,” I promised. “No matter what happened today, no matter what might happen tomorrow. We're in this together, remember? To the end.”

He closed his eyes, his breathing ragged, and for a moment I thought he might pull away again. But instead, he drew me into his arms, holding me with a desperate intensity that spoke volumes.

I held him just as tightly, ignoring the pain from my wounds, focusing only on the solid warmth of him against me.

We were both broken in our own ways, both scarred by pasts we couldn't escape.

But in this moment, holding each other in the quiet aftermath of violence and fear, we were exactly what the other needed.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:32 pm*

Morning light filtered through the blinds, casting golden stripes across the kitchen table where Levi and I sat with cups of coffee and untouched plates of breakfast. Neither of us had much appetite, the events of yesterday still weighing heavily on us both.

Last night, we surrendered to our wounds and visited the Great Eternity Hall, where Lacey healed us both. Though, Levi didn't tell her about his transformation, and I stayed quiet about it, respecting his decision. When ready, he was going to tell her.

Now, I watched Levi over the rim of my mug, noting the tension in his shoulders, the distant look in his eyes.

He hadn't mentioned his transformation since our conversation after returning to the apartment, but I could tell it was still foremost in his mind.

The guilt and fear lingered in the careful way he moved, as if afraid of his own strength, his own nature.

As for me, my dreams had been haunted by images of Ezekiel's form disappearing in front of my eyes, of my mother and sister trapped in Elysium, their fate uncertain.

Mixed with those fears were echoes of the Reflecting Pool's magic, forcing me to relive the day I lost my wings over and over again.

I'd woken twice during the night, drenched in sweat, and each time, Levi had been there, holding me until the panic subsided.

We were a fine pair—both broken in our own ways, both trying to hide how close we were to shattering completely.

“You should eat something,” Levi said, breaking the silence. He nodded toward my untouched toast. “We need to keep our strength up.”

I managed a small smile. “Pot, kettle,” I replied, gesturing to his own full plate.

He acknowledged the point with a slight tilt of his head, then pushed his plate aside entirely. “I’m not hungry.”

“Me neither.” I abandoned the pretense of breakfast, wrapping my hands around my coffee mug instead. “Do you think?—”

My phone buzzed on the table between us, the screen lighting up with an incoming message. The number was unfamiliar, but something about the sequence caused my heart to skip a beat.

“What is it?” Levi asked, instantly alert to the change in my expression.

“I don’t know,” I murmured, reaching for the phone with a strange reluctance. “But I have a bad feeling.”

The message was brief, just a few lines, but my blood ran cold as I read it:

Ariella. Come to Elysium alone. The central square. Tomorrow at dawn. Your mother and sister's lives depend on your compliance.

No tricks. No allies. Just you.

— Rhodes

I stared at the screen, my fingers tightening around the phone until my knuckles turned white. Levi gently pried it from my grip, reading the message with a darkening expression.

“Son of a bitch,” he growled, his eyes flashing with anger. “He's using your family as bait.”

“It's what I would do, in his position,” I said, my voice surprisingly steady despite the storm of emotions raging inside me. “He knows I'll come.”

“You can't seriously be considering this.” Levi set the phone down with careful control, as if afraid he might crush it otherwise. “It's a trap, sweetheart. He's not planning to let any of you walk away.”

“I know.” I picked up my mug again, but the coffee had gone cold, bitter and unappetizing. “But what choice do I have? They're my family, Levi.”

“And he's counting on that. On your loyalty, your willingness to sacrifice yourself for them.” Levi ran a hand through his hair, frustration clear in every line of his body. “If you go alone, you're dead. And then he'll kill them anyway, because why wouldn't he?”

I knew he was right. Rhodes wasn't offering a genuine exchange—he was trying to eliminate me, the one person who knew the truth about his plans, who had the allies and the will to stop him. My family was just leverage, a way to force my hand.

“I'm not going alone,” I said finally, decision crystallizing in my mind. “But I am going.”

Levi studied my face, searching for something. Whatever he saw there must have convinced him, because he nodded once, his expression grim but resolved. “Then we

plan. We gather our allies. And we make damn sure that when you walk into Elysium tomorrow, you've got an army at your back.”

I reached across the table, taking his hand in mine. “Thank you.”

He squeezed my fingers lightly, careful of his strength. “Don't thank me yet, sweetheart. We've still got to figure out how to pull this off.”

Over the next hour, we reached out to everyone—Lacey and Abbie at the Great Eternity Hall, Farrah and Wyatt, Erin and Rey and the other demon hunters, Aspen and Boise, and finally, Kadriel and the Lost Legion. By early afternoon, we'd arranged to meet at the warehouse to plan our next move.

I left Rhodes's message unanswered. Let him wonder, let him worry. It was a small act of defiance, but it gave me a sliver of satisfaction in the face of his threats.

\* \* \*

The warehouse was crowded with allies by the time Levi and I arrived.

Lacey and Abbie had set up a makeshift command center with the crates, spread with maps of Elysium that Kadriel had provided.

Farrah and Wyatt stood nearby, deep in conversation with Erin and Rey.

Aspen and Boise were examining what looked like small glass vials filled with a shimmering golden liquid—the elixir made from the lilies, I realized with a surge of hope.

And in the corner, standing slightly apart from the others, was an angel I recognized—the one who had guided us to the Lost Legion's hideout in the

mountains. He straightened as we approached, offering a formal nod.

“Ariella,” he said, his voice deep and resonant. “Leviathan.”

“Didn't catch your name last time,” Levi said, his tone carefully neutral. Since his transformation, he'd been even more guarded around the angels, as if afraid they might see the demon lurking beneath his controlled exterior.

“Tarek,” the angel replied. “Commander Kadriel sent me to represent the Legion. The others are making their final preparations.”

I nodded, grateful for his presence. “Thank you for coming.”

“The commander believes in you,” Tarek said simply. “That's enough for us.”

His words warmed me, a reminder that despite everything that had happened, despite the betrayals and the losses, I wasn't alone in this fight. I had allies—powerful ones—who were willing to risk everything to help me save Elysium.

“Everyone's here,” Lacey called, drawing our attention to the center of the room. “We should get started.”

We gathered around the table, a circle of determined faces above the spread of maps and diagrams. Lacey took the lead, her expression serious but confident.

“Rhodes has made his move,” she began, gesturing to the phone where I'd shown her his message. “He wants Ariella in Elysium tomorrow at dawn, alone. Obviously, that's not happening.”

Murmurs of agreement rumbled through the group.



“We have two primary objectives,” Lacey continued. “First, stop Rhodes before he can use the dagger on Adona. Second, rescue Ariella's family and Ezekiel.”

“Have you figured out how we’re supposed to get into Elysium?” Rey asked, his arms folded across his chest.

Abbie held up one of the vials with golden liquid. “That's where these come in. Thanks to Ezekiel's lilies and Commander Kadriel's knowledge, we managed to create the elixir that will allow non-angels to cross into Elysium.”

“And we have more than we hoped for,” Lacey added. “Enough for everyone here.”

“That's the first part,” I said, taking over. “Getting in. But we need to be invisible once we're there. Rhodes will be expecting me to bring backup, regardless of his warnings. He'll have guards posted, watching for any sign of intrusion.”

“Which is why we've been working on this,” Lacey said, producing another set of vials—these filled with a clear, shimmering liquid.

“Invisibility potion. Lavinia shared the recipe with us.

It won't make us completely undetectable, but it'll make us hard to spot, especially if the angels aren't specifically looking for us.”

“How long does it last?” Farrah asked, taking one of the vials and examining it with a practiced eye.

“A couple of hours, give or take,” Abbie answered. “So timing will be crucial.”

I leaned over the map, focusing on the central square where Rhodes had instructed me to meet him.

“I’ll enter through the main gate, alone as requested.

The rest of you will come in behind me and split into teams, taking different paths toward the central square, staying invisible until we’re ready to act.”

“And when will that be?” Wyatt asked.

“Once I have eyes on my family and Ezekiel,” I said. “And once we’ve confirmed where Rhodes is keeping the dagger. We can’t move until we know both.”

“We’ll need to neutralize Rhodes quickly,” Tarek said, his voice grim. “He’s powerful, and he’ll have his most loyal followers with him.”

“We might have something,” Abbie said. We all looked at her. “While both potions were brewing, Lacey and I worked on a binding spell specifically designed for archangels. If we can catch him off guard, we can immobilize him long enough to take the dagger.”

“And what about Adona?” Erin asked. “Where does she fit into all this?”

“Kadriel believes she’s being held in the Celestial Tower,” Tarek explained, pointing to a structure on the map. “Heavily guarded, but not impossible to reach if we create enough of a distraction elsewhere.”

For the next hour, we refined the plan, assigning teams and mapping routes through Elysium. It wasn’t perfect—there were too many variables, too many ways it could go wrong—but it was the best we could do with the time and resources we had.

“Remember,” I said as we began to wrap up, “Rhodes is expecting a trap. He’ll be prepared for almost anything. Our advantage is numbers and surprise. Once we lose either of those, the odds shift dramatically against us.”

“We understand the risks,” Rey said, his expression solemn.

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I looked around the circle of faces—angels, demons, witches, shifters, hunters—all united by a common purpose. It was humbling, the trust they were placing in me, in this plan.

“Get some rest,” I urged them. “Tomorrow will test all of us. We meet back here at five AM, two hours before dawn in Elysium.”

The group dispersed slowly, breaking into smaller conversations as they made final preparations. I found myself drawn to the window, staring out at the darkening sky as the enormity of what we were about to attempt settled over me.

Levi joined me after a while, his presence a comforting warmth at my side. “Penny for your thoughts, sweetheart?”

“They're worth less than that right now,” I admitted with a small smile. “I'm just hoping we're doing the right thing. Putting all these people at risk.”

“They're here because they choose to be,” he reminded me. “Because they believe in you. In what we're fighting for.”

I turned to face him, taking in the strong lines of his face, the depth in his dark eyes. Despite everything—the trauma of my trial in the Reflecting Pool, his transformation in the forest, the looming danger of tomorrow's mission—I found myself drawing strength from his unwavering presence.

“And you?” I asked softly. “After what happened yesterday, are you sure you want to be part of this? No one would blame you if you wanted to sit this one out.”

His expression hardened. "I'm not leaving your side, Ariella. Not tomorrow, not ever. Whatever happens in Elysium, we face it together."

The fierce conviction in his voice scattered my doubts, at least for the moment. "Together," I echoed, the word feeling like a promise, a vow.

\* \* \*

The apartment was quiet when we returned, the silence heavy with anticipation for the morning to come. I moved around the kitchen, going through the motions of preparing a simple meal neither of us would probably eat, my mind racing with thoughts of tomorrow.

Levi watched me from the doorway, his gaze thoughtful. "You should try to get some sleep," he suggested. "Dawn comes early."

"I don't think I could sleep if I tried," I admitted, abandoning the pretense of cooking. "Every time I close my eyes, I see..."

I didn't need to finish the sentence. He knew—the Reflecting Pool, the trap at the eastern gate, my family in Rhodes's hands. The nightmares waiting to claim me.

"Come here," he said softly, holding out his hand.

I went to him without hesitation, letting him pull me against his chest, his arms encircling me with careful strength. We stood like that for a long moment, drawing comfort from each other's warmth, from the steady rhythm of our heartbeats.

"This might be our last night," I whispered against his shirt, giving voice to the fear that had been haunting me since we'd made our plans. "If something goes wrong tomorrow..."

“Don't,” he murmured, his lips brushing against my hair. “Don't think about that.”

“I can't help it.” I pulled back just enough to look up at him, to see the emotion in his eyes that he so rarely allowed to show. “There's so much at stake, so many ways this could go wrong. And I can't stop thinking about how I might never get the chance to?—”

He cut me off with a kiss, his lips capturing mine with gentle insistence. I melted into him, my arms sliding up to wrap around his neck as the kiss deepened, became something hungrier, more desperate.

“Then let's make tonight count,” he breathed against my mouth. “Let's forget about tomorrow, about Rhodes, about everything but us. Just for a little while.”

His hands moved to my waist, drawing me closer, and I went willingly, craving the solid reality of him against me. Whatever tomorrow brought—victory or defeat, life or death—tonight we had this. Each other. This moment stolen from the chaos swirling around us.

Levi lifted me easily, my legs wrapping around his waist as he carried me through the apartment toward the bedroom. His lips never left mine, the kiss growing more heated, more urgent with each step.

He dropped me on the bed, his body still tangled with mine as I pulled off his shirt, barely breaking our frantic kisses.

As my shirt and bra came off, our bodies pressed together, I didn't know where I began and he ended, I just knew I needed him.

His lips trailed down to the hollow of my breast and then my stomach as he scooted to the end of the bed, tugging my jeans and underwear off in one fell swoop so I lay

naked, vulnerable beneath him.

He dipped his head down, his tongue flattening against my center as he kept his gaze locked on mine.

So many thoughts ran through my mind.

How I wanted to tell him how I felt.

We both knew we might not have much time, and this could be the last time to say it.

And yet when my body bent to his will, letting him taste me, all I could do was moan his name, my eyes sliding closed as I pressed my head to the pillow, relishing in the feel of his mouth on my sensitive nub.

