

FALLEN
GUARDIANS

HEAVEN
AND HELL
HAVE NEVER
BEEN SO
CLOSE...

BEYOND DESTINY

GEORGIA LYN HUNTER

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FALLEN GUARDIANS



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GENRE: PARANORMAL ROMANCE

This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, businesses, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Beyond Destiny

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Hi There,

While this novel can be read as a standalone as far as the romance is concerned, it is highly recommended that you read the other FG books first since they have an underlying plot that continues throughout the series. And this book contains spoilers (of previous books)

If you want to read just this book only, then the **Glossary** would help for a better understanding of the story with terms and words used. (Still suggest reading the previous books first :))

Either way, I hope you enjoy **Beyond Destiny. :)**

~Georgia

PS: These books contain scenes of violence— but only at eliminating evil :), cussing, and steamy love scenes, with a dirty-talking hero.

GLOSSARY

Absolute Laws: Forbids the mating between mortal and immortal. (So no offspring would be born with the immense powers of gods and angels.) If broken, the couple is executed. These laws do not apply to demons.

Ancients: The mystical forces that watch over all realms.

Archangel: Michael, Leader of the Fallen Guardians (also referred to as “Arc.” A term coined by Týr, and used by the others.)

Ater: A place like Hell for dead, evil Empyreans.

Celestial Realm: Home to the divine angels.

Cambion: An offspring born from a demon and human mating.

Dark Realm: Where the species with dark souls dwell, along with other amorphous entities.

- **Blood Demons:** A genus of demons that live on blood. They revel in the high of human blood.
- **Caligos:** Mist entities that thrive on emotions and steal human or corporeal bodies to inhabit.
- **Curantii:** Healer of the Veils, a descendant of the leader of the Watchers.
- **Jaedas:** Like the Caligos, but prefer immortal bodies to inhabit.
- **Demonii:** Demons who have consumed human souls, and in turn, lose their natural dark ones. But a human soul fades within days, and they need to constantly replenish it with another. Human blood consumed temporarily extends the life of the soul.
- **Demons:** Supernatural beings with dark souls who reside in the Dark Realm.
- **Otiums:** A species of demons, more docile in nature. Many escaped the tyranny of their realm to dwell on the human world. They usually live below the radar

not keen to draw attention to themselves, except for a few twats.

- **Wyverns:** Enormous lizard/dragon-like creatures that dwell in the Dark Realm.

Empyreans: They were created in the image of the divine angels but enjoy a more carnal life. Two level denizens:

- Higher-level: The Lords (with vast powers)
- Lower-level: The working class (limited or lesser powers)

Elysium: Like the mortal Heaven, but where the dead Empyreans go for eternity.

Fallen: Angels who fall and give up their wings and stronger abilities when they leave the Celestial Realm.

Fallen Guardians: A formidable group of fallen immortal warriors banished from their realm for past misdeeds. They swore their fealty to Gaia to protect humans from supernatural evil, and now reside on Earth. Some of whom are referred to by their pantheon's name.

Gaia: A powerful mystical Being who watches over Earth and mankind.

Healer of the Veils: Curantii, Usually an angel born with the ability to heal the tears formed in the mystical veils which protect the world from supernatural evil—a gift Echo inherited through her angelic ancestors.

Nephilim: Half-angel offspring born from human females and divine angels mating.

Others: A collective term for other supernatural beings: gods, fae, vampires, etc.

Obsidian dagger: A mystical weapon gifted to the Guardians from the goddess Gaia. When a Guardian's destined mate touches the weapon, it instantly connects to the mate, and the warrior loses the ability to summon the blade, only his mate can now.

Pantheons: Where the gods of various religions dwell.

Psionics: The human descendants of the Watchers. (All females)

Rogues: Angels who refuse to lose their wings and stronger powers. They escape from the Celestial Realm and go into hiding on Earth.

Seraphim: The highest-level angels who oversee all things in Heaven.

Sins: The Seven Deadly Sins, counterparts to the Ancients.

Tartarus: Where immortals are incarcerated.

Throne: Third level divine angels, created for war.

Urias: Spawned from Chaos, Creator of the Empyreans.

Watchers: Higher-level angels who were tasked to watch over fledgling mankind, but fell in love with mortal women.

Whitefire: A heavenly immortal flame that can cause untold destruction. Used to destroy the wings and abilities of angels who fall.

Name Pronunciation:

Blaéz: Blaze

Týr: Tier

Dagan: Day-gun

Aethan: A-thin

Loráed: Lo-raid (Lore)

Reynner: Rainer

Terms used:

Elska: love - Norse

Clavile: piano - Empyrean

Fosser: idiot - Empyrean

Vae: Damn - Empyrean

Me'morae: my love - Empyrean

Ma'laika: my angel - Dark Realm

Laika: angel - Dark Realm

Vyerav'k: polluted blood - Dark Realm

Hascu'ri: truth test - Dark Realm

Immitis: ruthless - Dark Realm

Cnati: son - Dark Realm

Fragmen stercore: piece of shit - Dark Realm

BLURB

Can a creature of the dark and an angel conquer a forbidden love?

As a new Guardian, bloodshed and death become Ely's way of life. During a skirmish, she faces off with a demon unlike any, whose sexy swagger and wicked smile throw her off her stride. Until he opens his mouth. Then she wants to kill the maddening male. Yet, every time he's near, the draw to him is inexorable...but he's her sworn enemy.

They call him *Sicari*, an assassin. Except he is something worse—a monster. Bound to a hellish existence, Nate shuns entanglements of any sort until *her*. A female who's as lethal as the weapons she wields, and who cracks through his armor with just a glare. Their attraction is undeniable, but they can never be. Not when his all-consuming desire for his beautiful nemesis becomes as dangerous as his need for gore and death.

As emotions unravel, aware of the eternal heartbreak, both succumb to a dark passion, awakening Nate's sinister nature. With enemies on all sides and time running out, Nate must sacrifice everything to protect the angel he loves. But Ely will battle the entire Dark Realm to save him, even if it means facing a fate from which there is no escape...

***Another slow-burn dance in this 126k+ words enemies-to-lovers story!**

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CHAPTER 1



DEATH WAITED. Mere minutes away.

It always did in his life.

Even now.

“Come, *vyerav’k*,” the *dregvar* demon taunted in guttural clicks, small, malevolent eyes gleaming like the acid, yellow moon in his ash-blackened face. One long spiky horn stuck out like a dagger from his brow, the other broken and jagged. “What you wait for?”

As if calling Nate *polluted blood*, the vilest name for a mixed breed, would unhinge him, make him lose control.

Too bad today wasn’t that day.

He never lost control. *Ever*.

Sword clenched in one hand, dragging in the sulfuric air into his burning lungs, Nate countered his opponent’s deceptively slow moves with even slower ones, agony spreading from his many wounds. Blood saturated his ripped t-shirt, leaving a gory trail on the dusty ground.

“I’m right here,” he panted.

Growling, the *dregvar* lumbered forward, and the cracked ground trembled. Dust flew. His clawed fingers flexed, and his leathery face suddenly split into a macabre grin, revealing several rows of serrated, blackened teeth, intensifying the scare factor on his leathery mug. “I will feast on your innards, *vyerav’k!*”

Had Nate been anyone else, death would be moments away.

But fear was *his* fucking calling card!

His!

Blood...wantsss! The jubilant hiss scraped Nate's mind, reminding him he wasn't alone, and never would be. *Kiiiiiiii*, the shriek ricocheted inside his skull.

The crowd, hyped on the violence and gore, yelled, "Rip him apart, Kozzat!"

Too bad they chose wrong!

Blood thundered to Nate's head, the killing rage sweeping through, burning like the eternal fires of Hell. His hands hurt as his talons broke free, and his sword clattered to the ground. The skin on his chest tightened and stretched, pressure building in his head. A blast of pain erupted inside his skull.

Yessss! The beast within roared in satisfaction.

Bloodlust consuming him, Nate tore across the pit and leaped up, lashing out, slicing the *dregvar* clear across the carotid. The demon yanked Nate off and flung him away. He hit the ground in a hard slide, lungs flattening, gravel scraping his back. The *dregvar* stumbled back several steps, grasping his gushing throat in shock.

The noise around the arena erupted in a cacophony, drowning out the guttural choking. The *dregvar* let out a garbled screech and lurched for Nate.

Adrenaline surging, Nate shot into the air, grabbed his opponent's head, braced his feet on the massive chest, and twisted, breaking the *dregvar*'s thick neck. With another swipe of his deadly talons, he severed the head from the neck. Skull in hand, he jumped down as the body lurched about, then toppled to the ground, blood spraying everywhere.

The noise dropped.

Silence deafened him.

Did they think him weak because he retained his human form despite his morphed, scaly black hands with the razor talons, the fangs digging into his lower lip, and the black horns he knew stuck out of his head?

Fucking assholes!

Nate tossed the head on the gravelly ground, and rampant cheering escalated.

Two-faced bastards, the lot of them!

“Sicari—Sicari!” they yelled his moniker.

Assassin? Yeah, he was. Whether in a mortal fight or hunting and eliminating a target, the end result was the same. He killed.

His sight blurred from the blood loss, dizziness swamping him, and the ground swayed—

Fuck! Inhaling pained lungfuls of air, refusing to show any weakness, he strode toward the arena’s exit. The huge demon guards moved aside, clearing a path.

A familiar strain of prickles slid down his bruised and bloodied skin. He knew who it was but looked up to the VIP box anyway.

Azgoreth, the Archdemon of Voracity and ruler of Ys, in his human form, rose from his seat and inclined his head. The demon was as old as dirt and master of these goddamned fights, and he looked as happy as an emptying bladder.

Yeah, job well-fucking-done!

A demoness glided up to him in her transparent black pleasure den gown worn to entice. “Let me aid you, *Sicari*.” She caressed his blood-drenched shirt, giving him a sultry smile, sucking her gore-smeared fingers suggestively. “I’ll lick every bit of you clean.”

He grasped her arm and stalked out of the pit, then flashed them to the busy town of Ys. Gloomy buildings with dim lights lined the town’s circle where an obelisk loomed in the center, stained black with eons of blood from those Azgor nailed there and flayed in punishment until death.

Adrenaline finally flatlining, Nate lowered his head. And struggled to find a way back into himself, to lock down his blood rage as the beast within battered his mental shield, seeking a weakness to break free. Always seeking.

“I know what you need,” a low voice breathed, dragging his agonized mind back, and he became aware of the demoness hanging onto him.

Smiling at getting his attention, she reached up and kissed his clenched mouth, licking his fangs still piercing his lower lip.

“Leave,” he growled, pushing her away.

“But *Sicari*...” She frowned.

Yeah, they all wanted to fuck the dangerous beast, and usually, he indulged for days. But rutting wasn't on his mind, even if its energy would heal him faster.

“Go!” he snarled, too close to the edge. If the beast within reared up, he would kill again.

Her eyes widened, and she scurried off.

His chest constricted, the heat, the sulfur, the immense pain, all of it suffocating him. Hades! He had to get out of this place. With his ribs hurting like a hail of blades ripping through his chest, he flashed to the outskirts where he could open a portal in private.

Moments later, he stepped through the swirling gateway into the human world. The smell of grease and oil in the workshop abraded his nose in welcome relief. A place he always came back to—his sire's home.

Nate shut the portal with his mind, his gaze settling on his black talons. His mouth compressed. His fangs sank deeper into his lower lip, and a spasm of pain lit through his jaw and head—

Fuck! After another agonized inhale, he managed to calm down enough to retract his extended canines and horns.

Now he was just a bloodied, beat-up-looking human, and every inch of him hurt.

Nate wiped his hurting face on the sleeve of his tee, the only spot not drenched with blood, and shuffled between the vehicles to the open door, each step an excruciating feat. He trudged into the living room and up the side stairs, taking in his wounded status. Yeah, he'd likely torn ligaments everywhere and busted a rib or two, and then there was the damn burn mark on his chest where the demon had tried to yank out his heart.

“Nate?”

Unable to avoid this, he stopped on the landing and waited. Footfalls echoed on the worn, tiled stairs as his sire ran up behind him. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” Hell, maybe he fractured his jaw, too. It fucking hurt to speak.

“Don't tell me it's nothing. You're torn, bleeding all over.” Aba's tone was hard, yet Nate knew he couldn't feel, and had no emotions. How could Aba, when he didn't possess a soul?

“You've been fighting again.”

“It's the Dark Realm. There are always assholes after a *half-breed*. Don't worry, I'll be fine.” Nate shuffled to his bedroom, shut the door, and sagged against the wood. Why burden Aba further with the truth about the death fight?

A moment later, his sire's low voice drifted to him. “He's badly hurt.”

By the dark gods! Who was he calling?

Nate didn't bother tuning in with pain gutting him, but his heightened hearing didn't spare him, and Aba's part of the convo bled through. “I don't know. You need to come.”

And then he didn't care. He knew.

Nate dragged his sodden shirt off, tossed it aside, and fumbled for the towel he'd flung on the bed days ago, pressing it to the seeping claw slashes on his belly. His self-healing had slowed, and his arms appeared almost gaunt. Unsurprising, considering just how much repairing his body needed.

He longed to lie down, shut off from this life if he could, but thanks to Aba's phone call, his blooded kin was on her way. Cussing again, he trailed to the window, pressing one bruised fist on the cement sill, the other clutching the towel. He glared out into the murky evening. A drizzle turned everything gray and oppressive.

Hades, he was tired.

Of this life.

Of what he'd become.

Of every-fucking-thing.

Pain ratcheted in retaliation at his clenched jaw, splintering into his already hurting skull, and he grunted.

No, death wasn't for him, not yet. He had a score to settle with the one who'd set him on this path. Vengeance would be his.

CHAPTER 2



SIX MONTHS LATER...

“You ain’t getting that shot, Elytani of Ademéras.”

Ely narrowed her eyes at Týr’s grin as he countered her moves like the wily immortal he was. She continued bouncing the basketball on the courtyard cleared of snow, waiting for a clear shot. “You think?”

“I know.”

Darn taunting male. But she refused to let him throw her off her game, no matter her exasperation with him. He’d already thrashed her butt once too many times.

Man, she should have jogged straight back to the castle when she’d found him shooting his free throws. Instead, she’d swiped his pitch and went in for a three-pointer. Big mistake. Now she was out a hundred bucks. *Vae!*

Since she’d set the bet, something she’d learned from Echo to do up-front when playing with the guys, she needed to win this before her pride got trampled right down to the core of the frozen earth.

“Tell you what, El,” he drawled while shamelessly blocking every move she made with an ease that made her want to groan. “How about we change up the bet a little? Make this shot, and my Corvette’s yours for a year. If I win, I’ll add your ten dollars to my already over-flowing coffers of ten dollars.”

Yep, dangle the bait. Gah!

Since Hedori had taught her how to drive, she'd wanted to get her hands on one of the automobiles humans used for transportation. And here, Týr offered her his newly acquired vintage car on a platter.

Vae, if only someone would distract him for a second.

“Scared?” he taunted as she bounced the ball away.

Heck yes! This was her crumbled pride she had to pick off the ground.

“As if,” she snorted. “You’re on—”

“Týr?” Kira called out, her spiral locks cascading around her pretty face as she hurried across the tarmac court to them, holding a small plate with two creamy cupcakes piled with cherries. “I have something for you.”

His head snapped to his mate.

Ely leaped up, making the shot—

“Holy creamy cupcakes, I won!” she yelled, jumping and punching the air, her long braided hair whipping her back. “Thank you, cupcake gods!”

Týr spun around, jaw nearly smacking his chest.

Kira burst out laughing.

“Hell no, that doesn’t count!”

“Hell yes, it does!” she shot back, grinning. “I won the Corvette!”

“No way,” he growled. “We play this again.”

“Way yes, warrior. Suck it up! You don’t hear me grumbling every time I lose ten bucks to you.” Ely rolled her eyes. The human action felt good and communicated her exasperation well.

He glared, hands settling on his hips. “You’re comparing *ten* dollars to a million-dollar vintage?”

“I sure am. It was your idea, betting the car,” she pointed out sweetly, wiping her sweaty face on her t-shirt. “And it was

a *hundred* dollars, by the way.”

“Honey, it’s only for a year,” Kira consoled, giving him a one-armed hug, hazel eyes gleaming with mirth.

“That’s not the point! I waited two years for it. I haven’t even driven it yet.” He looked like he’d lost his best friend.

“I would say I feel your pain.” Ely smirked. “But nope.” She glanced up as more clouds gathered. Late afternoon gave way to twilight, and the temperature dropped to chilly. “So, keys?” She wiggled her fingers.

“You spend too much time with my mate,” Týr grumbled, selecting a cupcake. “Sneaky, but respect, girl. Ask Hedori for the keys.”

Yes! With a little wave, she jaunted off toward the castle.

This was why she liked Týr. He wasn’t a sore loser. No wonder when she first came to this world, she asked him to mate her so she could stay, not realizing she had other options. It was her parents’ fault, instilling in her that all females must be mated and protected and have guards attached to their backsides twenty-four-seven.

Man, she was happy to live her life on *her* terms. She liked this realm that was now home. And she finally owned a car, even if only for a year. However, she had a job to do, one she’d signed up for: find those soul-stealing demoniis and eliminate them.

Tomorrow, she’d take the Corvette for a spin.

Smiling, Ely hurried into the enormous, ivy-covered stone castle, through a rarely used living room, and headed for the back stairwell.

Back in her elegant, first-floor bedroom decorated in cool shades of forest green and cream, she shut the door. The small, attached sitting area near the sea of windows overlooking the lake and gazebo in the distance added a restful ambiance to her room.

She kicked off her sneakers, removed her clothes, and made for the shower. Out of habit, she lightly rubbed the scar

on the side of her stomach, a reminder of what she'd endured to break free and live her own life—of guards trying to capture her and return her home, and one wounding her.

Aye, she'd do it all over again, hurt or not.

Ten minutes later, showered and changed into her workwear of black leather pants, t-shirt, and heeled boots, Ely fastened her long hair in a high ponytail and braided the length, snapping on a black rubber band at the end. She pulled on her trench coat, not needing the outerwear, but it was winter in the human world, so she had to conform.

Yep, rules had to be followed. Even here. But these she didn't mind.

Since she wasn't hungry, she grabbed two snack bars from her bedside drawer, slipped them into her coat pocket, and headed out. There wasn't any meeting with the formidable archangel this evening. The passing nights had been quiet for a while.

While she didn't care much for bloodshed, if those scourges from the Dark Realm causing havoc on this world crossed her path, she'd let her dagger do the talking. Living here gave her a sense of purpose, protecting those who couldn't defend themselves, who didn't even know the supernatural existed.

However, she had something else to do before patrol.

Trepidation building, Ely dematerialized from her room to a suburb in Brooklyn she came to often in recent months.

She reformed in the lane between two brownstones, a gush of chilly night air smacking her dead in the face. Head lowered, she made her way along the quiet, residential street, past trees denuded of leaves, their spindly branches drooping as if weary of the cold, her boots squishing through the thin layer of snow covering the sidewalk.

Ely slowed to a halt in front of a two-story, red-bricked brownstone with a granite stoop. She slipped her hand into her coat pocket, stroking the little metal toy there, one she'd had

ever since that fateful night a few years ago when she first came to this world...

Muggy steam rose from the hot asphalt as the familiar, prickling force of energy closed in on her. Vae. Her guards were close. She darted between the looming buildings in some dingy part of the human city and let herself and the shadows become one. Her wet gown clung uncomfortably to her body from her fall into a salty river, and her side hurt from the dagger wound, but she ignored it all, fear consuming her that they would find her—

“Hide, baby!” A woman’s pained scream rent the night air, thick with fear, freezing Ely.

Then running footfalls sounded. A faint sob echoed. So much terror in it, like arrows piercing her soul. The urge to find and protect gripped her despite her dread of being discovered. She eased out of the shadows and hurried to the sidewalk—

A small body slammed into her. Footsteps stampeded, drawing closer. Ely scooped up the child and used her abilities, letting the shadows conceal them. His silky dark hair brushed her cheek, the scent of candy and warmth enveloping her.

“Mama,” he wailed, pushing away, trying to break free and reaching for the unseen female who’d cried out.

“Find the brat and kill him, too!” a male snarled.

“Hush, morae.” She put her palm over the child’s mouth, instinct warning her that something terrible had happened to his mother. “We don’t want the bad people to find us.”

The little boy whimpered, dark eyes on hers. Then he clung to her, one thin arm tangling in her hair, his tears wetting her neck and squeezing her heart. In her world, no babes had been born for millennia, and she hugged him—

Ely stilled as the abrading power she hid from grew stronger, bruising her psyche.

A faint clatter sounded. The child wriggled, pointing to the grimy asphalt.

“No, we cannot leave yet,” she whispered in warning. “The bad people are still out there.”

Vae! She even glamoured herself after escaping the castle, and still, they managed to track her. Her mouth clamped into a hard line, she swiped the dull glint of metal—the toy car the child wanted—off the ground. Then she dematerialized them...

And ended up here, in this place in Brooklyn, where she left the little boy with an older couple.

She’d promised him she’d come back, but life just wasn’t fair.

“Hello, my dear. Can I help you?”

At the croaky voice, Ely glanced to her right and smiled at the older man shuffling toward her, a folded newspaper tucked under his arm, his thin body hunched beneath the thick fleece coat, gnarled fingers resting on a walking cane.

“I’m not sure,” she told him.

He pushed the bill of his knitted cap up. Rheumy blue eyes blinked, then crinkled into a smile. “You are a sight for sore eyes on this devilishly cold night.”

Hastily, Ely tightened her psychic shields, keeping her angelic side hidden. While she might not be divine, she was still an angel, an Empyrean possessing a similar appeal as those celestial beings.

“Do you live on this street?” she asked.

“Yes, about thirty or so years.”

Please, please let him remember something about the child.

“Maybe you can help me. A few years ago, a little boy was left here.” She nodded to the brownstone. “Would you know anything about that?”

He shuffled to the wooden bench in front of the house. Faded graffiti mapped the weathered timber. Exhaling tiredly, as if it was an effort to maneuver himself, he set the newspaper

on the damp wood and sat on it—the streetlight casting a dull glow over man and bench.

“These old bones don’t support me so well anymore.” Despite his obvious discomfort, he cast her a wry smile, rested his cane next to him, and rubbed his bony knees. “We have many young ones here.”

“No, no. A, er, woman left him with a couple,” she said. “The boy would have been around four or five?” Drat, she had no clue how old he’d been, but he had been quite small. “He had dark hair.”

“Children are always left on doorsteps when parents can’t afford to keep ‘em,” he said, his features pinching. “Sad.”

This was a waste of time, but she refused to give up.

“Umm, there was something,” he murmured, huddling under his thick coat and shoving his hands in his pockets. “I was home...” He tipped his head to the next building, blazing with lights. “It was late. I couldn’t sleep. Insomnia. Had it all my life. I was sitting near the window, as I oftentimes do, when an angel appeared. She glowed like the moon...”

Ely hastily checked that her allure remained locked tight. Back then, she didn’t know she had to conceal her angelic nature, having just escaped her world to this one.

“What happened?” she asked softly.

Rheumy eyes met hers. His deeply lined brow creased, digging further grooves. “She spoke to the couple, gave ‘em the child, and disappeared as quickly as she appeared.”

Her heart banged painfully against her ribs, hope springing.

“Are they here?”

“Alas, no. Rosie and Jacob moved soon after.”

Damn, disappointment settled like lead in her belly. “Do you know where they went?”

“No, my dear.” He rubbed his eyes. “I went to my daughter’s home the following day for a visit. But I heard they

relocated across the state. Now, I must be getting home. These old bones can't take the cold much more." He reached for the metal arm to pull himself up.

"Let me." Ely grasped his gnarled fingers and slipped her other arm around him. As she helped him to his feet, she let her warmth flow into him. She couldn't heal old age or his type of illness, but she tried to give him a little ease. Since she wasn't allowed to interfere in human lives, she could do these little things. No one needed to know.

After the old man shuffled up the steps and disappeared indoors, she made her way back to the lane. All she wanted was for the boy to be safe. And for him to know she hadn't broken her promise. She did return to find him, even if it was a few years later.

The old couple she left him with, Ely had picked up no shadows of evil in their heart, and that was the only reason she'd handed the child over. In Empyrea, where no babe had been born in over two thousand years, they were longed for and treasured. She only hoped the boy was protected and cared for in this world.

A faint hint of sulfur prickled her nose, one she recognized as belonging to the quieter Otium demons living in this world. Probably some resided in one of these brownstones.

Scanning the lane and checking that she was alone, Ely dematerialized to the Bowery, her current place of patrol. Hopefully, she'd find a few demoniis to eliminate and get rid of the feeling of failure inundating her.

She reformed in an alley deep in the rundown parts, and keeping to the shadows—as was her habit—she made her way along the cracked, sludgy asphalt. A lone female in a dark street always drew two types: those who would try to rescue her or those who would harm her. The latter found out, much to their detriment, she wasn't one to trifle with.

A scrawny, stray feline leaped onto a broken crate and froze, staring at her with reflective green eyes.

“I’m not going to hurt you, little kitty. Just the bad demons,” she murmured, walking past him.

She perused the area, sparing a glance at the biker’s den, then noting her coffee vendor on the corner where the alley met the street. Coffee sounded good right about now, the one thing she’d become addicted to since living in this realm.

About to head off and get her caffeine fix, movement stirred in her peripheral view deeper down the alley. Frowning, Ely stepped back, becoming one with the building’s shadows as a lone figure strode in her direction. He was tall and built. Head lowered, his unfastened coat flapped open, probably flipping off the impossibly cold weather. Heck, it would fit his dark silhouette, she thought with wry amusement.

She couldn’t see much of his face, but as he neared her hideout, his head snapped up as if sensing he wasn’t alone. His stride slowed, and he stared straight at where she remained hidden. Raven-black hair fell to his broad shoulders, framing a tanned face. The hard lines of his brooding features merged to form a visage of rugged masculine beauty. Lean. Powerful—

His eyes flashed red.

Demon.

Of course, he was.

Only they appeared eerily beautiful, concealing the evil within.

Except this one didn’t possess the stomach-churning stench of sulfur marking those diabolic spawns. Her heightened senses picked up a light woodsmoke tinged with the tantalizing scent of...anise. She remembered the smell from when Kira baked.

Pretty boy’s mouth thinned as if sensing her droll assessment before he strode off. And disappeared into the dingy biker bar.

Oooh, boy. Ely sighed, shrugging off her fascination for the Guardians’ natural-born enemy. She could just imagine the uproar that would create if she ever dated one.

Snorting, she ambled off toward the coffee vendor.

Nope, that would never happen.

* * *

Ten minutes earlier...

“Sicariiiiiiii.”

The moniker coasted through the freezing air to where Nate crouched on a rooftop, and he cursed. Damn Derrodus!

Before the imbecile found him and messed up his job, Nate flashed and continued tracking his target. He had to get his mark into an alley, fewer witnesses there.

The lanky demon below shoved a path through the humans on the busy sidewalk, his head snapping around, then his hand shot out. A shriek echoed and snapped off. The demon vanished into the night air with his victim.

Does the fool think he can easily lose someone like me?

Nate flashed over the buildings at preternatural speed, tracking the vibration of fear. As he closed in on them, the demon skidded to a halt in a grimy backstreet, holding the whimpering boy in front of him like a shield.

“Let him go,” Nate called out. “You know you can’t escape.”

“Come any closer, and I’ll kill him!” The demon pressed a blade to the shuddering youngster’s throat, his features morphing to a leathery, demonic one and back to humanoid. His gaze bounced all over the alley, trying to pinpoint Nate’s location. Then he glanced up to the warehouse rooftop where Nate stood.

“You should have known better than to steal what belongs to another.”

“He doesn’t even know it’s gone,” the demon flung at him. The boy, barely in his teens, cried out as the blade pierced his

skin. Blood dripped.

Nate leaped into the sludgy snow merged with sewer water and strolled closer, the stink barely making an impact. “Then why am *I* here?”

The demon’s eyes widened when he saw who it was, terror leaching what little color he had. “*Sicari?*” he gasped, shuffling back, dragging the boy in a chokehold.

Yeah, he got that right. It’s what he was.

An assassin. A killer.

“I need it to aid my ailing consort. She’s fading from this life!” he blurted, sweat dripping down his face. Red-streaked eyes darted about, looking for an escape route. “*Sicari*, I’ll give you half of it, let me go.”

Always the same thing when they were caught.

A metal door further down shut in an echoing clang. The demon’s gaze shot over his shoulder—

In a move too fast for human eyes, Nate dove forward, snagged the dagger, and shoved the boy aside. The demon stumbled back. Growling, he flung out a hand, and a fiery hellbolt torpedoed straight for Nate.

He ducked, the missile missing his head by a hair’s breadth, slamming into the building behind him. Bits of brick and mortar exploded, the debris raining on the asphalt.

Terror reeking off him, his mark flashed, but Nate lunged and grabbed him by the neck before he disappeared. Iron dagger summoned—a metal lethal to demonkind—he swiped clean across the demon’s throat, slicing through muscles, tendons, and carotid. Blood spurted. Nate plunged the blade into his mark’s heart.

The demon gurgled and fell to the ground. His body began to deflate, and before the clothes disintegrated, Nate rummaged through the pockets, found the small pouch with several reddish-black crystallized blood orbs, and shook his head.

Who the fuck knew what these things did? But extend a life force? It certainly didn't.

Symbionts did.

He recalled the ones *he'd* stolen several years ago to save his blooded kin, Shadow. Well, she lived, and it was all that mattered—

Fuck! Pain splintered down his spine, like claws digging into his back, and he grunted, reminding him that he also paid the price for breathing again as the beast within made its presence known.

Teeth clenched, sack in hand, he rose. The terminated demon had crumbled to ash and goo, already sucked back to Purgatory. The job was kill and retrieve. Mission accomplished.

He looked around for the boy. He'd vanished, too. Good. Nate slipped the sack into his coat pocket.

Why the idiot thought he could steal from Azgor and get away with it, he had no idea. But the irony didn't escape him. He'd done the same shit once. His punishment, however, hadn't been termination but something worse.

Death fights.

No, Azgor wasn't going to destroy his trophy killer, hunter, assassin, or whatever the fuck Azgor used him to get done when Nate housed something they both knew every powerful demon would give their left nut to own.

He shut out thoughts of a life he could never change.

Head lowered, he made his way out of the alley and up the street. Prickles coasted over his nape and down his spine, and the sensation of being watched took hold. Nate slowed his steps and mentally scanned, but he couldn't pinpoint anyone. Still, the impression persisted.

No...not threatening.

Probably some stray feline hiding in the shadows, watching him.

He always had eyes on him. In this world, in the Dark Realm, there were always those determined to find his weakness.

Too bad they never would.

Ignoring his feline watcher, he continued toward the biker bar further up the narrow street, avoiding the patches of slushy snow, his breath a white mist in the dead cold.

Moments later, he slipped into the dimly lit, noisy joint. A cacophony of yells and cusses ricocheted off the faded, peeling walls that hadn't seen a lick of fresh paint since their probable construction decades ago. Cigarette smoke hung inside like a dense fog, causing his nose to twitch. As he passed the single pool table occupied by a few bearded human bikers and the local Otium demons, silence fell for a second before starting up again.

They knew him, didn't like him.

He didn't give a shit.

He was an antisocial son-of-a-bitch, except when he wanted to play pool. Tonight wasn't that night.

Nate crossed to the bar, manned by the heavysset demon who owned the place. A few customers hunched over their beers at the wooden counter, desperately clinging to their solitude. Nate dropped onto a vacant stool at the far end. Someone cranked up the music from an ancient jukebox. The booming tune and the balls colliding against wood amplified every lick of sound, increasing the crushing pain in his head.

He gritted his molars, wishing humans were given the same heightened senses as him, then they would live the same fucking torture daily. He dropped a few dollars on the counter and rubbed his temples.

"Vodka neat," he muttered to the figure in front of him. Another shaft of pain flayed him along his spine, almost cracking his bones. Shit! He grunted at the reminder he had to feed, but he wasn't in the fucking mood to gratify his beast side just yet.

The bartender set his drink on the counter. The door behind him crashed open, letting in a blast of icy air. At the familiar stink of sulfur and burning spice, his mouth thinned. Even secreted in this run-down bar in the worst part of the Bowery, he couldn't be left the fuck alone.

Derrodus was a thorn in his ass. Always following him.

“There you are, *Sicari*.” The demon snagged the seat next to him as if Nate's silence was an invitation to join him, all smiles like they were best buds. “You're hard to track. Did you get the thieving git?” he demanded as if Nate answered to him.

“Fuck off.” Nate tossed back his liquor, the burn barely distracting him from the searing pain, left the glass on the counter, and strode out of the noisy joint, into the freezing weather. He halted on the sidewalk near a row of parked bikes and pulled up his coat hood, not to keep out the chill, but to ward off any more attention.

A stench of sulfur hit him. With his heightened sight, his gaze instantly lasered in on the movement of several dark figures deeper in the backstreet, traversing furtively as if tracking something or someone.

Damn cretins! He took off after the horde.

Their heads snapped around to him.

“*Sicari*?” One smirked, revealing fangs. “Come to join us?”

“You brought these plagues to this world?” he snapped at Derrodus, still on his ass.

“Couldn't stop them.” The demon shrugged, pissing Nate off further.

Suddenly, they stiffened, and like feral dogs, their heads snapped around to stare down the dark alley.

“Blood,” another groaned. “Frrrrresh blood.”

“No,” Nate growled, but his warning disappeared in the fetid, sulfuric air left behind. The bastards were gone. By Hade's balls! This wasn't his job, stopping these friggin' shits.

But while he was on Earth, he didn't want them creating havoc in his area. Or he'd put himself directly in the sight of those damn Guardians again, and he needed to be under the radar, especially considering the job he did, and the fact he lived here, too.

The faint sounds of screeching and fighting reached him. Annoyance surging, he took off after the fucktards.

CHAPTER 3



ELY HUNG BACK in the recessed doorway of a warehouse deep in the Bowery. It was close to midnight, and not a hint of any of those Dark Realm pests skulking about. Man, even the rats seemed to have gone into hibernation.

As the moon slid out from behind the heavy, dark clouds, casting its pale glow over the buildings, she circled a finger, summoning the warehouse shadows. They glided over, slipping around her hand like a dense glove, some parts forming solid bands that not even light penetrated.

How odd. She peered closer at the bands.

Usually, this ability was like playing with smog, and one she'd used to hide—always hiding from her guards, her parents, her so-called friends—

Ugh, she shut out thoughts of her past and timid self. Releasing the shadows, she stepped out from the recess as two figures strolled toward her. Cops. Before they saw her, she let her molecules dissolve and became one with the gloom.

“I swear I thought I saw a woman here...”

“It’s all in your head, Kev,” the taller cop grunted. “No woman in her right mind would hang around this dump at this time of the night. Probably a ghost.”

“Fuck, man!” the shorter one grumbled as they passed her. “Now I’ll see spooks in every dark flippin’ corner. This place gives me the creeps.”

She couldn't blame them for feeling that way. The Bowery was a known area for demonic activity, not that humans knew this.

"We have to patrol these damn places now," the tall cop muttered. "With the women and children disappearing—"

A rattling sound echoed eerily, the chains demarking a loading zone squeaking in the chilly breeze. A cat screeched nearby.

"Shit!" they both cursed, wheeled around, and practically sprinted back up the alley, bypassing Ely's hiding place. Frowning, she followed, keeping a safe distance behind them. So, the human authorities were aware of mortal women and children vanishing?

The Guardians had shut down a part of the trafficking ring—one her friend Shadow had nearly been a victim of several months ago. Those scourges from the Dark Realm were either laying low for now, or they'd found another way to escape the Guardians' notice and continue their heinous crimes elsewhere.

Her mind slipped back to another missing child, the one always in her thoughts. After her dismal failure to locate his whereabouts earlier, she knew Shadow was right. The little boy would be a little older now and hopefully still with the kind older couple she'd left him with.

Moonlight filtered through the passing black clouds, underscoring the dank alley and dirty snow. She cut through another backstreet and headed toward Club Anarchy. As she passed the queue waiting to get into the club, a pair in a lusty clench had amusement threading through her.

That sure was one way to keep warm in this freezing December weather. But it made her aware, too, of just how empty that part of her life was.

"Slow night, eh?"

Ely glanced toward the club's entrance. And Tagg, who stood guard there, smiled.

“Something like that,” she said, stopping at his side. “You’re busy tonight.” She nodded to the line trailing down the alley.

“Every night,” he drawled. “Come hell or high water.”

Ely laughed. She liked the half-human, half-demon cop who moonlighted as a bouncer, and had become friendly with him in the passing months. With his deeply tanned features and close-cropped dark hair, Tagg was easy on the eyes. And he didn’t hit on women or her, unlike some of the human men and Otium demons she came across in clubs or bars.

But more, he was the Guardians’ go-to man, handling the murky side of business when humans sometimes encroached on the Guardians’ job—

A shiver coasted through her, and she pushed her icy hands into her coat pockets and upped her body warmth, hoping it wasn’t a portent of things to come.

“Why don’t you do some watching inside the club?” Tagg murmured.

Either he didn’t know she could raise her body temperature when required, or something suspicious was happening there.

“Demonii?” she asked.

The heavens knew those curs who gave in to their dark side and first stole a human soul for that elusive light, losing their own dark one as a result, were the bane of humanity. Mortal souls were never meant for demons and didn’t last. It became a never-ending cycle, reaping human souls to live. And the reason the Guardians existed.

Tagg hesitated, then shook his head. “No. Just thought you might like to step out of the cold for a while.”

Vae, she stifled an exasperated groan. Not only did she have her brother, who would hover given a chance, and her fellow Guardians who were just as bad, but now Tagg, too?

Seriously? She cast him a gimlet stare. “You know what I am, right?”

“I know.”

But the way he watched her...and then it whacked her upside the head. *Oooh...boy!* How did she miss the signs of how he felt?

While she did like him, she wasn't sure what she wanted yet. Maybe...

Her thoughts drifted to the other demon she'd seen earlier with the wonderful scent. Ugh. What was it with her being drawn to the darkest of species? Tagg would be better. He was nice...*nice?* Man!

"How about coffee when you're free?" he asked.

Before she could respond, a whiff of sulfuric air stung her nose. Ely stilled as the icy vibration coasted over her psyche. It wasn't from the few local Otium demons waiting to get into the club, but the real deal straight from the Dark Realm. And they were on the hunt.

"I'll let you know. Gotta go." Her mind already on her job, she raced past the long queue of chattering humans, then ducked into the narrow alley and dematerialized, tracking the stench.

Moments later, she reformed in a rundown part of the Bowery, her heightened hearing picking up low grunts and snarls, and her mystical weapon inked on her biceps stirred in warning. Keeping to the shadows of the old grubby building, she trailed a short distance behind the pack, squabbling among themselves.