With his hands pressed to my thighs, pinning me down, I should have felt constricted. My body going into fight mode.

But instead, I melted into his touch, feeling safe for the first time in a long time. This was where I belonged. With him. Together in his arms.

All the things I wanted to say, I knew I couldn't say out loud, so I poured them into my body, letting myself feel all of him as my body shuddered and I whimpered, riding out my orgasm on his awaiting tongue.

I could barely breathe as he finished, then pressed his mouth to mine so I tasted my own salty sweetness on him.

I usually hated that sort of thing, but with Levi, everything felt perfect. So alive. So real.

As our bodies pressed together, I willed him to slide into me, to feel his familiar fullness.

But he just stayed against me, our bodies moving together as he continued kissing me, his fingers going down my sides and my waist, then back up again as if he was trying to memorize every curve.

But I needed him, my whole body pulsing and begging for more.

Putting my hands on his chest, I pushed him gently, and he flinched before I rolled him onto his back, thighs still braced on either side of him as I straddled his naked body.

Sitting up, I smirked, running my fingers down the hard lines of his abs.

“You’re beautiful, Sweetheart,” he murmured, his fingers going to my cheek and rubbing softly.

I wanted to memorize that moment. Keep it ingrained in my brain forever as his eyes widened while I slid his erection inside of me.

Each inch by exquisite inch was better than the last, and I moaned, relishing in the feel of him.

Normally, I would slam my eyes shut, just focusing on our bodies and the pleasure.

But this time, I kept my gaze locked on his, my fingers grasped firmly on his chest as I rocked our bodies together.

He gripped the back of my legs, pulling me closer.



“You feel incredible, Ariella,” he rasped with each thrust.

“You do,” I managed to breathe as my body pulsed, so close to the brink that I could feel stars pulsing throughout my body.

But before I could reach the top, Levi suddenly flipped me to my back, never breaking out contact as he slid his body against mine over and over again, his breathing heavy against mine.

I gripped onto his back, letting the magic and pleasure flow through me as I breathed him in.

He rasped against my ear, something I couldn’t quite make out.

I wanted to ask.

Wanted to know if he was finally going to say what I’d desperately been holding back, but then his eyes locked on mine, and all the will to speak left my body.

His hands went between us again as he rubbed my sensitive nub, continuing to thrust his hard body against mine.

As I stayed connected with him, our eyes locked, I silently said the words I knew I couldn’t say out loud, hoping it was enough before I cried out his name, letting my orgasm take over.

He followed soon after, his body shuddering against mine before he collapsed on my chest, our bodies tangled together.

I wanted to stay in that moment forever. To just breathe him in.

We both knew what was going to happen soon, and I had to hold back the tears threatening to escape as I ran my fingers through his hair.

“We should probably clean up,” he whispered before placing a light kiss on my shoulder.

I blinked hard, trying to control my emotions.

Usually, we’d lie together until we fell asleep after sex.

Maybe he was just ready to get it over with.

But I gasped when instead of heading to the bathroom, he pulled me with him to the edge of the bed, then slid his arms under my thighs, lifting me and carrying me forward to the bathroom before lightly placing me on the edge of the tub.

With his back to me, he turned on the water, letting it fall in a steady stream as he checked the temperature before adding in some bath salts.

“A bubble bath, Levi?” I asked, raising a brow.

He laughed, standing up to his full height, before he stepped behind me, easing my body into the warm water. “I can do things like bubble baths.”

I gasped as I felt his chest slide against my back, then his legs against my side as he slid into the tub behind me.

Sighing, I leaned my head back against his sweaty shoulder, letting my eyes drift closed.

“I don’t know what tomorrow is going to bring,” he said quietly, his fingers lazily

trailing down my chest where my heart beat rapidly.

“We don’t need to talk about tomorrow, okay? Let’s just stay in this moment for as long as we can.”

He stayed silent for a moment before I finally felt him breathe again. “Okay.”

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Early morning, we all gathered at the warehouse.

No one spoke much—the weight of what we were about to attempt hung heavy in the air, making idle conversation impossible.

Instead, we moved with quiet efficiency, checking weapons, reviewing maps, and preparing the potions that would allow us to infiltrate Elysium.

Aspen and Boise stood at the center of the warehouse, hands raised as they prepared to open the portal that would take us to the eastern gate—the same place where Ezekiel had supposedly arranged to meet me with my family, where we'd walked into a trap.

It seemed fitting that we would return there, this time with our own deception planned.

“Everyone clear on their roles?” Lacey asked, her voice steady despite the tension evident in her posture. She and Abbie moved among us, distributing small vials of the invisibility potion along with the golden elixir made from the lilies.

Murmurs of confirmation rippled through the group.

I looked around at the faces of my allies—Levi, his expression grim but determined; Farrah and Wyatt, standing shoulder to shoulder; Erin, Rey, and Rage weapons checked and ready; Kadriel, Tarek and the rest of the Lost Legion, their eyes alert for any sign of danger.

The portal shimmered into existence before us, a swirling vortex of purple energy that would take us to the edge of Elysium.

“Remember,” I said, addressing the group one final time, “stay hidden until you see my signal. No matter what happens, no matter what Rhodes does or says to me, don't reveal yourselves too early.”

“We'll be right behind you,” Lacey promised, her eyes fierce with determination.

With a deep breath, I stepped through the portal, feeling the familiar disorientation as magic pulled me across space. The others followed close behind, emerging into the same wooded clearing where we'd been ambushed just days before.

From our position among the trees, we could see the eastern gate of Elysium—a simple arch of white stone, unadorned but radiant with power. Ten angel warriors stood guard, their armor gleaming in the early morning light, their expressions alert and watchful.

“Showtime,” I murmured, straightening my shoulders.

One by one, my allies drank the elixirs. The effect was immediate and fascinating—they didn't disappear completely, but rather became like reflections on disturbed water, their outlines blurring and shifting until they were barely visible even to my enhanced angelic senses.

Levi was the last to drink his potions. Before he did, he caught my face between his hands, his eyes locked with mine. “Be careful in there,” he said, his voice low and intense. “Remember the plan, but also remember to adapt if things go sideways.”

“I will,” I promised, leaning in to press a quick, fierce kiss to his lips. “See you on the other side.”

He drank the potions and faded from view, leaving me standing alone at the edge of the clearing. I took a deep breath, then another, steeling myself for what was to come. I'd faced Rhodes before, had survived his betrayal. I could do it again.

With deliberate steps, I emerged from the trees and walked toward the gate, my hands raised to show I carried no weapons.

The angel guards reacted instantly, their swords materializing in their hands as they moved to form a barrier between me and the entrance to Elysium.

“Halt!” one commanded, his voice echoing with authority. “Identify yourself!”

“My name is Ariella,” I said, keeping my voice steady despite the rapid beating of my heart. “I'm here at the request of Archangel Rhodes.”

The guards exchanged glances, clearly having been warned to expect me. After a moment's hesitation, the one who had spoken nodded.

“We were told you might come,” he said, his eyes hard with suspicion. “Alone.”

I spread my arms wide, inviting their inspection. “As you can see.”

The guard studied me for a long moment, then barked an order to his companions. Two of them moved forward, roughly grasping my arms and binding my wrists with shackles that glowed with suppressive magic.

“These will prevent you from summoning your wings or using your powers,” the guard explained with cold satisfaction. “Standard procedure for traitors.”

I said nothing, allowing them to manhandle me through the gate and into Elysium. Behind me, I knew my invisible allies were slipping through as well, taking

advantage of the guards' focus on me to infiltrate undetected.

The air in Elysium was as I remembered it—sweeter, cleaner, charged with the subtle energy that permeated every corner of the realm. Under different circumstances, returning after so long would have been a homecoming.

Now, it felt like walking into enemy territory.

The guards led me along a narrow path that wound around the side of a mountain, away from the main thoroughfare that led to the capital. This was a back route, less traveled and more discreet—perfect for transporting a prisoner without drawing too much attention.

But as we rounded a bend in the path, I caught a glimpse of the main road below us, and my breath caught in my throat.

It was chaos. Angels crowded the wide avenue, some in battle armor, others in civilian dress.

They seemed to be gathering for some kind of assembly or announcement, their faces turned expectantly toward the central square.

And they were divided. Even from this distance, I could see the tension rippling through the crowd.

Some angels stood tall and proud, clearly Rhodes's supporters, while others huddled in small groups, their expressions fearful and uncertain.

As I watched, a skirmish broke out between two factions, quickly quelled by warriors in silver armor.

“What's happening down there?” I asked, unable to hide my concern.

One of my escorts gave me a rough shove. “Silence, traitor. It's no concern of yours.”

But I'd seen enough to understand that the situation in Elysium was even worse than we'd feared. Rhodes hadn't just been gathering supporters—he'd been sowing discord, turning angel against angel, preparing for a complete restructuring of our society.

We continued along the mountain path, climbing higher toward the Celestial Tower that loomed against the sky.

The tower had always been a symbol of angelic authority, the place from where Adona ruled and the highest council met to make decisions that would affect all of Elysium.

Now, it seemed, Rhodes had claimed it as his base of operations.

Our passage didn't go unnoticed. As we moved through a small residential area on the mountainside, angels emerged from their homes to watch. Their reactions chilled me to the core.

“Traitor!” one shouted, his face contorted with fury. “Murderer!”

“She killed her own squadron!” another cried, the accusation slicing through me like a physical blow.

But not all were hostile. Some watched with wide, frightened eyes, quickly ducking back inside when my guards looked their way. Others whispered among themselves, their expressions doubtful or confused.

An older angel, his wings showing hints of silver that denoted his age and wisdom,



stepped forward from his doorway. “Is it true?” he asked, his voice cracking with emotion. “Did you really betray us, Ariella? You were always such a devoted guardian.”

Before I could answer, one of my guards shoved the elder back. “Return to your home, citizen. Rhodes will address all concerns at the gathering this afternoon.”

The elder's face hardened. “Rhodes speaks many words, but answers few questions.”

For that bit of defiance, he received a backhand across the face that sent him staggering. I struggled against my bonds, outraged by the casual cruelty, but another guard grabbed me by the hair, yanking me forward.

“Keep moving,” he growled.

As we continued our ascent, a younger angel broke away from a small group and rushed toward me, her expression wild with grief and rage. “My brother was in your squadron!” she screamed. “He trusted you!”

My heart clenched, recognizing her as Jeremiah's sister—we'd trained together, shared meals in the academy's dining hall. Now she looked at me with pure hatred, believing I'd murdered her beloved sibling.

My guards intercepted her before she could reach me, one of them catching her around the waist while another drew his sword in warning.

“Rhodes will deal with her,” the first guard said, his voice firm but not unkind. “She'll face justice for what she's done, I promise you.”

The younger angel spat in my direction before allowing herself to be led away, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

I watched her go, a hollow ache spreading through my chest. How many others believed the lies Rhodes had spread about me?

How many families were grieving loved ones they thought I had killed?

“Shocking, isn't it?” a quiet voice murmured next to my ear—so faint I almost thought I'd imagined it. Levi, invisible but still beside me. “How easily they believe what they're told.”

I didn't respond, couldn't risk acknowledging him with my guards so close, but his presence steadied me, reminded me why we were here. Not just for my family, not just for Adona, but for all of Elysium—to free it from Rhodes's manipulation and restore the truth.

The Celestial Tower rose before us, its crystalline spires catching the morning light and refracting it into thousands of rainbow shards. Under other circumstances, it would have been breathtaking. Now, it seemed cold and forbidding, a prison rather than a beacon.

Guards flanked the massive doors, standing at rigid attention as we approached. They stepped aside at a nod from my escorts, allowing us to pass into the cavernous entry hall beyond.

Inside, the tower was eerily quiet, the usual bustle of angelic activity replaced by a tense stillness that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

My guards led me through corridors of polished white stone, past many flights of pristine white stairs, past chambers where important decisions had been made for millennia, now empty and silent.

Finally, we reached a set of ornate double doors, carved with scenes from Elysium's

earliest days. Two more guards stood at attention there, and they opened the doors as we approached, revealing the vast chamber beyond.

The Celestial Audience Hall had always been impressive—a circular space with a domed ceiling that mirrored the stars above Elysium, walls of pure crystal that caught and amplified the light. But my attention wasn't on the architecture. It was on the figures waiting inside.

Rhodes stood at the far end of the room, resplendent in armor of silver and gold, his wings—usually hidden like most angels'—fully extended behind him in a display of power and authority. Beside him, Haines watched with cold satisfaction as I was marched forward.

And kneeling on the floor before them, bound with the same glowing shackles that encircled my wrists, were four figures that made my heart stop in my chest.

“Ariella,” Rhodes greeted me, his voice silky with false warmth. “How good of you to join us. I believe you know everyone here.”

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My heart pounded in my chest as I stared at the prisoners kneeling before Rhodes.

My mother's face, so familiar yet lined with new worry. Adriel, my beautiful, stubborn sister, her eyes wide with shock at my appearance. Ezekiel, beaten and bloody, his wings damaged in a way that made my own back ache with phantom pain.