Ely slowed, determined to end these vile miscreants who killed with no remorse, some of whom were as beautiful as the divine angels. And she would, as soon as she found out what they were after.

A fiery hellfire bolt hissed like a crimson laser in the night. A demon yowled, leaping back. The odor of charred flesh saturated the icy air. Guttural growls emitted from the others, their eyes glowing red in the night as they continued bickering.

"He's mine!" one growled, fangs flashing.

Blood demons! These curs didn't merely steal souls, they drained the humans, too, relishing in the addictive high of

consuming mortal plasma.

Ely willed her Gaian weapon to her. It detached from her biceps in an eddy of dark smoke, taking shape in her hand in the misleading length of a black walking stick. One she could snap into twin glaives when needed.

The demons' heads twisted toward her, blinking like ghoulish, red-eyed owls.

“She’s mine,” another chafed.

Yes, seeing a defenseless *human* female, since she’d shut off her allure, was right up their morbid alley.

Her internal radar clanged in warning. Ely pivoted and rammed her deadly weapon at the demon sneaking up on her, nailing him in the gorge. Blood gushed, and he stumbled back, grabbing his throat. She spun her staff, keeping them at bay. Another leaped at her, and she lashed out with a flying kick, her spiked boot heel slicing him across the chest.

A tanker slammed into her back, and the air exploded from her lungs as she flew face-first toward the wall. Shit! She flung out her hand to stop the crash. Instead, her head and hand went right through the brick wall—

Urias! She reared back, feeling as if her chest would explode.

Too furious to understand what just happened, Ely wheeled around, gulping in a huge breath. They surrounded her like rabid dogs, ogling her like their next meal. The maggots!

“You shouldn’t have followed us, female!” a stocky cur grinned. “Your little stick won’t help you now. But you’re too lovely not to taste.” He rubbed his crotch. “Then we’re going to drink you dry.”

The scum! “Try.”

They swarmed her from all sides. Adrenaline spiking, she moved in a blur, her weapon lengthening and spinning, slicing and stabbing. Shrieks echoed. A punch landed on the side of her head, and she stumbled backward. Stars exploded, pain

careening through her skull. Her senses swam. She was going to crucify the effin cretins!

Teeth clenched, fingers tightening on her weapon, she eyed the asses as they crept closer, smirking and revealing fangs as if they had her cornered.

Oh, yeah? Time to spice up this fight.

She summoned the shadows from the alley. Like eerie fingers, they shot forward and seized the demons circling her, hauling and trapping them against the building like insects stuck in smoky webs. Screeches erupted, assaulting her ears. But it opened a path to the victim, revealing a dark, hooded figure hunched over the human lying on the sidewalk.

What the hell? The cur was feeding?

Another demon flashed in front of her, blocking her view, and more of the vermin backed him up. This one was reed thin and pretty. Pale curly hair hugged his skull, the color almost matching his milk-white cherubic features.

“Female.” He angled his head and smiled, then his nose twitched. “By the darkness, you smell...incredible. Come,” he crooned in a hypnotic hum, dark eyes flashing a deep red, his invasive stare sliding over her body as if licking her.

For that alone, she wanted to gouge out his eyeballs and make him eat them before killing him.

“Come female—”

“Enough!” an icy voice snapped. The utterly lethal tone had Ely freezing for a split second.

A shadowy blur catapulted over the horde and landed in front of them, sending the remaining demons scattering, his hood falling off his head. Even the anemic cur took a step back as their leader stalked over like some predator of the night. His long coat flew open, revealing black jeans hugging muscled thighs.

If he thought she would fall back, yeah, too bad for him.

Weapon braced, she waited, fed up with the lot and their freaking arrogance.

Her gaze settled on his face. If Milk-White was good-looking, this one knocked what little air she had in her lungs right into the stinky alley. Straight, ebony hair framed a face made for sin and fell about his broad shoulders. His flame-hued, topaz eyes did a quick up-down of her, and for some reason, it had her breath catching—

Vae! It was him!

The demon *she'd* ogled earlier.

Up close, he was even more breathtaking. Tiny pairs of black hoop earrings glittered in both his lobes, and something about them added to the perilous air he wore like a second skin. She couldn't help but stare.

Then he opened his mouth. "Female, any other time I'd play with you. Right now, do me a fav and get lost. This is none of your business."

The condescending ass!

One thing she hated even more than having a mate chosen for her was being spoken down to as if she were a clueless idiot.

"Wrong," she said coldly, her fascination dying. "My turf, my biz, demon."

There was a heartbeat of a pause. Then his head cocked, recognition dawning in those hellish eyes. One corner of his mouth tipped in a knowing smirk, revealing the tip of a fang.

Too bad for him, only one of them would come out of this alive.

With preternatural speed, she flew at him, staff swinging. He ducked her deadly weapon and grabbed her, her body slamming into his at full speed. The air punched out of her lungs as arms like steel bars locked around her. Before she could dematerialize and free herself, his searing eyes captured hers. This close to him, she could actually see the orange streaks in his topaz irises.

"*Don't fight, laika.*" The low timber of his mesmerizing voice blurred her thoughts, and everything around her

disappeared but him. His scent of anise, leather, and a hint of woodsmoke, masculine and seductive, teased her senses. His nose trailed along her jaw, his silky hair sliding along her cheek like caressing fingers. But underneath it all, was something darker...perilous.

“Forget you saw this, laika.” His lips lingered at the corner of her mouth, causing her breath to stutter. *“It’s for your own safety. Until next time...”* His voice faded, the words a taunting whisper in the ether, hauling her out of her stupor.

And she was alone.

“Fuck!” Not even the human swear word alleviated her rage, especially at herself for being so easily sidetracked by a pretty face. And worse, finding herself on a freaking rooftop!

Her fingers clenched around her weapon. She’d fought and killed many of the vermin in the year and a half since she became a Guardian, even those damn Narakas who’d come after Nik several months ago, but none derailed her like this infuriating demon!

Jaw clenched, Ely flashed herself back down to the silent alley.

Those asses she’d trapped with her shadows had disappeared, too. Dammit! With her mind distracted, she’d lost her hold on them.

A faint groan reached her.

Putting aside her frustration—oh, she would find the scourges’ leader and end the ass!—she dismissed her weapon and sprinted to the victim.

The man the demons fed on lay on the ground, his shirt torn, blood trickling from his neck wound. A faint whiff of liquor combined with a coppery odor drifted from him. Sighing, Ely knelt at his side. Drunken humans made easy prey.

She moved his collar aside, revealing the two small, still seeping holes in his throat. So, they hadn’t taken much, if any at all, but his heart pumped too slow, and his collar sported more blood, which generally indicated a frenzied feeding.

She frowned. His throat should have been gored open...

The human whimpered. Before he awakened, Ely cleared his memories, then she held her palm over his throat, letting her healing abilities flow into his wounds, sealing the punctures closed. She couldn't do much about his ruined clothes. It would have to remain a mystery for him.

However, the irony didn't escape her. Back on her homeworld, she healed. Here, she killed. But then, most of the vile pests from the Dark Realm deserved death.

As she lowered her hand, the man groaned and sat up.

"Go." She willed him to leave.

He blinked bleary eyes at her, scrambled to his feet, and shuffled off toward the main street.

Movement further down the alley snagged her attention. And Ely narrowed her eyes. Not demons. Instead, a fellow Guardian came into view, dressed all in black, cutting an imposing figure.

She shoved her hands in her coat pocket as Aethan drew closer. This male who, if her parents had had their way, would have been her mate. Except, she'd never seen him as such. Aethan was her brother's best friend and like another sibling to her.

Of course, she'd used *that* excuse when she came to Earth over two years ago, pretending to be his betrothed, wanting to stay in this world. But Aethan didn't bend, determined to send her back. Týr was the one who made it easy to remain for a while, then Michael offered her the job of being a Guardian.

Thank Gaia, it all worked out.

"You okay?" Aethan asked, stopping near her, gunmetal gray eyes scanning the area. The moonlight glinted off the silver hoops in his lobes and highlighted the lighter streaks in his multi-hued deep blue hair. "I sensed the blights from the Dark Realm here."

Her stomach heaved. Tell him that one of them had ambushed her and seduced her senses? Ugh, no! Then they'd

sure as hell lock her up for her own safety. Bet none of them ever had demons sending them into a stupor of fascination. *Grr*. She wanted to skewer the vexing demon.

“What happened, Ely?” Aethan demanded, a tinge of concern in his voice at her lack of response. His gaze did a quick skim over her, checking for injuries, no doubt.

Stars! Her slow-moving brain would be the death of her. She flicked back her braid. “Demons,” she said and started walking. “I came across several blood drinkers fighting over a human. I took care of them.” A half-truth.

“And the victim?”

“I healed him, did a memory wipe, and sent him off.”

“Good.” Aethan nodded, easily keeping pace with her rapid strides. “There’s been a spate of attacks in Chinatown recently. Could be the same horde.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for the asses.”

He raised an eyebrow, a smile tugging his mouth. At her cussing?

“Those jackasses will try anyone’s patience,” she muttered.

“Yeah, they do.” Smiling, Aethan did a quick survey of the alley before he dematerialized.

Maybe she should’ve revealed what had really occurred. But her mouth flattened in irritation, remembering. She must have lost her ever-loving mind for a second, caught in those glowing topaz eyes. Because consorting with the enemies she certainly wasn’t. Except now she did bear a grudge for the know-it-all jerk. Small of her, but she didn’t care. She would hunt down his sexy demon-ass and make him pay. Not because he’d addled her brain, but for being one of those vile blood-drinking scourges. His fangs and action revealed the truth.

They ranked on the same level as demoniis, belonging in the darkest pits of Gehenna, a place even demons feared, to burn forever in its eternal flames.

And she would be the one to send him there.

CHAPTER 4



NATE REAPPEARED in an alley near the biker's bar, a gust of noise whooshing over him as the bickering fuckers also took form, having followed him.

“She’s mine!” A lanky demon bared his fangs, his features distorting to demonic.

Derrodus grabbed Lanky by the throat. “Do you know who I am?” his voice dropped to guttural, his bony form escalating in size. Lanky snarled, black claws exploding, and they ripped into each other.

Nate wanted to walk away and leave these imbeciles for the Guardians to finish off, but his name could be thrown out there.

“Enough!” he snapped, freezing them. “Do you even know who—*what* she is?”

“Don’t care!” Derrodus glared, dark eyes spitting red sparks. “The female’s mine!”

“She’s a Guardian,” Nate bit out. “She had all those demons who tried to attack her nailed to the building with only her mind. Humans don’t possess that kind of ability. Touch her, and you’ll have the rest of them on our asses! Be grateful I hauled your hide off the human you’d been feeding on before she appeared, or she would have sent you straight to Purgatory!”

“So?” the prick countered, his chest puffed out in his usual show of dominance. “Unless they plan on coming to the Dark Realm and Eurymos’ Run, where they’ll all be a feast for

everyone, I don't think so. But if things went to shit, you'll make it right for me since *you* work for *my* sire." His dagger appeared, and Derrodus pressed the tip into Nate's chest, making his point. "And next time, don't interfere when I find my feed source, or you will regret it."

Fed up to his eyeballs, Nate grabbed Derrodus by the throat, talons digging into his flesh, and yanked him close. "I don't give a rat's ass who you are. You don't mess around on my turf. Or I'll send you back to your sire with your guts torquing your throat."

"Let me go, *vyerav'k!*" he wheezed the insult, eyes bulging. He grabbed Nate's wrist, trying to break free, black claws puncturing his skin.

A spasm of pain hit, triggering the one along his spine, but Nate didn't let go, driving his point home. "You get me?" he asked, tone glacial, fighting the urge to kill the prick.

Scowling, Derrodus gave a stilted nod.

"Good." Nate jerked his fingers free. Derrodus stumbled back, pressing his hand to his torn throat. "Don't ever follow me again. We are not friends."

With a hiss, Derrodus vanished in a puff of black smoke. The still squabbling demons disappeared along with him.

"You know there'll be payback, right?" a familiar voice said from behind him.

Damn. Couldn't he get a moment without anyone on his ass? Not that Pangur was a pest. He'd known the demon since childhood, and he would have been a friend if Nate had let anyone close.

"Then he'll learn the hard way." Nate retracted his talons and faced his sire's old chum, more pain flaying along his spine. And he gritted his teeth.

"The angel sure is something." A grin split Pangur's heavy-set, tanned features. "Think I'll lose my head if I go after her?"

Nate cut the brawny demon a flat look. “*Aba* will be pleased to see you.”

“But not you.” Pangur chuckled. He pushed away from the building he’d been leaning against and strolled over, his light eyes glinting eerily in the dark. “Yeah, been busy. Had a job to do for Azgor. Some scouting.”

More like what territory he could usurp. Azgor’s voracity was insatiable, always wanting more to add to his coffers—lands, beings, and symbionts. Nothing was off-limits.

“Your last match was quite something, taking on a *dregvar*,” Pangur continued. “No one ever survived those monsters. Azgoreth made a killing in bets, deals, and prizes.”

Match? Nate’s jaw hardened. They were straight-out cold-blooded, brutal extermination.

“By the way, I have a message for you.” Pangur flicked him a glance. “Azgoreth awaits you.”

What else was new? He called, and Nate had to jump.

Nate glanced down the dark, silent street. When he still didn’t respond, Pangur laughed. “You’re lucky he leaves you to do as you please until he needs you. See you back in the Dark Realm, *Sicari*.”

The demon vanished seamlessly into the night air.

Yeah, Azgor left him alone because he knew Nate wouldn’t run, not with his sire’s life on the line. But if he sent for him, it could only mean one of two things—another fight or a job.

Not ready to make tracks for the Dark Realm, he headed for the biker’s bar, and his thoughts slid back to the *laika*.

She’d been...unexpected. And nothing much surprised him anymore.

As far as he knew, all the Guardians were males. So, they’d changed the status quo to include a female? She must be a recent addition. How very proactive of them.

But just the thought of her and the unending abyss within him flickered. It wasn't her beautiful face or delicate air—he snorted at the latter since she'd taken down several blood demons a pro—but something else...something that pulled at him.

Determined to find out, since he let nothing sidetrack him, Nate flashed back to the alley where he'd left the *laika* on the rooftop, not surprised she wasn't there. He settled on his haunches, scanning the narrow street. Movement to his left caught his attention.

There. In all that darkness, like a beam of light, she glided deeper into the alley, but she wasn't alone. A tall male with blue hair rubbed shoulders with her.

Nate narrowed his eyes.

Oh, he knew these mofo Guardians by sight. They usually stayed below the radar. One of them had mated the girl he'd felt an inkling of something for, probably his moral compass showing him that he could squeeze out some empathy and save an innocent caught in his mess. Shadow was better off with that tattooed Guardian, anyway.

If these realm protectors ever suspected the truth of what he was and did, they'd kill him faster than a heartbeat. He should leave, get out of there. Yet he remained crouched on the rooftop, watching the angel with hair like the moonlight, who, for a blinding moment, had snatched his breath—

No! He jerked to his feet. Light had no place in his darkness.

As if in agreement with his thoughts, pain rammed along his spine again, reverberating inside his skull—

“Fuck,” he grunted. He could no longer ignore this. He had to feed.

Jaw clamping down against his discomfort, Nate flashed to the Bowery and made his way to Club Nocte's back entrance. A touch on the steel door, and the thing unlatched. He entered unnoticed, the way he preferred, bolted the door behind him,

and flashed into the darkened club, music rocking through the place.

A crash of drums erupted, the sound thundering into his skull. Fuck! Another spike of agony ripped through him like claws tearing his flesh. Inhaling harshly, he halted in the crowded nightclub, pinching the bridge of his nose and tightening his mental shields. Hades knew what havoc he'd wreak if he ever lost control.

“Hard night?”

At the low voice, Nate lifted his head to clash with the heated blue stare of a guy with disheveled dirty-blond hair. “I know a way to ease that—”

“I’m busy.” Nate dismissed him, searching for prey. There was always the type he preferred in places like these. His gaze skimmed over a pair of demons at the bar. Another spasm of pain torqued his spine, and he ground down on his molars.

“I can wait...”

Dammit. *He was still there?*

Annoyed, Nate glanced back. The human’s gaze lowered to Nate’s mouth, then back up. “Until you’re ready.”

It didn’t matter to Nate, male or female, as long as they had what he needed. While he preferred demons, this human would do for now. Because, behind the sultry smile, rage and a little wariness seeped off him. The latter was something he hunted; ultimately, it all channeled into what he needed—dark, vitriolic emotions.

The human put a hand on his chest, and Nate backed him into a dark corner of the club. A smile widened on his flushed face. He pushed Nate’s long coat aside and fumbled for the zipper on his jeans.

“Fucking your throat is not what I have in mind. Just this.” Nate grasped the human’s jaw, head lowered, his mouth hovering a hair’s breadth away from his prey’s, pain flaying him. He let his demonic nature bleed into his eyes, a guttural growl emitting from his throat.

The man gasped, horror dilating his pupils.

Too bad you chose me.

Impassively, Nate watched the human try to fight off the mental hold on him, his emotions wide open for a feeding. The acrid terror he emitted scraped Nate's psyche like shards of glass flaying layers off his mind, his penance for siphoning this way. Not like he had many choices.

To survive, this was what he'd become. A deviant.

The human's recent memories crashed through his skull like a vid in slo-mo...*two males on the couch...the blond banging into a dark-skinned guy. Pain then rage flogged him as he watched them...*

Nate shut out the images his feeding always exposed him to. Not his biz, anyway. His prey moaned, his shoves as feeble as a fly caught in a web, unable to break the psychic grip.

In what felt like hours later, the brutal agony crushing his spine eased. His beast side settled again, but Nate knew it wasn't enough, not with human donors.

He let go of his mental hold on the human and stepped back. The man slumped against the wall, looking like he'd been thoroughly satiated, terror gone.

Yeah, he was a bastard and made no excuses for it. But a thread of conscience must still be floating somewhere inside him since he left his prey with the illusion of being gratified.

Nate strode for the exit, skirting a gaggle of females, but one stepped in his path, forcing him to stop. Her hot green peepers did a slow up-down of him.

"Wow," she breathed. "You're freakin' gorgeous!" She put her palm on his chest, the invitation in her eyes clear.

For some reason, the copper eyes of the firecracker *laika* flashed in his mind. His jaw hardened, and he shut her out. The beautiful Guardian had no place in his horror-filled existence.

"Raincheck. If you're still around later, we can have a go at it," he drawled and stalked out, leaving the empty promise

behind.

Gorgeous didn't equate to nice.

He was a monster, the result of a fucking twist of fate, one that should never have been allowed to live. But here he was, anyway, still breathing.

* * *

Tingle slid over Ely's psyche as daybreak approached, despite it still being dark. She blew out a grateful breath, wanting to leave this failure of a night behind. With a quick look around, she rerouted her path to the narrow lane between two enormous warehouses and dematerialized.

Back at the Guardians' island estate some distance from Manhasset Bay, she reformed on the castle's front portico. Freshly fallen snow dusted the driveway and gardens and glistened under the moonlight. But all appeared quiet.

She crossed to the enormous front door, opened it, and stepped into the well-lit spacious foyer decked with lush plants and armored statues. As she unbuttoned her coat, her gaze lingered on the floor-to-ceiling stained-glass window of angels, and knights holding their females in a loving embrace.

After living a life in Emyrea and destined mates had faded to a myth, she now knew better. Heck, her brother had found his mate, and she lived in a castle full of them. But she didn't see that happening for her. She always believed that she'd know the moment she came across her destined one. The draw would be instantaneous.

So far, nothing.

And eons old loneliness swamped her.

While she enjoyed her friends' and Guardian brothers' company, she sometimes longed for that one person to share her life with.

The door opened, and Týr stepped inside, bringing in the cold.

“Hey.” He smiled, pulling off his beanie and rumpling his wheat-blond hair.

Their cells beeped simultaneously. A groan escaped him. “Not even a moment to breathe or see my mate,” he grumbled, fishing out his cell from his coat pocket.

Ely didn’t bother retrieving hers. It could only be their formidable leader wanting a meeting. *Vae*, all she wanted was a hot shower to wash away this night and a certain darn demon.

“Yup, a meet-up.”

Sighing, Ely dematerialized to the Arc’s study at the other end of the vast castle. She reformed in the corridor and entered the compact study with its L-shaped desk and walled bookshelves stealing up more space.

Michael wasn’t there yet.

Ely settled against the desk. Týr stopped at the closed French doors and stretched, his spine cracking.

Blaéz walked in, looking like he’d stepped out of a photoshoot, even after a long night patrolling. “Well done, Ely,” he said, shrugging off his trench coat.

She frowned. For taking on a horde on her own? But then he cut Týr a smirk, and the warrior snorted. *Right, the Corvette*. Instantly, her dark mood perked.

“Thanks.” She smiled. “I now have a super-expensive car that cost me only a hundred bucks. By the way, I’m changing the color to...” She contemplated one that would drive Týr crazy. “Purple.”

“Why, why would you do something so sacrilegious?” His eyebrows tipped together in displeasure. “The black’s perfect.”

She cast him a perplexed look, fighting a grin. “But I like purple. It’s spunky. Girly. Now...” She tapped a finger on her lips. “I must find a place to get the color changed.”

“Shadow’s friend has a workshop downtown,” Blaéz added helpfully. “I’m sure she’d give you more info.”

“Celt, I’m gonna kick your ass,” Týr growled.

Blaéz chuckled as Dagan, Aethan, and Nik strolled in, taking up the rest of the minuscule space and making the study appear even smaller.

She hastily sat on one of the two chairs opposite the desk, keeping out of the way as the guys settled in.

Man, she wished Michael would consider converting one of the seldom used, *bigger* living rooms into a study. But since the guys failed there, she buttoned her lips. More, she suspected, Michael remained here just to torture them.

Dagan leaned against the wall opposite Týr and folded his arms over his chest, eyebrows raised. “You look...unwell.”

Her smile reared up again. “It could be because I won his vintage Corvette playing one-on-one basketball.”

“By default...” Týr muttered, eyes narrowing.

“Ohhh, no, no!” She huffed. “I know that look. I won’t be betting or playing against you in any game for the coming year.”

“Norse, stop hounding her,” Nik called out from where he took up space in the back, the serpent’s head tattoo on his neck staring straight at her. From what she’d heard, he could also take on its smokey form.

Týr smirked. “Didn’t say a word.” He retrieved his pack of M&Ms from his coat pocket, selected a few blue candies, and popped them into his mouth.

“Didn’t have to.” Nik removed the tie from his ponytail, the sun-streaked length sliding to his shoulders. Her thoughts slipped to another male with hair like midnight and eyes like flames, and who rattled her brain.

Play with her? Her mouth thinned in irritation.

“You okay?” Blaéz asked, taking the chair next to her.

Ely froze. Crap. Did he somehow pick up something about her and the frustrating demon? With his precognition, anything was possible.

“She’s better than okay.” Aethan snorted, hauling everyone’s attention off her, and she nearly sank to the floor in relief. “She took out a horde of blood demons tonight.”

Horde? It was just a few, but heck yeah, she had.

Her gaze rushed to his. The former prince of her world gave her a little nod, gray eyes twinkling.

Even back on Empyrea, he’d been kind and considerate to a reserved young girl with self-esteem issues whenever their paths crossed. Then Aethan was banished for the accidental death of his little sister. A tragedy all of Empyrea had grieved.

Fate, however, had other plans for him since he found his destined mate in *this* world, and Echo had become one of her dear friends. As for herself, she had Bob, the castle pet, to keep her company, and she painted to dispel her bouts of loneliness—

Flame-hued topaz eyes crowded her mind once more. Ugh, she shut out the vexing demon. But remembering how easily he’d distracted her, then mocked her, her ire steamed again.

Laika? He called her that. What did it even mean?

The study door opened, and Michael strode inside, his aviator shades pushed to his head, his dark hair pulled into a half ponytail, an edge to his striking but austere demeanor. Something was up.

He walked around his desk, ignoring the stack of scrolls in a tray placed to the side, and those shattered blue irises, the silvery fissures flaring like lightning, took them all in with one sweep. “Anything out of the ordinary to report?”

“Just the norm from my side.” Blaéz leaned back in his chair. “Otium and human scuffle over territory, nothing new there.”

“There is something,” Aethan said, scratching his stubbly jaw. “Tagg informed me cops have been dispatched to alley duties regarding the disappearance of human women and children and, also, about the sounds of sword fights taking place out of the blue at night.” His expression wry, he lowered

his hand. “They’re no longer buying it as a nocturnal movie shoot.”

“I also overheard two cops in the Bowery backstreets tonight,” Ely said, facing everyone, “complaining about the place being spooky and seeing a ghost. Me.” She rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, witnessing the shadows consume you would do that.” Týr chuckled.

She scrunched her nose. Her abilities to become one with the shadows weren’t anything to brag about, unlike her fellow Guardians’ deadly powers. Heck, her parents would undoubtedly have a heart attack if they knew their gently raised daughter had signed on to fight treacherous evil. “Anyway, they mentioned the same about women and children disappearing. But Nik shut down the place beneath the city.”

“Trafficking is not something that dies,” Michael said as he sat down on his leatherback chair, and the thing creaked under his weight. He frowned at the sound, then settled in, anyway. “They will arise again. There are always those who’ll abduct and sell the innocent for profit. Regarding the weapons situation, try to avoid using swords if you can. Stick with daggers if you must.”

“So far, all the disappearances have been linked to the darker side of humanity,” Aethan continued. “Mafias, gangs —”

“And those human fuckers who work with demons,” Nik cut in.

“When humans join forces with otherworldly evil, they will become collateral damage in this war we fight.” The Arc’s tone was granite. He had no mercy for those who crossed the line. “Here’s what’s happening. A demon or a pack of them have been leaving a trail of drained bodies across eastern Europe. Race and my other warriors haven’t been able to pin them down yet. So keep an eye out for anything similar here.”

“We protect their so-called food source,” Blaéz said. “There will always be those blood scums lurking around.”

Ely recalled that skinny white cur referring to her as a food source, and no matter her own lapse at what had transpired with the flame-eyed demon, she had to report this.

Michael shifted on his chair, and it let out a drawn-out *creeeeeak*. Brow furrowing, he angled his head and peered down.

“Arc, just replace the damn thing,” Týr groaned. “The noise is annoying.”

Eyes gleaming, Michael leaned back, and another squeak rose. “We can’t have human authorities finding out it’s not some wild animal but otherworldly beings responsible,” he said, back to business.

“I came across a horde of blood demons feeding on a human,” Ely said. “I killed a few, but they disappeared as fast as they appeared.” Because of *him*, their leader, she knew without a doubt. “One referred to me as a food source. Said I smell, er, delicious.”

“He’s after your soul’s energy, your emotions—whatever the fuck energizes them,” Týr growled. “He will come after you, Ely. They never give up once they lock on you!”

Oh, man. She knew what was coming if she didn’t put a stop to it. Babysitters. Ugh. “I can handle them.”

“Okay, then.” Michael opened one of the scrolls, ending the meeting, much to her relief. “You get these demons—”

“Nail their nuts to the wall and get answers,” Týr grunted. “The fuckers won’t be running around for long on this realm.”

Ely opened her mouth, then shut it. Tell them that an irritatingly handsome demon had thrown her off-kilter and had somehow messed with her thoughts? How *he* got past her impenetrable mind shields, she had no idea.

If Michael had even an inkling of her mishap, he would haul her off duty and keep her butt castle-bound until this situation cleared, or stick her with a babysitter again. And that she refused to have. She’d worked her ass off to warrant patrolling solo. That maddening demon was hers to hunt down.

The meeting over, Ely leaped up and headed for the back stairwell. Light footfalls sounded, and Echo came down the narrow, softly lit stairs.

“Hey.” Ely stood aside and smiled as her friend hit the bottom step. But she appeared impossibly pale beneath her usual honeyed tone skin. “Echo?” Ely grasped her arm. “What’s wrong?”

Her friend blinked, her otherworldly bi-colored eyes—one resembling a misty gray lake and the other like embers—refocusing on her.

“I’m not sure.” Her smile wavered. She dragged her fingers through her short, spiky hair, disheveling it more than usual. “I have these images of leaping flames, like they would consume me. It felt so real...” She exhaled deeply, then shook her head as if clearing it. “Maybe they’re just remnants of a bad dream. Have you seen Aethan?”

“I’m here, *me’morae*,” Aethan said from behind Ely. Hastily, she stepped aside. He looped his hands around Echo’s waist and brushed a kiss on her crown. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” she mumbled into his chest, seeming to shrug off what she told Ely. “I’m just glad you’re here. Oh—” She eased back. “Another rune awakened. Look.” She dragged the wide neck of her navy sweater down, revealing the slightly swollen, reddish tattoo-like symbol on the upper curve of her left breast near her spidering bullet scar. A reminder of when she was shot two years ago by a deranged human who wanted her.

Ely peered at the new glyph. Little spirals radiated out of a small circle, almost like a stylized eye.

“What happened?” Aethan demanded.

“I was working with Lore earlier in the evening, going through the angelic runes when it spun out of the scroll and settled in me. Just like this one did.” She held out her palm imprinted with the rune she’d received last year. It had darkened to a deeper tan, almost like a henna print. “Lore said this new one is the Eye of Perception.”

A tic working his jaw, Aethan gently ran a finger over the rune on her chest. “Does it hurt?”

“No, not so much now.” She smoothed her top back in place. “But it felt like I’d been tasered when it happened.”

His mouth tightened. No, he didn’t like his mate hurting, but more, Ely sensed his disquiet. Echo wasn’t only a descendant of Zarias, the leader of the Watchers, but also the Healer of the Veils. Her ability to mend tears formed in the mystical shrouds protecting a realm from supernatural evil made her a target for demons—until they clashed with her mate, who could literally bring down worlds with his power.

“As long as it aids you,” he murmured, kissing her brow. “Whatever happens, I’m right here with you, *me’morae*. Always.”

Feeling like a third wheel, Ely left them and headed up the stairs. While she might have given up on finding her destined mate, a deeper part of her longed for that connection, that closeness she witnessed between the mated couples at the castle.

Maybe she should accept Tagg’s coffee invitation? But instead of Tagg’s face, another with a smirk and topaz eyes crashed into her mind. *Vae!* She must have hit her head darn hard when her face went through the building wall to even think of *him*—

Oh crap! Her breath caught as the wall incident came tumbling back, remembering her body sliding through bricks and mortar.

Had she dreamed it? She rubbed her tired eyes, everything felt so off-kilter.

Well, only one way to find out.

Eyes narrowed, concentrating with everything in her, she pulled back her fist and punched the stairwell stone wall—

Bone crunched. Pain erupted. “*Ow, ow!*” She spun away and bent over, eyes shut, hand clutched to her chest, gasping for air at the agony rolling through her...

When she could breathe again as her self-healing started, she groaned at the sight of her damaged hand. Her fingers limp, blood seeping from her smashed knuckles. So much for another so-called *ability* awakening.

Gaia had gifted her warriors with new powers or enhanced their own when they first pledged to become her Guardians. But hers, obviously, was still somewhere in the ether, asleep.

Sighing, she made her way to her room as her hand mended and her skin smoothed. At least the broken bones and pain took her mind off—

Ugh! Now that impossible demon was back in her thoughts!

Growling, Ely flexed her hand as she shut the door to her bedroom. Hopefully, a hot shower would bring her back to the sane person she usually was...

CHAPTER 5



IN THE EARLY parts of the morning, Nate headed for the garage because hanging in the bar and staring at his drink wasn't going to stop the looming meet with Azgor.

He rounded to the back of the building and opened the door next to the enormous roll-up one, both leading into the massive workshop. The sharp smell of car oil and cold cement enclosed him as he bypassed the office on his left, with the vehicles needing work on his right, and opened the door into the private sector of the building.

In the dimly lit living room, he dropped down on the old couch. Head tipped back, he shut his eyes. But sleep remained a distant memory despite his exhaustion—nothing new there, either. And nothing moved inside his usually dead self, either, except for that brief interlude when he held the *laika* and felt as if he'd been transported to a chimera of peace—

No! He glared at the ceiling. He was a corpse waiting to happen, his future set in stone. Whatever this draw was, he shut it out.

“Nate?” Aba called out, his soft footsteps sounding on the side stairs.

“Yeah?” Exhaling wearily, he got up and crossed to the small kitchen. He braced a hand on the counter and rubbed his dry eyes. Hell, he needed some shut-eye. But when his body was shared with another, it made that escape impossible.

Instead, he removed the absinthe from the bottom cupboard, unscrewed the bottle of green liquid, and guzzled

some down, hoping for a moment's respite. He gasped, the alcohol scraping off a layer from his throat to gullet, and still no ease for the wicked. Well, he didn't expect any different.

He turned and found Aba standing in the doorway, hair ruffled, wearing his usual cotton pajama bottoms and an old navy tee, studying him. By human standards, his sire appeared to be in his forties, his pale skin barely lined, and his short hair dark. Yet, at times, his deep brown eyes revealed his ancientness, but only to Nate. In truth, his sire was older than the civilized human world.

"Go, get some extra zzz." He recapped the bottle. "I have work to do."

"You're exhausted." Aba stepped into the kitchen. "Whatever it is can wait a few hours. Rest."

"There is none for one like me." The gut-churning sensation of suffocating, knowing there was no way out of this life, tightened like a noose around his neck. For the rest of his life, just to live, he'd have to feed off another's fear when gore and death were what his beast side required.

"I'm sorry for what you endure, *cnati*." No emotions showed on Aba's impassive features. How could they, when he didn't have a soul?

"Don't." Nate unclenched his fingers and dropped the bottle on the table. He didn't want to hear it. "What's done is done," he said, tone flat. "I have to go."

Yeah, he was a bastard. Living with self-hatred did that to a person.

He stalked out into the workshop and stopped between the two SUVs. With a wave of his hands, he summoned a portal. The asphalt creaked and groaned, forming fissures, then it gave way, revealing a swirling darkness. He didn't need a portal summoning stone like most Dark Realm dwellers did to open a gateway, but he had to watch his back constantly. There was always some asshole after the unattainable, and Nate certainly was that. His jaw ground down at the thought.

Aba saved you.

Damn. He pressed his fingers to his dry eyes, then turned, meeting the emotionless stare of his sire where he stood a short distance from him. It seemed he did possess a hint of conscience somewhere in his empty self, after all. But only for this male, who'd put his own life on the line for Nate many times over.

"Aba," he rasped, using the demon endearment for father, not revealing his inner torment. "Azgor awaits me. I can't leave him hanging for long."

"You should have never given in to him."

"I didn't give in." His expression hardened. "I chose to do this job. No regrets."

"And I wish you hadn't." Aba's chest rose and fell, then he nodded. While he might mimic emotions to get by living in the human world, Nate knew he cared.

"Be careful, *cnati*," he cautioned. "You can never reveal the reality about yourself to anyone. I know some in the Dark Realm provoke you, but you cannot be drawn into more fights. I fear for you."

Too late. But he didn't say so, didn't want to burden his sire with the truth. "I'll be fine. Maybe the dark gods will finally watch out for me," he drawled.

Aba didn't even give him his usual fake smile.

Nate glanced at the swirling portal. The thing looked like an open maw, waiting to swallow him whole, then back at his sire. "One way or the other, I will get your soul back."

"Don't. I'm fine. No emotions are better for me, anyhow. I don't want you stirring Azgor's wrath further. I knew what would happen when I stole the symbiotic blood from him."

To save me.

As if in response to his thoughts, the symbiont on his spine, connected to the beast, clawed at his mind. Nate gritted his teeth and rubbed his temples.

Yeah, he knew the old story of how he breathed again. It wasn't something he wanted regurgitated when nothing could

change his fate. He stepped backward into the swirling gateway, and fell...

* * *

Sweltering heat enclosed Nate as he landed in a crouch on the dry, cracked ground. The familiar stench of sulfur made his nose twitch. He'd lived half his life in this world, and while the heat didn't bother him, the stench still made him want to jam his fingers into his olfactory cortex and yank it out.

Keeping his breathing shallow, Nate rose, and with a wave, he shut the portal. He glanced up at the perpetually dark skies, currently sporting streaks of orange and purple for what constituted day in the Dark Realm, and scanned for unwanted creatures, especially wyverns flying about with their whipping poisonous tails and breaths of fire.

The beast within stirred in anticipation, sensing freedom close.

Yeah, that's never gonna happen!

A streak of pain stabbed his head in retaliation, spikes digging into his brain—

Shit! Grunting, Nate locked down on mental shields and rubbed his temples. He had to stop provoking that side of himself. Hell, he sure was fucked, having to fight for even a sliver of inner peace. But he could never accept that part of him, and never would.

As the pain eased, he scanned the massive, dark mountain range separating Azgor's territory of Ys from Eurymos' Run—the blood-demon lands—in the distance.

The oppressive air stirred, and an eight-foot *zaikon* demon sentry clad in gray materialized, a pronged weapon fisted, the tips spurting flames. Enormous horns—his species namesake—swept back from his chitinous brow, his barbed tail swishing back and forth. Not like Azgor needed a guard or protection. He just relished in the pomp and glory.

“Where's Azgor?” Nate asked.

Red eyes stared down at Nate, pinpoints of lights set beneath a ridged forehead tapering to a flat scaly snout. The demon lowered his flaming fork and flicked a claw behind him. “At his bath,” he grunted in an abrasive click of words.

Nate studied the looming volcano at the far side of the mountains, spitting out bits of lava instead of smoking like a chimney. Yup, he was in residence.

Azgor wasn’t just the Archdemon of Voracity but a collector, and a ruthless one at that, securing the souls of those he punished, and the symbiotic blood from the rare beings who possessed them. Hell, the bastard went after any damn thing he coveted, and he had a penchant for deadly fights. Azgor cared little for any lifeform. Everyone was expendable—unless you caught his notice. Like Nate had.

A decade ago, after training with Aba and honing his fighting skills, Nate had sought out Azgor to take over his sire’s job. Better him than having his father tied to the ruthless male. Surprising him, Azgor had readily acquiesced, freeing Aba from his servitude for stealing the cursed symbiont that had saved Nate’s life. So, he’d stepped in, hunting the rare and unattainable for a demon who could never be satisfied, and killing those who crossed him.

Until that one damn night...

Nate left Azgor’s fortress after another job and another senseless killing, striding through the dark town of Ys, needing to clear his head.

Three heavysset demons stepped in his path.

“Look what we have here.” One of the mofos smirked.

“Come on, vyerav’k, let’s see what you’ve got,” another taunted, circling him like vultures.

Same bullying, different assholes since his childhood. Nate ignored them, sidestepping the trio.

“He thinks to dismiss us?” One shoved him. Another lashed out, punching him in the face, sending him flying into a building.

Frustrated to his eyeballs that they wouldn't leave him the fuck alone, something within him snapped. Nate shot up, a dark rage erupting from the deepest part of him, taking over in a red haze. He tore into them, fists connecting with flesh, bones snapping, screams echoing...