And Adona herself, the leader of Elysium, her eyes unfocused and glazed, her movements sluggish as if she'd been drugged.

“Mother,” I whispered, unable to help myself.

Sanvi's eyes filled with tears. “Ariella,” she breathed, her voice cracking with emotion. “My baby girl.”

Rhodes strode between us, cutting off our line of sight. “Touching,” he said, his voice dripping with mock sympathy. “The traitor reunited with her family. Almost makes one forget the blood on her hands.”

I wanted to lunge at him, to wipe that smug expression off his face with my fists, my sword, my magic—anything.

But the shackles around my wrists dampened my power, and even if they hadn't, attacking now would be suicide.

Not with my family and Adona so vulnerable, not with Haines standing guard, not when I had no idea where the dagger was.

So I swallowed my rage, forced my face into a mask of calm. “The only blood on anyone's hands is yours, Rhodes.”

He laughed, the sound echoing off the crystal walls of the chamber. “Still defiant, even in defeat. I've always admired that about you, Ariella. It's a shame you chose the wrong side in this.”

“I'm sorry,” Ezekiel's voice came from behind Rhodes, ragged with pain and regret. “Ariella, I'm so sorry. They caught me trying to take more lilies. I tried to fight, but—” He broke off with a wince as Haines kicked him in the ribs.

“Quiet, traitor,” Haines snapped.

“It's not your fault,” I told Ezekiel, my voice firm despite the fear squeezing my heart. “You did everything you could.”

Rhodes clapped his hands together, the sound sharp and jarring in the tense silence. “Well, as touching as this reunion is, we have business to attend to.” He gestured to the guards still flanking me. “Bring her.”

I was pushed roughly forward, past my kneeling family, toward a set of doors on the far side of the chamber.

They opened onto a wide balcony that overlooked a courtyard below.

There, a sea of angels had gathered—some in the silver armor of the Guardians, others in the plain clothing of ordinary citizens.

Their faces turned upward as Rhodes stepped onto the balcony, me at his side, my guards ensuring I couldn't make any sudden moves.

“Angels of Elysium!” Rhodes's voice boomed out, amplified by magic to reach every corner of the assembly. “Today marks the beginning of a new era for our realm!”

Cheers rose from his supporters, while others in the crowd shifted uneasily, exchanging worried glances.

“For too long, we have been weakened by false leadership,” Rhodes continued, gesturing grandly. “By those who would have us serve humans and lesser supernaturals, rather than rule as is our right.”

More cheers, louder this time.

“But that time is ending. Today, we take back our power, our pride, our rightful place in the order of things.” He turned, grabbing my arm and shoving me forward to the edge of the balcony. “And we begin by bringing to justice those who have betrayed us from within!”

The crowd below rippled with movement as they recognized me, whispers spreading like wildfire through their ranks.

“Ariella, once a guardian of Elysium, revealed her true nature when she murdered her entire squadron five years ago!” Rhodes declared, his voice ringing with righteous fury. “Recently, she killed her mentor, Archangel Ylena, and plotted to overthrow our very way of life!”

Boos and jeers rose from the crowd, along with shouts of “Traitor!” and “Death to the betrayer!” But not everyone joined in. I could see confusion on some faces, doubt on others. Not everyone believed Rhodes's version of events.

“But her treachery ends today!” Rhodes continued, raising his hands to quiet the crowd. “She will face angelic justice for her crimes, and Elysium will be cleansed of

her corruption!”

I couldn't stay silent any longer. “He's lying!” I shouted, my voice carrying over the murmurs of the crowd. “Rhodes is the traitor! He betrayed Archangel Soren, he's planning to?—”

Rhodes's hand clamped over my mouth, cutting off my words. With a sharp nod to the guards, he had me dragged back inside the chamber, away from the prying eyes and ears of the assembly below.

Once the doors to the balcony were closed, he released me with a shove that sent me stumbling to my knees. “Did you really think I'd let you speak?” he sneered. “That I'd allow you to spread your lies to my people?”

“Your people?” I spat, rising to my feet despite the pain. “Elysium doesn't belong to you, Rhodes. It never has, and it never will.”

“On the contrary.” He circled me like a predator, his eyes gleaming with a dangerous light. “It already does. Most of the angels out there support me. Those who don't... well, they'll learn to adapt or face the consequences.”

“They support you because they don't know the truth,” I said, my voice carrying to where my family still knelt, watching this confrontation with varying expressions of fear and hope.

“They don't know that you orchestrated the ambush that killed my squadron. That you worked with a higher demon to trap us, to get your hands on the Scarlet Hex Dagger.”

Rhodes laughed, the sound cold and hollow. “More lies. Is that all you have, Ariella? Desperate accusations with no proof?”

“I was there,” I said, my voice steady despite the rage and grief boiling inside me. “I saw you betray Soren. I saw you take the dagger from Molraz. I heard you talk about reshaping Elysium, about how Adona was too weak to lead us into the future.”

“Don't listen to her,” Rhodes told my mother and sister, his voice dripping with false concern. “She's delusional, damaged by her time on Earth among the lesser beings.”

“It's the truth!” Ezekiel shouted suddenly, his voice cracking with the effort. “I heard Rhodes and Haines planning it all! The coup, the use of the dagger on Adona, everything! Ariella is innocent!”

Haines moved with shocking speed, his hand connecting with Ezekiel's face in a backhanded slap that echoed through the chamber. But he didn't stop there. He grabbed Ezekiel by the throat, light magic crackling around his fingers as he channeled it directly into the younger angel's body.

Ezekiel screamed, his back arching in agony, before collapsing unconscious to the floor.

“Ezekiel!” Adriel cried, straining against her bonds to reach him.

“Stop this!” my mother pleaded, tears streaming down her face. “Please, just stop!”

I lunged toward Haines, but my guards caught me, hauling me back with bruising force.

“You'll pay for that,” I promised, my voice low and deadly.

Sanvi looked up at me, her eyes shining with a mixture of tears and dawning realization. “I knew it,” she whispered. “Deep down, I knew you couldn't have done those things. You're my daughter. I should have trusted in that.”



“Mother—” I began, but Rhodes cut me off.

“Enough of this family drama,” he snapped. “It changes nothing. The fact remains that Ariella is a traitor, and she will face justice for her crimes.”

“What crimes?” Adriel demanded, finding her voice at last. Her face was a study in conflicting emotions—anger, relief, confusion—but beneath it all was the stubborn determination I'd always admired in her. “What proof do you have that she killed anyone?”

“I don't need proof,” Rhodes said dismissively. “I am Elysium's ruler now. My word is law.”

“Not yet,” came a soft, slurred voice from the far side of the chamber. Adona had raised her head, her eyes still unfocused but a hint of her usual power sparkling in their depths. “Not while I still live, Rhodes. This isn't who we are. This isn't what Elysium stands for.”

Rhodes stalked toward her, his expression darkening. “What Elysium stands for is exactly what I'm changing, Adona. Your weakness, your obsession with partnering with other supernaturals, with helping humans, has made us vulnerable. It ends now.”

“It doesn't have to be this way,” Adona said, her voice growing stronger with each word. “We can go back. Forget this madness. Return to our purpose.”

For a moment, Rhodes seemed to consider her words, his face softening just slightly.

Then his expression hardened again, colder than before.

“No. We're beyond that now.” He turned back to me, his eyes gleaming with a new, dangerous light.

“Perhaps a demonstration is in order. To show everyone what happens to those who oppose the new order.”

From within his armor, Rhodes withdrew a familiar object—the Scarlet Hex Dagger, its blade gleaming with an unnatural light, the red gem in its hilt pulsing like a heartbeat.

“I was going to use this only on Adona,” he said, advancing on me with slow, deliberate steps. “But I think you deserve this honor, Ariella. After all, you've been such a thorn in my side.”

I backed away instinctively, but my guards held me firm. The shackles dampened my magic, leaving me defenseless against the approaching dagger.

“What are you going to do?” I asked, hating the tremor in my voice but unable to suppress it. “Change me into what? A human? A demon?”

Rhodes's smile was terrible to behold. “Oh, I have something much more fitting in mind.

I'm going to strip away everything that makes you an angel—your power, your immortality, your very essence.

Worse even than a mere human. I'll leave you as nothing but a shell, aware enough to know what you've lost but powerless to do anything about it.” He raised the dagger, its blade catching the light from the crystal walls, sending crimson reflections dancing across the chamber. “Any last words, Ariella?”

A thousand thoughts raced through my mind—pleas for my family, defiance against Rhodes, regrets for what might have been. But before I could voice any of them, a familiar voice cut through the tension in the chamber.

“Yeah, I've got some last words for you.”

The air shimmered, and suddenly Levi was there, the invisibility potion wearing off at exactly the right moment. His darkfire crackled around his fingers as he stepped out from the shadows near the entrance. “Get away from her.”

Rhodes froze, his eyes widening in shock as more figures appeared throughout the chamber—Farrah and Wyatt near the balcony doors, Erin and Rey flanking the main entrance, Lacey and Abbie on either side of the prisoners, their hands already moving in patterns that would undo the shackles.

“What is this?” Rhodes demanded, his voice cracking with rage and disbelief. “How did you?—”

“Surprise,” I said, feeling a fierce grin spread across my face despite the danger we were still in. “Did you really think I'd come alone?”

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For a heartbeat, the chamber was suspended in shocked silence—Rhodes and his guards frozen in disbelief, my family wide-eyed with hope, and my friends positioned strategically around the room, ready for battle.

Then chaos erupted.

The doors to the chamber burst open, and dozens of angel warriors poured in, summoning their weapons with flashes of light. The peaceful crystal walls that had reflected gentle rainbows moments ago now blazed with the harsh glare of angelic magic and darkfire as the fighting began.

“Ariella!” Levi shouted, fighting his way toward me. A guard moved to intercept him, but Levi dispatched him with a brutal efficiency that left no doubt about his intentions. He reached me, his eyes blazing with determination. “Let's get these off you.”

He grabbed the shackles, straining against the enchanted metal, but they resisted even his demonic strength. Lacey appeared at his side, her face tight with concentration as her fingers traced glowing patterns over the bindings.

“Hold still,” she commanded. “These are complex.”

A wave of magic flowed from her fingertips, seeping into the shackles. They heated, then cooled rapidly, becoming brittle. With a final surge of power from Lacey and a sharp wrench from Levi, they shattered, falling to the ground in fragments.

Power flooded back into me, my magic rushing through my veins like a river

breaking through a dam. I flexed my fingers, feeling the light magic crackling at my fingertips, ready to be unleashed.

“Thanks,” I said, already turning toward Rhodes, who had retreated several steps, the dagger still clutched in his hand.

Around us, the battle raged. Farrah and Wyatt fought back-to-back, her ice magic freezing angels in their tracks while Wyatt, partially shifted with claws and fangs bared, tore through any who got too close.

Erin and Rey moved with the practiced coordination of long-time partners, their demon-hunting weapons finding weak spots in angelic armor with deadly precision.

The Lost Legion had engaged Rhodes's elite guard, angel fighting angel in a blur of wings and light magic. Aspen and Boise had created a barrier near one of the exits, preventing reinforcements from flooding in too quickly.

Rhodes's eyes darted around the chamber, assessing the situation with the cold calculation of a seasoned warrior. His gaze landed on my mother and sister, still bound on the floor, and a cruel smile twisted his lips.

“Guards!” he barked. “Kill the prisoners if anyone comes near me!”

Two warriors broke away from the fighting, moving toward my family with swords drawn.

My heart lurched, but before I could react, Abbie was there, her hands moving fast. A shield of silvery light sprang up around Sanvi, Adriel, and the unconscious Ezekiel, deflecting the first strike from the guards.

Lacey joined Abbie, her own magic bolstering the shield as she worked to free the

prisoners from their bonds. “Go!” she shouted to me. “We've got them!”

I hesitated, torn between protecting my family and stopping Rhodes, but Levi's hand on my arm steadied me.

“Trust them,” he said, his voice low and urgent. “Rhodes is the priority. The dagger?—”

“I know.” I steeled myself and turned away from my family, focusing on Rhodes. “Let's finish this.”

We advanced on Rhodes, who had backed toward Adona, the dagger held before him like a talisman. Haines moved to his side, his own sword materializing in his hand.

“This changes nothing,” Rhodes snarled, his composure cracking. “You're outnumbered, outmatched. Elysium is mine!”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Levi replied, darkfire crackling around his hands. “Maybe it'll be a comfort when you're dead.”

We attacked simultaneously—me with a bolt of light magic aimed at the hand holding the dagger, Levi with a stream of darkfire directed at Haines to keep him occupied. Rhodes deflected my attack with a shield of his own magic, but the force of it knocked him back a step.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Ezekiel regaining consciousness as Lacey finished removing his shackles. Adriel was at his side instantly, helping him sit up, while my mother looked on with concern.

“Get them out of here!” I called to Ezekiel, ducking under a slash from Rhodes's conjured sword.

Ezekiel pushed himself to his feet, his injured wings folded painfully against his back. “Ariella?—”

“Please, Ezekiel.” I blocked another strike from Rhodes, countering with a blast of light that forced him to retreat. “Take them somewhere safe.”