Then he was alone in a blood-soaked alley, standing amidst scattered heads, a spine ripped from one's body, a massive hole plundered in another's chest, a crushed heart on the ground, severed limbs everywhere...

His entire being roared with renewed vigor, the glee within him escalating. He stared blankly at his fingers dripping blood... Not fingers but scaly black extremities with elongated talons!

His mind crashed back online, sharp teeth puncturing into his lower lip—

Fangs? No-no!

Yesss, a sibilant voice in his head hissed. We are one noooooow.

"Well done," a familiar voice drawled.

Nate whipped around to the maw of the alley, blood thundering to his head.

Azgor stood there with his guards. "Come, Natek, let us talk..."

Once Azgor had seen signs of the merciless creature Nate harbored, there was no escape. The moment he'd offered to take on Aba's job, he'd unknowingly walked straight into a trap.

The *zaikon* hissed, pronged fork flaming again, reminding Nate to get moving. Right. Might as well get this over with.

He flashed to the gloomy volcano mouth and down to the deep underground cavern, the deadly heat and dense sulfur almost suffocating him. Almost. Azgor made the climate safe for his chosen few, not that Nate needed the protection. He could tolerate immense heat, something he didn't divulge to the demon.

Lava, though, would likely burn his flesh to a crisp within seconds of contact. He halted on the stone ground edging the molten pool, the bubbling and hissing magma echoing in the massive cavity. The temperature soared. Sweat beaded his brow as he strolled closer. Then his gaze lit on the unconscious demon nailed to the rockface with iron spikes in his hands, feet, and throat. Blood dripped, coagulating on the ground beneath him. Who the hell knew what the stupid sod had done to warrant Azgor's rage and this brutal torture.

Nate didn't react, aware he was being watched.

Azgor lounged in his hellfire bath in his demonic form, crackles of fire spurting free—as if relaxing in some tranquil lake in a forest—watching him coolly. His mammoth, two-headed hellhound terror, basking nearby, let out a low growl of warning, the spines on its neck rising.

The beast within Nate snarled in challenge, the sound rumbling in his throat—

Fuck! Jaw clenched, he hastily bolted his mind shields, shutting the fucker out. He gave Azgor a perceptible nod, a courtesy he demanded, then removed the pouch with the red crystal orbs from his jeans pocket. “Demon's taken care of. Artifacts retrieved.”

He crossed to the craggy boulders and set the sack on one.

“Why is it everyone thinks they can simply take off with my possessions and there won't be repercussions, hmm?” Azgor scooped up and poured the bright orange lava over his domed skull and jagged horns. The flaming sludge slid over his leathery umber skin and down his torso.

Nate didn't answer, knew it was Azgor's way of reminding him what was at stake. If Nate didn't toe the line, he would be killed, too, no matter how many fights he won or how good his kill-and-retrieve record was.

“I have a match arranged in two human weeks.”

Shit. His gut twisted. So soon? “No—”

“You forget the symbionts that give you life and power belong to me.” His dark eyes flashed red, pinning Nate's as he

poured more lava on his biceps.

Yes, remind him of that, like he didn't know. It restarted his fucking life, and now he had to live in constant battle with a monstrous side that refused to give him peace. Another match, and it just might be his last.

“It was supposed to be a fight *after* the *fourth* blood moon rising!” Nate reminded him, shoving his clenched fists into his jeans pockets, and only two had passed. This was his damn life on the line, and how he died should be his fucking choice!

“And I can change my mind.”

Anger careened through Nate, and his belly rolled because there was nothing he could do.

Azgor ruled the region of Ys with an iron fist and was as merciless as the barren realm to dissenters, thieves, and whoever the fuck went against him. Nate knew because *he* did the gruesome jobs. Still, for some reason, he never understood—and Aba had merely shrugged when he'd asked, not knowing either—Azgor allowed Nate more leeway than any of the other subjugated minions who worked for him.

“As a show of goodwill,” Azgor said. “Here...” A small box appeared with a click of his fingers, hovering in the dense, boiling air, an arm's length away. “It's what you've been after, isn't it?”

Nate's breath cemented in his lungs. *Aba's soul?*

Azgor rose and stood in the flaming lava pool, scorching red sludge sliding down his naked body like molasses. His leathery skin cracked, revealing veins of red-hot plasma. He smiled, revealing a perfect set of teeth as his demonic form shimmered into a tall, lean male with pale features and a shock of green-streaked brown hair. “Take it.”

Nate didn't move.

Why now when he never had before?

“It's only a part of it.” Azgor nodded at the gleaming lead box. “For the other half...” He flicked back his steaming hair. “Fight when I want you to and continue as my *Sicari* for, let's

say, one *human* decade, and your debt to me—which means your sire’s, too—is paid in full.”

Nate’s heart nearly crashed through his ribs at the possibility.

A human decade was a mere blink for demons, but fuck. This was about his sire’s soul, one he wanted more than anything.

The nailed demon moaned.

“Don’t mistake my generosity for weakness.” Azgor’s stare went dead-cold. “Go against my wishes, and I will kill your sire. You will be bound to this world, never to set foot on the human one for the rest of your life.”

“On one condition,” Nate countered. He didn’t trust the bastard, who, for some reason, wanted him like a dog after a bone. “If anything happens to me before the decade’s up, you will return the other half of my sire’s soul.” He was fucked anyway, and chances were he might not last that long in the damn death fights.

Azgor lifted an eyebrow. Then he laughed, the sound like rusty nails on metal as if he knew better. “Very well, *Sicari*.”

His easy acquiescence didn’t bode well. As the Demon of Voracity, Azgor never gave up anything. Ever. It was all about possession. So what the fuck was he up to?

But Nate didn’t care. If it got his sire’s soul back, he’d fight every damn day to the death. He caught the hovering container, and a faint warmth seeped into his palm. “I’ll be here.”

“Good.” Azgor flicked his fingers, and the demon tacked to the rockface tore free and was flung straight into the flaming magma pool, his pitiful whimpers snapping off as the ravenous flames consumed him, turning him to ash.

Then Azgor and his pet, along with the pouch on the rocks, vanished without a stir of the heated air.

Nate pocketed the lead box and flashed out of the volcano to the barren place where he’d entered the realm, and inhaled a

deep breath of acrid, ashy air, wishing he could feel something, anything, knowing what was left of his life was now tied to an insatiable demon. But all he felt was a yawning emptiness.

The dense air near him shifted. Pangur appeared in a swirl of dark smoke. “Seen Azgor yet?”

Nate cut the demon a flat stare, not in the mood to give his vocals another workout.

“Okay then.” A wry smile twisted Pangur’s lips. “I’m guessing it’s a fight he wants that’s put you into this black mood. Let’s get a drink. It should help.”

Pangur flashed.

Nate hesitated, then followed. Maybe a stomach-gouging brew would make him feel something—anything—instead of unending emptiness.

In the dark, bustling town, they entered a busy tavern lit by veins of fire beneath the floor. The demons gave him a wide berth. Others stared. Yeah, his rep had shot up fast after his first fight years ago when he’d decimated his opponent. Now his demonic beast side was revered.

A table suddenly cleared. Nate dropped onto the chair, back to the wall. With his boot, he pushed the table away for more leg space.

Pangur flicked a hand for drinks, then straddled the seat opposite, his light eyes pinned on him. “This win’s guaranteed, too.”

Nate didn’t respond, the noise in the place crowding his mind as the void within grew. Drinks appeared. He slugged back the burning liquor in one swallow, the liquid fire settling in his belly like live coals.

“Pangur?” a gruff voice yelled.

“Be a moment.” His chair scraped back, and he strolled off.

Nate set the glass down and motioned a waitress for another, counting silently, waiting for the emptiness within to

ease.

“She’s just fine,” a laughing voice said from several tables away. “There’s a huge price for her delivery.”

Fucking cretins, always targeting unsuspecting females. While he might be a bastard for most things, he didn’t condone that shit. He shoved off his chair, stalked over, and grabbed the demon by his collar, slamming him against the blistering black wall. “Whatever plans you have for the female, lose them. Or I will rip you apart.”

“Not me—not me, *Sicari!*” he yelled, terror leaking off him. “Someone else wants the unicorn—I mean the angel on Earth who kills our kind. They think it’s time for payback to teach those Guardians not to mess with us.”

A strange cold rage started deep in his gut, surprising him. The *laika?*

“Who’s after her?”

“I-I don’t know.”

Nate dropped him, and the fight he didn’t want roiled through him. Finally, he found the perfect way to work through the nothingness within as a scorching rage took over. He stalked over to Pangur, seated at the back of the tavern with his cronies, the latter eyeing Nate warily. “Who’s after the angel?”

The burly demon frowned. “What?”

“The female Guardian,” he snapped.

“Oh, right.” Pangur scratched his chin and pushed to his feet. “Just heard about that. I don’t know. The buzz suddenly sprung up tonight.”

There was only one asshole stupid enough to go after her. “Derrodus.”

“Even he wouldn’t dare.” Pangur motioned him out of the tavern with a head tilt. “I wouldn’t bother about it. It seems no one’s keen to take the job. It would have been right up your alley, though.”

Nate sliced him an unamused stare.

“Just saying.” Pangur shrugged, stopping outside the tavern. “Not even Azgor, who goes after the impossible, bothered with this trophy. Take on an invincible Guardian and have the archangels coming into the Dark Realm?” He shook his head, snorting. “Whoever put up the bounty must have lost their ever-loving mind. But I’m sure she can take care of herself.”

Nate didn’t give a shit. The fact remained they’d put a price on her. “Find out.”

Leaving Pangur behind, he strode for the barren land beyond the town to open a portal and get out of this infernal place. Now, he not only had to keep an eye on the *laika* but hunt down the piss-stain after her.

CHAPTER 6



HOURS PASSED, and the night grew colder. Ely pushed her hands into her coat pockets and trudged deeper into the bowels of the Bowery, passing grime-covered buildings, her boots squelching in the water running from a cracked pipe.

Nothing evil slithered across her path, and her thoughts slipped back to the flame-eyed demon who put her on a rooftop.

It'd been two nights since they crossed paths, and her irritation didn't subside.

Keep her safe?

As if she needed his darn help!

The urge to seek her reprisal grew every time she thought of him. More, she hated that she thought of him at all.

Scowling, Ely pivoted and made her way back toward the main street. A chilly breeze picked up as she neared a garage, and she slowed her steps, an odd sensation creeping through her. A whiff of acrid, sulfuric air stung her nose—

She quickly scanned the quiet street for the curs from the Dark Realm, and her gaze latched onto a lone figure further down, and her heart pounded.

Him.

She hadn't seen hide nor hair of him, and there he was, reading something on his cell.

After what Michael had revealed, she wanted answers before seeking retribution for feeding on a human, and for getting in her way.

In preternatural speed, she blurred across, her Gaian weapon summoned. He pivoted like an unleashed whip, body primed for attack. Ely didn't expect any less, and she braced her staff.

"Guardian." One corner of his lips quirked in a ghost of a smile as he slipped his cell into his pocket. "Keeping tabs on me, hmm?" He circled her like some wily predator, forcing her to counter. He angled his head, eyes gleaming as he watched her.

Mouth thinned, Ely matched his moves. As mad as she was, she couldn't shake off the sense of familiarity, as if she should know him. Ugh. Maybe it was because she'd already met him, and he riled her like no one else ever had. At least they were now in an alley and away from human eyes.

"We can do this dance all night long, *laika*," he teased, his gaze skimming her face in a caress so visceral, Ely faltered a step. "Or, we could cut to the chase, and you can tell me you want me."

"The only thing I want is my weapon between your ribs, in that organ you call a heart, demon!" She lunged, staff spinning.

Chuckling, still weaponless, he catapulted over her head, landing on her other side, hiking her ire, his light laughter sending a flood of goosebumps down her arms. Ely spun around.

"Such violent foreplay, *laika*. Can't wait."

Urias! She hated the oaf! Furious, she snapped her staff in two, the pointed ends lengthening and morphing into glowing glaives.

"Well, now." He smiled, eyeing her deadly weapons. "I can't let you kill me, *laika*, so you understand why I must defend myself, yes? Good," he answered his own question, two swords appearing in his hands.

She didn't mind the weapons. Hell, she welcomed them, but the burning frustration sweeping through her erupted at the taunting smirk playing on his lips like she was a pesky little fly to his spider.

Tired of being treated like some weak female, a growl broke free, and she flew at him, her weapons arching high and low. He countered her strikes, the clash of metals resounding in the dark alley.

Then she cursed. Dammit! He was playing her, merely blocking her hits as they fought. His smile grew. "What's wrong, *laika*?"

Jaw clenched, she blurred forward, her form as insubstantial as the shadows she commanded, and she hurled her glaives at him, one after the other. He deflected the strikes. She summoned her obsidian dagger and flung it—

"Damn," he grunted, staggering back a step, both his swords falling to the asphalt in a clatter. He glanced down at part of the weapon embedded in his gut.

Ely gaped, shocked at her direct hit, her chest heaving.

His mouth twisted, whether from pain or to mock her, she wasn't sure. She didn't expect it to be so easy.

That's because he wasn't trying to hurt you.

He grasped the weapon and tugged. "Well, *laika*—" He held up his palms, fingers spread and bloodied. "It seems I'm fated to die by your hands. Go on then, finish me."

Her stomach rolled. Ely gulped in lungfuls of air, her gaze fixed on his plasma-smeared palms.

"Why are you waiting?" he baited. "To see me disintegrate into dust and be sucked into Purgatory?"

Urias, this was so out of her depth. Usually, she killed and walked away without remorse after sending those Dark Realm deadbeats, who stole human souls, straight to Purgatory. But this? He hadn't done anything for her to warrant killing him, except for her tormenting her, putting her on a rooftop, then sniffing her, and exacerbating her ire—

Wait a darn minute! He'd been with those blood demons who'd fed on the human, and he'd been feeding, too.

You don't know that for sure.

“Were you part of those blood demons who captured the human?” she demanded. *Darn, he'd just say no—*

“What do you think?” He gave her a tight-lipped smirk.

—or say that and provoke her. Damn pain in her backside.

Ely frowned then, recalling him yelling at the demons to stop. Did that make him a good guy or the leader of the pack? Ugh. She glowered as her ire fizzled.

But she refused to apologize. He'd been an ass back then. Still was.

With no way out of the quagmire she found herself in, she snapped, “I know demons can self-heal. Do what you must, and never interfere in my business again! Or it will be the last breath you take.”

He laughed outright, irritating her like no one ever had. “Ah, *laika*, how can I stop when you're a temptation beyond any dream? Not that my dreams are any good, you get me? But you are one I cannot resist.”

“Try.”

* * *

Try? This female.

The moment he arrived back on Earth, he had to bump into her.

Nate gripped the weapon stuck in his gut and watched those cool copper eyes glitter like metallic stones beneath the moonlight, spitting her venom at him. No demon would dare attack him without consequences. But she had, and he couldn't blame her. He'd pushed her with his teasing—how could he not? She'd somehow cracked through the layers upon layers of deadness within and brought out a playful side of him.

By the nine hells, *no!* He shook away the whimsy—

Fuck! His breath caught, agony garroting his insides at his movement, and he could withstand a shit-load of pain. Whatever her blade was created from, it hurt like freakin' red-hot swords jabbing into his belly. And try as he did to remove the thing with his hands—his mind—he couldn't. The beast within rumbled, sensing pain, too. But Nate kept that part of himself tightly leashed.

“Well?” she demanded, slicing him a cool-as-hell stare, fingers clenching the other half of her deadly glaive.

She wanted her weapon back, did she?

Fitting, really, if she did kill him, considering the violent life he led. He'd accepted long ago it would also be how he left this existence. But not before he got Aba's soul back.

He cast her a taunting smile, and her lips tightened, pink creeping into her pale cheeks. Yup, he got to her with his baiting, and it was so worth the injury. However, the damn dagger buried in him refused to budge. Nate dropped his hand. “You're gonna have to remove this, *laika*. I cannot.”

She went motionless.

Yep, it finally struck her that she would have to get close to him to do so.

But deeper, another urge took hold, one he'd recognized from their first meet, and made him sniff her. That scent. It beckoned him closer like a life-giving sustenance...warm and playful like a spring breeze, filling the empty void in his chest and easing the suffocation of his unending cycle of violent killings. Peaceful—

She growled, detonating his illusion.

The dagger suddenly ripped free from his abs, and he grunted, damn grateful then it wasn't her glaives, even though hers were a smaller version of the massive weapons he'd faced in the death pit a time of two, or she'd have probably sliced him in two at his lack of focus.

The blade settled in her outstretched palm.

Nate cocked an eyebrow, despite the immense pain flaying him. But hats off to her for recognizing the vile fuck-up he was.

She scowled and stalked off, heading deeper into the alley. Her fallen glaives had vanished, too.

Well then. He pivoted for the garage—

Shit! Agony flayed him once more, and he stumbled to a slower pace. Hell, he had a damn fight coming up soon, and here he was, already injured. And hoped he healed up fast.

In what felt like hours later, he staggered into the living room as Aba walked out of the kitchen. “*Cnati!*” He rushed over as Nate collapsed onto the couch, his emotionless gaze sweeping over him. “What happened?”

“Had an encounter with a Guardian.”

“What did you do? You know we must stay under the radar from them.”

“Stopped those blood demon fuckers from killing a human, got labeled as an accomplice with the damn bunch.” Nate didn’t mention the time frame between the first encounter and getting hurt or that he’d attempted to heal the human. “Their weapons don’t allow for quick healing, it seems. Besides, how can we stay undetected? Shadow mated one of them.”

“I can get away with it, pretending to be a timid Otium. But you, Natek, *you* must be cautious.” Aba lifted Nate’s t-shirt, examined the wound, then he hurried to the kitchen.

Grimacing, Nate pulled off his shirt and pressed it against the long, seeping wound on his abs. Black scales shimmered along his torso. Muscles stretched, bones creaking within him as if they would crack, the urge to shift pushing at his psychic shields.

“Fuck!” Nate grunted, struggling to keep from fracturing.

Aba reappeared in a flash with the first-aid kit of salves, potions, and other stuff he’d procured in Ys. He crouched and stilled, his gaze fixed on the shifting scales beneath Nate’s skin. “I’m sorry for what you endure.”

“No,” he muttered, pain fragmenting his mind. “You did what you had to, to save me. You had no idea what would happen.”

“You were a child. I couldn’t let you die.” Aba started cleaning the wound. “Still, I should have known...” His tone hardened. “Nothing good ever came from that damned realm. But at the time, I wasn’t thinking straight. I only wanted you to live, and those symbionts brought you back to me.”

Eyes shut, Nate dropped his head against the backrest as another spasm of pain ripped through his gut. Hands fisted, he pressed them into the old leather couch.

“You’re not healing. Go see Qinera,” Aba said, mentioning the seer-slash-healer in the Dark Realm. “She’s healed me many times back in the day.”

“No.”

“Natek, this wound is from a Guardian’s weapon. Most demons don’t recover from what I’ve heard. They die.”

His sire was the only one who used his full name, except for Azgor, especially in moments like these, relaying his frustration. “I’ll take my chances. Parts of me are changing more now when I lose control.” He expelled a shattered breath. “I can’t have anyone in Ys or anywhere in the Dark Realm finding out the kind of beast I house.”

He sensed more than felt Aba go dead still. “You are right,” he said quietly. “Even if Qinera doesn’t talk, there are those unscrupulous enough to get more information about you any way they can, and they would torture her.” Sounds of him ruffling through the med box echoed in the quiet place. “They already see you as Azgor’s favored one. Jealousy is an infectious poison.”

Nate opened his eyes, studying the lean features of his sire, who never wavered in his care. And here he was, tending to him once again.

“Favored?” he repeated. “Then they’re welcome to take my place.” He shifted on the couch, trying to find a position that didn’t hurt. The dark gods knew he was so fucking tired of

being *favored*. Hell, his soul was stained by the blood of those he'd killed. He doubted even Purgatory would let him in when death called.

A long silence passed as Aba cleaned his injury, then applied a thick, musty-smelling liniment. "What did Azgor want?" he finally asked.

"The usual. A job."

He stopped his treatment. "Nate, don't bullshit me. I worked for him once. I know what he's capable of."

"You're out of that business. Let it go."

"Because you took over my debt." Aba cut him a flat stare. He hadn't liked it back then, and that sentiment hadn't changed. "If he ever comes to know what you are, you will never be free."

Too late, the comeback floated in his muzzy brain. "I'm careful."

"You're so stubborn." Aba shook his head and continued pasting the unguent on the wound. "This tear is bad."

"I know." His *laika* was deadly. *His?* Rough laughter escaped him.

"What?" Aba glanced up from taping on a dressing.

"Nothing." Nate shifted on the couch, then fumbled out the small lead box from his jeans pocket. "I have something for you. Here." He held it out.

Aba went motionless, then he shot to his feet, standing over him. Hands clenched. "Natek, what did you do?"

"I got what I always wanted." Nate pushed to his feet and grunted, his wound protesting his movements. He opened the little box and tipped the red orb of light onto his palm, its heat incinerating his skin—fuck! It hurt more than the stab wound in his belly did.

Jaw locked, he lifted his sire's t-shirt and slapped his hand against his father's chest.

Aba's eyes widened, and he stumbled back, his pale features flushed, chasing away the pallor he usually sported. He gasped, pressing his hand over Nate's as emotions seeped into his eyes, not fake, but true, and they grew wet with tears. "What did you do, *cnati*?"

"Nothing you wouldn't have done for me."

"You are my child. I would give my life for yours. Tell me."

Nate was aware Aba had lost his first family—his consort and their offspring in the ongoing faction battles—a long time ago while he was away on the job. He'd never cared for another until he had Nate.

"You did," Nate reminded him. The pain in his palm and belly tore through him like claws, and he welcomed both. It took away the chill settling in him once again. He shuffled for the stairs. "It's nothing, Aba. Just a new job. I'm going to lie down."

In his darkened room, with everything crowding his mind, along with the new threat to the *laika*, Nate sagged against the door. Hell, he should have warned her earlier instead of teasing her, something he'd never done with another. But knowing her, she would shrug it off and think he uttered lies.

Guardians were a damn pain in his ass.

He moved away from the door, shrugged off his clothes, and, wearing only his boxer briefs, he gingerly laid down on the bed. Moonlight filtered through the undraped windows, which would have distracted him, but since he rarely slept, he didn't care. He exhaled a shallow breath, ignoring his throbbing wound, the beast side stirring, scraping at his mind shields, sensing his weakness.

Shit, he'd have to feed soon to settle it or risk it fighting him. And that would be disastrous. His mind leaped back to years ago, to the first time he went through the change at fourteen, finding out the truth of what he was...

"I don't get sick, Aba," he moaned, tossing on the bed, sweat pouring down his face. He'd been this way for days,

excruciating agony ripping down his spine. “Make it go away.”

“I know, cnati. Hold on to me.” His sire dabbed a cold, wet towel over his hot face and chest. “It’ll pass soon.”

But more sweat dripped, soaking the bedding. He’d had his symbiont since childhood, and it had only demanded dark blood, which Aba had gotten for him by procuring demons, then clearing their minds after Nate had fed from their slit wrists.

Now, this.

His fingertips hurt with a piercing pain, bones cracking—

“Aba!” he yelled. “What’s happening to me?” He held out his thin arms, staring in horror as his fingernails morphed into black talons. “Something’s inside me!” he shot off the bed, shaking his hands to get rid of it.

Aba tossed the towel aside and hurried around to Nate’s back. “It’s your symbiont—”

“What?” Pain and hunger encapsulated his entire body. Kill, kill, feed! The thoughts stabbed his mind.

Nate tore out of the garage apartment, moving like the wind, speeding into the street and stumbling into an alley. He stopped dead, his senses growing, everything sharper, more acute, his newly heightened hearing attuned.

A figure stumbled his way...human, his aura, a happy glow...drunk. Not him.

Nate stalked the narrow lane. Another figure exited a building, the rage in the demon’s pulsing blackish-red aura snagging Nate, and he charged.

“Yesss!” a sibilant hiss echoed in his head as Nate slammed his thin shoulder into the huge demon’s chest—

“You stupid mongrel!” The demon shoved him into the wall. “I will kill you for that—”

Hunger taking hold of him, Nate rammed his talons into the demon’s chest, slashing through muscle and bone, and

fisted his prey's beating heart.

Terror flashed in the demon's eyes. "Hades! What kind of sorcery is this? A child—"

Nate slammed his mouth onto the male's, and he siphoned the demon's emotions, drinking in the terror and fear, his fingers tightening in his frenzied feeding, squeezing hard...

The crushing pain within Nate eased. He yanked his hand free, and the demon collapsed to the ground, his body decomposing and vanishing within seconds. The pulpy, mushed-up organ on his palm caught fire.

No. No! Nate reared back in horror, knocking into someone behind him. He spun around.

"By the dark gods..." his sire whispered.

"Aba, I killed him—I killed him!" He grasped his head, deafening pain shredding his skull, and encountered twin bony protrusions. "Aba!" he cried, stumbling about. "What's happening to me?"

"Tighten your mind shields, now! You can never let that change occur, cnatl. No one must know you can likely shapeshift."

Let me out!

Nate froze, unadulterated terror compressing his chest at the other presence inside him. The same one that had spoken to him moments ago.

"Nate, now!"

At his sire's hard command, Nate locked down his mind as Aba had taught him, and the voice within cut off. "Is it going to kill me, Aba?"

His sire had never answered, but Nate knew.

Soon after, Aba had packed up and took them back to the Dark Realm and Ys, where he'd learned the unassailable truth of exactly what symbiont he'd been given, and what he could become if he ever let that side free.

A fucking wyvern!

One of those raucous, lethal demonic beasts that roamed the Dark Realm, scavenging for flesh and gore.

As if sensing his disquiet and simmering rage, the beast snarled, sending shafts of pain through his head. Nate rubbed his skull and winced as the new wound on his abs pulled.

Exhaustion swamping him, he dropped his arm over his brow and shut his eyes, fingers clenching, but the burn in his palm from holding Aba's soul had him hastily releasing his fist.

He might have finally gotten a part of Aba's soul back, but at what cost? With so much blood on his hands, nothing could ever give him peace.

As for the beguiling *laika*...

Despite his immense pain and discomfort, a smile tugged his mouth. He didn't kid himself. If she knew the truth about him, she would have undoubtedly ended him tonight instead of stalking off in a huff.

Yeah, he must have lost his mind, but he liked the cold and lovely hellion angel.

There was something about her that called out to him. An attraction he couldn't deny.

Hell, if he had to take his last breath, he might as well do so by her hands. Maybe then he'd finally find the peace he yearned for.

CHAPTER 7



URIAS! How could I have let my ire win?

Ely slammed her fists into the punching bag, again and again, guilt assaulting her at how she'd rushed off last night, chagrined and frustrated that he'd been so casual about her stabbing him.

Usually, she was a rational person, slow to anger, but he just rubbed her all wrong.

"I'm outta here," Týr grunted, pulling her out of her remorse as he stepped off the treadmill. He grabbed the towel, wiped his sweaty face, then removed his AirPods, pushing them into the pocket of his sweats. Towel slung over one muscled shoulder, he passed her, reading something on his phone.

"Týr?"

"Yeah?" He looked up, those striking, toffee-hued eyes focusing on her. "What's up, El? Wait, you're reconsidering giving my car back?"

She huffed out a laugh. "No." She grabbed the punching bag before it smacked her in the face. "I've been wondering..." And with no way else to do this but to ask outright, she blurted, "We use our Gaian weapons when fighting evil demons, right? But what if we, er, accidentally hurt an Other with it?"

His eyebrows hitched up. "Why, who did you injure?"

“No one,” she said quickly. “Just curious. I’ve been a Guardian for over a year and a half. And I’ve killed those malevolent beings from the Dark Realm. But if I hurt, say, an Otium with my weapon, will he die?”

“Eventually. It’s a slow and painful process. Our weapons are meant to kill, El. Even a scratch is lethal. It’s why we don’t play with it amongst ourselves.” He slipped his cell into his pocket and dragged the towel over his face again. “Besides, it’s pure torture to get them off us when there’s no evil around. Aethan did once, before he and Echo mated, and said it was like ripping his guts out through his mouth.” Týr grinned as if enjoying the memory, causing his slashing dimples to deepen. “But *we* can heal since it is intricately linked to us, though it takes time.”

Ely barely heard past the ‘*slow and painful death.*’ *He would die eventually?*

“Need me to come by the Bowery tonight?” Týr asked.

“No, no, I’m fine.” Her fingers dug into the punching bag. “I can handle one skinny demon if he returns.” How she managed a calm tone, she had no idea as nausea tracked up her throat.

“Okay then.” He nodded and strolled off.

Biting back a groan, Ely dropped her head against the sandbag, remorse hitting her hard. *Goddess, what have I done?*

“Hey, Týr,” Echo’s smiling voice drifted to her a moment later.

“Back at ya, Curantii.”

Snorting, Echo ambled into the gym, bypassing the treadmills and weights section, stopping in front of Ely. “I sensed you were here. Want to join Shae and me in the arena, a session with weapons?”

Darn. She could barely get herself to concentrate on anything the entire day. Chances were she’d hurt someone or herself.

“Rain check. I don’t think I have any energy left.” She groaned, stretching her aching arms over her head to ease her sore muscles. “Besides, I have to get ready for work soon.”

“Ah, right. Time runs away during the day.” Though she smiled, there was a tinge of dullness to her usually bright eyes.

Ely frowned.

As the Curantii, or Healer of the Veils, and the fact that she was a descendent of the leader of the Watchers, Echo usually sported an inherent sparkling aura.

“So, you’ll be here for Christmas Eve?” Echo asked, scratching the shallow dimple in her chin. “Or, are you going to Reynner and Eve’s?”

“I’ll be here. I’ll see my brother and Eve later.” *Vae*, she had to get cracking and finish her paintings. Even though it was a day into December, her gift choice took time.

“Wonderful.” Echo grinned. “Hmm, I wonder what’s keeping Shae?” She retrieved her cell from her hoodie pocket and grimaced, rubbing her temple.

“A headache?” Ely asked, unfastening the straps of her fingerless boxing gloves.

“No...” Her friend dropped her hand, glancing at her phone’s display, where she had a snapshot of Aethan and Bob. How she got those two together for a photo, Ely didn’t know since her cat was choosy about whom he favored for a petting.

“I just feel...tired. Probably remnants from using my abilities and healing that rift up in Scotland a few weeks ago—don’t tell Aethan,” she said hastily, “or he’ll insist I rest again. Ugh—” She sighed wearily. “Now I’m getting these fuzzy images in my mind, and it makes my head hurt.”

Ely took in her wan, tense features, her concern growing. “Your recent nightmares about the flames?”

“No. Just blurred images of faces now.”

“Maybe the new rune’s responsible?”

“I don’t know... Though it did start during my lesson with Lore. He’d doubtless tell me I’m daydreaming again.” She rolled her gorgeous silver and amber eyes, a sparkle seeping into them again.

Ely laughed in relief. She’d heard enough of Echo’s grumbles about the *tight-ass* angel who was her tutor and piled her with work.

“Hey.” Shae took form in the gym, appearing a little winded, her red hair fastened in a haphazard single braid. “I’m so sorry about the delay. Dagan, he, ah...”

Echo burst out laughing, and Shae’s pale skin turned bright red. “Yeah, *that*.”

“I know.” Echo grinned, following her out. “See you later, Ely.” She waved over her shoulder, and both her friends left the gym.

Inhaling deeply, Ely flexed her sore fingers, her restlessness stirring again as her current problem resurfaced, aware she had to put right what she’d done. And her stomach heaved.

Chances were, *he* might just want to kill her now. But she had to try.

* * *

With it being winter, dusk fell earlier and night came faster. Back in her workwear, her nerves in a tangle of knots, Ely piled her hair into a low bun and fastened it. She grabbed her trench coat and slouchy beanie from her walk-in closet, put them on, and hurried out, only to stop near her bed. “Dammit, it won’t work, not on him...”

But it just might.

Ugh. She sprinted back for the bathroom, found what she wanted in the sink cupboard, pocketed the healing salve and potion, then rushed out.

Blaéz and Darci came down the grand staircase from their second-floor quarters. The warrior, also dressed in all black for work, had his arm around her and whispered something in her ear.

Darci laughed and playfully smacked his chest. “You—hey, Ely.” She smiled serenely as if they weren’t just having a moment. “Joining us for dinner?”

“Can’t. I’m going out.”

“Ooh, date?” She grinned, slipping out of Blaéz’s hold and hurrying down the stairs to her. He lifted an eyebrow, cobalt-blue eyes bright with amusement as he followed his mate.

“So, spill.” She hooked her arm through Ely’s as they descended the stairs to ground level. “Who?”

“No one.” Ely stifled a groan. “Unless you think my quick visit to see our Oracle before patrol is a date, then sure.” There, that would take care of it if anyone asked after her.

“Ah, well.” Darci sighed, eyes twinkling. “Should be fun. I haven’t seen Jaden in a while.”

Right. “See you in the morning.” Ely beat feet out of there before anyone else stopped her.

Once outside, she inhaled a deep breath of icy evening air, trying to calm the rampant pounding of her heart. Stars, she rubbed her brow, grimacing at the little white lie. But she did usually stop to see Jaden, just not tonight.

“Ely, a moment?”

Crap! She spun around to find Blaéz standing behind her. Worse, there was no smile on his face as he strolled closer.

Her stomach squeezed in trepidation. The only reason he would come after her so fast, he must have *seen* something. His precognition was unsurpassed.

Kira had mentioned once that he’d foreseen hers and Týr’s future *before* they’d even met.

While Ely came from Empyrea, a world steeped in otherworldly tales and magic, did she really want to know

whatever Blaéz had seen? Gods, no.

“Blaéz—”

He shook his head. “While I might not like having this insight into anyone’s life when it occurs, I can’t *not* say anything. Not if it might help in any way. Just be vigilant out there in the coming days, all right? Because all I see is eternal darkness when I look at you, Ely.”

A cold shiver snaked down her back. It could mean anything. Precognition didn’t always reveal itself fully and wasn’t always straightforward.

“Given the life we lead, we always face some kind of danger,” she pointed out.

“Indeed...” He cast his attention to the still night and snowy grounds, frowning. “Just follow what *feels* right. And be careful out there.”

Ely dragged in a deep breath, wrestling her unease into lockdown.

Eternal darkness? That usually signified death. Ugh, she wasn’t going to let herself dwell on the thought now.

“I’ll meet up with you, and we can patrol together for a while,” he offered.

Gods, no! “I’ll be fine.” She scraped up a smile. “If there is a threat, I’m sure I can handle it, or Gaia wouldn’t have thought me capable of being a Guardian.”

“True.” He laughed then, eyes gleaming, chasing away the concern in them. “Take care.”

She nodded and dematerialized before her knees caved, and she gave lie to her bravery.

* * *

The hours trickled past as Ely prowled the alleyways, not even a hint of sulfur around, probably too cold for those asshats hunting humans. And no sign of *him* either, even though she’d

practically trampled every inch of the backstreets in the Bowery, searching for him.

Recalling what Týr had said, regret compressed her chest in a vise. She didn't want him to die. Her fingers tightened on the potion and salve containers in her coat pocket, aware she had to get these to him fast. She slowed her steps.

A quick look around revealed she trudged herself to the borders of the Bowery and the Lower East Side, near Club Anarchy.

As she made her way to the nightspot, a tall figure in a long, black leather coat entered her line of sight, and Ely froze, her heart kicking hard against her ribs.

Finally.

She tucked the few escaping strands of hair under her beanie and followed as he entered the nightspot.

Tagg smiled but didn't detain her with small talk. She bypassed the loitering patrons and followed *him*, several eyeing the tall demon like a favorite snack as he strode past, not that she could blame them. While he might be a pain in her butt, he was...mesmerizing.

Music blared as she entered the club. The frenzied energy and eardrum-splitting music had her wincing. Hastily, she shut out the sounds, tracking him as he headed to the lower level, making his way deeper into the nightspot. The way he prowled through the place reminded her of a predator on a hunt.

She frowned. What was he after?

He halted at the softly lit bar, spoke to the bartender, then skirted the crowd and made his way to the back.

A human stopped in front of him, putting a hand on his chest, and Ely stilled. The guy leaned closer and said something. Despite the flashing lights in the dark club, she could clearly see the lust in the human's expression as he stared up at the brooding demon who'd shifted her world off its axis. She couldn't see his face, but his posture showed no discomfort from the wound she'd inflicted when she knew it had to be worsening.

Then he moved in that incredibly sexy way of his, wrapped his hand around the human's throat, slowly backing him past the partygoers who paid them no heed, and into a dark corner. His head lowered. The human's eyes widened...in fear? She wasn't sure, but then his features morphed into one of ecstasy. He moaned, grabbing the demon's head and dragging him closer.

Ely stood there paralyzed, her belly twisting, nausea tracking up her throat.

He liked males.

Seconds passed, maybe more, she had no idea how long the kiss lasted. It felt like an eternity before *he* let go of the man and stalked off.

The human blinked, glanced around him, then ambled in her direction with a dreamy expression. Her burning lungs had her inhaling harshly, and she hastily sidestepped him before he bumped into her, her attention back on the demon.

He strolled over to a trio of humans seated at a table almost concealed in the corner. They hurriedly vacated their spot—either they sensed the peril he was, or he'd willed them to do so—and he dropped into the empty chair. Those glowing topaz eyes lifted then narrowed as they settled on her.

Her expression cool, Ely removed her beanie and strode over, her hair sliding free of the bun. It was too heavy to keep in the style anyway, and she was an idiot, thinking... Yeah, like usual, she'd lost whatever rational brain cells she possessed when it came to this demon.

She stopped opposite him, the table between them.

“Following me now, *laika?*” he drawled, slouching back in his seat. His dead-straight hair flowed like black satin over his shoulders, his direct stare gliding over her in a slow caress.

Ely had no idea why, when his actions with the male clearly showed his preference.

She didn't bother raising her voice above the music, knew he would hear her. “The slew of drained bodies, I know you're

a part of it,” she said, pushing her heavy cascade of hair over her shoulder.

His eyes traced the movement of her fingers before settling back on her face, and he arched that irritating eyebrow at her. “Do you now?”

She couldn’t see his fangs, but she knew that close-lipped smirk hid sharp incisors.

“Sit, *laika*. You’re straining my neck.”

Her mouth thinned. Yes, she was taller than most human females at six feet, but he made her feel about as graceful as a doddering elephant.

Feet planted on the floor, arms folded, she waited.

A slow smile started, igniting his flame-hued eyes to a luminous, champagne gold. His hooded stare turned sinful, pure seduction. And her treacherous body went into slow burn, the pull to him undeniable.

Man, she stifled a groan, trying to shut off this growing awareness, but it was like a damn dripping faucet, taunting her.

With the grace of a panther, he uncoiled all six-foot-six or seven inches of his tall self from the chair and came around to her. His hand shot out, and he grasped her arm, hauling her to him. She hit his chest with an oomph, the impact of his tough body against hers stealing her breath. And the tap gushed. By the stars!

“What are you doing?” she growled, pushing at him, then her gaze fell on the waiter passing them, a smirk on his dark face, drinks tray in hand. Her cheeks burned.

“So stubborn.” Her nemesis shook his head. “It’s why I tried to draw you closer, not because I want to get my hands on your delectable self...or maybe I do.” His mouth tipped into a taunting little smile.

For the sake of her sanity, and this demon would likely drive her mad, she moved a few steps away. “That crap doesn’t work on me. I know which way you roll. I saw you with the human moments ago.”

“Ah.” His smile lingered, but he didn’t correct her. The jerk. “C’mon, my cold-hearted *laika*, let’s get out of this place. Don’t want blood spilled here, with witnesses around, if you plan to finish me, that is.”

Cold-hearted? Ely choked back a stinging retort, hating the label as she followed him. Worse, being this close to him, with the patrons crowding them, his palm settled on her lower spine, and his intoxicating scent enfolded her, overpowering all the other smells—causing every nerve ending within her to tighten. And the short passage to the club exit became a mile long.

Finally, they were outside. Ely gratefully inhaled a deep breath of icy cold air.

Tagg glanced her way, and an eyebrow rose. It could be because her hair was undone and not because of who was attached to her back. But she knew better... Ugh. Ely moved away from her nemesis’ touch and overwhelming presence.

“Hey, Tagg,” she greeted, forcing an airy smile. Then she stopped. Heck, might as well move on from this dangerous attraction. But this flirting thing was so beyond her. So she settled for, “About that coffee? Tomorrow evening at five, yes?” she asked.

His brown eyes lit up. “Yup, that would work. Where—”

A low growl erupted behind her. “She’s busy.” A hand snagged hers and hauled her down the alley, the queued patrons watching them as if waiting for a squabble to start. But she wasn’t one to air her life in front of a crowd.

The moment they cleared the onlookers, she yanked free. “What the hell is wrong with you? That was impossibly rude.”

“If you want a demon, I’m one, too,” he retorted. “Probably not as nice as the bouncer.”

“He’s my friend!”

“Don’t care.” A tic started on his jaw, belying his calm facade. “Don’t dally with males in front of me, *laika*, not if you want them to keep breathing.”

Wait, *what?*

The air rushed out of her lungs at his possessive retort. “Oh, no, no, don’t even go there. We aren’t anything,” she snapped. “We’re strangers.”

“Oh, so you didn’t think of me once?” His gaze slowly caressed her face like he’d done in the club, and his voice dropped to a husky purr. “I know I thought of you.”

Scowling at the way her traitorous heart pounded, she flipped back her yards of long hair. How dare he give that seductive spiel when he was locking lips with a human not so long ago? As if she would ever admit she thought of him.

“Yeah, right.” She skewered him with an icy stare. “What I do in my life is my business, not yours. Besides, I don’t possess the several inches you require for gratification!” Dammit, she instantly regretted her crude rejoinder.

His jaw dropped, then a wicked smile started. “If you want those inches, just say so.”

Heat blistered her face. She deserved that with her stupid runaway mouth.

“A little warning, *laika*.” His amusement faded, his expression morphing to dead serious. “You need to watch your back. A demon’s after you.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” she muttered, braiding her long hair, trying to regain her composure.

“I mean it,” he growled. “Those you killed the night we met—”

She flashed up one hand, stopping him. “Let me lay this out for you, okay? As Guardians, we will always have those who want to kill us. They will find out that’s an impossible feat.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like I’m going to reveal secrets to you.” She looked around in her pocket for a hair tie and sighed when she came up empty.

“Fair enough.” He slipped his hand into his coat pocket, then took the end of her braid she fisted and snapped on a black rubber band, startling her.

“Always keep them.” He raked back his unbound mane, revealing those tiny black hoop earrings he wore before his hair slid back again, settling over his broad shoulders. “Now, about why you sought me?”

Trying to get her racing heart to calm the heck down, she stuck her restless hands in her coat pockets. Why did he tie her hair? Probably to mess with her mind. As if he wasn’t already doing so. “There’s been a recent trail of drained bodies left behind, and since I found the human male a few days ago, whom your horde-buddies fed from, I want to know who’s behind it?”

“Would you believe me if I said I don’t know anything about drained bodies? And those fuckers aren’t friends. I don’t have friends,” he said, tone flat. “Tried to stop the bastards. Just wrong place, wrong time, and all that shit, when you came across me.”

Vae. Much as she wanted to dispute what he said, her gut instinct never steered her wrong. But then demons committed heinous acts and still appeared as innocent as a babe and lied through their teeth—fangs—whatever. They were all conniving tricksters.

“Why would you do that?” she asked, needing to understand.

His jaw hardened. “Because taking a life for simple gratification isn’t right.”

That, she didn’t expect from an intractable, dangerous male like him, and she’d bet the small pile of money she earned since becoming a Guardian that he killed, too.

A faint coppery odor seeped into her nose—

Crap! His injury! One she’d inflicted. And here she was grilling him.

“I have something for you.” Hastily, she removed the salve and small bottle from her coat pocket. “Here.”

He stared at them, then back at her. When he didn't take them, she grasped his warm hand. About to put the items on his palm, she frowned at the circular, slow-healing scorch mark on his callused skin. "What happened?"

"Touched something I shouldn't," he drawled.

At the innuendo, her lips flattened. He had a way of pushing her buttons. She shoved the things at him, and he finally accepted them, using his other hand. "It's a paste and a potion. Apply the former and drink the latter to aid your wounds' recovery."

He remained silent, but there was something so intense in his stare as if he was trying to figure her out. Unable to endure his focus, she stalked off, rubbing her tingling hand down her coat. Nothing helped, because that demon drew her in a way she never expected.

* * *

Nate ground down on his back teeth at the pain radiating from the wound on his abs, staring at the small metal container and the opaque bottle on his palm.

Why would she give him this?

Needing answers, he pocketed the stuff and flashed after her, grasping her arm before she dematerialized. "Why?"

Those eyes, like liquid copper, remained impassive. But she didn't shrug him off or berate him for touching her. "I wrongly assumed you were one of those curs. And flashing those fangs at me didn't help your case," she retorted. "I could have killed you when I thought you were also responsible for the drained bodies."

Yup, he believed her. She was that deadly.

"What fangs?" he teased, flashing his normal teeth and enjoying her frown. His beast stirred, but he caged the bastard before it revealed his truth.

Hell, he didn't think she was ready for a monster like him.

Despite being a Guardian, he'd bet his stained soul she was fairly new to this way of life, unlike those other huge motherfuckers she kept company with. He hadn't seen her until recently.

"Drink that potion and use the salve until the wound heals," she reiterated. "To miss a day is dangerous."

"Ah, guilt."

"Yes. I'm an open book," she shot back. "Not my problem if you can't read."

Laughter burst free, and he shook his head. She made him do that. Laugh.

"So, my beautiful, *laika*?" He dropped his voice to a gravelly purr, and she eyed him warily. "Care to aid me with the treatment?"

"There's no need to flirt with me." Those gorgeous eyes darkened. "I know you prefer your own gender. Goodbye, er..." She fumbled over not having his name.

"Frank...einstein." He couldn't resist. Hell, he felt like one at times, his facade just a human shell encasing his monstrous side.

Her tempting mouth tightened, making him long to soothe it back into its sensual lushness with his tongue.

"It's Nate," he said softly before she stalked off. And she was good at that.

She blinked at his un-demon-like name, a flicker of suspicion in her eyes.

Hell, this female.

"And just so you know, I don't *prefer my own gender* as you so succinctly put it. Males have their uses for what I, er, need."

"What? Locking mouths in a nightclub?" she muttered beneath her breath, but he heard her. "Why are you telling me all this?" she asked, louder. "I simply wanted to correct my error."

Who the hell knew, but he couldn't seem to let her go just yet. "What can I say? I'm a demon. I like all things forbidden, *laika*."

"Of course you do," she shot back. "Count me off your list. And don't call me that!"

"Why not, *angel*? It's what that means in my language." He closed the small space between them.

Hastily, she stepped back, hitting the warehouse wall behind her. She glared but didn't run, standing her ground. He liked that about her.

"What do you want?" she practically growled.

He put one palm on the dingy surface near her head, wanting to breathe her in, to savor the moment, wishing he could taste her deliciously pursed lips. A gentle whiff of her warm floral scent crowded his senses, reminding him of sunshine and meadows—

Hades, he inhaled deeply. A dream she certainly was. Because nothing could ever happen between them. She was a Guardian, and he was...fucked up, housing a monster, and tied to Azgor for what remained of his life.

But wanting this moment, Nate lowered his head and trailed his nose along her jaw and down her neck, impressed when she allowed it, and his body hardened. "If I told you what I truly wanted," he whispered against her luscious skin, "you'd stick your glaive in me and probably carve out my heart..." When she didn't move or shove him away, the locked organ in his chest thumped hard. "Ah, so you do want to know, hmm?"

Unable to stop himself, he pressed his lips to the rapidly beating pulse in her throat. He might plague her about the attraction between them, but for the first time, whatever this thing between them was, it made him feel alive, even knowing he was only tormenting himself.

He drew back and met her wide-eyed stare. Hell, every time he saw her, all logical thought dissipated like mist,

especially the danger she was in, not only from that vermin, Derrodus, but from his own dark side.

“Yes, I want your delectable mouth and your tongue sucking mine. I want to taste every inch of you...” He trailed his finger along her breastbone, slowing between her breasts before gliding to the waist of her pants and lower. An audible gasp left her. He stopped midway along her zipper, and met her darkening eyes—

For fuck’s sake! What the hell am I doing?

She might wield her weapon like a badass and kill without hesitation, but in this seduction game, she was innocent and shouldn’t be suckered in with a bastard like him. Maybe he did possess some inkling of integrity, who the fuck knew.

“For both our sakes, *laika*,” he growled, frustration burning through him, “stay away from me.”

She frowned, probably at his change in demeanor, and he said the one thing guaranteed to piss her off. “Or we can fuck in this alley and get the lust out of the way. But we’d have to be quick—”

“You jerk!” She shoved him hard. “I’m not one of your club hookups. Why would I ever want someone like you?” She wheeled away on her sexy high-heeled boots and stomped off.

“Why, indeed?” He sagged against the wall, his wound hurting as if acid had settled in there from her push.

It took a moment before he could limber up his sorry-ass self and flash to the garage. He entered the workshop, locked up behind him, and made his way into the living room. All appeared quiet, and he sensed Aba upstairs, still awake.

In his room, Nate removed his coat and dropped it on the armchair, then remembered the healing meds. He pulled off his t-shirt, tossed it aside, and retrieved the potion and salve from his coat pocket. There were no directions on the bottle. Hell, he was dead either way if this wound continued deteriorating. With nothing to lose, he tipped the potion into his mouth—

Damn! The thing tasted terrible!

Nate glared at the bottle as he set it down on the nightstand, swiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then peeled away the blood-drenched dressing from his abs, revealing the open, three-inch gash...the edges had darkened. It looked worse than it did yesterday.

If he survived this, it would just be one more scar to add to his many.

He scooped up the dark green, gooey salve—the pungent smell of musty wood and herbs teasing his nose—and pasted it on his open wound. Then he got a fresh dressing from the chest of drawers and taped it over his injury.

Exhaustion felling him, he kicked off his boots and lowered to the bed, the streetlight from below casting a dim glow into his room. He flung an arm over his eyes, but thoughts of her crowded his mind again...the sensation of her skin against his lips, the feel of her toned, slender body under his hands, and his groin hardened.

Fuck! He sat up, pressing a palm on his aching cock, then he stilled, the dense atmosphere in the apartment scraping at his skin like icicles. Shit—

Nate shot to his feet, ignoring his protesting wound, and sprinted to Aba's room, shoving the door open. His sire sat on the floor, leaning against the bed. Head lowered.

“Aba!” He flashed across and knelt at his side, a coppery odor with a tinge of sulfur crowding his nose. “What happened?”

Pain lines etched deep into his sire's brow, his palm pressed to his belly. “I was closing the shop for the night when they came. Demons from the Dark Realm.”

Nate lifted the t-shirt Aba wore, revealing the wide length of fabric wrapped around his middle, glossy with blood. Carefully, he undid it, and rage tore through him like wildfire at the fist-sized burn wound there. “They used a fucking hellfire bolt on you?”

“Aye,” Aba grunted. “I didn't recognize any of them. I killed one and hurt another before one of them did this and

escaped.” He motioned to his stomach. “Couldn’t do much else with my human staff around. Had to do a mind-sweep of the attack. Damn—” He grimaced in pain.

Nate shot to his feet, instinctively aware of what this was about.

“No-no, don’t hunt them, *cnati*.” Aba grasped his forearm. But the need for retribution garroted him.

“They wanted me, *me!*” he bit out. “Then let me make it easy for them.”

“And leave me in this vulnerable state?” Aba wheezed, pressing his other hand to his belly.

Nate recognized the ploy to keep him there, but dammit, his sire was right. Hands fisted in helplessness, he glared at Aba.

“It wasn’t you they were after.” Aba rested his head against the bed, exhaling a pained breath. “They kept asking where it was. Then said something about a unicorn?”

Without a word, Nate strode to his room, his mind a chaotic haze, the need for vengeance amping up.

The beast slammed into his mind, sensing his rage. Pain shot through his skull. *Blood. Wantssss. Killll.*

Grunting, Nate tightened his mental shields, and the strident hiss faded. He collected the salve and potion the *laika* had given him from his bedroom and headed back, setting the things on the nightstand, then lowering to his haunches.

He gently cleaned out the ointment from the gaping wound on his sire’s stomach.

“What’s that?” Aba asked, voice hoarse.

“Something that’ll aid you.” Nate pasted the mossy salve on the brutal wound, applied a fresh dressing, then taped it down. He wiped his hand on the towel there, then held out the potion bottle. “Drink this.” He hoped like hell the potions worked on demon-inflicted wounds, too.

Once Aba had taken a gulp, he capped and set the things on the nightstand. “Use them every day until healed.” He helped his sire up and into bed, then said, “Call, if you need me.”

In his room, he pulled on an old tee and sneakers and headed down to the shop. The place was a mess, things strewn everywhere. And the lingering stench of sulfur hit him. Keeping his anger on a tight leash, he tracked their signature odor, picking up a hint of rancid ash and hot tar near the door.

You won't escape me.

He set about putting things right, then locked up the shop and headed for the workshop. Hands clenching and unclenching, he bypassed the vehicles awaiting work, dragged off the tarp covering the sanded-down seventies Charger he'd practically rebuilt from scratch—

Fuck! He slammed his fists on the roof, a vise knotting his gut. They knew he protected the *laika*, yet they challenged him, attacking his sire to make a point.

He would crucify Derrodus for starting this shit with the bounty, and the one who hurt his sire would pay.

Sure, Aba could have handled them, but he'd lived like a human for decades, followed the laws, and didn't like drawing attention to himself. Now, he ended up hurt.

Nate's resolve hardened. First, he'd get Aba to safety, and then he'd hunt down the fuckers.

They would learn firsthand why they called him *Sicari*.

CHAPTER 8



ELY BLEW OUT A BREATH, shifting her gaze from the 18 x 24 canvas she worked on to stare through the glass wall of the boathouse on the Guardians' island estate.

Noon winter sunlight painted a golden shimmer on the undulating body of water as if calming the sea. And she wished it could do the same to her own turmoil, as memories plagued her since the encounter two nights ago with Nate... Her fingers traced a path along her jaw, a path he'd charted, trailing his nose down to her neck to kiss her throat, and her breath hitched.

Nate.

His name resounded inside her head, and her finger tightened on her paintbrush.

"We can fuck and get the lust out of the way, but we'd have to be quick."

And as fast, every soft emotion burned away. Scowling, she glared at the canvas, shutting him out. She had to finish this painting and not moon over the darn crass-mouthed demon.

She stepped back to take in her work—

And her jaw nearly hit the floor.

Behind the likeness of Bob, Echo's pet, loved by all and resident king of the castle, a pair of familiar, striking eyes took form. The teasing laughter reflected in those deep, flame-hued topaz depths had her heart pumping like mad.

Gah! She tossed her paintbrush on the table near her easel, stacked with her tubes of paints and brushes, and rubbed her bleary eyes. Not only would Aethan freak out at his mate receiving a painting of some strange male as a Christmas gift, but what the hell was she doing, transferring *his* image to canvas?

Usually, she liked painting and found it soothing. It made her forget her loneliness for a while. Now he'd infiltrated her one place of escape.

"I don't think I'm doing you any justice, Bob," she grumbled to the cat dozing on a bench, "sharing your image with another. Blame it on the lack of sleep."

Man, everything seemed to be closing in on her. Ely dug her fingers into her temples, massaging the dull throb as she paced the length of the sparse living room, past the single armchair to the small galley kitchen and back again to her makeshift painting corner.

Hoping to dislodge thoughts of him, she stopped near the side window and thumped her head against the pane, and went straight through the glass!

Eeek! Her hands flew like broken wings as she fell through the solid pane to the snow-covered gravel in front of the boathouse, twisting at the last second and landing on her ass, pain jarring up her spine.

Vae! So much for her usual quick reflexes. She glared up at the window. Bob peered down at her, then went back to his snoozing.

What in the ever-loving stars just happened?

Then she recalled what happened during the demon fight several nights ago, her face going through the warehouse wall. Holy crap! Were her bequeathed Gaian powers finally awakening?

Her thoughts skipped back to her time in a subterranean realm of the ancient goddess, Gaia, where Michael had taken her when she decided to become a Guardian...

Sweaty and groaning from her tired muscles and many bruises, Ely lay on the ground, panting hard. Her opponent, one of Gaia's shield-maidens who trained her, rolled to her feet, her dusky face flushed, the vine-like tattoo along her neck and jaw glowing neon green.

She bowed. "More practice with the weapons, and you'll be unbeatable, mostly, mistress."

A backhanded compliment? Heck, she'd take it. She picked up both her swords from the ground—

"Elytani of Ademéras."

Power rolled around her. Ely shot to her feet, hastily curtsying to the ancient goddess.

Golden hair framed Gaia's face, her skin the rich brown of the earth. Inked vines swirled from her brow to her cheeks, reflecting the deep green of her eyes.

She reminded Ely of spring, of growth and hope...of love.

"This is the life you've chosen since you've stayed the course and battled my fiercest of shield-maidens."

Ely held her breath. Yes, she'd been here for months, fighting and surviving in the forest. "Aye, my goddess, I understand that once I pledge my allegiance to you, Earth will be my home." Being bound to her oath was her decision, and it felt right.

Gaia inclined her head regally. "Usually, my female warriors train for the required length of time on my realm like the males do, but you are a quick learner and would do better back on Earth. It is your time now."

Ely frowned. Her time?

"Elytani of Ademéras," the goddess intoned, "as my Guardian, you will encounter evil unlike any ever seen. Accept and become a Guardian, and I will give you purpose and powers unrivaled. As you strengthen, those powers shall be set free. And in time, you will find what it is you seek."

Ely's heart pounded at the sacred words finally spoken. "I accept, my goddess, Gaia. I pledge my life to your cause."

Gaia lifted her hand and touched Ely's brow. A light layer of power tasered her, causing every nerve to tingle. Ely clenched and unclenched her fingers, feeling different... tougher. Stronger.

Gaia held out her hands. Several obsidian daggers appeared on both her palms. "Select."

One shimmered with a silvery-red hue. Ely picked it up, and it lit up as if connecting to her.

Cool fingers touched her left biceps. At the slight burn, she grimaced, frowning at her upper arm and the tattoo of crossed staffs taking form.

"Not the usual Guardian sword?" she asked.

A smile glimmered. "I've seen you fight, child. The glaives will be more suitable for your style of combat..."

The goddess was right. While she could handle a straight sword, her twin glaives were better, swift, and deadly.

Ely pushed to her feet, dusting the gravel and snow from her dampened jeans. When the powers Gaia spoke of hadn't manifested, she figured manipulating shadows was it, but now...

Holy freakin' stars! A grin started. Okay then, let's see if I can do this again.

Steeling herself, she shut off her mind and shot up to the window, sinking seamlessly through the glass, back into the living room, landing on her feet this time.

"Yesss!" She laughed, pumping her hands into the air and doing a quick dance. Bob flickered an amber eye open. "Did you see that?"

The cat went back to dozing as if she bored him.

Still grinning, her attention settled on her canvas again, and the flush of excitement faded a little as she stared at those striking eyes seeming to laugh at her childish glee.

"Of course, you'd laugh." She grabbed a sheet from the floor and threw it over her canvas, blocking the tormenting

demon. “There, much better. This will be our secret. Don’t tell anyone, okay, Bob?”

Her model ignored her, but his tail twitched. Ely snorted. She’d found him skulking on the pier earlier, and he’d followed her up to the apartment.

“Coming?” Another lazy twitch of his fluffy extremity. “You might as well.” Ely chuckled, scooping the overweight feline into her arms. She walked out of the apartment and down the side steps. “Jeez, you sure are heavy, huh? I took down some of those dangerous Narakas, and those demons are freaking huge, but you defeat me, you huggable pile of fur. Just as well I adore you, or you’d be waddling back to the castle.” She kissed his furry head.

He purred and butted her chin.

Ely spluttered with laughter, stopping on the bottom steps, and eyed the trail leading into the forest. An hour’s walk back to the castle, carrying Bob? Nope, not doing that—

A low-grade heat swamped her. “Whoa!” she groaned and tried to lower her body temperature but couldn’t seem to get the ability working. At least the icy air helped a little. Was it because her powers were awakening?

Not sure if that was the reason, she dematerialized them to the castle. The moment they reformed on the kitchen terrace, Bob leaped out of her arms, his heavy girth causing him to skid a little as he landed on the terracotta floor. He waddled off into the garden, doubtless to stalk birds.

Ely opened the French doors and entered the enormous, open-plan dining and kitchen area, the delicious aroma of the noon meal being prepared, wafting to her. She shrugged off her jacket as she passed the long dining table to the kitchen.

Shadow worked at the window countertop, icing gingerbread cookies. She glanced up, her starburst-hued eyes twinkling. “Hey, you’re back.”

“Yep.” Ely dropped her coat on a chair back.

“Finished your morning painting?” Hedori asked, putting a large roast into the oven and shutting the door.

“For now, I have.” She stifled a grimace, recalling who she’d painted. “Thanks for letting me use the boathouse apartment.”

“My pleasure.” He straightened, a smile lighting his pretty orange-green eyes. “It’s been empty for too long. I’m glad it’s getting some use now.”

She’d always liked Hedori, having known him since she was a little girl. As a bodyguard, he used to accompany Aethan, who’d been the sovereign heir of Empyrea back then, during his visits to her home in Ademéras to meet her brother.

The mouth-watering aroma of the cookies finally getting to her, Ely filched an un-iced one from the cooling rack and scrunched her face at her paint-smearred fingertips. Oh, well, she shrugged and bit into the spicy cookie. “Man, I love these.”

“Thank you,” Jenna said, walking into the kitchen from Hedori’s quarters, a book in her hand.

His gaze snapped to her, then away, but Ely caught the fleeting flash of pain and frustration on his striking face. She could understand his tension since Jenna was his destined mate, but *she* had no idea what she was to Hedori because he remained unfailingly polite and refused to cross that line.

Ely wondered if Jenna probably saw him as a protector, too, and why she continued to live in his quarters since he’d been the one who’d carried her out of that lone house in the Dark Realm where the mad angel, Samael, had held her prisoner for many months.

But more, Ely understood why Hedori kept his distance from his mate—an air of fragileness and melancholy still lingered around Jenna even a year after he’d rescued her.

“Try this.” Shadow handed Ely one of the frosted gingerbread men.

“I have to learn how to bake these.” She bit off a crumbly leg and moaned around a mouthful of sweet, spicy yumminess. “This taste *a-ma-zing*.”

“Biting guys? Of course, it would,” Shadow teased, and Hedori snorted, but a smile tugged his mouth, making Ely grin as she ate more of her cookie.

Jenna stared at him for a second before glancing at Ely again. “I’ll teach you,” she offered, a smile in her soft dove-gray eyes. “Shae bakes wonderfully, too.”

But Shae rarely did now, not when her mate’s diet fell along the lines of plasma. Dagan was a vampire. Heck, she still couldn’t wrap her mind around that. And she came from a mystical world.

“Would you? I’d like that.” She finished her cookie, got a glass of water from the faucet, and sipped the icy liquid. Jenna was speaking to Shadow, and Shadow’s pale features lit up.

“Yes, she’s kicking now.” She gently caressed her little pregnant belly.

Her friend was about seven months along and not very big from what Ely had seen of expectant women in this world. Still, it had to be tiring being on her feet.

“Can I help?” Ely asked, setting the glass down and joining them.

“Nah, I got this.” Shadow waved her offer off and continued icing white buttons on the gingerbread figures.

The kitchen door opened, and Darci glided in, her curly honey-brown hair pulled back in a casual ponytail. Her gorgeous caramel skin glowed like she’d worked out in the gym or had a sexy tussle with her mate. Ely suspected the latter.

“Hmm, gingerbread cookies...” She sniffed, a huge smile lighting her striking sunflower-hued eyes. Then her eyebrows drew together. “Shadow, don’t tire yourself. I’ll finish this.”

“Christ, Darci!” Shadow groaned. “Nik’s not around, and I want to do something, or I’ll run screaming into the snow from boredom—”

A cell beeped. Shadow glanced at the counter, set the piping bag down, and picked up her phone from the

countertop. She stared at the message, her features tensing.

“What is it?” Ely asked.

She looked up, eyes dark and troubled. “I don’t know. It’s my brother. He wants to see me.”

“Liam?”

“No. The one from the garage. He saved me by giving me these, remember?” She gently rubbed her sternum where her symbionts resided, her attention back on her cell. “He’s never messaged me before. It must be serious. Darn, Nik’s in Romania with Race. He said he needed to fight that dragon.”

Ely knew one of the warriors went over daily to train with the dangerous male. Heck, she had to put in time with him soon, too.

Shadow chewed her lower lip. “He won’t be back until this evening, and I cannot wait that long.”

Ely couldn’t blame Nik, not with Shadow being a beacon of hope to demons because of her odd ability. The symbionts keeping her alive needed to feed on the darkness in demons’ souls, giving them the light they desperately sought. And they would come after her.

Besides, she didn’t want Shadow alone anywhere downtown, either. “I could go with you. I have nothing pressing going on for the afternoon.”

“You will?” Relief brightened her pale face. “Great. Maybe I should text Nik and tell him. I don’t want him getting any gray hairs,” she mused, stroking her stomach. “Anyway, demon activities are practically nonexistent during the day.”

“So what are you going to do?” Darci asked at Shadow’s torn expression. “Wait till Nik gets back.”

She scowled. “I’m quite capable of protecting myself.”

“I know,” Ely said quickly, not wanting her agitated. *Vae!* She’d seen what Shadow could morph into. That girl was dangerous when pissed off.

* * *

Ely slipped on her long coat and waited outside on the front portico for Shadow, inhaling the sharp smell of evergreen and snow. But thoughts of her friend had her mind slipping back to the past and two other females she'd cared about...

Giggles drifted to Ely where she sat by the window in the music room, dabbing paint onto the canvas, capturing the wet, misty garden. Oh, good. Her friends were here and probably heading for the private lounge where they usually spent their time.

She set her brush down, grabbed a cleaning cloth, and hurried for the entrance, wiping her paint-smearred fingers on the damp linen. As she opened the massive door, Kacela's low voice reached her. "Do you think he's here?"

Ely sighed. Were they talking about Reynner again?

"The guard said he was home, so he must be." Osara smoothed her amber hair. "Elytani barely tells us anything when we ask. It's a misfortune we have to be friends with his sister. Urias, she's so boring, a dullard."

Ely froze, her fingers gripping the door handle.

"She can't even play the clavile well. I don't understand how she could be blood-related to Reynner."

"Hush, Os." Kacela laughed, then whispered, "It shows you can't always win the genetic draw even if you are nobility. She doesn't even know Irek sleeps with another while courting her."

A punch of pain suffocating her, Ely stumbled back into the room.

"When I mate Reynner," Osara's voice drifted to her, "I'll have to convince him to live away from here..."

Twinges of old hurt seeped through her. She didn't really care about her cheating ex, though she had her guards toss him out, but how her friends thought of her wounded her. Soon

after, Reynner had left Ademéras, never to return, and they, and several other so-called friends, stopped coming over, too.

No, the girls here were nothing like those backbiting females, and why she'd do anything for them.

Gods, she was so happy Reynner mated Eve!

The door opened, and Shadow hurried outside, dressed in a navy, thigh-length parka, leggings, and faux fur-lined boots.

She flashed a grin, lifting the plastic container she held like it cradled the answer to the origins of life or something. "Cookies and muffins," she said. "For the guys. They both have a terrible sweet tooth. Probably a side effect of their species." She pulled on her parka hood to cover her white-streaked ebony hair and dematerialized. Ely did, too, following her downtown.

Moments later, they reformed in a gloomy warehouse. Broken bits of timber and discarded steel pipes littered the cement floor. Weak, noon sunlight slipped through the cracked slats covering the windows, lighting the inside a little.

"Wait." Ely put out a hand, stopping Shadow from leaving. While it was still daylight, anything could happen, and she refused to take a chance. She did a quick mental scan of the alley. "All's clear."

With her mind, she willed the lock open, stepped outside, *aaand* found herself in the same alley where she'd hurt Nate. Her stomach dipped at the memory.

It seemed as if the universe was determined to remind her of the demon who drew her in a way she couldn't even begin to explain, who took over her thoughts to the point that she now painted images of him.

"It's on the main road," Shadow said, distracting her from her thoughts. "There." Shadow tipped her chin at the garage opposite with an apartment above it. "They live upstairs."

She hooked her arm through Ely's as they waited for an opening in the oncoming traffic to cross. "Who knew I'd change my fate and meet Nik when I ran from home all those years ago? Yet, despite everything we've been through, I'm so

incredibly happy I have him in my life,” she said with a soft sigh.

Ely’s chest tightened, pleased for her friend because she witnessed first-hand the agony Shadow had lived through after that horrid demon, Mammon, had killed Nik. She’d been with Shadow every painful step in the terrible months following his death until his miraculous return.

“I know,” she said, giving Shadow’s arm a little rub, and they darted across the street.

“He’s out front.” Shadow nodded to the lanky, older male who appeared human, but Ely already caught the faint vibe of his demonic side, flickering in a light, abrasive rub over her psyche. Since becoming a Guardian, her sense receptors had amped up a lot more.

Ugh, she wasn’t on the job, and so she shut down on her mind shields for now. *There. The quiet’s so much better.*

“Aba?” Shadow called out, bypassing the cars tanking up on gas to where he’d stopped at the shop’s entrance. A smile broke free, lighting his lean features. “What are you doing here?” His dark gaze shifted to Ely. He glanced about, then back to Shadow. “Where’s your mate?”

“Busy.”

Aba frowned. “Shadow—”

“Stop worrying. You’re worse than Nik,” she grumbled, hugging him. “Aba, I’d like you to meet one of my dearest friends, Ely.” She eased back. “Ely, this is Aba, my protector, friend, and father.”

Wow, the girl sure could wheedle, and judging from the affectionate smile gracing the demon’s face, it worked, too.

Maybe Ely had handled her parents all wrong?

“Hello,” Ely said, extending a hand.

After a second’s hesitation, he shook hers. She couldn’t blame him. Demons were wary of the Guardians. *And* they were hunted by every species. However, unlike nearly all her Guardian brethren who had been imprisoned in Tartarus—a

place of horrific confinement and sadistic torture by their demon jailors—for failing to protect the goddess of life, she had no gripe against the species, except for those evil nuisances who hunted the innocent for their blood and souls.

Aba cast another quick look around the place. “Let’s go inside.”

He ushered them into the convenience store and nodded at the bearded human behind the counter. “Alan, I’ll be in the back for a bit.”

“Gotcha, boss. Will hold the fort,” he said, staring at her.

Ely hastily checked, making sure her angelic allure was tamped down. She pulled her slouchy beanie over her ears and low bun and followed Shadow through the back entrance into a room used as storage for the shop. Aba opened the inner door and stepped into a more homey space, shutting the heavy door behind them.

“Here.” Shadow handed him the Tupperware. “Cookies and muffins.”

“Thank you, child.”

Shadow trailed Aba into the small kitchen. Ely didn’t follow, her attention drawn to the flurry of noise and activities in the workshop opposite. Two Otium demons worked on the vehicles there, but beneath it all, a faint scent of anise and sandalwood teased her nose. Her heart pounded a tad too hard. Darn, this was his neighborhood, *his* territory, as he’d pointed out. Of course, he’d mark the place however he could. She rolled her eyes.

But watching the demons work on the car, a smile started. Man, she could seriously get Týr fired up if she left the Corvette here for a bit like she was giving it a do-over. She grinned evilly at the thought.

“Fuck!” a low, familiar voice distracted her, followed by a whiff of blood.

Without thought, Ely moved in a preternatural blur to an SUV with the hood popped. Rounded it—

Crap! It was him!

Nate looked up from examining his wrist, then gaped at her like she was his...worst nightmare? Yeah, he'd likely think so.

Ugh, he was irritatingly sexy, even clad in old, faded jeans with fraying pockets and a threadbare gray t-shirt that stretched over his muscular torso. And with his hair tied back, revealing the hard lines of his intractable jaw and the tiny black hoops he wore in his ears, yeah, she couldn't help but stare.

His casual get-up did nothing to mute his dangerously dark magnetism, and it wrapped around her, tugging her closer.

Then one corner of his sensual mouth kicked up in a smirk, putting the brakes on her careening thoughts. "Come to see if I'm still breathing, *laika?*"

"You're a mechanic?" she blurted.

Ugh, great save, Ely.

"There are vehicles, popped hoods, grease, oil..." He waved a hand at the place. "You figure it out, angel."

Damn male. But the sight of blood on his inner wrist distracted her. "Why aren't you healing?"

"Seems you hindered that ability," he said drily.

When she'd hurt him?

Guilt constricting her lungs, Ely grasped his hand and licked the small gash on his inner wrist—the coppery taste of blood flooded her tongue, along with the sensation of his powerful, warm wrist against her mouth, sending her thoughts spinning. At his sharp inhale, her head snapped up, her gaze clashing with his burning stare.

Crap! Ely scrambled around for an explanation. "My saliva heals," she said, fighting for a calm that had deserted her, so sure her thrashing heart would escape and run away. "Since it's my fault..." She lifted a shoulder in a careless shrug. "It's something my kind can do, so get over yourself."

Drawn as she was to him, she'd healed him without thinking, using the more intimate method, something she'd never done with anyone before. But she would never divulge *that* info to him.

His expression morphed to stony. "Why are you here?"

Oh, he was pissed now? Good, better than him tormenting her. "It's a workshop, open to the public, I believe," she said airily. "I have a Corvette, and I want the color changed."

"No." The nerve on his jaw pulsed as if it would pop. He rubbed his wrist down his jean-clad thigh. Wiping her touch away?

"Too late," she taunted, then lied through her teeth. "Aba already gave me the yes—"

"Nate?" Shadow's voice hauled Ely from yet another disaster she'd created like a slingshot.

Wait— "*What?*" she croaked, head snapping to her friend. "Who?"

"This is Nate," Shadow said, too distracted to notice Ely gaping like she'd been clocked in the head. "Remember, he saved me?" To Ely's nemesis, she said, "You wanted to see me?"

He watched Ely, his pissy mood gone. Amusement tinged his eyes, apparently enjoying her shock.

Vae. She'd never put the brother Shadow worshipped and this pain-in-her-butt and tormenter of her thoughts as one and the same person. Her heartbeat thundering in her ears, she stalked off, giving them their privacy. Heck, giving herself some much needed time to recover. She stomped into the living room and blew out a breath. *Urias*, she scrubbed her heated face with both hands—

"Are you all right?"

She looked up and found herself standing near the kitchen doorway. Aba shut the fridge door, watching her quietly. With the coppersy hint of Nate's blood still on her tongue, she

rubbed her mouth—yeah, like it would get rid of his taste. The low-grade heat that started earlier hiked in vengeance.

“Yes, I’m fine.” She forced a smile, feeling so out of her depth while trying to lower her body temperature, but nothing worked. “You should try the cookies. Shadow made them,” she blurted for something to say, hoping to break the ice with this reserved demon who was a father to Shadow and, obviously, Nate.

“You look a little...agitated. Would you like something to drink?” Aba asked her.

“Yes! Water, please.”

He removed a small bottle from the fridge and handed it to her.

“Thank you.” She unscrewed the cap and swallowed some of the cold liquid, washing away *his* taste and hoping to find a way to excavate his scent out of her neural pathways, too. Except, now, she recalled the warmth of his skin, the sensation of his wrist against her tongue—

Goddess, I’m losing my mind.

She gulped down the rest of the water with the finesse of a panting hound and set the bottle on the table.

Aba watched her for a second, then gave a little nod of acknowledgment. For what, she had no idea, her mind like a sieve. “Shadow did like baking when she lived with us,” he said, passing her into the living room, as if he couldn’t wait to leave. “Please...” He waved a hand to the couch. “Make yourself comfortable. I must get back to work.” And then he was gone, the inner door shutting behind him.

Ely walked into the living room but didn’t sit, too worked up to remain still. She picked up a car magazine from the stack on the coffee table and flipped through it. Then she glanced at the open door into the workshop—

No! She glued her attention back to the magazine again, but his low voice drifted to her as if determined to plague her. Darn, Ely shut her eyes, aware she was fighting a losing battle.

This was *sooo* bad.

CHAPTER 9



“NATE? WHAT IS IT?” Shadow asked, her soft voice taking on an anxious edge.

Nate dragged his gaze away from the empty doorway, rubbing his healed wrist where he’d accidentally scraped himself while working on the engine of the old SUV—the sensation of her soft lips, her *tongue* on his skin, gripping him by the balls. For a heart-stopping moment, she’d drawn him into a place of intense desire and burning need, making him forget his reality, and now his damn cock refused to ease the fuck up.

But Aba was his priority right now.

“I need your help.” He took the cloth lying on the grille and wiped the engine dirt from his hands, hiding his stiff dick. The last two days, he’d tried finding a safe refuge for his sire, but nothing panned out. Every damn place he knew, the fucking demons did, too, and finally, he’d resorted to calling Shadow.

“Are you hurt?” she demanded, her gaze rushing over him, searching for visible signs of injury.

He couldn’t blame her. The last time she’d seen him, many months ago, he’d just come out of a death fight, torn and bleeding. She’d also changed so much since then. It didn’t surprise him. Those fae symbionts he’d used to save her life years ago were known to cause changes.

He raised a hand, halting further questions. “Give me a sec. Guys,” he called out to the Otiums who worked at the

garage. “Wrap it up. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He didn’t want anyone privy to what he was about to ask.