He hesitated, clearly torn between helping me and following my request. “I won't let you down this time,” he finally said, determination hardening his features. He turned to Adriel and my mother. “Come on, we need to move.”

“But Ariella—” my mother protested.

“Will be fine,” Ezekiel assured her, already pulling them toward the exit where Aspen and Boise maintained their barrier. “She has help this time.”

I allowed myself a moment of relief as I saw them reach the exit, Aspen dropping the barrier of a side entrance just long enough to let them through before reinforcing it. One worry eased, but many more remained.

Rhodes and Haines had regrouped, fighting with the ruthless efficiency that had made them legendary among angel warriors. Levi and I pressed our attack, trying to separate them, to create an opening where one of us could disarm Rhodes and take the dagger.

“Getting tired, Ariella?” Rhodes taunted, parrying one of my strikes. “You've been away from Elysium too long. Grown soft among the humans and lesser supernaturals.”

“Funny,” I retorted, feinting left before striking right, “I was about to say the same about you. All that time sitting in council chambers has made you slow.”

His face contorted with rage, and he launched a barrage of attacks that forced me back several steps. But his anger made him predictable, his strikes powerful but lacking finesse. I used his momentum against him, letting him wear himself out while I conserved my energy.

Levi, meanwhile, had managed to push Haines away from Rhodes, engaging him in a separate battle that drew them toward the balcony doors. Darkfire met light magic in explosive bursts that shook the crystal walls of the chamber.

I saw my opening and took it, diving low and sweeping Rhodes's legs out from under him. He fell hard, the dagger nearly slipping from his grasp. I lunged for it, my fingers brushing the hilt?—

A deafening crash from above stopped me in my tracks. The domed ceiling of the chamber shattered as two more angels burst through, sending crystal shards raining down on the battle below.

I recognized them instantly: Sariel and Julien, two of Rhodes's most loyal supporters.

Not long ago, Levi had ripped one of Sariel's wings, and now she had a fake one made of light tucked behind her back.

“Rhodes!” Sariel called, her voice booming over the sounds of battle. “The lower levels have been breached! The rebels are inside the tower!”

Rebels? My heart leapt. It seemed that other angels in Elysium had heard Rhodes's confession and decided to act.

Rhodes seized the moment of distraction, kicking me away and scrambling to his feet. “Hold them off!” he commanded, already moving toward where Abbie was working to free Adona from her bonds.



The angels didn't hesitate, diving into the fray with terrifying speed. Julien headed straight for me, his sword a blur of light as he attacked. I parried desperately, my own sword materializing in my hand just in time to block a strike that would have taken my head off.

Sariel engaged Levi, forcing him away from Haines, who immediately moved to join Rhodes. The two of them converged on Abbie, who stood protectively in front of the still-dazed Adona.

“Levi!” I shouted, unable to break away from Sariel's relentless assault. “Rhodes is going for Adona!”

Levi tried to disengage from Sariel, but the angel was too skilled, too determined to let him pass. Lacey saw the danger and rushed to help Abbie, her magic ready, but Haines intercepted her with a blast of light that sent her crashing into a pillar.

“Lacey!” I cried, fear for my friend momentarily distracting me.

Julien seized the opportunity, his sword slashing across my arm, drawing blood. I hissed in pain but managed to block his follow-up strike, forcing him back with a surge of light magic that momentarily blinded him.

But it was too late.

Rhodes had reached Adona, shoving Abbie aside with a blast of power that left her dazed on the floor. He grabbed Adona by the throat, lifting her partially off the ground, the dagger raised in his other hand.

“No!” I screamed, fighting to reach them, but Julien was there again, his attacks pushing me back, away from where Rhodes held Adona.

The chamber seemed to slow, sounds fading to distant echoes as I watched Rhodes press the dagger against Adona's chest, right over her heart. The red gem in the hilt pulsed with a sickly light that spread along the blade, seeping into Adona where it touched her.

“With this dagger,” Rhodes intoned, his voice carrying through the chamber despite the chaos of battle, “I reshape your essence, Adona.

Not to kill you—no, you're too valuable for that. I change you into what Elysium truly needs: a leader who will follow my will, who will command the loyalty of all angels, but serve only me.”

The light from the dagger intensified, bathing both Rhodes and Adona in its crimson glow. Adona's back arched, her mouth open in a silent scream as the dagger's magic invaded her body.

“Obey me,” Rhodes commanded. “Serve me. Be the face of my regime, the puppet through which I will rule Elysium!”

Something was wrong. The light from the dagger wasn't just flowing into Adona—it was being somehow reflected, amplified, spiraling outward in patterns that made my eyes hurt to look at. Rhodes's expression shifted from triumph to confusion, then to the first hints of fear.

“What's happening?” he demanded, trying to pull the dagger away, but it seemed stuck, fused to Adona's chest. “This isn't right!”

A high, keening sound filled the chamber, building in intensity until it felt like my eardrums might burst. The fighting faltered as everyone, angel and ally alike, turned toward the source of the noise.

Adona was changing.

Her slender form began to grow, stretching and expanding until she towered over Rhodes.

Her delicate features contorted, sharpening into something feral and predatory.

Her wings, normally hidden, erupted from her back—not two, but six massive appendages that spread across the width of the chamber, their color shifting from pearlescent white to a deep, burning gold.

Her eyes, once the gentle blue of a summer sky, now blazed with an inner fire that held no recognition, no mercy, no trace of the wise and compassionate leader she had been.

Rhodes stumbled backward, the dagger falling from his nerveless fingers as Adona continued to transform. Her hands lengthened into claws, her teeth into fangs, her entire body radiating a power so intense it made the air around her waver like heat over desert sand.

“What have you done?” Haines whispered, his face pale with horror.

Rhodes had no answer, could only stare in mute terror at the creature he had created—a being that bore little resemblance to the Adona we had known. A monster that stood nearly eight feet tall, its golden eyes surveying the chamber with a predatory intensity that sent chills down my spine.

For a long, terrible moment, everything was still, the fighting forgotten as we all stared at the transformed Adona. Then, slowly, deliberately, she turned her gaze toward Rhodes, a low, inhuman growl rumbling from her throat.

Rhodes raised his hands in a placating gesture. “Adona, I command you to?—”

The creature that had been Adona threw back her head and let out a roar that shook the very foundations of the tower, a sound of pure, primal rage that held no hint of understanding or restraint.

Then she lowered her gaze, surveying the chamber once more—Rhodes, Haines, the angel warriors, my friends, me. There was no recognition in those golden eyes, no indication that she remembered any of us or cared who was ally and who was enemy.

There was only hunger, and fury, and power unleashed from all restraint.

And then she attacked.

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The creature that had been Adona launched herself across the chamber with shocking speed, her massive claws raking through the air toward the nearest target—an angel warrior who barely managed to dive out of the way before those talons shredded the space where he'd stood.

“Don't hurt her!” I shouted, dodging a swipe from Julien that nearly took my head off. “She's still Adona!”

“Tell her that!” Farrah called back, creating a wall of ice between herself and the transformed angel, who shattered it with a single blow. “Because she doesn't seem to know!”

The chamber had descended into absolute chaos.

The disciplined battle lines had dissolved into a frantic scramble as everyone—Rhodes's forces and our allies alike—tried to avoid Adona's relentless attacks. She moved with terrifying grace, her six wings allowing her to change direction in midair with impossible agility.

“We need to contain her somehow!” Lacey shouted, her hands weaving protective spells around herself and Abbie as Adona's attention briefly turned their way.

“How?” Levi growled, still locked in combat with Sariel. “She's juiced up on whatever the hell that dagger did to her!”

Rhodes had retreated to the far side of the chamber, his face pale with shock as he watched the monster he'd created tear through his own forces.

“Adona!” he called, his voice cutting through the din of battle. “I command you to stop this! Obey me!”

The creature paused, her golden eyes fixing on Rhodes with predatory focus. For a heartbeat, I thought his command might have worked—then she let out another earth-shaking roar and launched herself toward him, all six wings propelling her with frightening speed.

Rhodes barely had time to summon his own wings before Adona crashed into the spot where he'd stood. Stone cracked beneath the impact, sending fissures spreading across the floor. Rhodes took to the air, flying toward the shattered dome of the ceiling, desperate to escape.

“He's getting away!” I shouted, breaking free from Julien with a well-placed blast of light magic.

Without hesitation, I summoned my wings, the familiar weight settling against my back as they unfurled in a flash of white feathers.

Levi was already airborne, his demonic wings propelling him upward in pursuit of Rhodes. I followed, the rush of air against my face as I soared through the broken dome a stark contrast to the chaos we left behind.

Outside, the sky of Elysium stretched above us, eternally bright and beautiful despite the turmoil below. Rhodes was a dark speck against that perfect blue, flying fast toward another section of the Celestial Tower.

“Cut him off!” I called to Levi, banking sharply to the right while he veered left, trying to trap Rhodes between us.

Rhodes saw the maneuver and dove sharply, heading for a large stained-glass

window that depicted the creation of Elysium. He crashed through it in an explosion of colored glass, disappearing into the building once more.

Levi and I followed without hesitation, shielding our faces from the razor-sharp shards as we burst through the ruined window. We tumbled into a section of the grand library, shelves stretching from floor to ceiling, filled with ancient scrolls and tomes that documented the history of our realm.

Rhodes stood at the center of the room, his Celestial sword already drawn, his expression a mixture of rage and desperation.

“You've ruined everything,” he snarled, pointing the blade at me.

“Generations of planning, centuries of preparation—all destroyed because you couldn't mind your own business!”

“Destroying Elysium was never my business,” I replied, my own sword materializing in my hand. “You made it personal when you betrayed us, when you killed Soren and the others, and you blamed me.”

“I did what was necessary!” Rhodes shouted, his composure cracking further. “Elysium was stagnating, growing weak under Adona's leadership. I would have made us strong again, feared throughout all realms!”

“Feared isn't the same as respected,” I said, circling slowly to his right while Levi moved to his left. “And strength without compassion is just tyranny.”

Rhodes laughed, a harsh, bitter sound. “Such naive platitudes. You sound just like Soren before I killed him.”

My grip tightened on my sword. “That's a compliment.”

Rhodes tensed, preparing to attack, when a flash of light announced a new arrival. Haines burst through the library doors, his own sword drawn, moving immediately to Rhodes's side.

“The monster is rampaging through the upper levels,” he reported, his voice tense. “We need to retreat, regroup.”

“I'm not running from them,” Rhodes spat, gesturing toward Levi and me with his sword. “Not when I'm so close to ending this.”

“Two against two,” Levi said, darkfire crackling around his free hand. “I like those odds.”

Without warning, Haines attacked, launching himself at Levi with blinding speed. Their blades met in a shower of sparks, darkfire meeting light magic in explosive bursts that scorched the ancient books nearby.

Rhodes came at me a heartbeat later, his sword a blur of motion as he pressed his attack.

I parried desperately, giving ground as I sought to find my rhythm against his centuries of experience.

He was good—one of the best swordsmen in Elysium—but I had spent years training under Ylena's exacting standards, and more recently, sparring with Levi.

We were evenly matched, neither able to gain a significant advantage. Rhodes's strikes were precise, powerful, but I was faster, more agile. For every blow he landed, I countered with one of my own.

Across the library, Levi and Haines were engaged in an equally fierce battle.



Levi fought with the raw power of his demonic nature, his movements less refined than Haines's but no less deadly.

Bookshelves toppled as they crashed into them, ancient texts scattering across the floor like fallen leaves.

I caught glimpses of Levi's face as we fought, saw the strain in his features as he fought to maintain control. His eyes flickered between their normal blue and the burning black of his demon form, his skin occasionally rippling with hints of the transformation we'd witnessed in the forest.

“Levi,” I called, concerned. “Stay with me!”

He nodded tightly, visibly wrestling with the urge to fully transform. Part of me—the desperate, pragmatic part—almost wished he would. His demon form had torn through a dozen angels with terrifying ease. It could give us the edge we needed.

But I remembered his horror afterward, his fear that he was becoming like his father. I couldn't ask that of him, couldn't bear to see him torment himself that way again.

Rhodes seized on my moment of distraction, his sword slicing toward my neck.

I barely managed to deflect the blow, the force of it sending me staggering backward into a reading table.

My wings instinctively flared to help me keep my balance, knocking over a stack of scrolls that scattered across the marble floor.

“Losing focus, Ariella?” Rhodes taunted, pressing his advantage. “Such a basic mistake. I expected better from Ylena's prized student.”

I gritted my teeth, pushing back against his relentless assault. “Don't you dare speak her name. Not after what you did to her.”

“What I did?” Rhodes laughed. “I simply used her ambition against her. She was always too hungry for power, too eager to climb higher in the ranks. All I had to do was show her a path, and she took it willingly.”

His words hit me like physical blows, reopening wounds I'd thought were beginning to heal. Ylena had been my mentor, my guide—and according to Kadriel, my father's murderer. The complexity of her betrayal still burned.

With a cry of rage, I channeled that pain into my attack, driving Rhodes back with a flurry of strikes that momentarily caught him off guard. My blade nicked his cheek, drawing a thin line of dark blood that glowed against his skin.