He rubbed his abs, tracing the dressing on his side as his workers nodded at him and walked out. Whatever the little *laika* had given him for his gut wound worked, not as fast as he would have liked, but then he’d only used it once. At least it had stopped the infernal bleeding.

“It’s not me but Aba.” He glanced back to the entrance of the apartment, then at Shadow. “I need to get him to a safe place.”

“What?” Her eyes widened. “Christ, Nate, tell me what happened! I’m no longer a breakable human you need to protect, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“I’m aware. First, do you know of any such location?”

Hopefully, being mated to one of those Guardians, she did. Whether they would agree to protect a demon, their natural enemy, he wasn’t certain. But he’d get Aba to a safe place one way or another.

“I’m sure there is.”

He nodded. His expression hardening, he told her. “Demons are after him.”

“What? Did they hurt him?”

“A little. He’s fine now. I want him out of their sight, but any place *I* take him, they could probably track me. It’s why I need your help.”

“Why are they after him?” “He lives a quiet life.”

Nate tossed the rag aside. He didn’t want to worry her with the truth, especially with her being pregnant. He settled for, “I’m not sure. For whatever reason, they came after him. I want him safe, so I can concentrate on finding them.”

“Nate,” she began, and he knew he wasn’t gonna like what she’d say. “I could talk to Nik. He’ll make sure to find those demons—”

“No! This is my reprisal, my hunt for those daring to harm my sire.”

“Okay-okay.” She swallowed, both hands rubbing her flushed cheeks. “I will ask Nik about a safe place.”

“It’s all right, Shadow. I know of one,” a cool voice said.

And *she* was back to torment him.

Nate watched the female who could bring about his downfall if he wasn’t careful glide over to them in those ridiculously high-heeled boots. Every time he laid eyes on her, that innate attraction between them flared like lightning. No matter her sharp tongue she wielded like a weapon, he knew. And even with her pretty hair hidden under a slouchy black hat, she was a dream. But that was all she could ever be.

“Oh, thank God!” Shadow blurted to her friend. “Where is it—oh, I’m so sorry. This is Nate,” she said, seeming to forget she’d already given his name. “Nate, Ely’s one of my dearest friends.”

Ely.

Her name seeped into his soul like a gentle caress, and he had to restrain himself from rubbing his chest. He watched, waiting for striking eyes, the color of newly minted copper, to focus on him.

Instead, a light blush flared across her creamy pale cheeks, and he suspected why. Not five minutes ago, she had those sensual lips on his wrist, her tongue licking his skin.

Yeah, he was a bastard to enjoy her discomfort. However, he didn’t push his luck. Not when his sire’s life was on the line. “Where?” he asked. “And is it accessible to my kind?”

“Give me a minute.” She got out her cell and texted. “He’ll be here soon.”

“No!” he bit out sharply. “I don’t want anyone else, especially more of those Guardians involved in this.”

“I know.” She slipped her phone back into her coat pocket. “But they are the only ones who can keep him safe.”

“Will they, really?”

The flush which had faded reared up again at his acerbic tone. Yeah, she got his meaning.

“Nate.” Shadow touched his arm. “Please, don’t be upset with Ely. She only wants to help.”

Yes, she’d eventually proven herself, coming after him with the healing potions as reparation, licking his wrist wound better, attesting she had a moral compass, unlike him.

He bit off a growl at his hang-ups, gripped his nape with both hands, and prowled away. While he didn’t care about himself, he refused to put Aba in harm’s way. He stopped near his Charger as a tall, fair-headed male entered the workshop. Another immortal. The newcomer strode straight for Ely, throwing out all kinds of deadly, *don’t fuck with me* vibes.

“Reynner!” She smiled and flung her arms around him.

Nate narrowed his eyes, everything in him demanding he storm over and haul her away from the male, *aaand* he was already stalking toward her. *Shit*. He forced himself to slow down.

“What are you doing in this part of town, Ely?” he asked as she stepped back, adjusting her beanie.

“In case you’ve forgotten, I am a Guardian.” She rolled her eyes. “This is Shadow, mate to Nik, another Guardian. And that’s Nate,” Ely flicked her thumb his way. “Shadow’s brother.”

Shadow greeted him, and the male nodded. Nate halted, standing closer to Ely than he should have.

And eyes like navy daggers nailed Nate.

Nate folded his arms over his chest and stared right back.

Ely cut Nate a frowny glare. “This is my *brother*, Reynner,” she told him, then to the brother, “Reyn, please, we need your help.”

“Look,” Shadow said, cutting through the tension and pressing a hand to her pregnant belly. “Aba needs help. I’ll do

anything for him and Nate to be safe.” Man, she made him sound like some halfwit who couldn’t find his cock from his ass. “They helped me when no one else would. I owe them my life.”

After several seconds, Ely’s brother inclined his head. “Very well. There is one such place.” His flat stare met Nate’s. “Meet me at Central Park, near the lake, at dusk. Just one thing about Exilum, stick to its rules. It’s a peaceful realm. Or you’ll leave faster than you entered.”

Jaw clenched, Nate remained silent. He didn’t like asking these holier-than-thou immortal asses for help, but he didn’t have a choice.

“Thank you,” Shadow said, voice husky with gratitude, and Reynner inclined his head. “It means a lot to us. Now to convince Aba to leave.” She exhaled deeply.

Hell, Nate seconded the sentiment. He knew his sire.

As if summoned, Aba poked his head out through the doorway, his brow pulling into a frown.

“Aba?” Shadow hurried over, hooked her arm through his, and escorted him to them.

At his dark stare, yeah, Aba knew what they were about, and he wasn’t happy. Nate caught bits of Shadow’s explanation to his sire, encouraging him to go. And Ely, though she watched Shadow and Aba, she fidgeted with the hat hiding her hair, tucking in a pale strand. Was she nervous? Because big brother was around?

“Nate?” Aba’s terse tone conveyed his displeasure. “I cannot leave—”

“Then I’ll have to come and check on you every day,” Shadow said. “And it will have the Guardians crawling around this place.”

Aba cast her a frustrated glance.

“Besides,” she added, her expression suddenly cool as fuck. “Your word is a promise.”

“A promise?” Aba’s eyebrows tipped together now. “I didn’t make any promise.”

“Yes, you did,” she countered. “I might not know your real name, but you’ve apologized to me for when I got hurt years ago right here, so that puts you in my debt. Then you *thanked* me not too long ago. Again, a no-no for one such as me.”

“What?” His eyebrows tipped in confusion.

“I am part Fae, Aba.” Shadow nonchalantly tucked her dark hair behind her ears, revealing the pointed tips. “A *demonic Fae. Words are binding.*”

“Shadow, all I did was thank you for the *cookies*,” Aba grumbled.

“You weren’t specific. So it puts you in my debt.” She gave a little shrug. “I don’t want these things I have inside me”—she waved a hand over her chest—“to cause havoc, exacting payment for broken promises. You should know I’m a little more dangerous now that I have my unborn baby to protect.”

Aba grunted as if to anchor his frustration, then his gaze settled on Shadow’s belly, and his shoulders slumped. “Very well. I will pack. Just so you know, I dislike being coerced, but it’s for a few days only. I’m not leaving the garage unattended for long.”

Once Aba disappeared into the house, Shadow blew out a relieved breath.

“Are those things about the Fae true?” Ely asked her.

Smiling, Shadow took a red candy from her coat pocket, unwrapped and popped it into her mouth. “No idea. I read it on a social media meme. Could be true, though, considering all the things I’ve done.”

Ely laughed. “I remember.”

By the dark gods, seriously? Shadow had smoothly played his sire, getting what she wanted, not that Nate was complaining. But the sound of Ely’s light laughter stirred his senses like a flash of sunlight.

“Let me go check on Aba.”

As Shadow hustled off, Nate’s gaze lingered on Ely, tracing the lines of her lovely face. While he might have his hang-ups—hell, life had shown him nothing good was freely given—but the way she’d readily stepped up to find a safe place for his sire made the bolted organ in his chest thump hard. Hell, this female was like a drug to his system, and he had no idea if he could ever wean himself off her.

However, he was aware, too, of the glacial stare from her brother, pinning Nate as if he were something that had crawled out of the gutter.

He hardened his expression. No matter his own internal war, no one dictated his life—

Pain shattered through his skull, like claws raking, as his beast stirred. Shit. Nate clamped down on his molars as if he could ever forget the fucker. Or the reminder that he was never alone, and never would be.

“Reynner, thank you for doing this,” Ely said, dragging her brother’s rabid focus off him.

“We need to talk.” His features rigid, the male ushered Ely out of the workshop. No doubt to warn her about the blackhearted demon lusting after her. Nate snorted.

Yeah, he wouldn’t be wrong.

* * *

“Reynner, would you stop with the threatening looks,” Ely grumbled the moment they stopped a short distance from the workshop entrance.

He folded his arms over his chest, the weak winter sun casting a gold glint in his silvery pale hair. “You are my sister. Get used to it.”

Vae. Ely shook her head, trying to find her center of calm, one she’d perfected over the millennia, and failed. All of it was Nate’s darn fault, with those caressing stares. But she

wasn't going to bring *that* up with her brother currently looking like he'd gut Nate.

“Reyn, you helped my best friend, gave her peace of mind, and for that, I'm eternally grateful. And yes...” She rolled her eyes. “I know he's a demon, but he's like a father to Shadow —”

“It's not the older demon who concerns me,” he muttered. “But the other one.”

Urias. Ely bit back a groan. “Trust me when I tell you nothing will happen there.” All *he* wanted was a quick fuck, which still pissed her off.

Reynner searched her face with narrowed eyes as if seeking out the truth, then he gave a terse nod. “Very well. I need to get back to my mate. I'll see you soon, right?”

“Yep. Or out on the street during patrol,” she teased.

“Don't remind me,” he grumbled.

She laughed and gave him a quick hug. He was her big brother, and she loved him. The stars knew she'd missed him for all those millennia he'd been gone from Empyrea.

Reynner stepped back and dematerialized with barely a stir of the late noon air.

Ely wandered into the silent workshop and slowed her steps. Nate was alone, working under the popped hood of the SUV.

Exhaling softly, trying not to be aware of him, she walked past.

Warm, calloused fingers snagged her wrist, stopping her, and her heart leaped to her throat as those flame-like topaz eyes met hers. “What?”

“Thanks.”

Well! He could have knocked her over with a feather. She didn't think the word featured in his lexicon. “I did it for Shadow.”

“I know.”

“Is there something else?” It was an effort to keep her voice even as his thumb stroked her inner wrist.

“Aren’t you going to ask me if I’m healed, and I don’t mean my wrist?”

Heat scorched her cheeks. “You’re standing, fixing an automobile. I assume you’re fine.”

“Stubborn.” A hint of a smile now. His gaze shifted to her head. “Why do you hide your hair?”

“What?”

Before her mind could grasp the change in conversation, he removed her beanie with his free hand. Her bun trembled free, escaping the hairgrip, and her hair cascaded down her back.

“What are you doing?” she rasped as he pocketed her things.

He snagged a ribbon of her hair and gently wrapped the long length around his finger. “They’re like rays of moonbeams...shouldn’t be hidden.”

With a soft sigh seemingly dragged from the depths of him, he lowered his head and trailed his nose along her jaw like he did on the rooftop, breathing her in and stirring her fickle body to hyperawareness. “The way you smell makes me lose my mind—”

“Then stop touching and sniffing me.”

“It’s like asking me to stop breathing.”

Her heart stuttered at his words.

He lifted his head, a rawness to his intense stare. “These two days of not seeing you, time became endless...” Dark laughter. Yet Ely sensed it was more at himself. “You shouldn’t be anywhere near something like me, yet every time you’re close, I want to lay you bare and lick you from your lush mouth to your doubtless pretty toes, and lose myself in this chimera you torment me with glimpses of.”

His husky words were a spark to her shaky emotions, igniting a need from deep within as embers of a long-dormant desire unfurled. But what he said troubled her. “What do you mean, *something like you?*”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he kissed her inner wrist, the sensation of his lips tightening every nerve endings as desire stirred—

“Ely?” Shadow called out, shattering the bubble enclosing them.

Ely blinked, hurtling back to where they were, behind the popped hood of the SUV.

Nate shut his eyes briefly, then let her go, his expression smoothed back to impassive. He rounded the open hood.

She sagged against the SUV grille, struggling to get herself together, his words a haunting echo in her mind.

Something like me.

Why would he say that about himself?

“Is Aba ready?” his voice drifted to her. No sign of the male who seemed so torn moments ago.

“Yes,” Shadow murmured. “Nate?” she said then, her voice edged with worry, and Ely stilled. “Please be careful. I’m scared for you. The last time you were hurt so badly—”

“I’ll be fine,” he brushed it off. “I’ll text you once Aba’s back.”

Something had happened to him? Hurriedly, Ely smoothed her hair and joined them, keeping space between her and Nate. Because proximity wasn’t good with this dangerous pull between them.

Shadow bit her lip and glanced at Ely, then back at Nate.

“Hey.” He touched her arm, his expression softening, something Ely had never seen on a hard male like him. “I’ll be all right.”

The walls around Ely’s heart trembled. She wanted that tenderness directed at her...so much.

Shadow exhaled, then reluctantly nodded.

Nate pivoted, and as he passed Ely, he slid his hands into his jeans pockets. But the hooded stare he cast her caused her stomach to pitch. Ely watched him go, her beanie peeking out from his back pocket. Oh, crap! She hoped Shadow hadn't seen it. She didn't want her friend drawn into whatever this thing was between her and Nate. He disappeared behind the popped SUV hood and started working on the engine again.

Her emotions all over the place, Ely turned to Shadow. "Let's go."

Minutes later, they reformed on the castle portico as evening approached, absorbing what remained of the weak sunlight. Ely crossed to the massive front door.

"Ely, wait—" Shadow grasped her hand, and she knew what was coming. "How do you know Nate?"

And there it was.

Stalling, Ely tucked a breeze-blown lock of hair behind her ear and settled for, "I ran into him during patrol."

"Oh, no." Anxiety flickered across Shadow's expressive face. "Was he, was he...?"

With other demons? Ely didn't want to add more to Shadow's worries, so she shrugged. "He was being a pain in my ass, trying to *save* me from a demon fight."

Shadow blinked, then her mouth dropped open. "*Ohhh.*"

Heat scorched Ely's cheeks as understanding dawned on her friend's face. "It wasn't like *that*," she said quickly. "He didn't know I was a Guardian."

"Yeah? I was there once, too," Shadow murmured, pushing back her hood, a smile starting. "Denying it all because, well, Nik was overwhelming. And Nate is kind of the same, too. And just as hard, perhaps worse."

Ely groaned, rubbing her burning face. Maybe she should fall face-first in the snow-covered grass to cool off then this conversation would be over.

“Hey, I’m okay with whatever it is between you.” Shadow patted her back affectionately. “It’s your life, your business. Besides, I’d be the last one to say anything. I mean, I have demon blood in me, and Nik loves me, regardless.”

“I know.”

“And,” she said softly, “You were always there for me in my darkest days. You didn’t leave even when I went after that terrifying demon, Mammon. If there’s anything I can do for you, even if it’s to talk, I’m here.”

It was pointless to deny these stirring feelings for Nate. The moment their eyes met on the warehouse rooftop, a connection had formed. As much as she tried to shut him out or keep her distance, he consumed her thoughts.

“I don’t know what this is, Shadow,” she said, pressing a hand to her unsettled belly. “It’s all so confusing. I mean, I’m thousands of years old. I’ve met males I liked, but I felt nothing deeper for them. Why him? Why now?”

“You’ll figure it out,” Shadow murmured in a comforting tone. “C’mon, it’s too cold out here.” She opened the door and disappeared inside.

Slowly, Ely followed. There was nothing to figure out. No matter the attraction between her and Nate, he was too steeped in whatever he was embroiled in. And even if he weren’t, it would never work between them. She wanted a forever mate who belonged to her and her alone. And Nate could never be that for her.

CHAPTER 10



IN THE EARLY hours of the morning, Ely made her way up an alley in the seedier backstreets of the Bowery, the icy air soothing the heat wave sweeping through her. Except for a tussle between two Otium demons over some human female they crushed on, the night was quiet.

Her thoughts slid back to Nate, and she shook her head. Darn, demon. He'd known from the start who *she* was and hadn't said anything about his connection to Shadow.

She halted in the shadows of the warehouse opposite the garage and studied the quiet filling station. There was no activity in the darkened upstairs apartment, which meant Nate wasn't in. He must have shut down the place while Aba was away.

Probably a good idea so humans wouldn't get caught in any backlash. But she needed to find out and prepare for whatever those blights from the Dark Realm were after before the situation detonated. It meant talking to Nate. And that foolish organ in her chest took off like a galloping horse.

Exhaling, Ely dematerialized to an alley near Club Anarchy, the nightspot, one of the places he frequented. People lingered outside despite the freezing weather, tipsy laughter erupting from a group as they clambered into a cab and departed.

Tagg wasn't there, and a human bouncer guarded the entrance. Ely held his gaze when he glanced at her, compelling him to let her inside. Heck, it was far easier with demon

bouncers. They knew who the Guardians were and raised no fuss. Humans? A whole other situation since they could never know about otherworldly beings living in their realm.

She bypassed the knot of humans gathered in the dimly lit corridor and stopped on the landing of the split-level club. Music blasted, assaulting her sensitive ears, and she grimaced, shutting out the noise. Colored smoke and laser lights doused the dance floor and its jittery patrons as she scanned the place for Nate, trying not to think about the last time she was here when she saw him with the human male. Still, her stomach churned, and her grip tightened on the guardrail as she reached the crowd—

“Who are you hunting this time?” a low voice whispered in her ear, the silky strands of unbound hair brushing her cheek. Even in this place with its blizzing lights, multiple odors, and thick crowd, her senses and body instinctively recognized him. And the somersaulting sensation in her belly erupted in a fluttering riot.

Ely wheeled around and found herself caged as Nate grasped the steel balustrade on either side of her, her gaze clashing with his amused one. Dressed casually in a black leather coat, button-down dress shirt, and jeans, he was gorgeous and dangerously tempting.

Oh boy. Needing space, so she could breathe and not sound like a landed fish, she leaned back, her spine pressing against the handrail. “We need to talk.”

“Ah, so it’s me you stalk, then?” A tiny smirk tugged a corner of his mouth. “What is it you seek, *laika*.”

“My name’s Ely—”

“I know.”

“Nate, stop,” she hissed. “This is serious.”

“And she finally says my name, even if it is through clenched teeth.” The smirk morphed into a genuine smile. “Very well.” He grasped her hand and headed downstairs to the dance level. Humans and a few demons parted, probably sensing the peril amidst them.

He pulled her along to the jam-packed dance floor and drew her into his arms.

“Wh-what are you doing?” She pressed her palms against his chest.

“Dancing while you talk.”

“Are you sure you want this discussed here, with demons possessing heightened hearing?” She frowned at him. But being so close, his warm, masculine scent with the dark undertones of woodsmoke enclosed her. Unable to stop herself, Ely slid her hands up his hard chest to his shoulders.

He watched her beneath ridiculously long lashes, then shrugged. “Don’t care who hears me. If they come after me, I’ll kill them.”

Stars! Did nothing scare him?

“What about those who threatened your sire?” she countered.

“He’s safe. The rest I can handle.”

He’d somehow managed to get her to move with him in a slow dance, and now she was hyper-aware of his arms banded around her waist, his hard body pressed against hers, along with the part that made him all male. She swallowed. “Who—” She cleared her throat. “Who’s after you?”

He lowered his brow to hers, his long silky hair cocooning them. “Plan to keep me safe, *laika*?”

Despite the desire coiling in her core for this intractable demon, she refused to let him sidetrack her. “The Bowery is my area of patrol, and the people there are under my protection. I need to know what I could face.”

“Ah. Then it would put me under your protection, too, hmm?”

What? Ely hastily scanned him, letting her senses coast over his psyche... His dark prickling aura brushed hers—

Suddenly she found herself flung out, and she jerked back, gaping at him in shock.

He sighed. “Don’t do that, *laika*.”

Heat singed her cheeks that he felt her mental trespass. She had no idea what she thought she’d find. He was a demon, and he’d been teasing her as usual.

“I’m a Guardian. It’s my job,” she said, covering up her embarrassment.

He shook his head, his gaze drifting over her face to settle on her lips. “Do you know what I truly want?”

“Probably what you can’t have,” she retorted because she wanted the same thing, too.

He husked out a laugh. “True.”

His lips brushed hers in the lightest of touches, and her breath caught. She’d been kissed before, back on Empyrea, but this... A mere touch of his mouth and every nerve tensed in anticipation.

He lifted his head, eyes glittering like flames igniting. His stare on hers, his fingers slowly slid to her neck, cupping her nape. Ely realized he was giving her a chance to pull back, but she didn’t. Maybe, just maybe, this would reroute her mind and achy body back to normal. Stars, she hoped so.

Then his mouth glided over hers again, lightly sucking her top lip as if savoring her, then licking her lower one before his tongue slid into her mouth, caressing hers in a kiss so sensual, her entire world shifted on its axis.

Nate kissed her as if he couldn’t get enough of her, as if he was starving.

And her shaky control shattered. With a soft moan, she kissed him back, her fingers tangling in his hair. His arms tightened around her, every hard inch of him aligning almost perfectly, his cock a rigid bar pressed between her thighs, causing a wave of need to flood her. He kissed her deeply. Possessively. Surrounding her with his scent and warmth. All she felt was him, and she wanted more...

The ramping beat of music and drums exploded. Ely reared back, panting for air, her mind crashing back to reality

and to where she was. In the club. Her body was plastered to his, her fingers tangled in his hair, in a place where any of the Guardians could have walked in and seen them kissing.

Burning topaz eyes held hers with a hunger that had her gulping lungfuls of air. “This...this shouldn’t have happened.”

She’d hoped a kiss would get rid of this attraction like it had with others, but all it did was make her want him more. *Goddess, I’m such a fool.*

With her mind in turmoil, her body taut with unfulfilled desire, she took off, unable to handle all these new feelings consuming her.

“Ely, wait!”

She ignored Nate’s growl, pushing through the jam-packed bodies on the dance floor and sprinting up the stairs for the exit. Outside the club, she hurried past the waiting revelers, then moved at preternatural speed until she put a fair distance between herself and the nightclub. She stumbled into a recessed warehouse doorway, gulping lungfuls of icy air—

“Ely, I know you’re here!”

Shit! She spun around, chest heaving from her mad sprint, and found Nate filling the tiny space.

“Dammit, Ely. Show yourself.”

She looked down and found only shadows. *Oh...* She’d let herself become one with the gloom. Inhaling a shaky breath, she took corporeal form.

“Why did you run?” A nerve pulsed on his jaw.

“Because I came to you with questions, and-and this happened.” She flicked her finger between them, his tormenting scent making her want to crawl back into him. “I kissed you in full view of everyone!”

“So? You want me, and I want you.”

“And then what?”

His brow lowered. “Why must there be a *then what?*”

Of course, he'd say that. Self-deprecating laughter escaped her. "Well, being who you are, it's a fair question."

"Who I am?" His eyes narrowed. "You mean a demon?"

"No—I mean, yes—gods!"

"Right." His features hardened. "I'm a bit slow on the take when it comes to you, *laika*, but I get you. Guess this genus I am is too far beneath your angelic feet." He stepped back. "Go. I won't trouble you again."

Urias! This was going all wrong. "That's not what I meant at all," she bit out in frustration. "I meant I am a *Guardian! Vae—*" She rubbed her burning face with both hands. "I don't even know what I'm doing anymore..." She lifted her troubled gaze to his, and his expression softened a little. "Nate—"

Icy prickles slid down her spine. Ely stilled, all her senses on alert. Nate pivoted to stare into the alley.

A whiff of sulfur with a hint of metal burned her nose. A trace of fresh blood tainted the night air. Blood demons! Those vermin from the Dark Realm were back and hunting prey. Dammit. *She* should have been out on the street, saving the innocent. Instead, she was kissing Nate, caught up in a whirlwind of emotions that had snuck up on her.

A low growl escaped Nate.

He recognized those odors, too? Ely pushed past him, out of the recessed entrance, sensing the other Guardians taking form nearby. "I have to go."

"I'll help."

"No!" She wheeled around, almost crashing into him, and pressed her palm to his chest. She didn't want him anywhere near this. "Don't. The Guardians—"

"Got it," he cut her off, his mouth tightening. "You don't want to be seen with me."

"Nate, stop. Gods!" She exhaled, her gaze darting to the alley as the faint sounds of fighting grew, the need to get moving, pulling at her. "I can't do this now. I have to go. This is my area of patrol."

At the shuttered look in his topaz eyes, Ely felt like a brick had lodged in her chest. She swallowed, wishing she could stay and explain things to Nate. But if she didn't turn up, there would be questions. She took off in preternatural speed toward the ruckus.

Later, she'd talk to him.

* * *

Nate remained in the shadows, watching Ely disappear into the frigid night, mouth tight. It stung that she didn't want to be seen with him because of what he was.

Hell, a sane part of him knew a moment was all it could ever be between them because he wasn't just a demon but something worse. He should leave, forget this doomed attraction. Instead, he flashed to the roof of the building above the fracas taking place in a dead-end alley.

Two males clad in black. One he recognized as Shadow's mate and another with a glint of blue hair he'd seen before, but his gaze latched on Ely's tall, lithe form. Her long, pale braided hair gleamed beneath the moon, flying like a whip as she fought. They swiftly demolished the lowlifes. But the two humans the bastards had fed on lay unmoving near a huge metal dumpster.

The smell of blood had the beast pacing beneath his skin, talons stabbing at his mind. His jaw clenched.

A familiar odor of burned spice stung his nose, snapping his senses to high alert. Nate tracked the acrid sensation to the eaves of a warehouse, two buildings from the fight, and he blurred across. Derrodus had been so intent on watching the deadly battle, he didn't even notice Nate. Pain and anger propelling him, he grabbed the demon, flashed to another building still under construction a fair distance away, and flung the fucker to the cement.

"What did you do?" he snapped, standing over Derrodus, hands clenched so he wouldn't kill the bastard. "You let your horde drain humans?"

The beast shoved at his mind shields. *Kiiillll*, the sibilant hiss reverberated through his skull. *Wantsss blood!*

“Not my problem if they’re so frail.” Derrodus rolled to his feet, crimson eyes glowing in annoyance. “I needed a fix, I took it.”

“You brought the fucking Guardians into this! They’ve massacred your pals! Now they’ll be tracking us!”

“They’re expendable, too. But I got what I wanted.” He smirked, revealing bloodstained fangs, triggering Nate’s fury.

“Did you send those cretins after my sire two nights ago?”

“I have better things to do than go after a servant—”

Nate smashed his fist into the asshole’s face. Derrodus yowled and stumbled back, blood dripping from his broken nose. “Have a care when you speak of my sire!”

Snarling, Derrodus flung a hellfire bolt. Nate ducked, then he dove, grabbing the cretin by his neck—his hands morphing to black scales and gnarled fingers—his deadly talons shooting out and burrowing into Derrodus’ throat.

“If you’re here for the female Guardian, not happening. I will rip out your spine and hand it to you if one hair on her is touched. You get me?” Derrodus gurgled, his clawed hands digging into Nate’s wrist, fighting for release. But Nate just tightened his grip, talons plowing further into his gullet. “Did you put up the bounty for her capture?”

“No,” Derrodus choked out, a tinge of wariness flashing in his eyes.

Nate flung him away, fingers ripping free.

The demon hit the support pillar and straightened, his broken nose and torn neck healing instantly, loathing turning his irises a coagulated red. “She’s not worth the trouble. I like my females easy. Would stay and chat at how glorious human blood tastes,” he taunted, “but I have things to do for *my* sire. And you’d do well to remember all my sire’s *slaves* don’t last long.” He disappeared in a puff of agitating black smoke.

Fucking dimwit!

Growling, Nate prowled the cement floor, breathing harshly. The bastard was here for Ely because the little shit never gave up, no matter his denial. Hell, he carried the same covetousness bloodline as his wretched sire, Azgor.

He fought for calm, but nothing worked. His talons and scaly hands remained. His beast side roiled too close to the surface. Pain pierced his head like shards, stretching his mind shields thin. Fuck! Nate grunted, hands clenching, his lethal claws driving through his palms and coming out on the other side, so sure he'd split in two with the monster fighting for dominance.

The problem was that both he and the beast possessed strong wills, neither giving way for control. No matter his torment, he would never allow the change to occur—

Spikes of agony shot through his skull, rendering him immobile for a second.

Fuck off. He slammed the thought through his mind. *This is my fucking body—mine!*

A low sibilant hiss ricocheted inside his head. *Minesss, too!*

His jaw clenched. He forced himself to relax his hands, allowing his palms to heal. The beast was growing stronger. And deep within, Nate knew the time would come when his monstrous side could win.

I'd sooner die than let that occur!

Too wound up, he continued prowling, bypassing the bags of cement, timber, and whatnot, and found himself at the scaffolding. He stood there, his attention riveted to the now quiet alley and where Ely was.

She moved around like a beam of light in all the darkness. Hades, he longed for some of those rays in his endless night. For a brief moment, he forgot the shitfest that was his life and went after her. But there was no future with one like him.

A spasm of pain flooded his spine, radiating outward into his breastbone and up to his skull. Nate grunted, slamming a

palm on a support pillar. He needed to feed and get the fucker to give him a moment of peace, no matter how transient it was.

With one last look at Ely, he flashed to the seedy backstreet near Club Nocte. Movement at the alley mouth caught his attention. A tall figure with flowing tawny hair ambled toward him, a female hanging onto his arm. Despite the human glamour, Nate picked up on what lay concealed.

Fae.

These assholes, unlike demons, kept their activities tightly cloaked from the Guardians.

The male sauntered past Nate with all the arrogance of his kind, like he owned the damn world, his gaze doing an up-down of Nate.

Yeah, he'll do.

Nate leaned against the building, a foot braced on the wall, hiding his elongated talons and morphed hands against his thighs. He waited.

“Stay here,” the fae commanded, and the woman sighed and sagged against the wall.

He strolled over, his dark eyes sliding languorously over Nate as if he had the hots for him. A ruse that had probably worked often for the asshole.

“What’s your name, lover?”

Nate eyed him coolly. He might be eons younger, but he wasn’t new to this game or how these dickheads rolled. His name would tie him forever to this pointy-eared fucker, as if he didn’t have enough shit going on in his life. “You have a female.”

“Yes.” The fae’s mouth tipped up into a little smile. “I like variety.” His eyes flashed an eerie silver, blinding Nate for a second, throwing him off guard, and nearly snagging his mind. It would have worked, if Nate didn’t have the detestable symbionts blocking any unwanted mental intrusion.

“Tell me,” the fae crooned, eyes settling back to ebony.

A damn dark fae.

“You dicks never learn, do you?” Nate lunged, plunging his talons into the fae’s chest and ramming him against the opposite brick wall. Confusion and fury replaced the fae’s smug demeanor, his human glamour fading, revealing the ethereal creature with an aura as black as his eyes. Perfect.

“You feel different,” the fae breathed. “What are you?”

“Your vilest nightmare. Set the female free. Or I will kill you.” Nate twisted his talons, drilling his point home.

Grunting, the fae turned his head. Whatever he did, the girl gasped. The moment she hightailed it out of there, Nate moved closer, and the fae smirked. He didn’t seem to care that Nate could behead him with his claws alone. So, the bastard liked pain?

Nate let his mouth hover close to his prey’s, allowing his beast side to emerge a little.

The fae’s leer vanished. His eyes widened in horror, unable to move as Nate trapped him with a stare alone and started siphoning on that emotion, satiating his ravenous symbiont. The malevolent creature within him stilled its agonizing clawing of his mind and feasted on the fae’s terror instead...

* * *

As the last demon disintegrated and seeped into the ground, Ely palmed her glaive and glanced around, chest heaving. She found Aethan scanning the now quiet area.

“I’ll go check the surroundings, do a recon, see if any more are lurking,” she said quickly before he did. She couldn’t sense Nate around, but if he was, and Aethan found him—they’d consider him a part of the hordes currently attacking humans and kill him. And *that* she refused to let happen.

“All right.” Aethan nodded and joined Nik, who crouched near the dead humans.

“The Arc’s going to lose his shit,” Nik muttered. “Two victims tonight.”

Aethan squatted next to him as Nik took several snapshots. Ely cast a quick look at the drained bodies, their faces ravaged and their jugulars ripped out. Deeply carved in each victim’s forehead were several slashes. It could be an initial, but she wasn’t sure with all that gore.

“It looks like an M or N,” Aethan murmured, and Ely frowned. “Can’t have the human authorities getting an inkling that otherworldly beings caused this.” They both rose to their feet.

A white flare rolled out of Aethan’s palm, and his deadly power of whitefire swept through the bodies, turning them to ash within seconds. These humans would become another statistic of unexplained disappearances in their world. *But not for us.* This was now the Guardians’ business. Humans died on *her* watch...

While I was with Nate.

Remorse tracked bile up her throat. She pressed her fingertips to her temple to ease the throb of guilt pulsing there. Then she remembered how she and Nate parted ways earlier, and her stomach knotted. She had to find him and put things right.

Ely dematerialized and coasted through the Bowery, searching for him...

Her senses locked onto Nate’s licorice and woodsmoke scent, and she reformed in a narrow, dingy alley. Two steps in, and she stumbled to a halt. A burst of pain shot through her chest, strangling the air in her lungs. Not an hour had passed since he kissed her as if she were all he wanted, and now he was locking lips with another.

It took several moments before she could shut off the hurt corroding her insides like acid and strode across to him. “We need to talk,” she said in a low, cold voice.

His head snapped her way, topaz eyes burning...with passion? For the guy? Well, fine. She didn’t care.

Nate pushed the man aside, and he slumped against the wall, a lustful expression on his face, looking like he was ready to go all the way. And cool as hell, as if he just hadn't mouth-fucked some male, Nate stalked over and grasped her arm.

She yanked free. "Don't touch me."

"Not here," he growled.

Her gaze flicked back to the male, another immortal. One of the Fae, judging from his pointed ears and pale complexion. "You can go back to your boyfriend in a minute. This won't take long—*eeek!*" She squeaked as he hauled her to him and flashed.

The moment they reappeared on squishy ground, she slammed her palms on his chest, shoving away. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"You're a Guardian. What do you think will happen when I speak to you in a place which is a hotbed for demon activity?" he demanded. "And just so we're clear, you didn't want to be seen with me. So, much safer here, isn't it?"

Her brow creased. "What?"

"Back in the alley when your friends arrived?"

"It wasn't about that at all!" she snapped, struggling to keep a lid on her anger and sense of betrayal.

"It damn well was! I'm a demon, so I doubtless rank among the sewer rats with you and your Guardians pals. Is that why you kissed me back, to taste the dark side and tangle with some dangerous lowlife?" His cold eyes swept over her face. "Don't worry, Ely, message received. I might not be on your level, but I refuse to be ashamed of what I am."

"What?" Her jaw dropped, reeling in shock at his bitter words. "I don't see you that way. Or even the Otiums who live in this world. And I don't hate demons. I asked you not to accompany me because I didn't want the guys to think you were a part of the blood demon horde had they seen you there."

His expression remained stony, fangs digging into his lower lip.

“Nate...” She took a step closer, but his arms stayed folded over his chest, keeping her at bay. “When you get angry, your fangs appear like they are right now. And I know my fellow warriors, had they seen us together, they would have likely made you mad. You are Shadow’s kin. I don’t want any friction to arise and have her agitated in her condition.”

This close, his warmth and taunting male scent enfolded her, reminding her of the kiss they’d shared. But fast on its heels followed images of him with the fae. Pain resurged, harder now. Ely retreated several steps away from him, boots sinking into the soft snow, inhaling lungfuls of icy air—

A flood of heat swept through her, and she rubbed her sweaty palms down her leathers. Dragging in another shaky breath, she blinked, finally taking in the sheer whiteness surrounding them, her attention locking on the small log cabin with a sloped roof snuggled between tall pine trees. “Where are we?”

“The Adirondacks,” he said, tone quieter now, his fangs no longer visible. “You’re right. I would have lost my shit with those males. What did you want to speak to me about?”

And still, he didn’t explain about the fae.

Well, she had some pride left. She wasn’t going to ask. It was better if she focused on what she’d signed up to do. Her job. Shutting it all out, Ely faced him once more. “Those humans in the alley are dead. Drained. They had slash marks on their brows.” She flicked a hand to her forehead. “An initial like an N.”

His eyes narrowed. “Are you accusing me?”

“No.” She knew he’d been with her at the time. “I want to know who’s after you. Because that initial is either to distract us from finding them or setting you as a target. Which is it?”

He slipped his clenched hands into his jeans pockets. “Don’t let it trouble you. I know who it is. Someone who likes pissing me off.”

“By killing humans?” she snapped. “It’s now the Guardians’ problem. We’ll be tracking them.” She stepped back to dematerialize.

“Ely, wait.” His hand shot out, but he didn’t touch her.

She skewered him with a flat stare. “Why?”

He didn’t say anything for a second, then... “This place.” He waved his hand to the cabin. “Aba built it several years ago to escape the rat race. I use it most times. Ely, the Fae I was with just now, it isn’t for what you think.”

Her breath caught. “Then why?”

“It’s...complicated.”

“How is it complicated? All you have to do is explain.”

His expression shut down. “I can’t.”

Her stomach sank. He couldn’t make it any clearer where he stood on the subject of them. *Them?* Gods! They weren’t even together, except for that one heart-shattering kiss.

This was all on her because *she’d* gotten caught up in feelings so new, they overwhelmed her, making her forget for a moment who she was, and why they could never be.

“It doesn’t matter. Not my business, anyway. Since you won’t tell me about the dangers we could face, goodbye.”

“Did you know they steal humans and take them to the fae realm?” he asked, stopping her from dematerializing.

“What?”

“I stopped him my way and prevented the abduction. Like demons, they do the same shit, too, except they’re smarter at how they go about it, using their glamoured persona and magnetic draw. Ely, you and me—”

“Don’t.” She flung up a hand, heart thrashing wildly at the switch in conversation. “There is no you and me.” He’d made that very clear. “We are two people whose paths crossed unexpectedly. I kill your kind, and you try to annihilate the Guardians.”

“Right...” His mouth tightened, but something dark shifted in those scorching topaz depths, then the fiery streaks grew subdued, leaving them bleak. “Light and dark, there is no mixing of that, is there, *laika*?”

The hurt she tried hard to block out seeped free again. He shoved back his unbound hair, the silvery moonlight highlighting the taut lines of his handsome face. But the dried smears of blood on his hand snagged her attention. “You were in a fight?”

He ignored that. “Remember what I said about the demon after you.” His gaze skimmed her face once more, then he was gone, leaving her alone in the vast, snowy whiteness and tall trees.

Frustrated by Nate’s locked-door attitude, Ely glared at the spot where he’d been. Everyone was entitled to their secrets, but Nate used his to put a mile-high wall around himself. Damn difficult male!

Scowling, she dematerialized back to the Bowery, reforming in a backstreet—

She stumbled, another wave of heat sweeping through her. She flung out a hand, bracing against the brick wall of a warehouse, gulping in massive amounts of icy air. Her knees shook, and her entire being felt as if a brazier had lit within her.

Dammit! She fumbled open the buttons on her coat and fanned herself with the open fronts, her irritation growing. She didn’t have time for this. Whatever this indisposition was, she hoped it cleared up fast. Emphyreans didn’t get sick. Ever!

She had to find and deal with the demon cur who hunted her before Michael heard about it and stuck her with babysitters. Ugh, a frustrated groan escaped her. She wiped her sweat-dampened face on the hem of her t-shirt and pushed away from the wall, trudging out of the alley.

Nate must have an inkling of who it was.

Ugh. Right now, she needed to find a way to cool the hell down because her ability to regulate her body temperature

appeared to be on hiatus! Tomorrow, when she was in a better frame of mind and body, she'd go after that intractable demon and get answers!

CHAPTER 11



SPORADIC RAYS of late afternoon sunlight flickered through the window, bathing the castle living room with intermittent brightness. Soft voices drifted to Ely. Curled in an armchair, she paid no heed to her friends or the open book on her lap. However, she did turn a page so as not to draw attention to herself.

It was difficult enough dealing with her escalating heat problem, but now, alone with her thoughts, it was like her mind followed its own path, taunting her with memories of a kiss that refused to fade into the ether. A kiss so raw and primal, it dragged out a desire she never believed possible.

Urias! She shut her eyes and kneaded her temples.

She had to stop thinking about him, but how could she when only he could help her find the demon after her?

“Headache?”

Her head shot up to find Echo watching her, a concerned expression on her face. Shadow and Kira switched their attention from a Christmas movie on TV to her, too.

Vae. Ely’s heart pounded a little too fast as the darn heat shimmered through her again. “Not really. I’m reading the book you gave me.” She picked up the heavy tome of *A Game of Thrones*. “I can’t make sense of it.” Heck, in her current state of mind, she doubted she would recognize her name on a to-go coffee cup.

“Yeah, it’s a tough one, but I kinda liked it,” Echo said, her brow still furrowed.

Kira snorted. “Just watch the *GOT* series on TV like I did. Or, I could recommend some of *my* books.” She winked.

Ely laughed. Kira was a die-hard romance fan. “Maybe, I will. I mean, I will watch the show.” She set the book aside, slipped her feet back into her sneakers, and rose. “I need to clear my head.”

She stepped out onto the terrace and into the chilly air. Ugh, flip it. She was too hot to care, and she hauled her sweater off, tossing it onto a nearby wrought iron chair. The bracing cold enclosed her, but the spiking heat didn’t relent.

Gods, she sank against the wrought iron table and scrubbed her hot face, wishing she knew what was happening. Aware, too, she couldn’t reveal to anyone that something was terribly wrong. Michael would have her off duty and castle-bound before she drew her next breath. No way would she risk being pulled out of patrol. She had demons to find. One to kill and the other...to aid her, then purge him from her thoughts.

Just recalling his mouth on hers, her blood heated hotter than the sun, and desire crawled through her veins to pool in her core. Biting off a moan, Ely jerked up from the table and tramped to the other end of the terrace, stopping near the bordering shrubs. She lifted her gaze to the thick bruise of clouds gathered above, consuming the noon sun with promises of more snow to come.

She rubbed her chest. Stars! Why did she have to feel this senseless attraction to Nate?

It was like her entire being being pulled her toward him, and there was nothing she could do to stop it—

“Hey.”

She pivoted as Echo stepped onto the patio, her overgrown shaggy bangs dipping into her worried, bi-colored eyes. Darn, she hadn’t bought Ely’s ruse about the book.

“Man, it’s cold,” her friend grumbled, wrapping her arms around her body. “Kira and Shadow have gone to get snacks. You okay?” she asked, glancing at the discarded sweater, then

back at Ely clad in a tank. “You’ve been out of sorts since this morning.”

“It’s nothing.” She rubbed her arms and made her way back to lean against the table. She couldn’t tell Echo about her problem or her attraction to Nate—a demon.

Bob wandered out and weaved between Echo’s legs. “Hey, baby...” she crooned, crouching and running her fingers through her pet’s long, soot-gray pelt. Her gaze lifted back to Ely’s. “You look a little agitated and flushed. Oh, no...” Her eyes widened, and she leaped to her feet. “Ely, do you need to Ground, too?”

“What?”

“I mean, you being an Emyrean, I heard about your species’ immense powers,” Echo said, her anxious gaze searching Ely’s as if looking for a sign she was about to erupt. “I know Aethan had to do so constantly before we were mated. You know, let the white quartz found in the mountains absorb your excess energy?”

“No, no, I’m okay.” Ely huffed out a wry laugh. “It’s just the males who need to Ground...” she trailed off because her powers *were* escalating. Was *that* responsible for what was happening to her? A glitch in her DNA causing the temperature spike?

She sank on the wrought iron chair, dropping her face into her palms, and groaned, wishing she knew...and the crotch seams of her jeans brushed against her sensitive core—

Gods! She lurched to her feet.

“Let me call Aethan. He’ll know—”

“No, don’t. If it continues, then I’ll go and Ground. This could be because of my new power’s awakening. After all, the ancient goddess did gift me with another ability.”

“Ohhh, right.” Echo nodded, her relief palpable, the concern in her striking eyes diminishing.

“Eshana, a moment?”

Echo pivoted at her birth name as the archangel and Aethan joined them on the terrace.

Frowning, Ely rubbed her arms. Something was up.

“What’s wrong—what happened?” Echo asked, hurrying to her mate.

Mouth tight, his gray eyes resembling gathering storm clouds, Aethan slipped his arm around her and held her as if to keep her safe from the world.

Echo might appear petite, the top of her head just about reaching Aethan’s collarbone, but she was a firehouse with a potent ability. It was expected with her being a descendant of the all-powerful leader of the Watchers.

“You’re needed,” Michael answered. “We have—”

“Another rift?” Her bi-colored eyes widened.

Michael inclined his head. “Yes.”

The air shimmered, and a stranger took form, wearing a navy tunic over black, leather-like pants and knee-high boots. His gleaming mahogany-red hair was pulled in a ponytail, revealing pointy ears and a stunning face. Extraordinary purple eyes swept over them.

“This is Angelus,” Michael introduced the young fae, who appeared to be around nineteen or so in mortal years. “That’s Elytani of Ademéras, and Echo, Aethan’s mate. She’s the Curantii.”

Oh, crap, trouble on another world?

“My ladies.” The fae gave them a half-bow in acknowledgment.

“Angelus will be your guide for where you need to go,” Michael told Echo.

Angelus inclined his head, expression somber. “While we can fight the evil that attacks us, the tear in the veil into our world grows wider, and makes it impossible to win this battle.”

“Wait-wait.” Echo pushed away from Aethan, her brow furrowing. “Not Earth?”

“No. My old realm in the fae world,” Angelus said. “At the Vales of Ishinor.”

Echo’s jaw nearly smacked her chest.

Worried now, Ely rubbed her damp palms down her jeans. Being a Guardian, she’d learned a little about the Fae. The Light Fae were tolerable at best, but the Dark Fae? Humans were collectibles to the latter. She had to warn Echo, just not in front of Aethan. But judging from his tight features, he already knew.

“So...” Echo’s gaze rushed to Aethan’s, and a smile started. “I, a former human, will save the fae world?”

Aethan sighed and shook his head, but his grim expression softened.

“Okay. Give me a few minutes to change and pack a few things.” Echo hurried for the door, then threw over her shoulder, “I mean, we don’t know how long we’ll be gone, right?”

“I think it’s best we go through Exilum,” Angelus said, drawing Aethan’s attention. “The route is safer for opening a portal into Ishinor...”

Ely grabbed her sweater from the chair and followed Echo into the quiet living room. “Echo, wait,” she said, keeping her voice low. “Are you well enough to do this?”

She laughed. “Going to another world? You bet I am.”

But Ely wasn’t so sure. Her friend’s aura still appeared lackluster. “All right. But be careful. The Fae are not to be trusted.”

“I am aware. I learned something about them from Lore when I started these lessons.”

“Oh, good. Never give them your true name, either.”

“I won’t. Besides, I don’t use it anymore. Only Michael does.” Echo leaned in closer. “I’m genuinely excited about

this, Ely. I finally get to do something I've been training for, for so long," she whispered. "I mean, I do so here, healing the veils between our world and the demon one, but this feels like more, you know?"

Ely could understand the need to feel wanted, so she nodded. More, her friend would be helping a species more powerful than humans. "Just be safe and come back to us, please."

"Oh, she will," Aethan said, joining them. He put his hand on Echo's lower back and ushered her out of the living room. Smiling, she gave Ely a little wiggle of her fingers as she left —

Another wave of heat swept through Ely. Dammit! She grabbed the armchair's backrest, panting for air.

"You okay?" Michael asked from behind her.

Crap! She plastered on a smile and faced the archangel. "It's nothing. Just worried about Echo," she evaded. Her sweater gripped tightly as if it would cure all her woes, Ely hurried for the door. *Urias*, rushing off would only make Michael suspicious. She glanced back to find him frowning at her. Ugh. "Is there a meeting tonight?"

"No. Just keep an eye out for the blood demon pests."

She nodded and walked out, then hurried for the back stairwell, breathing like she'd run around the massive island several times. Maybe an intense workout is what she needed. Hopefully, it would expend this painful influx of heat ricocheting in her. Because right then, she wanted to tear off her clothes and run out in the snow, which would surely get her off duty and grounded. She texted Shae for a sword session, instead.

* * *

Seated in the back of the biker bar, Nate rested an arm on the scarred surface of his table and scowled at the amber liquor. The crash of balls against the pool table and the music playing

in an old-fashioned jukebox added to the growling echoes in his head. Despite the cacophony, he preferred this joint. Humans left him alone.

No sign of the Dark Realm scum who hurt Aba, either. He spent nearly half the night trawling and scouring underground demon joints for info. Those assholes knew he would peel the skin off their useless hides if he ever caught up with them.

And there was Derrodus.

Hell, if he killed the asshole, Azgor might lose his shit, and Nate his life. He couldn't leave his sire or Ely unprotected—

Damn. He pinched the bridge of his nose, recalling the hurt in her eyes when she saw him with the fae before it all went to shit. His teeth ground down. *That* was the reason for his pissed-off mood, because he could never explain to her the aberrant he was. He never wanted to see the fire in *her* eyes turn to horror.

The door opened, and more bikers stomped inside, the chains on their jackets rattling, bringing with them an icy breeze—

Nate stilled. Beneath the unwashed bodies and nauseating smells of cheap perfume and dirty leather, a light, floral fragrance beckoned. By the nine hells! She wasn't even here, yet that sucker-punched sensation rammed him dead in the solar plexus.

He'd done the right thing by walking away, he reminded himself again. Besides, he didn't want her trying to patch up the missing parts of him with her curious gaze and tormenting kisses. His *laika* didn't—and *couldn't*—belong in the brutal, treacherous existence he lived. It wasn't only Azgor or Derrodus who were the danger.

A low growl reverberated through his head as if in reminder. Like he could ever forget the fucker.

He slammed his psychic shields shut and swallowed the last of his liquor. As he set the glass down, the den door opened again, and another blast of chilly breeze whooshed

inside, and that familiar scent grew stronger, causing his body to go into a slow burn.

Nate lifted his head, his gaze tracking past the pool-playing bikers, fixing on the female sashaying to the bar, paying none of them any notice.

Ah, shit.

The black organ in his chest thumped hard as he watched Ely.

He didn't know why, but he half expected her to come after him last night. She hadn't. A part of him, the fucked up part, didn't like that she'd taken him at his word and dismissed him so fast.

The demon barkeep hurried over to serve her.

“Water, please,” she said.

She unfastened her black trench coat, revealing fitted leather pants hugging her sexy long legs and a tight tank top. She was hot as fuck.

Desire slid through his veins, hot and thick, and his groin hardened. In the dimly lit, drab place, her moonbeam hair pulled in a high ponytail emphasized her air of innocence, but he knew better. He'd seen her in action and recognized how dangerous she was. Still, she didn't belong in this shithole. But Ely marched her own path, and he wouldn't put it past her to come to his hideout just to show him she could.

The silence in the place finally cracked through his irritation.

His gaze shifted to the pool table where all the foul, leathered-up bastards eyed her like horny damn vultures. One skinny mofo, dull leathers sagging down his bony ass, sauntered over and leaned his arm on the counter near her.

“Hey, beautiful,” Pencil-dick drawled, and she smiled—she fucking smiled! The ass nearly toppled over but grabbed the counter instead.

The damn smile lingering, she dropped some bills on the counter, then went motionless, as did Nate... The same

nauseating sulfuric odor he'd caught a whiff of in the garage after those fuckers had hurt Aba drifted to him. They were trawling again, taunting him.

Water forgotten, Ely sprinted outside.

No fucking way! She wasn't going after the sick whoresons!

Nate leaped up, his chair crashing to the linoleum, and he took off.

"Babe, don't rush off," the weasel grumbled, hurrying after her just as Nate reached the exit. "Tell me your name—"

Nate wheeled around so fast that the human skidded to a halt. "Don't. Just don't! Or I'll hand you your teeth," Nate growled, aware his eyes probably flashed red.

The man paled, fear bleeding off him, stirring Nate's beast side. Ignoring the fucker, he sprinted from the den and went after Ely.

She was further down the pitch-dark alley like a slim column of light, moving fast. Before she dematerialized, he dove and grabbed her arm. "Ely!"

She spun to him, then scowled, yanking at her arm. "What the hell, Nate? Let me go!"

"No. Those demons aren't here for humans."

She stopped trying to break free, eyes narrowing. "They're after *you*."

"Ely, just let me handle this, okay? Stay here. I'll go deal with them before your friends come."

When she opened her mouth, he snapped, "I will tell the Guardians there's a price on your head, *laika*. What do you think will happen then?" A low blow, but he didn't want her hurt, not because of him.

"A price on me?" Spots of red brightened her cheeks and her eyes blistered him like burning copper, stunning him stupid. And all he could do was stare at her. She was breathtaking in her fury. "We shall see about that. Do me a favor and

stay out of my way. FYI? You and I will have words before this evening is over.” With her threat hanging in the air, she dematerialized from his hold.

Nate shook his head. Oh, he knew what those words were gonna be about, and for some reason, it made him smile.

Nate flashed after her, reforming somewhere near the warehouses at the waterfront, and found her already taking on the fuckers with her dangerous weapon.

Nate scanned for Derrodus in the horde of blood vermin but didn’t sense him anywhere. He grabbed one of the scourges and slammed him against the wall.

“*Sicari.*” The cretin grinned, fangs clear of blood. So, he hadn’t fed yet. “You brought the unicorn to us—”

Nate punched him in the mouth. And a screech erupted. He hated that fucking term.

“Never call her that. Touch her, and I swear on all the dark gods, I will make you beg for mercy.”

The demon reared back, blood dripping from his split lips. “Just because you’re Azgor’s pet doesn’t mean you get your way,” he snarled. “The reward says we can deliver her in any form!” He flung out his hand, releasing a deadly hellfire bolt. It torpedoed straight for—

No! Nate flashed in front of Ely, taking the hit in his chest. The sizzling bolt sent him crashing into the wall.

“Nate!” she yelled, throwing a glance at him as she decapitated another vermin. “What is it?”

He shook his head, pain splintering through his ribs and stealing his breath. He couldn’t speak, let alone breathe, or go after the fucker. The air around him intensified with power. More of the Guardians had arrived. Grunts and yells echoed. The sound of flesh hitting flesh thundered.

Fuck. He had to get out of there before disaster struck.

“Ely, you okay?” one of them yelled.

“Yes!”

The beast within thrashed at his unending pain as Nate stumbled for the narrow pathway between the looming buildings. He tried to flash, but he couldn't summon the ability.

“Nate!”

Hades, not now! He couldn't speak to her, not in this state when he couldn't lift a fucking finger to save his sorry ass. He lurched forward, and the buildings swayed, or maybe that was him. He slammed a palm on the brick wall, fighting to stay upright, and tried to flash again. Nothing. Trying and failing to summon his ability hiked his agony and shredded his mind. Sweat dampened his brow as he shuffled along the pathway.

“Would you wait one darn minute!” Ely called after him.

He cut her a look over his shoulder and met her scowl.

“I don't have time for this, Ely—” He stumbled, crashing into a dumpster. Slender, strong arms came around him, her sweet warmth enclosing him. Hell.

“I smell blood. You're hurt!” she breathed, her anger at him apparently forgotten.

“Dammit, Ely! Leave. Now!” he growled.

“That temper's not going to work on me,” she shot back. “I've dealt with muleheaded males before, but *you* just might be the worst of the lot!”

“I'm fine—”

“And I was born yesterday!”

“Ely?” a low male called out.

She glanced over her shoulder. Her grip tightened around him, and she dematerialized the *both* of them. Shit! With his strength waning and dizziness determined to steal his consciousness, there was nothing he could do.

Nate groaned as they reformed, agony eviscerating him as his molecules resettled. The beast slammed again at his mind shields, sensing him weakening. Breathing hard, and that fucking hurt, too, he braced a hand on the wooden wall. They

were on the porch of his cabin in the Adirondacks. And she still held him like some invalid. *Fuck.*

“Go,” he pushed through clenched teeth. “Before your friends follow you here.”

“I’m not leaving you alone when you’re hurt. None of the warriors have followed, or I would have sensed them.”

She stared, waiting him out. Growling, Nate opened the door with his mind and shuffled inside. The wooden panel shut behind him, blocking out the brutal cold. Dizziness blurred his thoughts. He stumbled toward the couch and clutched the back with one hand so he didn’t drop on his ass. She hurried over, her anxious gaze scanning him.

“Ely, please, go.”

Those pretty copper eyes came back to his. “I don’t know what terrifies me more, that you’re hurt or the fact you used, *please,*” she retorted, pushing his coat apart.

Before she saw his wound, he cuffed her wrists, stopping her. “I’m not in my best shape for this, *laika,*” he drawled through his pain, his voice raspy. “You might have to climb up and ride me while I hold on to the couch—”

“Nate, shut up.” Color rushed across her expressive face as more dizziness swamped him. He released her wrists to grab the backrest again. Hell, he couldn’t even enjoy provoking her. But he had to get her to leave.

He firmed his expression to inflexible. “Here’s the thing, *laika.* We can fuck, but that’s all it will be. You should mate someone just like you, have angelic young who look like you, and live a happy life.”

“That crap’s not going to work, either,” she retorted, calling him out on his shit. “Before your butt hits the floor, let’s get you to bed.” She slipped her arm around his waist and turned them toward the bedroom.

This female... “No.” Teeth clenched, he pushed away from her, shuffled to the tall kitchen cupboard, opened the door, and stumbled inside.

“Nate, what exactly are you looking for in a closet?”

“A broom to paddle your ass,” he muttered in frustration, slapping his palm on the back wall.

“In this state, it’ll be a miracle if you can lift a broom, let alone paddle anything,” she shot back, “much less me.”

Despite his immense agony, a smile started at her annoyed tone. But his fangs piercing his lip reminded him of the precariousness of his situation. He found the notch on the wall and thumped it. The barrier creaked and then slid open, revealing steps leading down into the dark basement.

“Lean on me.” Ely put her arm around him once more.

Hell, useless to protest when Ely did as she pleased like a force of nature. Nate grabbed the railing, trying to keep his weight off her as they made their way down the stairs.

In what seemed like hours later, they hit the cement floor in the pitch-black basement. A musty air of disuse clung to the place, along with a bone-chilling cold.

“Where’s the light?”

He willed on the naked bulb dangling from the high ceiling. Dim light cast a pool of yellow in the middle of the floor.

She glanced around, taking in the massive granite basement and the cell—large enough to imprison a horde of giant demons—fronted by unbreakable bars fixed into the high ceiling and floor.

“You can’t sleep there!” her voice jerked him back, her horrified gaze settling on the pallet in the corner of the chamber.

“I’ll be fine.” He tugged at his coat. Each pull had a fresh rush of pain gutting him and she ground down on his molars—

And then she was there, carefully peeling off his outwear. His gaze fixed on her beautiful face. He’d taunted her about finding another, yet everything within him wanted to find the nameless, faceless fucker and put him six feet under. Shit, this possessiveness was perilous for them both.

She would never survive him when the blood rage started and the beast took over.

Before he did something stupid and gave in to the urge to claim her in the way he truly wanted and pull her deeper into his fucked-up life, he staggered into his cell.

“Nate...” She dropped his coat and hurried after him. Her gaze lowered to his chest. Her eyes widened. Hell, hard to miss the fist-sized hole through his t-shirt or the plasma drenching the cotton. “You were hit by a demon bolt?” she breathed. “And you didn’t say a word?”

“Why?” He leaned against the wall, his legs unable to support him any longer.

Mouth pressed in a thin line, she reached for his shirt. He grasped her hands and shook his head.

“If you want to fight me on this, go ahead,” she said coolly, shrugging off his hold.

The air shifted, and a glittering ebony dagger formed in her palm. With a frustrated growl, Nate dropped his hands. He was in too much agony to argue, his gray matter no longer computing.

Her lush lips still pressed together in displeasure, she carefully slit his t-shirt down the center.

Her breath caught in an audible gasp, her dagger clattering to the floor. She clutched the edges of his sliced tee.

Nate glanced at the fist-sized, open wound on his inked chest, the edges of his skin seared black as blood seeped down his abs. “Don’t despair, *laika*. It’s not the first time I’ve been wounded.” And wasn’t that the truth? “Doubtful this will be the last, though I try to avoid ones like these.”

This would be a slow, torturous healing and damn dangerous for her if she didn’t leave.

He pulled off his ruined shirt and held it against the wound, biting back a grimace as he gingerly lowered to the pallet. Head tipped back against the wall, he watched her through half-mast lids, struggling to block out the pain.

Her troubled gaze slid further down his torso. The color drained from her face, leaving her parchment pale, her gaze fixed on the older wound on his lower abs. The one she'd inflicted. It was still inflamed, the skin barely knitted.

“Why didn't you use the potion and salve I gave you?” she demanded, crouching next to him.

“Aba needed them more. Those demons who broke into the garage hurt him with a hellfire bolt.”

“What?” She glared at him. “Nate, you could *die* from this—never mind! I'll be back.” She dematerialized.

Alone, the dank walls closed in on him.

Hades, he missed her brightness...missed her.

Hell, Nate shut his eyes, feeling like a brakeless freight truck hurtling downhill with no way of stopping, all too aware of the cataclysmic collision looming if he ever gave in to his need to claim her.

The malevolent wyvern paced within him, sensing freedom, its talons scraping his mind. Nate hung onto his shaky mental shields. But just in case, he mentally shut and bolted the cage door. He reached underneath the pallet for the loose granite square, moved it aside, and got out the med-kit. Sweat dripped down his face, his bones stretching, hurting.

Breathing hard, he slathered the ointment Aba had procured for him on the open, seeping wound—a wound meant for Ely. Anger pulsed through him that the fucker would even dare to harm her. While he might not give a fuck what happened to him, he never wanted to see the light in Ely diminished because of him.

Once healed, he would find the scum and teach him firsthand why Nate wasn't only Azgor's *Sicari* but also the *Immitis*, the merciless bastard of the death pit.

CHAPTER 12



ELY REFORMED among a cluster of trees near the Oracle's brownstone in Greenwich Village, her concern over Nate growing. He hadn't used the healing potion and ointment she'd given him. While she was glad Aba had healed, Nate could die! Didn't he understand that? The Guardians' weapons were a death sentence!

She hurried along the snow-powered sidewalk to the brownstone a few houses away—a place that once belonged to Kira and the former Oracle, her grandmother, Lila—who'd actually been her mother. A year later, Ely couldn't wrap her head around that revelation.

She ran up the steps to the front door. Creeping vines, grown from tubs, trailed over the trellis, framing the doorway and welcoming her in a gentle sway. Panting, Ely grabbed the metal handrail, trying to calm down before she worried Jaden with her panicked arrival. Then there'd be questions she couldn't answer.

As she straightened, the door opened, revealing the tall, slender woman, their new Oracle.

Instead of wearing the festive colors of the upcoming human holiday, Christmas, Jaden dressed in black tights and thick gray socks with black skulls, and she'd teamed her macabre footwear with a thigh-length indigo sweater which cast a bluish hue to her feline-shaped green eyes. She appeared more like a teenager than a powerful Oracle.

“I’m so happy to see you.” A wide smile lit Jaden’s striking face, then she scrunched her nose. “Good, lord!” She shuddered. “It’s too cold. Come inside.” She ushered Ely into the warm living room and shut the door. The smell of something savory lingered in the air, along with undernotes of lavender, sage, and some other herbs.

Ely unfastened her long coat, her heart beating too fast. “I’m so sorry for turning up without calling first.”

“No, worries.” Jaden waved it aside. “What can I do for you, Ely? I sense this isn’t a social visit?”

“No. I’m sorry.” In her worry over Nate, she’d forgotten about her own problems. She went with the easy one first. “I’ve been having a temperature spike for a few days that won’t ease.”

Jaden frowned. “Could it be your powers are surging? I’m aware Empyreans have this problem.”

Hell. She was a confusion of heat and need.

“No, not us females.” She rubbed her palms down her leather-clad thighs. “I did something terrible,” she blurted. “I let anger rule me, and I hurt someone. I fear my weapon will cause a slow and painful death.”

Jaden studied her with those jewel-colored, contemplative eyes. “The only species your Gaian weapons would have that effect on is demons or evil beings.”

Ely nodded. “Demon.”

“Hmm. I never had to treat a demon or save one,” Jaden murmured. “Maybe, I can add a little something extra to the potions I give you Guardians. Give me a moment.” She disappeared through the dark corridor like some wraith.

Another spike of heat spread through her, and she bit back a groan. Exhaling roughly, Ely trudged away from the warmth of the blazing fireplace to the window. She couldn’t deal with these unrelenting heat surges when she had to get back on patrol, and there was Nate to consider. She refused to leave him alone, injured, and in a damn cage. Man, she needed some time off, she finally conceded.

That meant she had to notify Michael.

With a shaky hand, she removed her cell from her coat pocket. Though she possessed the ability of telepathy since she became a Guardian, she rarely used it, uncomfortable talking into someone's mind. She texted him.

I think my new power has awakened, and my temperature's hiking. I might have to Ground. I spoke to Echo. She reminded me it's what Aethan used to do. I'm not sure how long it will take.

She hit send, then stared at her cell display, biting her lip as she waited for his response...

A knock echoed, startling Ely. She stared at the entrance. No pinging of power to alert her as to who it might be. Since Jaden was occupied, she answered.

Her jaw dropped. "Michael?" She didn't expect her formidable leader to turn up in person.

He nodded. Dressed in leathers and a black tee revealing his bulging biceps, and with his hair pulled back in a half-ponytail, the archangel might look like a brawny biker, except, he was all-powerful and incredibly dangerous. She hadn't seen him kicking ass yet, but she'd heard the stories.

"You could have just texted me back," she said quickly.

"It's no problem." He moved his aviator shades to his head. His unsettling, shattered blue stare did a quick once-over of her, no doubt ensuring she was not about to explode and cause mass destruction to the poor, unsuspecting mortals in the area.

Stifling her wariness, Ely stood aside, and he entered. She shut the door and took a few steps to an armchair, clutching the back for support as another wave of heat swamped her.

"Yes, I feel you," he said, stopping at the small fireplace, the swaying, crackling flames backlighting his massive build. "I sensed your state earlier today at the castle, too."

Crap. No wonder he turned up.

“I wasn’t sure what was happening at the time,” she explained. Everything had overwhelmed her, not that it was any better now.

Hands on his hips, Michael frowned, appearing equally intimidating and concerned. “Aethan’s not here to show you where he used to go—”

“It’s all right. I will speak to my brother.”

“Yes. Reynner’s place in Exilum would be better.” A nod. “The mountains there are richer with the white quartz needed to aid you.”

Her heart bumped hard at his understanding, but guilt strangled her. “Thank you. Let me try at the Catskills first. I’m sorry to put you on the spot like this,” she rushed out, “especially with Aethan gone.” The gods knew she just might have to Ground, but only after she tended to Nate.

“The others can handle the extra work.” Michael glanced around the living room, then back at her. “Are you hurt?”

“No-no. I needed something to aid me.”

Thank the stars she had the foresight to ask the Oracle for help. So it wasn’t an outright lie.

The Arc didn’t say anything for a moment, the silver fissures in his irises sparking like lightning in a sapphire storm, as if he could see into her soul. *Vae*, she hoped not.

“Yes, the goddess’ gifts emerge when you’re strong enough to handle them,” he murmured, then added, “You can talk to me about anything, Ely, just so you know.”

Aw, gods, more guilt piled. And all she could do was nod.

Not like she could say, *Oh, wait, there is something. I’m seriously attracted to this demon who runs with those blood-drinking cretins that drain humans.*

Yes, it would definitely get her ass castle-bound.

“Thank you,” she said, grateful when the Oracle entered the room, a package in hand, ending their one-on-one.

She smiled. “Hello, Michael.”

“Jaden,” he greeted, then to Ely. “I’ll see you when you get back from Grounding.” Shades shoved back on, he walked out, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Ely rubbed her burning eyes, her entire being a mass of churning emotions. More, she hated this subterfuge—

“He doesn’t know, does he?” Jaden asked softly.

She lowered her hands and stared.

With quiet understanding, Jaden handed over a package. “All that matters is that a life is saved. I’ve made a slight adjustment since he’s Other. Hopefully, it will aid him.”

She lightly touched Ely’s arm, and a gentle warmth flowed through her, calming her agitated mind. “The pale potion is yours. It should help stabilize your temperature, but it’s not a cure, Ely.” Green eyes held hers, her warning clear. “Being immortal, it shouldn’t be like this—”

“It’s my abilities. My power’s awakening.”

“Oh...” Jaden’s eyebrows tipped in a V. “I thought you already had yours.”

“I do.” Ely grimaced. “I meant, when I took my oath to be a Guardian, Gaia bestowed me with another,” she said, hugging the package to her chest. “I have to go. Thank you for this.” Then she bolted out of there.

* * *

Back in the quiet cottage in the Adirondacks, ignoring her discomfort, Ely ran downstairs to the granite basement where Nate still sat on the pallet, leaning against the wall, head tipped back. Eyes shut.

Her heart in her throat, she hurried to the gate but found it locked. Dammit. A bolted gate wasn’t going to keep her out if that was his intention. She dematerialized, slipped through the bars, and reformed near him.

He appeared far too pale beneath his honey-toned skin. Blood seeped from the wound on his tattooed chest even

though he'd covered it with some acrid-smelling ointment. A med-kit lay spilled on the pallet.

Ely set the package aside, shrugged off her coat, and dropped it on the floor. Then she crouched next to him and picked up his discarded t-shirt to clean his chest—

Faster than a striking serpent, he grasped her wrist, and she toppled forward to her knees.

His eyes flickered open, unfocused and dark with pain. Strands of his inky dark hair had escaped their tether and stuck to his sweat-drenched face. His hold on her wrist seared her skin. *Vae*. She sucked in a harsh breath. Being demon, she knew they usually ran hotter than normal, but Nate felt like he was incinerating from the inside.

“I have to clean out what you used for this salve to work.” She pointed to the package.

“I don't need help. You hav'ta leave.”

Of course. Males like him, all caveman strong, needing no one, hated being helpless, and worse, accepting help. “Unless you plan on physically stopping me, I'm going to help you.”

“You're stubborn, *laika*,” he said with a long-drawn sigh. His shoulders sagged, and his grip loosened but remained around her wrist, his thumb slowly caressing her skin.

Ely bit her lip, his touch causing her barely banked desire to spike, amping her problem.

Swallowing, she freed her hand, dropped his shirt, and removed the potion from the brown paper bag. She unscrewed the cap, aware of his burning gaze tracking her every move. “I'm not going to hurt you.”

A rough grunt escaped him. “Here's your chance to finally take me out—”

Ely put the bottle to his lips and tipped the dark contents into his mouth, not wanting to hear that.

“Shit—” He grasped her wrist with his feverish fingers. “That tastes damn rank, worse than the last one!”

“Perhaps. But you have to take more. It’s the only thing potent enough to destroy the demon virus inside you.”

Rough laughter. “Wasted on me, *laika*.”

All right, stupid explanation considering what he was. “Maybe. But just so you know, that wound...” She nodded to his chest. “Can act as a tracking signal for whoever hurt you, making it easy to find you again.”

His mouth tightened, but he took another gulp before pushing the bottle away.

“Lie down so I can tend to the wound.”

“No.” He shut his eyes.

Okay, then. She capped the potion, set it down, and picked up the ruined shirt again.

Gently, not to add more to his pain, she carefully cleaned off the bloodied salve he’d used. And the mess of his chest was revealed—

Heavens! Her stomach heaved. She could see a part of his breastbone. Her throat tightened. The agony he must be in, and yet not a sound of pain escaped him.

Working quickly, she dabbed away the oozing fresh blood, then scooped the unguent from the container and liberally pasted the stuff over the gaping fist-sized lesion. Finally, she taped a large dressing over it. Once done, she placed her palms over the wound, letting her healing abilities flow through, to aid him faster.

A little drained from using that gift, she lowered her hands. While she’d never experienced a direct hit from a demon bolt, she’d learned from the guys that it hurt like hell and weakened you, too. It was probably why Nate let her do what she wanted. At full strength, he was as immovable as a wall.

She applied more salve to the wound *she’d* caused on his abs and attached a gauze over it, too. At the bloody smears on his chest and abs, she pushed to her feet and pivoted for the gate.

Ugh, locked.

She dematerialized, shooting out of the cell.

* * *

Aware she'd left, Nate cracked his eyes open, staring at nothing. What the fuck was there to look at in this tomb but more darkness?

The emptiness at her departure wrenched at him and the vacuum within deepened. The urge to call Ely back took hold, but he clenched his teeth so he wouldn't succumb to temptation. It was safer for her.

His gaze lowered to his bloodied chest with its fresh dressing. Her caring for him, despite the immense threat he was to her in this current state, squeezed his heart. No one ever did that except for his sire. He wanted her with a need that gutted him—

Nooo wantsssss! The wyvern's snarl ricocheted through his skull like screams of glass shattering. Nate grunted, desperately clinging to his sanity and control. Agony bled through to the marrow of his bones, and the pressure to stretch and shift took hold, hurting worse than the chest wound, flaying his mind like scorching blades.

She'd given him the potion, which should have eased him like it had the last time, but every fucking inch of him still hurt, even the bones on his feet. Summoning the remnants of his fast-fading strength, Nate tightened his mind shields, trapping the fucker, then kicked off his boots.

Hades! He shut his eyes. Sometimes death was preferable...

The air in the cold basement stirred, a familiar scent flooding his senses...fresh, soft, reminding of a spring breeze and flowers. And a wave of calm seeped into him, soothing the rioting pain within a little.

She...didn't...leave.

A part of him rejoiced, but another part was gripped by terror. In his weakened state, he could hurt her if he fell asleep

and his mental shield fractured, letting the beast free.

He cracked open his eyelids. “Why are you still here?”

“How are you not asleep?” she countered, wiping the gore off his chest with the damp towel she’d procured. “If you want me to leave, you know what to do.”

Pick her up and throw her out?

If he did, he’d probably have her under him—because every inch of him, hurt or not—longed for her.

The damp terry cloth gliding over his abs disappeared. Then fingertips gently caressed the edges of the dressing... retaping it again?

Her touch felt *so* good...soothing.

Hell, maybe it was the potion at work, seeping through the turmoil and agony scouring his mind. Nate didn’t know or care, simply craving another minute, wanting to linger in this utopia his beautiful *laika’s* presence provided, no matter how fleeting.

His gaze caressed her lovely face as she cleaned away the blood from his torso, wishing he could have had a real chance with her.

But the Fates had screwed up his life, voiding it into nothing but a mere shell of an existence.

Shutting off the strangling sensation garroting him at the thought of never seeing her again, he closed his eyes. Because looking at her would only weaken his resolve at what he must do...

CHAPTER 13



HE FELL ASLEEP? Ely hoped so.

It didn't surprise her it took the potion this long to knock him out, not when he possessed a constitution armored in tungsten. He needed to heal, and fighting her every step of the way wouldn't help.

Satisfied the dressing remained intact, she sat back, then frowned. Something felt a little off with him. His chest rose and fell a little too fast. From the pain?

Carefully, she slid her fingers down his damp abs, the heat from his skin almost scorching her. It seemed worse than hers. She grabbed the other wet towel and dabbed him, trying to cool him down again.

As she slid the wet terry cloth over his chest and rock-hard stomach, her gaze lingered on his muscled body. He sported a faded, circular scar on his left pectoral, hidden under his tats. For a mechanic, he sure was built like a warrior, with bulging biceps and a hard, ripped abdomen. But being this close to him, touching him, his heady male scent cocooned her in a haze where nothing intruded, no boundaries were crossed, and where he wasn't the enemy.

“*Urias*,” she stifled a groan. “What am I doing?” It was utterly useless pretending whatever this was she felt for him would fade. She'd tried. And here she sat, taking care of him instead of Grounding.

Her gaze skimmed over his handsome, taut face. Even in repose, he didn't relax.

Long lashes formed shadowy arcs on his tan cheeks, and his straight nose suited his angular features. But the sense of familiarity she had dismissed several days ago struck her again. As if she should know him.

Her brow furrowing, Ely sat back on her heels. She'd never met him before. Nate was the kind of person one didn't forget in a hurry. Whomever he reminded her of, it would probably register when her mind wasn't fighting her own inner battles along with her growing feelings for this male who drew her so inexorably.

The churning heat coursed through her, coiling low in her belly.

Gods, enough already!

Exhaling a shaky breath, Ely tidied up the first aid supplies, then settled herself an arm's length away from him. Leaning against the chilly wall, she fished out her potion, drank some of the pinkish, somewhat sweet liquid, then recapped the bottle and set it aside.

“What is that?”

Crap! Her heart banged against her ribs, her gaze snapping to him. He wasn't asleep? Seriously? “How are you still up? The potion should not only ease you but knock you out for a while.”

“Fast metabolism.”

She snorted at his dry response, and answered. “It's just something I need.”

“Why?”

Jeez. “I'm not contagious. You can't catch it,” she muttered, then added, “I'm fine. Just have a bit of a temperature, is all.”

He didn't speak, but his unfocused stare remained on her for a second longer before he shut his eyes again.

Exhaling, Ely tipped her head against the wall and closed her eyes, too, hoping the potion would aid her a little. She

didn't want to secrete herself in some cold, lonely mountain just to expend the heated energy churning through her.

Quiet descended upon them. Hopefully, they'd both get some ease now...