Rhodes's expression darkened, his own attacks becoming more vicious, less controlled. We were both fighting on pure emotion now, technique abandoned in favor of raw power and speed.

Across the library, I heard Haines let out a cry of pain.

Risking a glance, I saw that Levi had partially transformed—not the full, terrifying change I'd witnessed before, but enough to give him an edge.

His skin had darkened, his eyes glowed with inner fire, and his wings had extended to nearly twice their normal size.

It was working—Haines was on the defensive now, bleeding from several wounds, his perfect composure finally cracking in the face of Levi's relentless assault.

“Haines!” Rhodes called, concern flashing across his face for the first time.

That momentary distraction was all I needed. I fainted left, then struck right, my sword slicing across Rhodes's sword arm. He hissed in pain, his grip on his weapon faltering for a crucial second.

I pressed my advantage, my boot connecting with his chest in a kick that sent him staggering backward into a bookshelf. It collapsed under his weight, ancient tomes raining down on him as he struggled to regain his footing.

"It's over, Rhodes," I said, my sword leveled at his throat. "Surrender."

"Never," he spat, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "I'd rather die than see Elysium fall back into weakness and mediocrity."

Before I could respond, the library doors burst open once more. Lacey and Abbie rushed in, both looking disheveled but determined.

"The binding spell," Abbie said, her hands already moving in complex patterns. "We can use it now."

Rhodes tried to lunge at me, but I dodged, keeping my sword trained on him as Lacey and Abbie positioned themselves on either side of the ruined library. They began to chant in unison, a language older than Elysium itself, their fingers tracing glowing sigils in the air.

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Across the room, Levi had Haines cornered, darkfire crackling around both hands as he forced the archangel to retreat. “Now would be good,” he called to the witches, never taking his eyes off his opponent.

The air in the library grew heavy, charged with the sisters' magic. Glowing chains of energy began to materialize, snaking toward Rhodes and Haines with purposeful intent.

“No!” Rhodes shouted, his wings flaring as he tried to take flight again, but the magical chains were faster, wrapping around his arms and torso, binding his wings tightly against his back. Beside him, Haines suffered the same fate, the magical bindings forcing him to his knees.

“It won't hold them for long,” Lacey warned, sweat beading on her forehead from the exertion of maintaining such powerful magic. “Their power is too great.”

I looked around frantically, searching for something more permanent than magical bindings. My eyes landed on two Guardian angels who had been hiding behind the toppled bookshelves, clearly having fled there when Adona began her rampage.

“You,” I commanded, pointing my sword at them. “The cuffs. Like the ones they put on me. Now.”

They hesitated, exchanging nervous glances.

“NOW!” Levi roared, his partially transformed state making him even more intimidating than usual.

The Guardians quickly fumbled with their belts, producing two sets of shackles identical to the ones that had bound me earlier. They slid them across the floor toward us, clearly not wanting to approach any closer.

I snatched up the cuffs and moved toward Rhodes, whose face contorted with fury as he struggled against the magical bindings. “You won't get away with this,” he snarled. “Elysium will never follow you.”

“I don't want them to follow me,” I replied, snapping the cuffs around his wrists as Lacey and Abbie's spell began to waver. “I want them to think for themselves, to remember what being an angel truly means.”

Levi secured the second set of cuffs on Haines, who remained silent, his expression one of cold disdain despite his defeat. With both archangels properly restrained, Lacey and Abbie released their spell, sagging slightly from the exertion.

“The dagger,” Lacey reminded me, gesturing toward Rhodes.

“Right.” I walked closer to Rhodes. “Where is it?”

He didn't say anything, just held my stare, impassive and angry. Levi grabbed hold of Rhodes and started looking for the dagger. Rhodes didn't make it easy, by jerking and moving away from the prying hands, but ten seconds later, Levi pulled the dagger from a back pocket in Rhodes' jacket.

Rhodes opened his mouth, but shut it, his eyes full of even more fury than before.

“Here you go.” Levi handed me the dagger.

I took it, the light weight almost painful in my palm. This damn dagger had caused so much trouble.

“We need to reverse whatever he did on Adona,” Abbie said. “Before she creates more damage.”

I looked at Levi. “Can you watch these two while we?—”

“Go,” he said, his eyes still glowing with demonic fire as he stared down at the captured archangels. “I’ll make sure they don’t go anywhere.”

I hesitated, not entirely comfortable leaving him alone with them, especially in his partially transformed state. But we had to stop Adona.

“I’ll stay too,” Lacey offered, sensing my concern. “We’ll be fine.”

With a nod of gratitude, I followed Abbie back through the ruined doors of the library.

The corridors of the Celestial Tower bore the marks of fierce battle—scorch marks on the walls, shattered crystal, smears of dark blood on the marble floors.

In the distance, I could hear the echoes of continued fighting, punctuated by the occasional earth-shaking roar from the transformed Adona.

“This way,” I said, leading Abbie up a winding staircase that would take us back to the council chamber where the nightmare had begun.

It would have been faster to fly upstairs, but I was concerned Abbie would get lost in the tower’s winding corridors.

As we started on the first flight of stairs, a scream echoed—Lacey’s voice, filled with warning and fear.

Without hesitation, Abbie and I raced back the way we'd come, dread filling my chest with each step.

We burst into the library to find chaos. Levi was struggling with Haines, who had somehow managed to free one hand from his shackles and was fighting desperately to release the other. Lacey lay against a far wall, dazed but conscious, blood trickling from a cut on her forehead.

And Rhodes—Rhodes was free, his shackles shattered on the floor, his Celestial sword gleaming in his hand as he advanced on Levi's unprotected back.

“Levi, behind you!” I shouted, already running, knowing I wouldn't reach him in time.

Levi spun, but he was still grappling with Haines, unable to fully defend himself. Rhodes's sword arced downward in what would surely be a killing blow.

Time seemed to slow. I was too far away to physically intervene, my own sword still sheathed. In desperation, I reached for my magic, hurling a bolt of light toward Rhodes, but I knew it would arrive too late.

Then, at the last possible second, Rhodes changed his target. He pivoted, his sword redirecting toward me as I charged toward him. I saw his face twist into a grimace of hatred, saw the blade glinting as it swept toward me.

I tried to turn, to parry, but I knew I wouldn't be fast enough. The dagger in my hand seemed to pulse once, as if in warning, and then Rhodes's blade descended.

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There was no time to think, only to react.

My Celestial sword materialized in my hand, muscle memory guiding me as I pivoted and swung upward to meet Rhodes's descending blade.

The clash of weapons sent vibrations down my arm, the impact jarring my shoulder as I struggled to deflect the killing blow.

Rhodes's face contorted with hatred, his superior strength forcing my blade back inch by inch.

I could feel my feet sliding on the marble floor, my stance weakening as he pressed his advantage.

His eyes burned with a manic light, all pretense of nobility and righteousness stripped away to reveal the raw ambition beneath.

“You should have joined me,” he snarled, his face inches from mine. “We could have reshaped Elysium together.”

“Into what?” I gasped, my arms trembling with the effort of holding him back. “A prison? A dictatorship?”

“Into a power that all realms would fear!” He shifted his weight, preparing for another strike. “Instead, you'll die a traitor's death, forgotten and reviled!”

He disengaged suddenly, stepping back only to launch a new attack from a different



angle. I parried desperately, knowing I couldn't match his centuries of experience in swordplay. Each blow drove me further back, my defense weakening with every strike.

Across the room, I could see Levi still grappling with Haines, their struggle keeping him from coming to my aid.

Lacey was pushing herself up from the wall, blood trickling down her face, but still too dazed to help.

Abbie was frantically weaving a spell, but I could tell from her expression that it wouldn't be ready in time.

Rhodes pressed forward, his sword a blur of motion as he hammered at my defenses. I stumbled over a fallen bookshelf, my balance faltering for a crucial second. Rhodes saw the opening and lunged, his blade aimed for my heart.

In that moment, instinct took over. I twisted to the side, letting his momentum carry him past me, and thrust my sword upward in a desperate counterattack.

The blade slid home, sinking deep into Rhodes's stomach.

Time seemed to freeze. Rhodes's eyes widened in shock, his forward motion halting abruptly as the sword impaled him. Dark blood spilled over my hands, warm and bright. His mouth opened, but no sound emerged—just a soft exhale as the light in his eyes began to dim.

I released my grip on the sword, stepping back as Rhodes sank to his knees, the weapon still protruding from his body. His hands clutched weakly at the blade, but he lacked the strength to pull it free. With a final, rattling breath, he toppled sideways, his wings sprawling lifelessly behind him.

The silence that followed was absolute, broken only by the distant sounds of fighting elsewhere in the tower. I stared at Rhodes's body, at the blood pooling beneath him, unable to fully process what had just happened.

I had killed an archangel. Not in the heat of battle against an anonymous enemy, but in close combat, looking into his eyes as life left his body. The weight of it settled over me like a physical burden, making it hard to breathe.

“Ariella.” Levi's voice, gentle but urgent, broke through my shock. He had subdued Haines, who knelt silent and bound, his face a mask of cold resignation as he looked at his fallen leader.

I nodded shakily, trying to pull myself together.

My hands trembled as I looked down at them, stained with Rhodes's blood.

Though I had hated him for what he'd done, though I had known this confrontation might end in death, I had hoped for justice—a trial, a chance for all of Elysium to learn the truth of his betrayal.

Instead, that choice had been taken from me. I had defended myself, as any warrior would. But the knowledge brought little comfort as I stood over the body of an angel who had once been revered as one of Elysium's greatest guardians.

The library doors burst open once more, and I turned, my sword materializing once more in my hands, before recognizing Kadriel and several members of the Lost Legion. They took in the scene with experienced eyes—Rhodes's body, Haines bound and subdued, the destruction around us.

“We're too late,” Kadriel said, her gaze lingering on Rhodes before shifting to me. “Are you alright?”

I nodded, not trusting my voice. The dagger still pulsed in my hand, a constant reminder of all that had led to this moment.

“Adona,” Kadriel continued, her expression grim. “She's tearing the tower apart. We've managed to contain her to the upper levels, but she's killed several warriors already and injured many more. If we don't do something quickly, she'll bring the entire structure down around us.”

The urgency in her voice snapped me out of my stupor. There would be time later to process what had happened with Rhodes. Right now, there were lives at stake—innocent angels caught in the chaos of a battle not of their making.

“Take him,” I said, gesturing to Haines. “Make sure he's secure. We can't risk him escaping.”

Two of the Lost Legion moved to flank Haines, hauling him to his feet. He went without resistance, his eyes fixed on Rhodes's body with an unreadable expression.

“We'll handle this,” Kadriel assured me, her voice softening slightly. “Go. Stop Adona before more lives are lost.”

Levi moved to my side, his hand finding mine. “Are you up for this?”

I looked down at the dagger, its red gem still pulsing with malevolent light. “Do I have a choice?”

His fingers tightened around mine. “We always have a choice, sweetheart. That's what makes us who we are.”

I managed a small, tight smile, drawing strength from his presence. “Then I choose to fix this. To save Adona, if I can.”

We left the library, taking flight through the shattered dome ceiling.

From above, the Celestial Tower looked like a wounded creature, its crystalline spires cracked and broken, smoke rising from various levels.

Angels flew in panicked formations, some fighting, others fleeing, their wings flashing like silver fish in a disturbed pond.

We angled our wings, soaring upward toward the chaos.

As we drew closer, I could make out the transformed Adona, her massive form rampaging through what had once been the observatory at the tower's peak.

The circular chamber, with its glass dome and intricate star maps, was now in ruins, its beauty reduced to rubble beneath Adona's clawed feet.

Our allies fought desperately to contain her, though it was clear they were avoiding lethal force.

Farrah had created barriers of ice that momentarily slowed Adona's advance before shattering under her raw power.

Wyatt, partially shifted into his wolf form, darted between her legs, distracting her while Erin and Rey attempted to bind her wings with enchanted chains from their demon-hunting arsenal.

Tarek and the other Lost Legion angels flew in coordinated patterns around her head, drawing her attention upward and away from those fighting on the ground. Aspen and Boise maintained a shimmering barrier around the chamber's perimeter, preventing her from escaping to other parts of Elysium.

But despite their efforts, Adona was winning. Her transformed state gave her strength and speed beyond even an archangel's normal capabilities, and the dagger's magic had stripped away her reason, leaving only primal rage.

“We need to get closer,” I shouted to Levi over the din of battle. “I need to use the dagger on her, try to reverse what Rhodes did!”

He nodded, darkfire already crackling around his free hand as he prepared to create an opening. “Follow me!”

We dove into the fray, Levi unleashing a barrage of darkfire that momentarily drew Adona's attention. Her golden eyes fixed on us, a feral growl rumbling from her throat as she swatted at us like insects.

“Everyone!” I called, my voice carrying over the chaos. “I need you to hold her still! Just for a few moments!”

Understanding dawned on their faces. Farrah immediately redoubled her efforts, creating thicker, more elaborate ice formations that wrapped around Adona's limbs.

Wyatt, Rey, and Erin moved in perfect synchronization, using their chains to bind her lower body while the Lost Legion angels focused on restraining her wings.