* * *

Ely jerked awake. An eerie sensation slid up her spine as the cold air around her changed, growing denser. Something else was here with them. Dagger summoned, she quickly scanned for danger in the cabin...it felt close.

Oh, shit, the dark vibe was coming from—

Nate?

Her gaze rushed to him. His entire body appeared rigid as if caught in a stranglehold of torment.

"Nate?" She dropped her weapon, scrambled to her knees, and gently rubbed his forearm. The muscles there strained, and the tendon on his neck popped as if he were fighting against the pain. "You'll get past this," she said softly, trying to soothe him, letting a calming wave of her healing energy surround him. "The warriors did, too."

His eyelids flickered open. Red bled into his irises. He shot up into a crouch, startling her. "Gonna kill him!"

"Nate!" She grabbed his arm, trying to hold him in place. "Stop, you'll do more harm to yourself!" Dammit, she was fairly strong, but whatever fever-induced nightmare gripped him made him impossibly stronger. "There's no one here."

"Couldn't let the bastard hurt you!"

What? The truth struck her then, recalling Nate flashing to her during the fight. *Heavens!* The hellfire bolt was meant for *her?*

And he'd protected her, taking the hit.

He shoved her away, and she landed on her ass. His head cocked in an almost animalistic angle as if he were listening.

To what, she had no idea.

About to push up, Ely froze, her breath catching in her chest.

Without his shirt, she could clearly see black scales rippling beneath his inked chest and arms.

Shit, oh shit! Cautiously, Ely shuffled backward on her bottom as he uncoiled to his full height like some dangerous predator. All her alarm bells rang. Her Guardian oath reared up at the threat in front of her. To kill—

No!

Her back hit the bars of the cell, hands clenched. Without thought, she let herself take on the consistency of smoke, sinking through the metal to the other side, ignoring the prickling of her tattooed Gaian weapon on her biceps, demanding release. Hands braced on the floor, Ely sat there, unmoving.

Anger and rage tinged the chilly air. Was Nate's demon side emerging? But why did it affect him so badly?

Desperately wanting to help, to do something—anything to bring him back, she latched onto the one thing she hoped would work—the connection between them. She scrambled to her feet. “Nate?”

Another guttural growl erupted from him. “*Run!*”

A shiver darted down her spine. *Vae!* She pivoted for the crude stairs—

A roar exploded. The cage bars rattled. Ely spun back.

Lethal talons gripped the bars, extending from the nailbeds of elongated, gnarled hands covered with black scales that ran up his thick forearms, the same scales slipping and sliding beneath his tan torso. Even his toes sported claws and scales, protruding from his torn socks. Deadly, straight black horns pushed out from his hairline, and his brow extended into a hooded ridge. Fangs dropped, yet the rest of him somehow remained human.

Predatory eyes fixed on her, more red than topaz, and his pupils... Dear goddess! They'd narrowed and elongated into slits.

"I'm not running," she rasped, fighting to keep calm while her heart crashed against her sternum.

"How are you not afraid?" His eerie guttural voice caused the goosebumps on her skin to spread. "Everyone runs when they see this."

"I've faced worse dangers..." She swallowed. "What... what kind of demon are you?"

"Your vilest nightmare." He tracked alongside the cage bars, claws clicking on the granite floor, his talons screeching eerily against the steel rods.

If she were anyone else, she would have bolted the moment she saw this side of him. But she'd fought those blights from the Dark Realm, and the Narakas—

Nate stumbled as if unused to his feet. An agonized groan flooded the basement. He grabbed the bars and rammed his forehead against them, and they shuddered with each crack of his head.

"Nate, stop! Please!" she begged.

Blood seeped from the split skin on his ridged brow, matting bits of his hair to his skin. His red-streaked eyes reminded her of a wounded animal, full of agony and rage. He stumbled backward, spine hitting the wall, then gripped his head, tugging at his hair as if to tear it out.

"Nate, what's wrong? Let me help you."

"*Laika...*" he groaned, but his tugging slowed.

Hearing his name for her shredded some of her panic. She moved closer to the cage.

"*No!*" A thunderous roar erupted, stopping her dead in her tracks, causing bits of rubble from the ceiling to clatter to the floor. He spun in an ungainly arc and punched the granite wall repeatedly—

“Nate!” She dashed forward, grabbing the bars, wincing at the sounds of his bones splintering. “Fight this, come back! Please...”

He stilled, shoulders heaving, head lowered as if he couldn't bear to look at her.

Most Dark Realm denizens had an alter-ego demonic form, she knew, and they accepted it. She'd seen enough during her time as a Guardian and also while training with Gaia's shield-maidens. So, why was he fighting his other side?

Her gaze focused on his straining, tattooed back. Bony nodes on his upper vertebrae pushed out. Frowning, she counted five of them, starting at his nape to the last one mid-back...

A ruby-red glow pulsed there.

What the hell?

The truth hit her like a punch to the chest. Shit, not nodes.

Symbionts!

Urias! What had happened to him to possess those things?

CHAPTER 14



“NATE?” Ely pressed a hand to her agitating stomach, her gaze fixed on the pulsing red glow on his spine. “Are those symbionts on your back like the ones Shadow has?”

While Shadow had transformed into a Fae, Nate was definitely Other, and with a scary-looking demonic alter ego. But Shadow’s symbionts didn’t hurt her. If anything, they exhilarated her when she let her wings free.

Nate wheeled around, and she hastily stepped back, even though the bars stood between them. His eyes glowed an eerie bloodred, his rage palpable. He didn’t speak for several long minutes, prowling the caged space. His ruined, morphed, scaly hands hung at his sides, dripping blood on the dusty floor, black horns jutting from his brow. Gods, he was fearsome and terrifying.

“Nate?” she whispered.

“How will admitting it make a difference?” he snarled in that guttural voice, grabbing the bars again, his damaged, bleeding fingers not quite locking around the steel rods. “This is what I am. No one can change that, don’t you get it? Or, is this half beast, half male what you want, and why you can’t stay away from me?” His icy rage enclosed her, his words like metal barbs, spearing her chest, but she tried not to let it hurt.

“If you want me to leave, you’re going to have to do better than hurling insults at me.” Now, finally, she understood why he pushed her away.

Well, she wasn’t some fragile female.

She stepped closer to the cage and cautiously laid her fingers over his. His hands weren't healing as fast as she expected. "I know this is not the sum of you. Neither is the façade you wear so well, with your don't-give-a-damn-attitude. You're hurting. Let me help."

Anger flamed in his eyes, his fangs cutting into his bottom lip. "Why would you, when even death spat me out? What can you do, *laika*?"

Ely understood his rage, her heart hurting for him. Her gaze lowered to their hands. She did the only thing she could, even if it drained her energy a little more. Ely let her healing powers flow—

An audible gasp escaped him, then he yanked free. "Don't."

"Why not? You're not healing, and you're in pain—"

"Because I want to hurt!" His eyes flashed red and topaz, and he started pacing again.

Ely laced her fingers over her head, pressing her palms to her skull, trying to understand him.

"Unlike those pretty boys you hang with, *laika*," he baited as he passed her, cutting her a sideways look, "I'm no one's hero. I hunt, I kill, innocent or not, because it's what I do. This is perfect payback for all my sins, don't you think?"

Irritation surged at his taunts, but she tamped it down, refusing to let him trigger her temper. She scrubbed her face and tried again. "Is this why you cage yourself?"

"It's so I don't take what I desperately want..." His voice became a rough purr. "You, on your back, on this pallet, to lick you from your lush mouth to your delicious little clit before burying my cock so deep—"

"Stop it!" She glared at him, despite desire stirring at his words. "If you want me, just say so because I want you too!"

He stopped dead as if she'd blindsided him.

"What? Now that I said I want you, too, you've lost interest?" she jeered, aware she was tugging a dangerous beast

by its tail. “Typical. Just like all males. It’s only the chase you’re after, isn’t it?”

His eyes narrowed, and he prowled back to where she stood. Right then, he was the epitome of Big Bad with those black-as-night horns poking out of his messy hair, raptor-like talons, and fangs.

“Even the way I am?” He angled his head, watching her.

The inescapable truth was she did want him, even in his half-beast form, taunts and all. So damn much. *He’s still Nate.* He stirred something within her, something she’d never experienced in her long life. He alone chipped away at her protective walls, drawing her out of her shell, causing all these feelings to unravel.

Whatever this was, she didn’t want to let it go.

Her heart in her throat, she whispered, “Wouldn’t have said so if I didn’t mean it.”

A low growl escaped him. He stalked the length of the cage again, the black scales on his abs fading. “It’s a fool’s dream. Go.”

Ely watched him for a second. If she gave in now, she might as well call it quits. He’d never let her close again. What could she do to make him listen? For him to understand that she only wanted to help—and more, she cared about him?

She arched an eyebrow, and taunted, “Scared?”

He went dead still.

The next minute, the gate flew open. He grasped her wrist and dragged her inside. Then his mouth came down on hers in a wild, unbridled kiss. Her back hit the cage bars, his hips pinning her there. He tasted all male and decadent, and she kissed him back. His fangs nicked her lip—a coppery tang flooded her tongue—

Ely pulled back, panting for air. He stared at her with eyes still streaked red, but his pupils were back to normal. And they burned with heat—a heat she was familiar with—as if he would devour her.

He gripped her braid, tipped her chin up, and kissed her again in a carnality that had her knees caving. He sucked and tugged on her lip, then her tongue. A feverish moan escaped her, and she tightened her grip on his hair.

One scaly hand cupped her breast and squeezed. He lowered his head and mouthed her nipple through the fine knit of her t-shirt, tugging on her nub—a pull she felt to her core. Desire gathered like molten lava, and she moaned. He pushed up her top, pulled down her bra, and plucked her hardened nipples with his taloned fingers.

“By the dark stars, *laika*. You’re so fucking beautiful.” His warm mouth covered one aching nub, fangs lightly scraping her skin, tongue licking her. The eroticism at watching him torment her flesh had her body coiling like a spring. A tug on her nipple sent a rush of wetness between her thighs and aching need straight to her center. A whimper escaped her, and she squirmed against him.

He came back up and kissed her again, moving his hips and rubbing his rigid cock between the V of her thighs, against her sensitive flesh. The friction had her core tightening, and she moved with him, fighting for release.

“Nate,” she panted against his mouth, needing more. Her fingers slid through his sweat-dampened hair, and she grasped his horns—

“No!” He reared back, chest heaving, eyes still streaked red. “This shouldn’t have happened.”

“Why?”

“Why?” he growled. “You, of all people, know *why* this can’t go anywhere.”

The sensual haze trapping her dissipated, hearing the words of their reality, and a chill swept through her like she’d been dumped in the icy ocean. She straightened her bra and tugged her top down, covering up. “I am aware of the stumbling blocks.”

“They aren’t just stumbling blocks, but insurmountable mountains.”

“Only if you let them be. I won’t let the guys come after you.”

“Your fellow warriors are the least of my problems!” He raked back his damp hair and cursed when he hit his horns. “Nothing can change what we are. I can’t—I *won’t*—put you in harm’s way. Being a part of my life makes that inevitable!”

“And you forget what I am,” she shot back, desperate to make him understand. “The ancient goddess *selected* me to kill those fiends you talk of! I’m not some weak or timid female playing at being a Guardian!”

“I know.” His gaze lowered to her kiss-swollen lips. Gods, she wanted his mouth back on hers, to wrap herself around him, and to feel his warmth again because right now, she felt chilled to the marrow of her bones at what was coming.

He shook his head, his expression morphing to inflexible. “I have enemies. Deadly ones. It’s not those scumbags who traverse to Earth to steal souls or drain their victims, but those who stay in the Dark Realm. Vicious doesn’t even come close to what they are.”

“And I’ve taken down Narakas,” she retorted. “Malevolent demons from the deepest part of Gehenna sent after Nik and Shadow.”

“What?” He went dead still. “I wasn’t aware of those things being here—”

“It was about six months ago.”

A tic started on his rigid jaw. “I wasn’t in this world then.”

“The Dark Realm,” she muttered. Gods! She’d disliked the damn place on principal, but with Nate and his shut-door attitude, she hated it even more.

Then he scowled as if remembering what they’d been arguing about. “We cannot change what is, Ely. There is no future with someone like me.”

“I see.”

“No, you don’t!” he snapped.

Of course, she didn't, not when he remained as tight-lipped as a damn vault about himself, and wouldn't explain why he and his demonic side were at odds, or what his symbionts were.

But the part that hurt the most?

The one time she dared to take a risk—she'd even been prepared to face her fellow Guardians for him—and he wasn't interested enough to take a chance, to see where this could lead.

“I guess I really am not interesting enough, now that the chase is over.”

He slammed a palm on the bars, a few columns away from her, and shook his lowered head. When he remained silent and didn't contradict her, it flung her into an abyss of pain—of her past and old wounds.

Dull. Boring.

Irek, her ex, had thrown those words at her after she'd learned of his betrayal from her so-called friends and had broken up with him.

Finding whatever remained of her pride, even though he'd trampled most of it to dust, Ely picked up her coat and potion bottle from the floor, the crater in her chest corroding like acid had settled in there, hurting—

“Nate?” A familiar voice hollered from above, and her gaze darted to the basement ceiling.

Ely froze. *Aba?* She'd been so wrapped up in her pain, she hadn't paid attention to anything else. But Nate had, judging from his tight mouth.

“Down here,” he grunted, straightening, his red-streaked stare fixed on her.

Seconds passed before Aba responded, “Okay.”

Ely quickly pulled on and buttoned her coat. And said the only thing she could, “As you wish.”

“I would never wish for something like this,” he growled. “You know the risks.”

“Risks?” she bit out, hating him and wanting him at the same time. “I was prepared to brave anything and everything! Even them.” She flung out a hand behind her. “My fellow Guardians, and the archangel himself, but I was a fool caught in the throes of lust, believing in something that wasn’t there, believing for a moment that you were different.”

“Wait one damn minute—”

“Go to hell, Nate!” Before he witnessed her falling apart, she dematerialized, his low, tormented words echoing behind her, “*My existence is hell...*”

But you won’t let me in. Won’t let me help. She couldn’t even breathe past the surge of despair welling in her throat as she departed the cabin and the Adirondacks, leaving behind the brief interlude she thought would be so much more.

CHAPTER 15



NATE GRABBED the bars and banged his brow against the metal, his horns slamming into them, pain crashing through his skull. He lifted his gaze to stare at the empty spot where Ely had been—empty like his entire existence.

He wanted to go after her.

And say what? You can't be with her.

He grasped his head, fisting his horns, not sure if it was his thoughts or the beast fucking with him again. He'd done his best to get her to leave, but she fought him at every turn until he finally cracked her, putting pain in her beautiful eyes.

He pivoted and punched the wall again. Agony shot through his damaged hand to lodge in his heart. Breathing hard, he sagged against the granite, detesting the bastard he was more than the beast within him.

The basement resonated with her hurt. *I was a fool caught in the throes of lust, believing in something that wasn't there, believing for a moment that you were different!* Her words flayed him like daggers, ripping him apart.

I'm so fucking sorry, Ely.

Footsteps sounded.

Nate shoved away from the wall and tramped to the other end of the basement, the splintering pain in his bones intensifying as the wyvern stretched its essence, searching for a way to break through Nate's control.

Aba appeared in front of the cell. "Nate?"

He shook his head, unable to deal with this conversation. “Not now.”

“Yes, *now*,” his sire rumbled. “What in Hades’ hell are you doing?”

Sacrificing my one chance at happiness because I can’t fucking keep her in my life!

He wanted to put his fist through the wall again. Instead, he paced back and forth, rubbing his nape, feeling as if he was unraveling at the seams.

“Nate,” Aba said then, seeming to quiet down a little. “I like Ely, too. But a Guardian? You are taking a gargantuan risk with your life.”

He spun to his sire, anger and torment garroting him. “You think I don’t know that? It’s always about *me*!”

“It has to be. It’s the only way you’ll remain undetected by the Others.” His sire’s dark eyes pinned his, reminding Nate that Aba wasn’t just any demon but an old one. “My blood runs in your veins, *cnati*. I sensed something was wrong, and that’s why I came. Nate—” He gripped the bars. “We built this place, a supposedly safe and *secret* place for you to have time to recover when this semi-shift occurs. Now, a Guardian knows about the hideout, and she *saw* your other side! What do you think will happen when it becomes known that a being like you exists in this world? The Guardians will come after you!”

“She won’t tell them.”

“You trust her that much?” Aba demanded.

After she’d first hurt him, then came after him to heal him? Hell, the female unearthed feelings in him like no other. Moreover, she was willing to be with him even though she knew the minefield she would have to traverse because both their lives were battlegrounds.

“With my life.”

His sire sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, then his gaze lowered to the dressing on Nate’s chest. “What

happened?”

He shrugged, staring at his scaly fingers and talons. “Took a hit from a hellfire bolt.”

“You what?” Aba’s eyes narrowed. Yeah, he didn’t buy the bullshit when he knew how good Nate’s reflexes were since they often trained together. “You saved her, didn’t you?”

He remained silent.

“By the dark halls of Hades!” his sire growled. “Nate, you are putting a bull’s eye on your back. If you pursue her, let alone the troubles you could face with the Guardians, the kind of work you do does not allow for having any vulnerabilities. She will become one. I lost my mate and daughter to enemies who sought revenge against me.”

Because Azgor is a spiteful fucking prick! he wanted to say. *Because your female chose you over him, Azgor didn’t give them the protection they deserved.* But he remained silent, didn’t want to dredge up old hurts.

But reality came crashing down, making him face the dark truth. He shut his eyes. “No need to worry; it’s over.”

A long second passed before Aba spoke. “I’m sorry, *cnati*.”

What the hell did he say to that? He could never be the kind of male Ely deserved.

His chest constricted as if something vital within him had been ripped out. From the moment he met her, it was like a thread in the ether had connected them, a thread always yanking, pulling them closer, and now he’d severed whatever this burgeoning relationship could have been. Yeah, he deserved this torment.

Still, she wasn’t safe. Because of *him*, she was already a trophy to hunt with a price on her head.

His gaze fell on his discarded coat and the dull black weapon next to it.

His heartbeat speeding up again, he picked up her obsidian dagger, running a fingertip over the lethal edge. He usually

never bothered with weapons, not when he was a deadly one himself. The blade was well crafted, with a black stone embedded in the middle of the cross-guard and a swirl etched over the hilt, almost like wings. He'd never seen anything like it. Unique as her, and rare...

Unable to breathe through the pain consuming him, Nate fisted the dagger, remembering the feel of her mouth on his, the glimmer of her effervescent light that had swept through his eternal darkness, making the monster within screech and claw at his mind as if trying to escape it.

Clamping down on his emotions, he turned his head sideways to look at his sire. "You should be in Exilum."

Aba snorted, opened the cage, picked up Nate's fallen coat, and set it on the stairway handrail. "You know very well I only left the garage so as not to distress Shadow. Did you honestly think I'd stay away in the face of danger?"

Nate bit back a frustrated growl. While Aba might not like the brutal side of their species' life, he wasn't one to sit back and avoid anything.

"*Cnati*, I am an old demon. I've lived since humans were mere fledglings. What else can these curs, who took the coward's way out and hurt me with a hellfire bolt, do, that I haven't lived through or faced before? No matter what comes, I will fight alongside you."

Dammit. "I'm not a babe, Aba. I can take care of myself." Since his feet were back to normal, Nate pulled on his boots over his ruined socks.

"Perhaps. But I wasn't there for my first family, and I won't repeat the same mistake with you."

Hell, his sire was relentless. At his intractable expression, Nate cursed and straightened. Aware nothing would change his mind.

He snatched his coat, pulled it on, covering his bare chest, and stalked up the steps, slipping Ely's dagger into his pocket.

"Nate, stay away from her."

Without a word, he strode through the cabin and stepped outside, but even the icy night air couldn't freeze out the gut-churning loss swamping him.

He flashed to the Bowery, appearing in the workshop a moment later. Then he just stood there, the smell of grease and oil surrounding him.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! He hooked his hands around his neck, pacing the narrow path between two vehicles, feeling like a lit keg of dynamite. Who the fuck was he fooling except himself?

He wanted her—hell, he longed for her. And if she actually forgave him for the callous way he'd treated her or for the shitty things he'd said, how in Hades' name did he explain the kind of monster she would be giving her angelic self to?

No matter his rare, good deeds, he'd done things that would make her stick her dagger straight into his black heart several times over. But being with her made him forget the hellishness of his existence for a moment—

Chilling, raucous laughter exploded in his head. *Find her—feasssst on her blood like otherssss.*

Fuck off! This was his fucking life. *His!*

CHAPTER 16



THE NOISE in the biker bar crowded his ears and reverberated through his skull. Nate gritted his teeth, mentally scanning the area outside again. And nothing.

His mood shifted to piss-low. It was his own fucking fault.

Ignoring the woman eyeballing him for the past several minutes as she swayed, holding onto the playing jukebox, he slipped his hand inside his coat pocket and stroked the hilt of the ebony dagger.

Where the hell was its owner?

Two days and nearly half the night was over, and still no sign of Ely.

Scowling, his drink untouched, he stalked out into the frigid night and prowled the backstreet, sidestepping a grate hissing steam. The Bowery, he knew, was Ely's current patrolling designation. So, she couldn't be staying away from her job since these Guardians took their work damn seriously. Then why the hell wasn't she around?

Was she avoiding *him*?

His mind stretched like an elastic band at the thought and snapped back painfully at the reminder of why she would.

You wanted it. You tore her to shreds!

No, he couldn't blame her. Still, Ely wasn't the type to hide. Hell, he wished he had her cell number. He could call Shadow, but that would raise questions. He didn't want to

make things tough for Ely, especially knowing how in-your-face those fucking Guardians were toward his kind.

His inner radar clanged, prickles of warning sliding along his spine, causing him to slow his rampant trawling. He glanced up the alley. Well, what do you know? Two of those mofos strolled toward him. If they were here, then was Ely on duty elsewhere?

Scowling, Nate stepped back and leaned against the warehouse wall, picking up who one of the duo was. To keep himself busy until they passed, he pulled out his cell. He had just three numbers on it. His sire's, a fast-food joint when he needed sustenance, and a car parts store.

Nik and his pal, who eyed Nate like he was fresh meat to clobber, sauntered closer.

Nik nodded.

“You know this asshole?” Blond dick asked Nik, flicking a thumb at Nate.

“Yeah. Shadow's kin, Nate.”

“Oh, *rrright*. The demon. Pity.”

Aware Blondie was needling him, Nate slipped his cell and hands into his pockets so he wouldn't throttle the bastard. With a nod at Nik, he strode past them, heading toward the garage.

“Hope Ely is good where she is,” Blondie murmured.

Nate stopped dead.

“It aided Aethan, so it must help her, too,” Nik responded.

Who the fuck was Aethan? And help her with what?

She hadn't been hurt during the fight. Hell, the beast would have sensed that and rejoiced in her pain and torment, wanting her death next.

What was wrong with her? He pivoted, striding back to them. “Is Ely hurt?”

Both turned.

“What is it to you?” Blondie asked, stepping up into his grill.

Nate didn't move, nailed him with a cold, fuck-you stare. “Not that it's any of your business, I met her when she came to the garage with Shadow. My sire cares for Shadow like his own. Her friend falls into the same category.”

Not an outright lie. Aba, though initially wary, did like Ely. Hell, who wouldn't? She just had to step into a room to brighten it with her innate glow.

Nik gave a slight incline of his head. However, his tight expression indicated he wasn't happy his mate had come to the garage without him. It didn't surprise Nate.

From the moment he'd met Ely, despite his overwhelming desire for her, the urge to protect her superseded everything he considered important. It even unsettled him when she was out of sight. Now his gut fisted with worry over her safety.

“What's wrong with Ely?” he reiterated, keeping his cool with these silent mofos. *Control*. He'd learned this the hard fucking way with his constant battle to rein in the beast side.

“Sick,” Blondie retorted.

Nate narrowed his eyes, the taunt pushing him to the edge of his precarious tether. The urge to rip the male apart grew.

“She's off duty,” Nik said. “Needed a break.” And not revealing anything at all. “Let's go, Týr. We have much ground to cover before morning.”

As they stalked off, Blondie glanced back, eyes like lasers. “Stay away from her, demon.”

Not your fucking call, asshole.

The next second, the jackass was up in his face. “I know that fucking look. You want to end up in Purgatory, then go ahead, test me—”

“Norse, let's go!” Nik growled.

The beast within Nate stirred, sensing a bloodbath. His talons shot out, digging into his palms as he clenched his

fingers so as not to lash out and tear the mofo apart.

Another second passed, then the dick stepped back and smirked. “You can thank Shadow for sparing your life.”

And you can thank Ely for yours.

Frustrated with the dead-end answers, Nate catapulted his senses, searching for her, even though it was futile. She wasn't there. He still didn't know what was wrong with her, and he had mere days left before returning to the territory of Ys and the city of Azgoreth for the damn mortal combat. After that, hell, he had no idea what condition he'd be in or if he'd even be breathing. Each fight brought the beast closer and closer to the surface, judging from his feet also morphing now.

The next fight could be his last.

And here he was, denying him and Ely the chance at happiness, however short it might be—

The sensation of being watched sent icy prickles across his nape. He scanned his surroundings, searching for who it was. It could be any of the blights from the Dark Realm constantly on his ass, trying to bring him down.

He didn't understand their motivation. Did they want his shitty life as Azgor's fighter or the curse of half-transforming into some monstrous beast so badly that they would hunt him? Hell, he fucking hated both, and they were welcome to them. But it was his life, one set in stone from the time he was born...or reborn.

The acrid odor of burnt tar mixed with copper abraded his nose, and he knew. The bastards who'd dare to hurt his sire would now mock him, leaving little glimpses of their trail?

Nate took off deeper into the Bowery. As he tracked the stench, a tug on his psyche had him stumbling to a halt, and he changed direction. The beast shrieked at being denied the blood and gore of prey, clawing at his mind.

His heart pumping like mad as if it would escape him, Nate pursued the pull instead, like an invisible thread tethered to him, reeling him in. Only one person affected him in this way...

* * *

A half-hour earlier...

Ely stood on the upper deck of the boathouse apartment and braided her hair, damp from her icy shower. Moonlight poured down in platinum rays, flickering over the sea's calm surface, enclosing her in a moment of tranquility, much needed after her almost twenty-four hours of confinement in the musty cavern in the Catskills.

But she received no respite, not from the hiking heat or her churning emotions, keeping her on edge. So, she gave up and came here. But thoughts of what happened in that basement sent her mind back into turmoil, and she wrapped her arms around her waist.

Her torment and careening emotions were entirely on her. She had to find a way to deal and move on. Sighing, she shut out thoughts of her dismal failure at relationships and glanced around, her focus settling on the building shadows on the deck.

She waved her hands, and the shadows drifted toward her, enfolding her palms like foggy, black mittens, bits of the dense streaks she'd seen several days ago forming again.

Ugh. Fat lot of good you do me.

Frustration torquing her, she wrenched the shades free, but they separated like strings. Scowling, she flung her hands out. The strands shot through the air, hitting the wooden handrail and causing it to creak. Yup, her incredible power couldn't even zap a cockroach, let alone a demonii. Stupid ability

Sensing she wasn't alone, Ely grasped the wooden rail and peered down at the enormous sailboat anchored below.

Hedori glanced up from where he sat on his haunches, unmooring his vessel. He lifted a hand in greeting. "My lady, I thought you'd gone to Ground?"

She sighed. He persisted in calling her that even though she no longer lived on Empyrea.

“It’s Ely. And yes, I did. But I couldn’t take being buried in there any longer...” She lifted a shoulder in a helpless shrug. “I know only the Empyrean males—the high lords—have to Ground the excess of their overwhelming powers, not us females. So why is this happening?”

Hedori slowly straightened, holding the heavy rope, the moonlight casting a silvery sheen to his steel-gray hair. “It is unusual for a female to be affected. Perchance, it lies with your abilities gifted from the goddess, Gaia?”

“Perhaps.” She sighed, her grip tightening on the handrail, and the thing shattered—

“Eeep!” she shrieked, tipping forward. Only her quick reflexes stopped her from falling headfirst into the icy water. She landed on her feet next to Hedori, who’d already shot up, reaching for her.

“That was a close one,” he said, smiling.

“Aye.” She grimaced. Though come to think of it, maybe she should have let it happen since nothing else seemed to be working to ease her.

Hedori lifted his head to the upper deck, his brow creasing at the broken railing. “I hadn’t realized the wood had weakened. My apologies, Ely. I’ll get it fixed, probably encase steel into the timber this time.”

Ely studied the destroyed fence, too, then she frowned... no, it couldn’t be. Heck, her abilities were like a puff of air.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” Hedori said, drawing her attention. “The apartment—” He nodded to the flat above. “I’ll have it redecorated, so it’s more suitable for your use.”

What? “Oh, no. You don’t have to do that.”

“Ely, I’ve known you since you were a lass of ten summers,” he said with a quiet smile. “I might have left Empyrea long ago, but I remember. Despite your many friends

calling on you, you preferred your solitude. It's why you paint and don't play the *clavile* anymore."

Even back then he understood her. Still, she snorted. "It wasn't me they came for..."

She's so boring, a dullard. How could Reynner have a sister like her?

She shut out the hurtful words. It was why she preferred her own company. Then she met the girls here. They were different. Better. They liked *her*. Even Echo, who had thought at first that Ely had come after Aethan, her so-called betrothed. If only they all knew the sad, sad truth.

"I was the bridge they used to get in faster and see if my brother was around."

"Then they didn't deserve your friendship."

His quiet words lifted her spirits a little.

He took the broken wood from her. "This place is yours now. Consider it a gift for always making time to talk to a mere bodyguard when I came with Aethan to Ademéras. Besides, I have the space I want here on the lower level." He waved a hand to the mooring section and the storage place under the apartment.

"There's nothing *mere* about you," Ely said, wishing he'd find his own happiness. "I spoke to you because I liked you. Did you know the females at the castle used to wait for your arrival on Ademéras?" she teased as he examined the broken wood.

A ghost of a smile appeared, and he shook his head. "I'll fix this tomorrow." He tossed the wood aside and headed for his sailboat. "Lore is here, going through a few things in the library."

No, her friend would never leave the castle unprotected.

"Hedori?" she called out, and he glanced back. "I know it's not my place, but I care about you and want you to be happy. Why don't you show Jenna what she means to you? In our world, destined mates are so rare."

He stilled. “And have her run from me, think I’m like that rogue angel who abducted and abused her?” Pain flickered over his features. “When she’s ready, she’ll find me. In the interim, I’ll be the silent support she needs right now.” He cast her another little smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “As long as she’s here, with me, it’s all that matters.”

But sometimes you need a little space, too. Hence, the sailing.

Oh, she understood the feeling all too well. Except it wasn’t the same with her and Nate. He wasn’t even prepared to fight for the possibility of them...and in that intrinsic part of her, deep in her heart, she knew they could be so much more.

Ely clamped down on the hurt and sense of worthlessness attempting to steal through her, and stuck her hands in her jeans pockets. “I think I’ll change and go back to work,” she said as Hedori climbed into the vessel. “I feel useless hanging around here, doing nothing. And thank you for this place. I love it.”

“My pleasure. See you in the morning.” Hedori waved and, moments later, set sail into the night.

Ely watched him until he became a spot in the distance beneath the silvery moonlight.

Right, work. Time to get back to her normalcy, such as it was.

A short while later, back in the Bowery, Ely made her way deeper into the alley, far from the garage. The latter wasn’t a place she wanted to be near in her current state of mind.

She slipped a hand into her coat pocket, stroking the toy she carried, seeking her calm center.

Dreary buildings loomed on either side as she bypassed overflowing trash bags and trudged further into the seedier backstreets, her boots squelching through the sludgy snow—

A whoosh echoed. Then footsteps pounded the asphalt.

“Ely, wait!”

CHAPTER 17



“*ELY!*”

Ely froze at the sound of that voice.

Then she scowled and pivoted, and the wretched organ in her chest leaped at the sight of *him* striding toward her, his coat flying open in his near sprint.

By the stars! Why couldn't the Fates give her a break? How could she move past him when the universe persisted in letting their paths cross repeatedly?

If he was here to ask her to patrol another area...her hands clenched. *Fine.* She could swap with one of the guys...

Nate stopped in front of her, chest heaving, raking back his unbound hair from his too-handsome face, his jaw spotting days-old stubble. His features appeared drawn beneath the moonlight. Lines bracketed his mouth. She tried not to let herself care. “What do you want, Nate?”

Those striking, flamed-hued, topaz eyes skimmed her face, then lowered to her lips, dragging her thoughts back to their raw, sensual kiss in the cabin. And just as fast, her heart shriveled, remembering why it all went to hell. She hardened her expression, tone razor-sharp with coldness. “What do you want, Nate?” she reiterated. “I have work to do—”

“You left this behind.” He retrieved something from his coat pocket. Held it out.

Her obsidian dagger.

Of course. Why else would he seek her out?

About to take it, she stalled. Maybe she was an idiot, but the stars knew he affected her like no other. And not wanting to wonder *what if*, she summoned her mate's dagger from him again.

The weapon vanished, causing Nate to shake his head as it settled on her palm. "I'm not gonna pounce on you if you come closer," he drawled.

Ely barely heard him, a sharp stab of pain piercing her heart. He wasn't her destined.

While females of her genus didn't carry the bonding gene, she had hoped, considering Gaia had handed her a mate's dagger, too, just like she'd done with the guys. But she should have known after that first time in the alley when they fought and she'd flung her blade at him.

Well, it was better this way than being unwanted by her fated mate. "Weapon delivered. Thank you. Goodbye."

"Wait." He grasped her arm when she turned to leave. "We need to talk."

"There's nothing left to say."

He watched her for an endless second. Then the smile that always made her heart leap—and the one she now hated—flickered like a warming flame.

Damn him, and damn the traitorous lump of muscle in her chest. She glowered.

"Ah, *laika*..." He reached out and tenderly stroked his knuckles down her cheek.

"Don't!" She jerked back, her spine hitting the building behind her, and he closed the inches between them. "If you're worried about running into me, don't be. You won't even know I'm—"

His mouth came down on hers in a gentle caress, stopping her words. He didn't seem to care that she held a deadly weapon against his chest, and then he was kissing her. There was something territorial in how he claimed her mouth,

intense...passionate. The urge to cave, to surrender, nearly splintered her fragile control.

“No—” She pushed back, fists to his pecs as pain hammered her heart. “Why are you doing this? You made everything crystal clear the other night. So, leave me alone.” Barely able to swallow past the lump in her throat, she brushed past him and hurried down the narrow alley.

He appeared before her in a skid of sludgy snow, blocking her path, his expression torn. “Ely, wait. Please. At least hear me out.”

“You can’t keep doing this, Nate.” Her eyes dampened. “I would have risked everything to be with you, but you—”

“I am sorry, Ely. Hell, I’m a fucking demon with an unhinged symbiont and enough enemies who’d see me dead. And I should stay away, but I can’t seem to do so.”

But you did.

As much as it pained her, she understood why he couldn’t be with her. “You don’t have to explain anything. It’s okay, I under—”

“What the fuck’s okay about any of this?” The orange specks in his irises blazed like an inferno. “When it felt as if my guts had been yanked through my throat watching you leave. I tried to do the right thing, give you a chance at a normal life instead of a fucked-up one with me, but nothing works—not when I think about you all the time,” he said huskily. “If these two days deprived of even a glimpse of you nearly drove me out of my mind, then eternity is going to be absolute torture without you. So no, I’m not letting this damn thing inside me come between us anymore!”

His impassioned words formed cracks in her mental armor, and she wanted so much to believe. But the hurt when he’d rejected her had wounded her deeply.

Nate palmed her cheek, his tender gaze drifting over her face as if memorizing every facet of it. “There is no one like you, Ely. I know I don’t deserve you, but I’ll ask anyway. Give me another chance, please...”

She swallowed painfully, too scared to hope.

At her silence, he brought his other hand to her face. “Talk to me, Ely. Say something. Hell, say anything, even if it’s for me to fuck off. Though I can’t promise you that.”

Her throat sandpapery with emotions, she dismissed her dagger and grasped his wrists. “How do I know you won’t walk away again when things get difficult?” And they would.

“Because you live in here.” He tapped his heart. “In the black, empty space where no light infiltrated until you crept in and took over.”

“What?” She blinked, not expecting that.

“And because I never make promises I can’t keep. In my life, I’ve made two, one to protect my sire and the other, reprisal for the one who—” His mouth tightened, his expression growing colder than the snow in the alley. “It doesn’t matter.”

Whatever number two was had hurt him badly.

“What is two, Nate?” she asked, because it did matter.

After several seconds, he said, “Reprisal for the one who changed my life and made me what I am.”

“The symbionts,” she murmured, a shiver coasting down her heated skin.

He gave a terse nod, but before she could question him further, he said, “I’m a selfish bastard, Ely. And just so you know, if you choose this, choose us, then you are *mine*. I’m a demon, and yeah, we are all possessive assholes.”

That alone should have sent her running. Heck, she’d run from her overprotective parents, but hearing those words, his promise, especially after witnessing bits of the harsh, dark life he endured, none of it mattered.

Nate was whom she wanted.

More, she realized his life had been as lonely as hers.

The heaviness within her eased. And just as fast, it turned to a lump of dread, her stomach tying itself into knots, not

knowing how the others would react when they learned of them. Nate wasn't even her destined, so she couldn't use the soulmate card, and he was also a demon housing a dangerous symbiont.

Expelling the air wedged in her lungs, she shrugged off the foreboding. Later, she'd deal with it.

She slid her palms over his chest, needing to touch him. "As long as I'm with you, it's what matters. You are whom I want." A smile lit his eyes like a million amber flames igniting, warming them as they tenderly skimmed her features. "But it won't be easy, Nate. Once the warriors and our leader Michael learn about us."

He snorted and wrapped his arms around her, pressing his lips on the top of her head. "Tell me something I don't know."

Wait—*what?* She pushed away from him, as far his arms would allow since they remained anchored around her waist. Her gaze searched his gorgeous face. "Did you bump into one of the guys? What happened?"

"Nothing I can't handle—"

"Nate." She pinned him with a gimlet stare. "Tell me."

"Let me hold you, *laika*. So I know you're not a dream." He buried his face in her neck, his warm breath fanning the embers of desire that never quieted.

Unable to resist him, she hugged him, relishing in his hard body and strong arms wrapped around her. She brushed his stubbly jaw with a soft kiss, then pressed her mouth to his ear. "Tell me, please."

He huffed out a laugh. More seconds passed before he straightened, his gaze sweeping the dingy, wet alley with its sludgy snow piles, probably scanning the area around them, too, for his enemies, or her Guardian brothers. However, all seemed quiet.

"I crossed paths with Nik and the blond one here in the Bowery," he said. "I heard blondie say something about hoping you were okay. I hadn't seen you for two nights, and with no way to contact you, well, I wasn't letting it go. Let's

just say he didn't like me asking after you. Give me your cell phone."