“Hurry!” Farrah shouted, her face strained with the effort of maintaining so much ice magic. “We can't hold her for long!”

I approached cautiously, the dagger held before me.

Up close, Adona was even more terrifying—her transformed face barely recognizable, her golden eyes burning with mindless fury as she struggled against her bonds.

One of her massive hands broke free, swiping at me with claws that could tear through stone.

Levi intercepted, catching her wrist with both hands, his partial demon form giving him the strength to momentarily check her movement. “Now, Ariella!” he grunted, muscles straining as Adona fought to break his hold.

I darted forward, pressing the dagger against her chest, right over her heart where Rhodes had first used it. The red gem flared with angry light, and I felt a surge of power flow through the blade into my hand, burning like liquid fire in my veins.

“Restore her,” I commanded, focusing all my will through the dagger. “Return Adona to her true form, to her true self!”

The dagger pulsed once, twice, then began to vibrate in my hand, the sensation growing increasingly violent until I feared it might shatter.

The red light from the gem spread along the blade, then into Adona where it touched her skin—but instead of seeping in as it had before, it seemed to be drawing something out, pulling threads of crimson energy from her body back into itself.

Adona threw back her head and roared, the sound so deafening it shook dust from what remained of the ceiling. Her struggles intensified, nearly breaking free of the restraints our allies had placed on her.

“I can't hold this much longer!” Farrah cried, her ice barriers already cracking under the strain.

“Almost there,” I gritted out, my entire arm now burning with the effort of maintaining contact with the dagger. “Just a little more!”

The red energy continued to flow from Adona into the dagger, each pulse removing more of Rhodes's corruption from her system. But the process was agonizingly slow, and I could feel our allies weakening around me as they fought to keep her contained.

“Come on,” I whispered to the dagger, to Adona, to myself. “Come back to us.”

As if in response to my plea, the dagger suddenly flared with blinding light, the red gem turning pure white for a brief, brilliant moment. The energy that had been trickling from Adona now rushed out in a torrent, flowing into the dagger so quickly that my hand went numb from the sensation.

Adona's body began to change, shrinking and shifting back toward her original form.

Her extra wings receded, her claws retracted, her feral features softening into the familiar, noble countenance I remembered.

The golden glow in her eyes dimmed, replaced by the clear blue that had always radiated wisdom and compassion.

With a final surge of power that nearly knocked me off my feet, the transformation completed. The dagger went dark in my hand, the gem now a dull, lifeless gray, as if it had expended all its power in the reversal.

Adona swayed on her feet, her wings drooping with exhaustion, her eyes unfocused but recognizably herself again. She would have collapsed entirely if not for Tarek, who moved swiftly to support her.

“Easy, my lady,” he said, his voice gentle with respect. “You're safe now.”

Adona blinked slowly, her gaze traveling around the ruined observatory, taking in the destruction, the injured warriors, the faces both familiar and strange.

“What ... what has happened?” she asked, her voice hoarse but steady.

“The last thing I remember is Rhodes with the dagger, and then... darkness.”

“Rhodes corrupted you with the dagger,” I explained, stepping forward cautiously. “He tried to bend you to his will, but something went wrong. You transformed into something else.”

Understanding dawned in her eyes, along with horror as she processed the implications. “Where’s Rhodes?”

“Dead,” I said, no hesitation.

Adona pressed her lips into a thin line. “I see.” She held her breath. “Did I harm anyone?”

I hesitated, unwilling to burden her with the full truth while she was still so weak. “There will be time for explanations later. Right now, you need to rest and recover your strength.”

She shook her head, a hint of her natural authority returning despite her weakened state. “No. The fighting must stop. Now.” She straightened, drawing on reserves of strength I hadn't realized she still possessed. “Help me. I must address what remains of my people.”

Tarek and I exchanged glances, then nodded.

Together, we supported Adona as she moved to the edge of the ruined observatory, where a balcony overlooked the central courtyard of the Celestial Tower.

Below, angels still fought in scattered skirmishes, Rhodes's supporters battling those



who had rallied to our cause.

“Angels of Elysium,” Adona called, her voice amplified by magic to reach every corner of the tower. “Lay down your weapons. The fighting ends now.”

Her voice, familiar and beloved to all of Elysium, caused the combatants to pause, looking up in shock and disbelief. A murmur spread through the crowd as they recognized their leader, restored to her true form.

“Rhodes is dead,” she continued, her voice steady despite the weight of the words. “His deception and betrayal have been revealed. Those who followed him were misled, but there can be forgiveness for those who seek it. Elysium must heal, must remember its true purpose.”

I watched as the fighting gradually ceased, weapons lowering, wings folding as the angels below absorbed Adona's words. Some of Rhodes's more fanatical supporters broke away, fleeing toward the edges of the city, but most remained, their expressions confused but hopeful.

“It's over,” I whispered, the realization finally sinking in. “We won.”

Levi moved to my side, his arm sliding around my waist as he supported some of my weight. I hadn't realized how exhausted I was until that moment, my body suddenly heavy with fatigue.

I looked around at our allies—Farrah leaning heavily on Wyatt, her energy depleted from overusing her ice magic; Erin bandaging a nasty cut on Rey's arm; Lacey and Abbie supporting each other as they surveyed the destruction; the Lost Legion angels, some injured, all exhausted, but alive.

We had survived, but the cost had been high. Lives lost, trust shattered, a realm

brought to the brink of civil war. And the scars—both physical and otherwise—would take time to heal.

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All around us, the injured were being tended to, their blood staining the white marble floors as they were carried to the tower's infirmary.

I watched as Erin expertly bandaged a gash on Rey's arm while Farrah, leaning heavily on Wyatt for support, created small ice compresses for those with minor injuries.

“The elixir won't last much longer,” Aspen warned, checking a small timepiece he'd pulled from his pocket. “Maybe another hour at most. We should start arranging transport back to Earth for everyone who needs it.”

I nodded, the practicalities of our situation slowly filtering through the fog of exhaustion. Our non-angelic allies couldn't remain in Elysium without the golden lily elixir—and once it wore off, they would be violently ejected from the realm.

“We'll make sure everyone who needs to leave can do so safely,” I said.

Levi squeezed my hand, his eyes questioning. “And you? Will you stay?”

Before I could answer, movement near the observatory entrance caught my attention.

Three figures were making their way through the rubble—Ezekiel, supporting my mother on one side and my sister on the other.

Their wings were folded tightly against their backs, and all three looked exhausted but unharmed.

“Ariella!” My mother broke away from Ezekiel, rushing toward me with tears streaming down her face.

She enveloped me in an embrace so tight it made my ribs ache, but I didn't care.

I hugged her back just as fiercely, burying my face in her shoulder as all the fear and longing of the past five years crashed over me like a wave.

“I'm so sorry,” she whispered, stroking my hair as if I were still a child. “I should have believed in you. I should have known you could never do the things they accused you of.”

“It's okay, Mom,” I said, my voice muffled against her shoulder. “You couldn't have known.”

She pulled back, her hands framing my face as she studied me with tear-filled eyes. “Look at you. My baby girl, all grown up.” Her gaze flickered to Levi, who stood a respectful distance away, watching our reunion with an unreadable expression. “And with quite the interesting companion.”

Despite everything, I found myself laughing. “That's one way to put it.”

Adriel approached more cautiously, her expression guarded in a way that made my heart ache. She had always been the more emotional of us, quick to laugh, quick to cry, quick to forgive. This reserve was new, a sign of how deeply Rhodes's lies had affected her.

“Hi, Adri,” I said softly, using the nickname from our childhood.

She studied me for a long moment, then stepped forward into a brief, tight hug. “I didn't want to believe what they said about you,” she whispered. “But after a while,

when you didn't come back, didn't try to contact us...”

I squeezed her gently. “I know. And I'm sorry. I wanted to, but it wasn't safe—for any of us.”

She nodded against my shoulder, then pulled away, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. Her gaze, like our mother's, drifted to Levi. “So, a demon, huh? That's unexpected.”

I reached for Levi's hand, drawing him closer. “This is Levi. He saved my life. More than once.”

Levi inclined his head with unusual formality. “It's an honor to meet Ariella's family.”

My mother looked him up and down, her expression unreadable. Then, to my surprise, she stepped forward and embraced him as well. “Thank you,” she said simply. “For protecting my daughter when I couldn't.”

Levi stiffened for a moment, clearly caught off guard, then awkwardly patted her back. “She protected me just as much,” he said, his voice gruff with emotion he was trying to hide.

A throat cleared behind us, and we turned to see Adona standing with Kadriel and several other archangels who had remained loyal throughout the crisis.

Despite her restored form, Adona still looked shaken, her normally immaculate appearance disheveled, her wings showing signs of damage from her transformation.

“Ariella,” she said, her voice stronger than I would have expected given her ordeal. “A word, if I may.”

I squeezed my mother's hand reassuringly before following Adona to a quieter corner of the observatory. Levi moved to stay behind, but Adona shook her head.

“No, please join us,” she said. “What you've done for Elysium today gives you the right to be part of this conversation.”

We gathered in a loose circle—Adona, Kadriel, three other archangels whose names I didn't know, Levi, and me. Despite the informal setting, I could feel the weight of history in this moment, the sense that decisions made here would shape Elysium's future for generations to come.

“What happened today cannot be allowed to happen again,” Adona began, her gaze moving from face to face. “Rhodes and Ylena exploited weaknesses in our system—weaknesses I allowed to develop through my own complacency.”

“You couldn't have known what they were planning,” one of the archangels protested.

“Perhaps not,” Adona acknowledged. “But I should have been more vigilant, more involved. I trusted my archangels blindly, delegated too much authority without sufficient oversight.” She sighed, looking suddenly ancient despite her ageless appearance.

“And Elysium nearly paid the ultimate price for that trust.”

“So what happens now?” Kadriel asked, her injured arm still held carefully at her side despite no longer being in a sling.

“Reform,” Adona said simply. “Meaningful, lasting change to the way Elysium is governed. More transparency, more accountability, more democracy, for lack of a better term.”

I blinked in surprise. The concept of democratic governance was almost unheard of in Elysium, where Adona's rule had been absolute since the realm's founding.

“And greater unity with other supernaturals,” Adona continued, glancing at Levi. “Rhodes's fear and hatred of non-angelic beings blinded him to the strength that comes from diversity, from alliance. If today has proven anything, it's that we are stronger together than apart.”

“The Lost Legion would be willing to help with these reforms,” Kadriel offered cautiously. “If our exile is officially ended.”

Adona's expression softened. “Kadriel, old friend.

Your exile was a mistake—one of many I made in trusting Rhodes's counsel too readily. You and your followers are welcome to return to Elysium, with all rights and privileges restored.” She looked at me.

“As are you, Ariella. Your name will be cleared, your service honored as it should have been from the beginning.”

I nodded, grateful but still too overwhelmed to fully process what this meant for my future. “Thank you.”

Adona straightened, her wings extending slightly in a subtle display of renewed authority. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I believe I owe an explanation to all of Elysium.”

We followed her to the edge of the observatory balcony, where she could look down on the courtyard below.

Angels had gathered there in the hundreds, looking up at the tower with confusion

and fear written across their faces.

The fighting had stopped, but tension still hung in the air like storm clouds.

Adona raised her hands, and her voice, amplified by magic, carried to every corner of the Celestial Tower and beyond.

“Angels of Elysium, hear me. Today, we have faced a betrayal without precedent in our history. Archangels Rhodes and Ylena, whom many of you trusted and respected, plotted to overthrow me, to reshape our realm according to their own distorted vision.”

A murmur ran through the crowd, some angels nodding as if they had suspected as much, others looking shocked and disbelieving.

“They framed an innocent guardian, Ariella, for crimes she did not commit,” Adona continued. “They allied with demons, they murdered fellow angels, and today, they nearly succeeded in destroying everything we have built together over millennia.”

She gestured for me to step forward, and reluctantly, I did, feeling hundreds of eyes turn toward me.

“This guardian, whom many of you were told was a traitor, has instead proven herself the truest protector Elysium could ask for.

At great risk to herself, she returned to us with the truth, with allies willing to fight for our realm, and ultimately, with the means to save me from Rhodes's corruption.”

I felt my cheeks burn with embarrassment as some angels in the crowd began to murmur my name, a few even raising their wings in a traditional salute of respect. This was the last thing I had expected or wanted—to be held up as some kind of hero.



“In the days to come,” Adona said, “we will begin the work of rebuilding—not just our physical structures, but the trust that has been damaged, the unity that has been fractured. This will not be easy, nor will it happen quickly. But I believe, with all my heart, that we will emerge stronger for having faced this trial together.”

She lowered her hands, and the magical amplification faded, her final words meant only for those of us standing closest to her. “Thank you, all of you. Elysium stands in your debt.”

Then, to my complete shock, Adona embraced me.

The leader of Elysium, the most powerful angel in existence, pulled me into a hug as if I were family, as if I were worthy of such intimacy.

For a moment, I stood frozen, too stunned to react.

Then, slowly, I returned the embrace, feeling the tremors that still ran through her frame despite her show of strength.

“I meant what I said,” she whispered, her voice for my ears alone. “Elysium needs guardians like you—ones who remember what we truly stand for, even when others forget. Whatever you decide about your future, know that you will always have a place here.”

As she released me and turned to address the other archangels, I felt a strange mix of emotions wash over me—relief, exhaustion, a tentative hope for the future.

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The days following Rhodes's defeat passed in a blur of meetings, healing, and reconstruction.

I spent most of my time with my mother and Adriel, making up for five years of absence, sharing stories of my time on Earth and listening to their accounts of life in Elysium under Rhodes's growing influence.

Levi divided his time between staying close to me and helping coordinate our non-angelic allies' return to Earth. Some, like Farrah and Wyatt, had already gone back, with promises to return for what Adona was calling the “Renewal Ceremony.”

Others, including Lacey and Abbie, had remained in Elysium a bit longer, granted temporary permission through a limited supply of the golden lily elixir that Adona had secured from her private gardens.

Throughout it all, the question of my future hung over me like a cloud.

Adona had made it clear that I was welcome to return to Elysium permanently, to resume my role as a guardian—perhaps even with greater responsibilities than before.

But the thought of leaving Earth, of leaving the life I'd built there and the connections I'd made, filled me with a strange melancholy I couldn't quite shake.

And then there was Levi.

We hadn't discussed what would happen next, both of us carefully avoiding the topic as if by mutual agreement. But I caught him watching me sometimes, when he

thought I wasn't looking, his expression thoughtful and a little sad.

On the morning of the ceremony, I stood on the balcony of the quarters I'd been given in the Celestial Tower, looking out over Elysium as the first light of day bathed the crystal spires in gold.

The city was still scarred from the battle—broken towers, damaged buildings, areas where the fighting had been most intense—but already, the healing had begun. Angels worked together to clear rubble and rebuild, their wings flashing in the sunlight as they carried materials from place to place.

A soft knock at my door pulled me from my thoughts. “Come in,” I called, turning from the balcony.

Lacey entered, looking beautiful in a flowing gown of deep blue that complemented her fair skin and dark hair. “Good morning,” she said, her smile warm. “I thought you might want some help getting ready.”

I gestured ruefully to the ceremonial gown laid out on my bed—a creation of pale gold and white that looked far more elaborate than anything I'd worn in years. “Is it that obvious that I'm out of my depth?”

She laughed, coming to stand beside me. “Maybe a little. But mostly, I just wanted to see you before everything gets crazy.”

I hugged her impulsively, grateful for her friendship, for her steadfast support throughout everything we'd faced together. “Thank you, Lacey. For all of it.”

“Oh, stop,” she said, though she hugged me back just as tightly. “You'd have done the same for me.” She pulled back, her expression turning more serious. “Have you decided? About staying?”

I sighed, turning back to the balcony. “No. Every time I think I have, I remember something else that pulls me in the opposite direction.”

Lacey nodded, understanding in her eyes. “Well, for what it's worth, we'll support you either way. But...” She hesitated, then continued more softly, “Levi won't say it, but I think he's afraid you'll choose Elysium and ask him to leave.”

My heart clenched at the thought. “I would never?—”

“I know that,” she said quickly. “But he's not always as confident as he pretends to be. Especially when it comes to you.”

Before I could respond, another knock came at the door, and my mother and sister entered, both already dressed in the formal attire of high-ranking angels. My mother's eyes widened as she took in my still-casual appearance.

“Ariella! The ceremony begins in less than an hour, and you're not even dressed!”

I couldn't help but laugh at her tone—so familiar, so motherly, despite the years apart. “I was just about to start, Mom. Lacey's going to help me.”

Between the three of them, I was transformed in record time.

The ceremonial gown fit perfectly, its flowing layers of fabric moving like water as I walked.

My hair was arranged in an intricate style that incorporated small golden threads and crystals, and subtle cosmetics enhanced my features without overwhelming them.

When I looked in the mirror, the angel who stared back at me was both familiar and strange—a version of myself I might have become if I'd never fallen from Elysium,

never lost my wings, never met Levi and the others who had changed my life so profoundly.

“You look beautiful,” my mother said, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

“Like a true archangel,” Adriel added, her earlier reserve finally melting into something more like the sister I remembered.

I smiled at them both, touched by their pride, even as uncertainty continued to twist inside me. “We should go. We don't want to be late.”

Together, we made our way to the grand hall of the Celestial Tower, where the ceremony would take place.

The hall had been repaired and redecorated for the occasion, all signs of the battle erased.

Crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, casting rainbows of light across the marble floors.

Long tables laden with food and drink lined the walls, and a string quartet played softly in one corner, their music ethereal and haunting.

The hall was already filled with angels of all ranks, as well as a select group of non-angelic visitors who had been granted special permission to attend.

I spotted Farrah and Wyatt near one of the tables, Farrah stunning in a gown of pale blue that matched her eyes, Wyatt looking uncomfortable but handsome in formal attire.

Erin and Rey stood nearby, along with Aspen, Jasmin, and Rage, all dressed in

clothes that reflected their respective supernatural cultures while adhering to the formality of the occasion.

And there, standing slightly apart from the others, was Levi.

He wore a perfectly tailored suit of deepest black, the only color a small splash of burgundy at his throat.

His dark hair was styled away from his face, emphasizing the sharp angles of his features.

He looked devastating, and completely out of place among the bright colors and wings of the angelic gathering.

Yet when his eyes found mine across the room, the connection between us was so immediate, so intense, that everything else seemed to fade away. He smiled, just a small curve of his lips, but it warmed me from the inside out.

A hush fell over the crowd as Adona entered the hall, flanked by Kadriel and several other high-ranking angels. She had fully recovered from her ordeal, her power and grace evident in every movement as she ascended the dais at the front of the hall.

“Angels of Elysium,” she began, her voice carrying effortlessly to every corner of the vast space.

“Honored guests from Earth and beyond. We gather today to mark a new beginning for our realm, to heal the wounds of betrayal and division, and to forge a path forward that honors the best of what we have been while embracing what we may become.”

She gestured, and a group of angels stepped forward, each carrying a small silver box. “First, I wish to announce the appointment of new archangels to serve on my

council, to help guide Elysium through the challenges that lie ahead.”

One by one, she called them forward—angels known for their wisdom, their integrity, their commitment to the ideals that had once defined our realm. Each received a medallion of office, a symbol of their new authority and responsibility.

“Kadriel,” Adona continued, and a murmur ran through the crowd as the former exile stepped forward.

“Your loyalty to the true spirit of Elysium, even in exile, has proven your worth beyond question. I name you Archangel of Justice, tasked with ensuring that what happened with Rhodes can never happen again.”

Kadriel accepted the medallion with dignity, her injured arm now fully healed, her wings gleaming silver-white in the crystal light.

“Tarek,” Adona called next, surprising many who had expected only Kadriel to be elevated from the Lost Legion.

“Your courage and leadership during these difficult times have not gone unnoticed. I name you Archangel of Defense, charged with protecting our realm from threats both external and internal.”

The ceremony continued, with more appointments and announcements.

Adona spoke of creating a new council that would include representatives from other supernatural communities, ensuring that lines of communication remained open and that Elysium would never again isolate itself from the broader world.

“To this end,” she said, “I extend formal invitations to the following individuals to serve as founding members of this Inter-Realm Council: Abbie, keeper of the Great

Eternity Hall, and her friend and great witch, Lacey; Erin and Rey of the Blackthorn Hunters; Farrah of the Frost Court and her mate, Wyatt; Jasmin and Rage of the Underworld; and Aspen, representative of the warlock community.” She paused, her gaze sweeping the room.

“And once the current crisis at DuMoir Castle is resolved, an invitation will be extended to Lord Drake as well.”

The named individuals stepped forward, accepting formal scrolls that detailed their roles and responsibilities. I caught Farrah's eye and smiled, pleased to see my friend recognized for her wisdom and strength.

“And now,” Adona said, her voice softening slightly, “I come to the most important recognition of all.” She turned toward me, extending her hand. “Ariella, please join me.”

My heart pounding, I made my way to the dais, aware of every eye in the hall following my progress. Levi's gaze was the most intense of all, his expression carefully neutral but his eyes burning with an emotion I couldn't quite name.



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“Ariella,” Adona said as I reached her side, “your journey has been unlike any other in our history. Falsely accused, exiled not by decree but by necessity, you could have turned your back on Elysium forever. Instead, you returned to us in our darkest hour, bringing the truth, bringing allies, bringing hope when we needed it most.”

She lifted a medallion that gleamed more brightly than any of the others, its surface etched with intricate patterns that seemed to shift and change as the light hit them.

“For your courage, your commitment, and your unwavering loyalty to the true spirit of Elysium, I name you Archangel of Truth, with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities that come with such a position.”

A ripple of surprise ran through the crowd, followed by a surge of applause that seemed to shake the very foundations of the hall. I stood frozen, unable to process what had just happened. Me, an archangel? It was beyond anything I had ever imagined for myself.

As the applause began to fade, Adona raised her hand once more. “And there is one more recognition I wish to make.” She gestured toward Levi. “Leviathan, please step forward.”

Levi's surprise was evident in the brief widening of his eyes, but he moved with characteristic grace to join us on the dais. He stood tall and proud, somehow managing to look as if he belonged there despite being the only demon in a hall full of angels.

“Leviathan,” Adona said, her voice carrying the weight of history, “never before has

a demon been honored in the halls of Elysium.

But never before has one proven himself so worthy of such recognition.

Your loyalty to Ariella, your willingness to risk everything to protect our realm from Rhodes's corruption, and your actions during the battle have earned you a place in our history and our future.”

She presented him with a small, intricate pin—a symbol I recognized as one of Elysium's highest honors, rarely bestowed even on angels.

“I name you Friend of Elysium, and grant you the permanent right to enter our realm freely, without the need for elixirs or special permission. Additionally, you will hold a position of honor on the Inter-Realm Council, representing the demon community in our new alliance.”

Levi accepted the pin. “I am honored,” he said simply, his voice carrying just enough sincerity to mask the irony that I knew was bubbling beneath the surface.

As Adona concluded the formal portion of the ceremony, the string quartet resumed playing, this time with livelier tunes meant for dancing. Servants moved through the crowd with trays of food and drinks, and the atmosphere shifted from solemn ceremony to celebration.

Ezekiel approached Adriel, offering his hand with a shyness that made me smile.

She accepted, and they moved to the dance floor, their steps slightly awkward but increasingly confident as they found their rhythm together.

Nearby, one of the newly appointed archangels—a dignified older angel with kind eyes—asked my mother to dance, and she accepted with a gracious smile that

reminded me of happier times before Rhodes's betrayal.

“May I have this dance, Archangel?” Levi's voice came from behind me, warm with amusement.

I turned to find him watching me, his hand extended, his eyes dancing with the light that always seemed to spark between us. “Are you making fun of my new title already?”

“Wouldn't dream of it, sweetheart.” He drew me into his arms as we joined the dancers, his movements surprisingly fluid and graceful for someone who had likely never attended an angelic ball before. “Though I have to admit, it has a nice ring to it. Archangel Ariella.”

I laughed softly, letting him guide me through the steps of the dance. “It feels surreal. All of this does.”

“Second thoughts?” he asked, his tone casual but his eyes watchful.

“About the title? Definitely. About being here?” I glanced around the hall, at the familiar and unfamiliar faces, at the crystal spires visible through the high windows, at the home I had lost and found again.

“I don't know, Levi. Part of me feels like I belong here, like this is where I was always meant to be. But another part...”

“Misses Earth?” he suggested. “Or maybe just the freedom to choose your own path, without the weight of all this history and expectation?”

I looked up at him, struck by how well he understood. “Yes. Exactly that.”

He spun me in a graceful turn, then pulled me closer than was strictly proper for an angelic dance. “You know,” he said, his voice dropping to a low murmur that only I could hear, “I could always stay. Here in Elysium. With you.”

I stumbled slightly, caught off guard by the offer. “What? But you hate Elysium. All the rules, the hierarchy, the angelic-ness of it all.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “True. But I love you more than I hate any of that.”

The words hung between us, simple and profound, a truth we had both known but neither had voiced until now. I stared at him, my heart pounding so loudly I was sure everyone in the hall could hear it.

“You... love me?” I whispered.

“Is that so hard to believe, sweetheart?” His hand tightened slightly on my waist. “I thought I'd made it pretty obvious by now.”

“I just... I didn't think...” I took a breath, trying to gather my scattered thoughts. “You'd really stay here? For me?”

“If that's what you want,” he said, his expression suddenly serious. “I meant what I said about loving you, Ariella. And if staying in Elysium is what makes you happy, then that's where I want to be.”

I swallowed hard, overwhelmed by the enormity of what he was offering, by the depth of feeling behind it.

In that moment, looking into his eyes as we danced beneath the crystal chandeliers of Elysium, I knew with absolute certainty what my answer would be—not just to his

unspoken question, but to the choice that had been haunting me since our victory.

“I love you too,” I said softly, the words feeling both new and familiar on my tongue.

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Two months after Rhodes's defeat, Elysium had settled into an uneasy peace. The wounds left by his betrayal were still fresh, but healing had begun, thanks in large part to Adona's swift reforms and the work of her newly appointed archangels—including me.

I stood on the balcony of my new quarters in the Celestial Tower, enjoying the warm June breeze that carried the scent of golden lilies from the gardens below.

Last week, I had finally made time to return the gem to the dragon shifter, who didn't attack us this time.

The blood oath was paid, and we left without many words, though I noticed he seemed more uneasy than before.

For a moment, I wondered what was his story?

Why he was here alone. But I knew very well that when people didn't want to share their story, you had to give them time.

So I made a mental note to come back and check on him in a few months. Or maybe I would tell Kaz about him.

My twenty-fourth birthday had arrived with little fanfare—I hadn't mentioned it to anyone except Levi, who had promised me a quiet dinner that evening. After everything that had happened, a simple celebration seemed perfect.

"Ariella?" Levi's voice called from inside. "Are you ready? Adona's messenger just

arrived.”

I sighed, turning away from the view. “Coming.”

Levi waited by the door, looking devastatingly handsome in his usual dark attire.

Though he had adapted surprisingly well to life in Elysium, he refused to adopt the lighter colors preferred by most angels.

The contrast suited him—a shadow among the light, a reminder that the new Elysium embraced diversity rather than enforcing uniformity.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart,” he murmured, pulling me close for a quick kiss.

I smiled against his lips. “You already wished me happy birthday this morning. Three times.”

“And I’ll probably do it three more times before the day is out.” His eyes gleamed with mischief. “Though I was hoping to celebrate with you properly tonight, not go on some mysterious mission.”

“I know. Me too.” I sighed, resting my forehead against his chest for a moment. “But duty calls, I guess.”

“The burdens of being an archangel,” he teased, though I could hear the genuine pride in his voice.

We made our way to Adona's private chambers, where she received us with her usual grace.

In the two months since Rhodes's defeat, she had recovered completely from her

ordeal, though I sometimes caught glimpses of a new wariness in her eyes—a reminder that even the most powerful beings could be vulnerable.

“Ariella, Leviathan,” she greeted us. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“You mentioned it was urgent,” I said, getting straight to the point. “What's the mission?”

Adona's expression gave nothing away. “I've received intelligence about a situation that requires immediate attention. It's sensitive. I need my most trusted representatives to handle it.”

“What kind of situation?” Levi asked, his natural suspicion showing through.

“You'll understand when you arrive,” Adona replied cryptically. “Aspen is waiting at the eastern gate to transport you to the location. The mission requires discretion, so I'd prefer you travel by portal rather than flying.”

I exchanged a glance with Levi, who raised an eyebrow slightly. Adona was being unusually vague, but I trusted her enough not to question further.

“Of course,” I said. “We'll leave immediately.”

“Thank you, both of you.” Adona's expression softened slightly. “Your service to Elysium in these difficult times has been invaluable.”

We left the Celestial Tower and made our way to the eastern gate, where we crossed to the other side, and found Aspen waiting as promised. The warlock looked unusually formal in a crisp suit, though his eyes twinkled with their usual mischief when he saw us.



“Archangel Ariella,” he greeted me with an exaggerated bow. “Friend of Elysium Leviathan. How nice of you to join me on this fine day.”

“Cut the formality, Aspen,” Levi said, though there was no heat in his voice. The two had developed an odd friendship over the past months, built on mutual respect and a shared appreciation for sarcasm. “What's this mysterious mission Adona's sending us on?”

Aspen shrugged, his expression innocent. “I'm just the transportation, my friend. Adona said you'd know what to do when you got there.”

“Which is where, exactly?” I asked, unable to hide my frustration. It was my birthday, and instead of celebrating, I was being sent on a cryptic mission with no information.

“You'll see,” Aspen said already beginning the familiar movements that would open a portal. “Ready when you are.”

With a sigh, I nodded, and Aspen completed the spell. The portal shimmered into existence before us, a swirling vortex of purple energy that revealed nothing of our destination.

“After you,” Levi said, gesturing for me to go first.

I stepped through, the familiar disorientation of portal travel washing over me. When my vision cleared, I found myself standing in the middle of a large, open space that seemed vaguely familiar?—

“SURPRISE!”

The shout came from all directions at once, startling me so badly that I nearly

summoned my sword on instinct. But then my brain caught up with my eyes, and I realized where I was—and what was happening.

The warehouse. Levi's warehouse in Houston, where I had been trapped in the witch's circle while my foreign magic threatened to tear me apart.

Except now, it was transformed beyond recognition.

White and gold decorations hung from the ceiling and walls, fairy lights twinkled everywhere like captured stars, and tables laden with food and drinks lined the perimeter.

A large banner hung across the back wall: “HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ARIELLA!”

And standing beneath it, grinning from ear to ear, were my friends. All of my friends.

“What—” I stammered, turning to find Levi and Aspen stepping through the portal behind me, both wearing matching expressions of satisfaction. “You knew about this?”

“Of course I knew,” Levi said, slipping his arm around my waist. “Did you really think I'd let your birthday pass without a proper celebration?”

Farrah rushed forward, enveloping me in a tight hug. “Happy birthday, Ariella! Did we surprise you?”

“Completely,” I admitted, still stunned. “How did you all manage this?”

“It wasn't easy, keeping a secret from an archangel,” Wyatt said, joining us with a grin. “But Levi was very persuasive.”

I looked around, taking in the faces of everyone who had gathered to celebrate with me.

Erin and Rey stood with Doreen and Andre near one of the food tables, raising their glasses in my direction.

Rage was deep in conversation with Jasmin and Tanner, who had actually left the underworld for this occasion.

Almae, Keeran, and Luana formed a small group with Aspen and Boise, while Hazel, Sean, Britta, Anna, and Shade had claimed a corner for themselves.

Shane and Raika were there with their pack—Minsi, Tyren, Lucille, Dom, and Anne—all looking slightly out of place but happy to be included. Twyla and Daleigh had made the journey from the Frost Court, standing close to Farrah and Wyatt.

And of course, Lacey, Abbie, Maggie, Gwen, and Trent, all beaming at me from near the center of the room. They had become like family to me during my time at the Great Eternity Hall, and seeing them here, in this place where I had been at my most vulnerable, felt particularly poignant.

My mother, Adriel, and Ezekiel stood by them, smiling wide and seemingly having a good time.

To my surprise, even Adona was there, having slipped through the portal while I was distracted. She stood with several members of the Lost Legion, including Kadriel and Tarek, looking far more relaxed than I had ever seen her in Elysium.

“You were in on this too?” I asked her, unable to keep the wonder from my voice.

She smiled, a genuine warmth in her expression. “Of course. Did you think I would

miss celebrating one of my archangels? Especially when she has done so much for Elysium?”

“But the mission?—”

“Was to get you here without suspicion,” she finished, looking rather pleased with herself. “And it worked perfectly.”

“Drake and Thea send their regrets,” Levi told me, leading me further into the party. “The lockdown at DuMoir Castle is still in effect while they deal with Sarki. But Lavinia, Killian, and Zadkiel sent messages.”

He handed me a small stack of cards, each containing birthday wishes from friends who couldn't be there in person. I felt my throat tighten with emotion as I read their words—so many people who cared, who had become part of my life through the strangest of circumstances.

“I don't know what to say,” I admitted, looking around at the gathering. “This is incredible.”

“You don't have to say anything,” Lacey said, joining us with a glass of champagne that she pressed into my hand. “Just enjoy it. You deserve it, Ariella.”

Music started playing—a young demon hunter had set up as DJ in one corner, mixing songs that ranged from upbeat pop to slower, more romantic melodies.

The lights dimmed slightly, creating a proper party atmosphere, and people began to move toward an open area that had been designated as a dance floor.

I sipped my champagne, still trying to process the fact that all these people had gathered just for me.

Two years ago, I had been alone on Earth, a fallen angel with no wings and no hope of returning home.

Now, I stood surrounded by friends from across realms, with a position of respect in Elysium and a mate who had defied every convention to be with me.

“You're thinking too much again, sweetheart,” Levi murmured in my ear, his breath warm against my skin. “I can practically hear the gears turning.”

I laughed, turning to face him. “Can you blame me? This is a lot.”

“Too much?” He looked concerned for a moment, his brow furrowing.

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“No,” I said quickly, reaching up to smooth the worry from his face. “No, it's perfect. I'm just not used to being the center of attention like this.”

“Well, get used to it, sweetheart,” he said with a smirk. “Because as long as I'm around, you're never going to be forgotten or overlooked again.”

My heart swelled with a sudden rush of emotion, and I had to blink back tears. “Thank you, Levi. For all of this. For everything.”

He leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “Happy birthday, Ariella.”

The night unfolded in a blur of laughter, dancing, and conversation.

I moved from group to group, catching up with friends I hadn't seen in weeks or months, sharing stories of our adventures and plans for the future.

Despite the lingering threat of Sarki and the ongoing work of rebuilding Elysium, there was a sense of genuine joy in the air—a reminder that even in the darkest times, there were moments worth celebrating.

I danced with everyone who asked—Wyatt, who moved with surprising grace for such a big man; Shane, who stepped on my toes twice and apologized profusely; Rage, who proved to be an unexpectedly skilled dancer; and even Adona herself, who moved with the ethereal elegance that only the oldest angels possessed.

But my favorite dance was with my mother, who held me close and whispered, “I'm so proud of you, Ariella. Your father would be too.”

The mention of my father brought a pang of sadness, but it was tempered by the knowledge that his legacy lived on in me—in my commitment to truth, to justice, to making Elysium what it was always meant to be.

As the night wore on, I found myself back in Levi's arms, swaying gently to a slow song. The party continued around us, but we had created our own private world on the dance floor, just the two of us moving together as if we'd been doing it forever.

“Having fun?” he asked, his hands warm at the small of my back.

“The best,” I admitted. “I can't remember the last time I celebrated my birthday like this.”

“Good.” He pressed his forehead against mine. “You know, I've been thinking...”

“That's not good,” I teased.

“For you, maybe.” He grinned. “But seriously, I've been thinking about us, about everything that's happened since we met.”

“That's a lot to think about.”

“It is,” he agreed. “But it all comes down to one thing, really.” His expression turned serious, his eyes holding mine with an intensity that made my breath catch.

“I never thought I'd find someone like you, Ariella. Someone who would see past the demon, past all the darkness, to whatever small glimmer of light might be hidden underneath.”

I started to protest, to tell him that there was far more than a glimmer, but he shook his head, silently asking me to let him finish.

“You changed everything for me. You made me want to be better, to be worthy of you. And somehow, against all odds, here we are—an angel and a demon, defying every rule and expectation.” His voice dropped lower, meant only for me.

“I love you, Ariella. Not because of some magical bond, not because of fate or circumstance, but because of who you are. Because of your strength, your courage, your stubborn refusal to give up on what you believe is right. Because of the way you fight for the people you care about, the way you never take the easy path if it means compromising your principles.”

My eyes burned with unshed tears as he spoke, his words washing over me like a warm tide, filling every corner of my heart.

“I love you,” he said again, “and I will spend every day of our very long lives showing you just how much.”

In that moment, surrounded by friends, held in the arms of the demon who had claimed my heart, I felt a sense of completion I had never experienced before.

The path that had led me here had been fraught with danger and loss, with betrayal and sacrifice.

But standing in this warehouse—once a prison, now transformed into a place of celebration—I couldn't regret a single step of the journey.

“I love you too,” I whispered, rising on my toes to press my lips to his.

After a few more dances, Levi caught my eye, a mischievous glint in his gaze. “What do you say we slip out for a while?” he murmured. “I have one more surprise for you.”

“Another one?” I laughed. “Isn't all this enough?”



“Not even close, sweetheart.”

With practiced ease, he guided me through the crowd toward the small office at the back of the warehouse—the one that contained the magical door to his apartment. No one seemed to notice our departure, too caught up in the celebration to pay attention to the guest of honor slipping away.

Once through the door, Levi swept me into his arms, his mouth claiming mine with a hunger that made my knees weak. I responded in kind, my hands tangling in his hair, my body arching into his as if we had been apart for weeks instead of hours.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all night,” he growled against my lips. “Do you have any idea how hard it’s been to keep my hands off you, watching you dance with everyone else?”

“Poor Levi,” I teased, nipping at his bottom lip. “Having to share.”

“I don’t like sharing what’s mine,” he said, his voice dropping to a register that sent shivers down my spine. “And make no mistake, Ariella—you are mine, just as I am yours.”

His possessiveness should have bothered me, but instead, it thrilled me—a reminder of the primal connection between us, the bond that had started as an accident but had grown into something deep and unbreakable.

We stumbled toward the bedroom, shedding clothes as we went, hands and mouths exploring familiar territory with renewed hunger. By the time we reached the bed, we were both breathless with need, our bodies seeking the perfect rhythm we had discovered together.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart,” Levi whispered against my skin, his voice filled with promise as he lowered me onto the sheets.

And as night deepened around us, as the sounds of celebration continued faintly in the distance, I surrendered to the joy of being exactly where I belonged—in the arms of a demon who had proven that sometimes, the most unexpected love was the most powerful of all.

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Thank you for reading Ariella's story! I hope you had a great time in the Rite World.