Ely gaped at him. It had already started. Unease nipped at her with sharp teeth as she fumbled out the device from her coat pocket and handed it over. She knew it would happen, just not this fast. "Did you fight?"

"No."

Thank *Urias*! "That's Týr," she said then. "He's, er, rather protective."

All the guys were, treating her like a younger sibling, but she had her brother for that. Though she understood Týr's antipathy toward demons, especially after being incarcerated in Tartarus with brutal jailors, not all were vicious, malevolent beings.

"Yeah, I got that," Nate muttered, his fingers moving carefully over her cell display, then deleting and retyping a few more times.

How hard was it to type his name and number? Frowning, she held out her hand. "Let me do that."

His lips thinned, a tic working his jaw. Then his cell rang, and he handed her phone back. He'd put himself down as *Laika's* followed by a heart emoji, which made her smile. She found him saving her number on his device.

"C'mon. Let's get out of here." He pushed his phone into his jeans pocket. "We need to talk." He grasped her hand, his warm, calloused fingers lacing through hers, causing her heart to clip hard. He flashed them to the garage and ushered her into the workshop. The metal door shut behind them.

Oh, heavens. This was truly happening. He was putting her first, giving them a chance, and a grin started. She didn't care what roadblock the castle household would erect against her being with him, and the dangers she would face—heck, she was a Guardian and equipped to handle anything—

What he said registered. "Talk about what?"

"Your favorite thing. Me." His smile was shameless.

Gods, this male! Cocky to the bone. But her insides melted. Still, she couldn't resist. "Why not me?"

His smile became a laugh, low and seductive as he opened the door into a dark, silent living room, a faint smell of metal and paint lingering in the air. "Oh, we will."

She deserved that. But tell him about the dull girl she'd been? Ugh, talking about ants crawling on a sidewalk would be more exciting. Scrunching her face, Ely scanned the garage and the surroundings, but all remained quiet. "Where's Aba?"

Nate switched on the lights, illuminating the couch, armchair, and coffee table scattered with car magazines. Nothing personal in here at all.

"At the cabin. He refuses to go back to Exilum."

"I can't blame him. He cares about you."

Nate shrugged off his coat. "Yeah, he does."

At his clipped tone, the truth struck her. Her heart sank. "He's not happy about us, is he?"

"Not for the reasons you think." He tossed his outerwear on the armchair and headed for the kitchen. Lights came on.

Ely untied her belt, removed her trench coat, leaving it on top of his, and followed him into the small kitchen. She leaned against the cupboard near the door as he put on the coffee pot and rubbed her bare overheated arms, wishing for a little respite from her intensifying temperature problem.

He faced her and stilled. His stare went slowly down her body, then up again. "You're wearing a skirt."

"What?" Oh, right. She'd forgotten she'd changed into that and a sleeveless top for work. With the incessant heat consuming her, it seemed like a good idea. But the damn fire wouldn't be beaten.

"I felt hot." She brushed it aside.

"You have a tattoo?" He smiled now. "Not something I expected."

She shook her head. "No, I don't."

“Yeah?” He strolled across and traced a fingertip over her bicep. “Then what’s this?”

His touch slid goosebumps over her skin. Frowning, she glanced at her upper arm, and her mystical Gaian weapons inked there. Oh. She lifted her gaze, aware of how close he stood. And since he’d already shared more than she had... “What do you think?”

His brow furrowed as he continued tracing the crossed staff. “Damn, *laika*. This is your weapon of destruction?”

She huffed out a laugh. “Something like that. The goddess gifted it to me when I took my oath as a Guardian. It can transform into glaives.”

“I recall.” He nodded. “Good. You’re never defenseless, then.” He went back to the spluttering coffee pot.

“Nate, I’m aware of the dangers...” She brought the conversation back to what they’d been discussing. “From both your side and mine.”

His broad shoulders tensed as he lifted mugs from the draining rack. “Diff is I won’t kill your brethren and risk alienating you.”

But he just might die at their hands.

Her stomach knotted at the truth of what could happen, wishing he was her destined mate.

She had to find a way to navigate this treacherous path fanning out in front of them without getting any blood spilled.

“This will be harder for you, Ely.” He faced her, setting the beakers on the table. “I won’t, or at least, I’ll try not to demand more than you can give, timewise, but I need to see you every night whenever I’m on Earth.”

“All right.” She nodded, already hating the thought of being parted from him when what he said knocked the air out of her lungs. And she gaped at him. “What do you mean not on Earth? Nate—” She crossed to him. “Please don’t say the Dark Realm.”

He ran his warm, calloused palms over her arms. “Ely, a part of my life has to be lived there, too.”

Gods, the skin contact felt *sooo* good. She wanted to lean into him, so he could touch her everywhere and ease this impossible furnace within her—ease the arousal coiling through her body. Ely fought to concentrate on what they were talking about. “Because of what you are?”

He gave a terse nod.

“But Otium demons have lived here without ever going back to the Dark Realm, so why can’t you?”

“It’s because of what you saw in the basement. No Otium possesses the type of demonic monster I have within me. I’m an aberrant, Ely.”

Aberrant? She frowned. “And the symbionts? How did you get them? I know Shadow was badly wounded and dying, and you put some in her.”

“Not dying. She died.”

Her heart stuttered at the truth. “It means you did, too,” she whispered.

He nodded and crossed to the fridge. “Yes. Aba brought me back. The symbiont he used somehow trapped my departing soul and merged with it.”

“But that’s good, right?”

Dark laughter. “If me breathing is good, then I suppose it is.” He retrieved milk from the fridge. But his sardonic tone twisted her heart.

“Nate, please, just tell me. I don’t want coffee. I’m too hot—unless you can make it iced.” Her gaze fixed on him. “I want to understand—to help you if I can. You matter to me.”

He set the milk bottle on the table, and his expression softened, a hint of red sliding through his irises. “No one can, *laika*. Unfortunately, my symbiont ties me to that world, and I need to go there to sort of...recharge.”

“Just one symbiont? You have five.”

“I’m aware...” He poured coffee into both mugs, full in one and a half in another, topped the half with cold milk, then got out the ice tray and added ice cubes. “The others didn’t survive the red one.”

Right. “Recharge how?” she asked, her throat suddenly bone-dry. “Nate, please tell me you don’t have to sleep with others.”

He looked up from stirring the coffee. “I did for a time when the change started,” he said, his gaze never wavering from hers. “It was...easier.”

“And now?” Memories of him with the human in the nightclub, then later with the Fae, reared up again, and her stomach heaved. “Because I can’t do this if you—”

“I don’t.” He shook his head. “Now I know what I need. It’s what I take from males here. In the Dark Realm, it’s more, and it satiates the symbiont better. Ely, I was feeding when you saw me both times. Just like this...” He set the mug down on the counter next to her, slipped his palm over her throat, his head lowered, his mouth stopping an inch from hers.

Then she felt more, the light caress of his breath on her lips, his scent and nearness enfolding her, stealing her thoughts for a second. She rather suspected the latter was all her—and likely how his prey felt, too—drawn to his dangerous aura, compelling charisma, and gorgeous face. But *she* felt far more for him than wanting instant gratification.

“...not kissing them.” Nate’s quiet voice pulled her back. “But I have to touch them, have eye contact, and draw on their darkness. To be fully satiated, the symbiont requires the emotional one of fear...terror.”

“And not a soul’s dark energy like Shadow’s does?”

“That would have been so much easier.” His thumb gently caressed her throat, but his expression hardened. “Right from the start, it was those ravaged emotions it went for. I’m just the vessel who houses it.”

His self-hatred was so palpable, she put her hands on his chest to soothe him. “The black scales I witnessed beneath

your skin, the horns, the fangs, the talons, is it because of the symbiont?"

He sighed but nodded. "Yes. When my control slips, those changes appear."

Urias! As terrifying as his beast side was—and it was damn near debilitating from what she'd witnessed—she refused to let it keep them apart.

Ely frowned. If Shadow's was fae, what was his? Because Nate remained zipped about that. All she knew was that nothing good came from the Dark Realm.

He lowered his head and trailed his lips along her jaw, sending her desire and her damn temperature careening like an out-of-control thermostat. But her thoughts remained on the thing standing between them.

"Nate? What is the origin of your symbionts?"

CHAPTER 18



THE ORIGIN OF HIS SYMBIONTS?

Hell, terrify her with the truth of what he was and lose her before they even started this relationship?

Nate stepped back, the tormenting scent of her arousal tugging at him to forget this damn convo and give them what they both needed. He rubbed his nape, the tension stretching his muscles like a tautly strung bow. But he couldn't ignore this.

"It's from a beast found in the darkest part of the Dark Realm. What you saw in the basement is a little of what it would look like."

Her eyes widened. "Wait, are you a...a shifter?"

He massaged his brow, pain rattling his brain, a norm for him. But fuck! Couldn't he get a moment's peace? "I suppose."

Her jaw dropped, then snapped shut as she digested his words. "What do you mean *you suppose*?"

"I haven't fully transformed, Ely, because I refuse to let that happen. What you saw in the basement is what emerges—what I am." She frowned. Not wanting to worry her with his constant battle and the hate between him and his symbiont, he settled for, "I don't like giving over control of myself to anything, even if it is a part of me."

"But from what I've heard, as a shifter, you need to accept the beast part of you and coexist." Her head cocked as she

studied him. “It’s probably why you have a headache. So what kind of animal is it?”

Hell, his *laika* didn’t miss a thing.

He lowered his hand from his temple and reached out to coil an escapee tendril of pale hair around his finger. The silken strands took his mind off his pain. “I have a wyvern symbiont—a demonic wyvern.”

Ely gaped at him, and he cocked an eyebrow. “Scared?”

She snorted, seeming to come back to herself. “I killed Narakas. Sure, they have no wings, but they’re still huge...”

“Motherfuckers? Got it.” he teased, slipping his palm around her nape, and she laughed, the sound pure temptation.

Unable to resist her, he trailed his lips along her jaw, and she sighed. “Now that you know, let’s talk about something else. Better yet, this...” He kissed her tempting mouth, then licked and sucked her lower lip. A soft sigh escaped her, and she leaned into him, her hands in his hair.

With a groan, he slid his tongue into her mouth, found hers, and deepened the kiss, a burning hunger for this female who captured him from the moment he saw her. He wrapped his arms around her and flashed to his room, dropping her on his bed.

Her chest heaving, she sat up, her mouth puffy and damp from their kiss. The streetlight cast a soft glow through the undraped window, highlighting Ely like the angel she was, pure, innocent...and his.

He pulled his t-shirt off. Her passion-glazed eyes slid over him, to the fresh gauze taped on his chest, then lowered to the newly healed wound she’d inflicted.

Remorse darkened her expression. “I’m truly sorry I hurt you.”

“And then you healed me.” He shrugged it off. “I find I like your mark on me. So, *laika*?” he drawled, wanting to take her mind off their tumultuous beginnings. “Do you like it slow and gentle? Or wild and dirty?”

Her creamy skin flushed scarlet. “I just want you,” she whispered, her husky voice stretching every nerve in his body.

Tenderness for this female surged in a wave. A feeling so new, it floored him. His life had always been one of darkness, horror, and pain. “You undo me, Ely,” he said, sounding like he’d swallowed gravel. “You scrambled every sane thought I have—have done so from the moment I saw you in the alley, slaying me with those cold, beautiful eyes.”

A smile surfaced, tugging her kiss-swollen mouth. “Is that why you tormented me whenever we met?”

“Foreplay,” he teased gruffly. “Didn’t you know?”

She snort-laughed, reached out, and gently stroked the scar on his abs, then she pressed her lips to it.

His muscles tensed, and his cock stiffened.

Damn. He pulled her up or tried to, but she shook her head and went down on her knees, unfastened the button of his jeans, slipped her hand beneath his underwear, and wrapped her fingers around his throbbing length, turning the tables on him. And then he didn’t care what she did as long as she touched him.

“Fuck,” he grunted, reveling in the feel of her hot little hand around his dick. She swiped her thumb over the sensitive head, wet with precum, then worked his length with incredibly strong strokes, the calluses on her fingers adding to the friction.

Her dark gaze sought his as she leaned forward to glide her tongue over the rounded head. Then her lips closed around him, and he groaned. With her kneeling in front of him in her short skirt and braided hair, with her innocent air, and her lips wrapped around his cock, she had to be the hottest fucking thing he’d ever seen!

She took him deeper, her fingers squeezing the inches of him she couldn’t quite take, straining his rigid control further as her mouth retreated, releasing his wet length from her mouth and then swallowing him again.

Nate gritted his teeth, tensing as his balls tightened, and his release drew closer and closer—

“No!” He dragged her up and kissed her hard. At her startled look from his lack of finesse or whatever, he growled, “Yeah, I’m that desperate. Off.”

He grabbed the ends of her top and removed it, tossing it aside. Then he snapped the rubber band at the end of her braid and freed her heavy rope of hair. Yards of moonlit strands cascaded to her hips. “It’s a sin to hide all this beauty.”

“It gets in the way of my job.”

Yeah, he got that. Nate coiled the length around his palm, tipping her face up, and kissed her swollen mouth, sucking her tongue, tasting himself, but that wasn’t what he was after. He slid his other hand up her thigh, moved her skirt up, pushed her panties aside, and stroked his thumb over her wet slit.

Her gasp was the sweetest, cock-stirring sound he’d ever heard, and then she pressed her hot, wet core into his hand. *Damn me!*

Her passion-darkened gaze met his as he stroked the length of her cleft, not quite touching her where she wanted, and she squirmed. “Nate...”

“I want it all, Ely,” he growled. “You falling apart on my hand, then in my mouth, before riding my cock. Do you want that, my *laika*?”

“Gods, yes!” she panted.

His mouth came down on hers again in a gut-churning kiss.

* * *

By the scattered stars! Ely groaned as he sucked on her tongue with an eroticism setting her ablaze. His lips, his hands on her too hot, too sensitive body felt so darn good, she wanted to crawl under his skin and settle there.

He dragged her underwear down her legs and dropped it aside, then he gripped her waist—

“Wait, wait, your wound,” she protested.

“I’m okay. It’s healing fast, thanks to you.” He picked her up, and Ely wrapped her legs around his waist as he braced her against the wall, her short skirt rolling to her hips. He grasped her ass, aligning her directly on the length of his hard cock, and moved his hips up and down, letting his erection slide between her bare folds—

A moan broke free as need flooded her. He rolled his hips, his sex rubbing against her clit, hiking her arousal. Heavens! She was so close. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. “Nate, please...”

“We’ve barely started.” He nipped her chin. “I’m not rushing our first time, Ely mine. I want to feel every inch of you in every way possible.”

Dammit. He was going to kill her if he kept this up. Panting, she dropped her brow to his shoulder. Then she bit his neck. “Sadist.”

He chuckled. “Only now you know this?”

She huffed and licked his neck.

He growled. His hold tightening on her hips, he stalked back to the bed and dropped her on the mattress again.

Ely lay there watching him as he unzipped and removed her boots and socks, setting them aside, then her skirt followed. She sat up, fumbled off her sleeveless top, and flung it aside. The cool air, a blessed relief on her heated skin, felt *sooo* good.

He kneeled on the bed. The dim illumination in the room from the streetlights cast him in a muted golden glow like some warrior of old with his muscular body, cut abs, and long hair falling about his shoulders as he hovered above her. He parted her legs, moved in closer, and settled her limbs over his thighs, revealing her most intimate self to him.

His stare scorched her, fluctuating between a fiery topaz and a burning gold as he stroked her inner thighs. “You’re a vision, *laika*...” Then his brow furrowed as he trailed a finger along the three-inch scar on her side. “What happened? I know immortals don’t generally have scars when they can self-heal?”

She didn’t want to talk about the past, especially now. “I fought someone who wouldn’t take no for an answer, got wounded, and accidentally fell in the river. The scar formed as a result.” She scrunched her face. “Salt water’s not so good with open wounds, especially when one has quick healing.”

“I will kill him.”

“He’s on another world.”

His expression grew dark, but he didn’t say anything. To take his mind off her attacker, Ely sat up, gripped one flat male nipple with her teeth, and gently sucked. He blinked, his eyes morphing to the fiery gold of desire.

Growling, he slid his fingers between her folds and gripped her throbbing flesh between two fingers. “I want this swollen, sensitive little clit in my mouth to lick and suck. Do you want that, *laika*?”

Her core tightened at his words. “*Yes!*”

A smile kicked up one corner of his lips. “You’re so easy. A little dirty talk—”

“Dammit, Nate.” She half laughed and half groaned. “Don’t make me regret not killing you—”

A hand on her chest, he pushed her to her back and moved lower to settle between her thighs. Her legs slid over his shoulder as he ran his tongue along her cleft, circling her clit, his stubbly jaw a caress against her skin.

Ely shut her eyes, sensations swamping her.

“Look, *laika*.” His husky voice had her eyes snapping open. “See what it is we do and know that you are *mine* to claim in this way.”

Chest heaving, she pushed up, feet braced on the mattress, bracing on her elbows.

His mouth parted, his tongue splitting her aching cleft with slow licks as if finding every hidden facet of her. Each languid stroke felt so godsdamn good, so soothing against her feverish skin. Gods, she wanted to crawl into him and stay there.

He slowly kneaded her bare mound and sucked one lip with teasing pulls, lightly thumbing her clit. She groaned. Her inner muscles strung tighter and tighter. Pressure built, her mind lost to the world, everything in her focused on what he was doing to her body. He grasped her clit with his lips, and suckled once, twice, thrice—a firm tug. And her orgasm crashed through her like a furious wave—

“*Nate!*” she cried out, grabbing the bed covers, her body bowing and mind splintering, pleasure taking her over...

Gasping like she'd run miles, Ely lay there, unable to think, consumed by the aftermath of sheer bliss.

Nate licked her hypersensitive flesh again, and she squealed, grabbing his head and tightening her thighs around his neck.

“I'm quite happy to stay here.” He brushed his lips on her clit.

“Gods, *no!*” She hastily parted her legs and pushed at his head, unable to take more.

“That's not what you said a moment ago.” He lifted to his elbows, his body still wedged between her thighs, a smirk in place.

Ely snorted and reached down, grasped his shoulders but couldn't get a grip, so she tugged his hair instead. He moved up, the fabric of his jeans abrading her legs in a rough caress, his bare sex a warm bar against her stomach. Not the place she wanted him, but then his mouth came down on hers, and he was kissing her.

She tasted herself as his tongue tangled with hers. Desire resurged with a vengeance and had her pushing him off. He laughed, landing on his back, and lay there like some gorgeous

fallen deity with his sculptured features, lowered eyebrows, his zipper still undone, and his erect cock visible.

Her gaze met his warm one, and her heart thumped wildly, her feelings for him expanding, knowing he was finally hers.

He cocked an eyebrow, a wicked glint in his eyes. “Still hungry, my female?”

For you, gods, yes!

She lifted a shoulder in an airy shrug. “Maybe. However, *I* can survive. I did for eons.” Heck, keeping her expression cool was darn hard when she wanted to laugh at his narrowing eyes, even as the heat-edged desire simmered again.

“Did you now?” he ask, tone low. Dangerous.

Oh, yes, she’d pay for that, but she didn’t care. She’d waited a lifetime for someone like him. A male who didn’t pander to her because of who her family was, who wanted her, and who made her smile and feel like she could breathe again.

* * *

At Ely’s provocative smile, Nate bit back his own.

His gaze roved her flushed face and pleasure-brightened eyes. And the spark which lit deep within him from the moment they met burned brighter, bowling him over and knocking out what little air remained in his lungs.

She straddled him, gently pressing the edges of the dressing on his chest, miles of shimmering pale hair cascading to her hips. Ely might appear slender, but her body was honed with sinuous muscles and a forceful strength, doubtless from her training and fighting evil when out on the street. Oh, he wanted to feel that power when he claimed her, wanted her so godsdamn badly.

“You would taunt me?” he asked softly, holding her hips.

She cast him an innocent look, trailing a finger down to his navel, and his cock jerked. “Besides it being fun, why not—*eeep!*” She squealed as he flipped her on her back again, then

gasped as his weight landed on her, and laughed, wrapping her long sexy legs around his hips, locking him in place.

While he reveled in the sensation of her trapping him, it was brutal torture for his throbbing cock pressed on her stomach. But the sound of her laughter made him smile.

The beast within stirred.

Nate tightened his mental shields, didn't want the fucker intruding on this incredible moment.

“You were saying?” He cocked an eyebrow at her.

The grin still in place, she trailed a finger along his unshaven jaw. “Merely that we Emphyreans are hot-blooded and have needs, but yeah, I did.”

Nate frowned. He hadn't heard of her species, mostly because he hadn't cared about the other realms or their denizens when he had his own nightmare to live through, but he was curious. “Emphyrean?” he asked. “Not a Fallen?”

The smile lingered. “No, but we're angels, too, just of a different genus.”

He stared at her, her teasing words of surviving eons without carnal pleasure, a punch to his gut. Was she truly an innocent in this seduction game? “Are you saying you've never been with anyone?”

Her smile faded. “A long time ago, yes...”

Her admission nailed him like a bolt to the chest.

However, at the flash of hurt in her eyes, he wanted to find the worthless fuckers and throttle them for putting the pain there.

“Nate.” She stroked his whiskered jaw. “Your irises are bleeding red. Just know they didn't matter. I was looking for something none of them possessed. Love, acceptance. They only wanted me for what they could get.”

“What do you mean? Ely, I know you haven't been a Guardian for long. How did *that* happen, by the way?”

A massive sigh escaped her. “I lived on another realm until two Earth years ago.”

“Empyrea,” he said softly. “It would account for your accent. I like it.”

That made her smile. She shifted and pulled her long hair out from under her, sweeping the mass away from her shoulders. Against his navy sheets, the pale strands appeared like glimmering rays of silver. “My parents are the rulers of Ademéras, a dominion in Empyrea. They wanted me mated to a well-connected family, and I don’t mean in Ademéras but from another dominion. First, it was to the prince of Empyrea, but that didn’t happen—”

“Why?”

“He left and mated someone else. Then my parents arranged two more betrothals, and I refused both. The fourth, they were determined I would go through with, so I left.”

He frowned. “You opened a portal and ended up here?”

“Yes. Well, actually, the mage of my world told me to seek what it was I desired. And more than anything, I wanted to find my brother. He’d been gone a long time from Ademéras. In the end, I not only got a job I find fulfilling, but I also found Reynner, too.”

“Then I’m glad. Or our paths would never have crossed. But you are mine now...” He kissed the tip of her nose. Hell, he’d accepted he would never have a consort, not for one like him, and then he saw her. “Mine, Ely, ” he whispered, kissing the corner of her mouth. “Say it.”

“Yes, I am yours, and you are mine,” she murmured with the same need he felt for her. She wrapped her legs around him again, her hot core pressing against his belly, stroking the furnace within. “Kiss me, Nate.”

His mouth returned to hers in a tender meeting of lips, and then it wasn’t enough, and he drew her tongue into his mouth with a raw, carnal need. He palmed her breast, squeezing the delectable mound—

A rush of prickles coasted over his psyche. Nate lifted his head and went motionless. A faint whiff of burning tar and acrid copper drifted to him from the open window. The same smell he'd sniffed earlier. The bastards who hurt his sire were back.

He didn't want to leave Ely, but he couldn't let them escape twice. He leaped off the bed. "I won't be long."

Ely sat up, eyes wide, as he zipped up his jeans over his painfully erect cock.

"What's wrong? I don't sense any danger."

"My world problems." Anger torqued him. The fuckers would dare taunt him? Come this close to the garage again?

"I can help."

"No. I've dealt with low-lives like these before." He pulled on his t-shirt and raked back his tangled hair. Ely watched him like a beautiful siren. Unable to resist her, he leaned down, cupped the back of her head, and kissed her again. "I won't be long, *laika*. Wait for me."

Then he flashed from the room, tracking the sewer rats.

* * *

What on earth? Ely frowned at the spot where Nate had been moments ago, his expression utterly lethal. It was *her* job to hunt down these sleazeballs from the Dark Realm, and if they shed blood, be it human or the peaceful Otium demons, well then, she would kill them.

Hastily, she rolled off the bed and swayed, the heat resurging, hitting her harder than before. Dammit! She dropped back to the mattress, panting as if she'd run miles across the planet. Even the much cooler air from the open window didn't help. Ugh! She pushed up once more, dressed, tied her hair into a high ponytail with one of the rubber bands she found in the bedside drawer, then lit out of there.

Outside in the welcoming chilly air of early morning, she scanned for Nate... And in the damp night air, the smell of anise and cedar merged with woodsmoke lingered—okay, most of it was already on her. A smile snuck to her lips. *Ugh, get a grip, Ely.* Right. She dematerialized, following the tug of her man.

A moment later, Ely found herself somewhere on the waterfront in Queens, near massive warehouses, the sounds of growls and grunts reaching her.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find you?” Nate’s icy voice reached her as she reformed in the shadows of the building. A body flew through the air, hitting the warehouse wall with the impact of a bullet and dropping to the asphalt. A guttural snarl erupted, and the demon reared up and flashed toward Nate, who easily evaded him.

Ely watched Nate fight, his movements fast and brutal as he landed blows, then a roundhouse kick to the jaw. Bones crunched. The demon groaned. Nate grabbed him in a chokehold—

A sudden hiss sounded, and a hellish bolt sizzled out of nowhere, brightening the night, its trajectory heading straight for Nate. Lightning fast, he moved, wheeling around, holding the cur in front of him like a shield. The bolt struck. The demon yowled in agony.

Her heart lodged in her throat, eyes narrowed, Ely scanned the place, ready to demolish the unseen damn ass for fighting dirty, not that she expected fair play from these Dark Realm scumbags.

“You know better than to come after me,” Nate bit out, dragging her attention back to him.

“When the price is right, anyone would—” the demon coughed, spitting blood.

“I’m sure. But your pal isn’t coming for you if that’s what you’re waiting for. He let you take the fall. So talk.” Nate rammed him against the wall. “Or, I will tear from limb to limb. Death won’t be quick.”

“H-he wants you dead,” he grunted, clutching his chest, blood glistening on his dark shirt. “He wants the unicorn brought back.”

Unicorn? Ely frowned. Earth didn’t house any rare mystical creatures she knew of...unless it was in disguise?

“That’s never gonna happen.”

A slash of silver glinted as dawn broke, streaks of gray lightening the sky. The demon broke free and lashed out with his dagger. Her breath caught. Nate didn’t evade the strike, he merely sidestepped, then grabbed the demon’s hand and yanked it upward, slicing the fiend’s carotid with one barely seen move. Blood sprayed everywhere. He snagged the falling blade and plunged it into the cur’s chest. The demon fell to his knees and collapsed on the asphalt, disintegrating into goo before seeping back into the earth.

It wasn’t like she didn’t kill, too, but this, whatever Nate was embroiled in, it was more than someone hurting Aba. She’d never seen this side of him. So cold and deadly.

Still, Ely inhaled lungfuls of air, grateful he wasn’t harmed. “Nate,” she called out.

His head snapped her way. “Dammit, Ely! Don’t follow me. This isn’t your fight.”

“Demons on Earth, hurting humans or Otiums, and causing strife? It sure is,” she corrected. “In any case, I didn’t interfere. I stood aside.”

“I don’t want you involved in this,” he growled, crossing to her. “They already have their sights on you, and yeah, it’s fucking personal!”

“Uh-huh, I can see that.” She stifled a snort. “The unicorn, what did he mean?”

His features hardened, his gaze flickering to her head. “What do you think?”

Frowning, she touched her ponytail, wondering if something was caught in her hair. Her brow furrowed as she dropped her hand. Ugh, Nate with his darn cryptic comment—

Ohhh...*shit!* Her stomach heaved as his words connected, her fingers flying up to touch her ponytail. With her light hair in this style—

“*Me?* I’m the unicorn? Because of my hairstyle?” She shook her head, laughter breaking free. “They can try. I’m not easy to capture.”

“I don’t care! They’ve already put a price on you!” His eyes burned with anger. “I might have killed one, but they’re just minions who work for someone far more powerful.”

Deciding not to aggravate him any further, she let it go. “Okay, but you know I’m not going to hide, right? I have a job to do.”

His mouth tightened. “I know.” He glanced around the place. “Let’s go.”

“I can’t. It’s dawn already. I have to head back. There could be a meeting. I’ll come by later in the day. You’ll be at the garage, right?”

Nate stood there, a tall silhouette in the shadows, his arms folded over his chest, not looking happy at all. “Not there, the cabin. It’s safer.”

From his enemies? “Okay. I’ll text you first.”

Before she could dematerialize, he grasped her hand. “Letting you go is damn hard to do.” He drew her to him, chest still heaving from his fight, and just held her in his arms. The gods knew she didn’t want to leave him, either. His unshaven jaw slid against her skin in a raspy caress, and a bolt of desire shot through her.

“I can smell your arousal, Ely,” he groaned, grasping her ponytail and kissing her. “Go, before I finish what we started in my room, right here in this damn alley.”

Her heart thumping wildly, Ely stepped back. Smiling was hard when she wanted to run back into his arms. She dematerialized back to the castle, aware of the endless wait until she could see him again.

First, she needed a shower to ease this damn heat within, and as much as it pained her, she had to wash Nate's scent off her, too. For now.

CHAPTER 19



LIGHTS BRIGHTENED the castle's windows in the early hours of the morning, lending it a fairy-tale appearance as Ely reformed on the terrace near the TV lounge, where she and the girls sometimes hung out. She cut through the empty room, stepped out into the corridor, and headed for the back stairwell, needing a shower before the meeting.

Soft footsteps echoed, and Kira appeared from further down, coming from the direction of the library. The moment she spied Ely, she hurried over, eyes bright with concern, her spiral, auburn hair bouncing around her shoulders. "I've been waiting to see you. Are you okay? Echo mentioned you weren't feeling yourself before she left with Aethan."

Ely's lips twisted in a wry smile. "As well as I can be currently."

"Grounding didn't help, huh?"

"No. Though I did fall asleep," she said drily.

Kira laughed, her pretty dimples popping free. "When I heard about your problem, it made me think of mine."

Frowning, Ely started walking again, and Kira joined her. "What do you mean?"

"Well, my father bound my powers so I'd remain undetected from his enemies."

Yes, her sire was the all-powerful Sin of Wrath.

"Though I doubt yours is for the same reason," she continued. "What I'm trying to say is we're both immortals."

My father blocked any ability I might have had while I was a child, until I reached twenty-five or my path crossed with my mate's. But long story short, I went through the same rising temperature and fluctuating powers until Týr and I mated—” She gasped, her hazel-green eyes glowing with excitement. “Maybe you met your destined mate, yes?”

A sharp stab of pain splintered Ely's chest, but somehow she managed a nonchalant tone, “Well...I've come across many, many males. But, alas, I kill most.”

“No.” Kira grinned. “I meant someone you met recently and who still breathes?”

Ely didn't laugh. She couldn't.

“Hey, what is it?” Kira stopped walking and grasped her hand, her smile fading. “If you need to talk, I'm here, you know that, right?”

“Aye. Thank you. I'm just feeling a little rundown and tired,” she evaded, rubbing her damp palms on her top, heat prickling her skin. “I need a shower. I'll see you later.” Ely forced a smile, then hurried for the back stairwell. She couldn't speak about this to Kira or even Shadow, who already knew about Nate. More, she didn't want to put both her friends in any crossfire that was bound to happen once the news got out.

As she ran up the stairs, Shae came down, her gorgeous red hair pulled in a loose braid.

“Great, you're back!” Her friend smiled. “Want to meet me in the arena this afternoon?”

Darn. Much as she would have liked that, she wanted to see Nate more. “I can't. I'm sorry.”

Shae sighed. “With Echo gone, it's hard to get sparring partners. All right, maybe tomorrow.”

The females here worked out mostly for fun and to keep fit. But the underlying thought was that one never knew when they could be attacked while their mates were out on patrol.

“What about, oh, I don’t know, say a certain yellow-eyed warrior, who’d be awesome to duel with?” she teased.

Shae rolled her gray-gold eyes, cheeks reddening. “That doesn’t always turn out the way I like.”

“And you’re complaining because...?” The gods knew she’d give anything to have Nate with her when she wasn’t working, to be dueling with him...kissing...making love.

“Hardly complaining.” Shae grinned. “But I seriously want to put in some time with swords.” She snapped her fingers. “I know, Kira!”

Ely burst out laughing. “She’s not going to be happy. You know she hates that kind of workout.”

Shae thought about it for a second, then snorted. “She uses the gym, so how is training in the arena different?” she asked in a tone of innocence.

Grinning at her friend’s antics, Ely wiggled her fingers in goodbye, sprinted up the stairs, and stopped on the landing. Wait, she had nothing pressing going on until she left to see Nate at noon. She could train with Shae *now*, give Kira a break, and hopefully, this cursed temperature problem would be worked out of her body, giving her a modicum of peace.

“Shae!” she called out, pivoting.

A second later, her friend appeared on the bottom step. “Please say you’ve changed your mind?”

Ely laughed. “I can spar with you *now* if you like?”

A smile lit Shae’s pale features. “Excellent. Let me go change.” She hurried back up the stairs. “Meet you here in ten?”

Ely nodded—

A massive wave of heat shot through her, stealing her breath. She wavered and slapped a palm on the wall for purchase. *Shit!*

“Whoa—” Hands grabbed her. “Ely, you okay?” Shae’s voice came from a distance.

She shook her dizzy head. Tingles spread from her fingertips through her body. Power zinged, prickles of pain darting through her. The shadows on the stairwell trembled, or maybe that was her...

“I don’t know...” She swayed. Every part of her hurt. Gods, even her eyeballs felt like it was on fire.

“Oh, shit!” Shae gasped. “The shadows here are going crazy. C’mon!” she yelled, tightening her grip. “Let’s get out of here!”

Shadows? Fear constricted Ely like a noose. While those things were harmless to her, they could terrify her friend if they trapped her. Shae had never witnessed this side of Ely’s powers.

Hastily, she stepped back, and the shadows moved, too, swirling around her, keeping a worried Shae at bay. Panting now, Ely rubbed her hot eyes. “It’s just my powers,” she brushed it off. “I have to go and cool down.”

Ely dematerialized, reforming again on the snowy banks of a slow-moving river, her boots sinking into a snow pile. Tearing free of her clothes, boots unzipped and kicked off, she dove naked into the freezing river scattered with floating ice. She submerged herself deep under and slowed her breathing, grateful it was something else she could do for long periods...

It was the chill that finally had her pushing to the surface. How long she remained in there, she had no idea—

“Ely!”

At the frantic yell, she wiped the water from her face with numbed fingers, her head snapping toward the voice.

Nate?

He stood on the bank, her scattered clothes in his hands.

Breathing rapidly, happy to see him, she swam over, and the pile of clothes he held fell to the snow-covered ground. He grasped her hands and hauled her out, his gaze doing a frantic up-down search of her naked body as water ran down to seep

into the snow. Then she frowned, taking in his sodden hair and clothes.

“What the hell happened?” he demanded. “I found your things scattered on the banks, and when you didn’t surface, I swam the damn freezing river searching for you for hours!—I thought you had a meeting? Did something happen? I’ll kill those bastards!”

Ely shivered, pushing back wet strands of hair from her face as her foggy brain rebooted to the present. Her teeth clattered, but she finally got her mouth working. “N-no-no, I’m f-fine. I needed a s-swim.”

Steam hissed briefly from his clothes, and they dried. A tic working his jaw, he shrugged off his coat and draped it around her, his warmth and scent enclosing her. He scooped her into his arms and flashed them...

To his cabin. The door swung open, and he strode inside and carefully set her on the couch, in front of the unlit fireplace.

“H-how did you find me?” She swiped the water from her face.

“I felt your distress like a damn punch in the gut and tracked your agony to the river.”

“H-how?”

“Who the hell knows?” he growled, his terror for her still evident in his fiery glower as he swiped the wet strands stuck to her face. “Maybe through your blood I tasted when I kissed you and nicked your lip.”

Oh, right. The kiss with fangs in the cage during his change.

He stalked off into another room and emerged with a towel and quilt, wrapping the blanket around her, then hunkering in front to rub her wet hair. “What the hell happened to make you submerge yourself in a river and scare the fuck out of me?” His expression was colder than the frigid air surrounding them, but flames continued to rage in his eyes.

“Nothing happened...” She gnawed her lip, the ungodly heat stirring deep within her again. “I-I...it’s my abilities,” she croaked, unsure how to explain this. “They’re emerging and causing these changes within me. It’s like I have a constant fever, and it’s growing worse, so I submerged myself in the icy river for a while.”

His gaze lowered to the layers covering her. “You’re hot again?”

She hesitated, then nodded, shoving the quilt away but gripping the jacket close, his scent soothing. “My clothes, I need them...” She moved to stand, but he put his hand on her knee.

“Stay here. I’ll go get them.” He rose and walked out of the cabin, the open door sending an icy draft to enclose her. Expelling a grateful breath, she slumped back against the couch, rubbed her face...and became aware of the low throb between her thighs.

Vae, she moaned, clenching her inner muscles. One problem eased for now, and another whacks her upside the head—or in her core. Man, even her self-deprecating humor fell flat.

Nate reappeared with her things and shut the door. “These are almost frozen, but I suppose they would aid you.”

She nodded and sat up. “Thank you.”

He left her clothes on the couch and set her boots on the floor. Pointless in feeling shy when he’d seen her naked. Heck, he’d had his hands and mouth on her. She pushed to her feet.

He stood there, hands on his hips, frowning. “Or, you could wear one of my t-shirts if it helps?”

“I’d like that.”

He strode off and retrieved a navy tee from the bedroom. Ely removed his coat and pulled on the shirt. The scent of fresh linen and a fainter one of him wrapped around her, and she inhaled deeply, smoothing her palms over the soft fabric. But the damn temperature started its hike again, and the throb between her thighs grew, too. Great, now she was horny as

well. But who could blame her when faced with a male like Nate? And who knew an old gray t-shirt stretched over his broad shoulders and biceps could look so mouth-watering?

“You’re flushed again.”

“Yeah, goes with the temperature hike,” she muttered.

He didn’t say anything, but his eyebrows drew together in a V, and his gaze drifted over her as if trying to figure out exactly what was wrong. “How long?”

When had she started to have these symptoms? She lifted a shoulder in a weary shrug. “A week, maybe more.”

“Don’t despair, *laika*. I’ll help.”

She rubbed her hot face. “How? Drop me back in the icy river?”

He laughed, and it lit him from within like a light bulb coming on, chasing away the shadows in his eyes and the dark aura that usually surrounded him. Her own lips twitched in response. She’d instinctively come to *his* retreat, seeking relief from her torment in the snowy wilderness. And now they were here together...

He drew her to him and buried his face in her neck. “Whatever ails you, we’ll get past it.” His warm, callused palms slipped under her t-shirt and stroked her waist...his touch, the skin contact, felt *sooo* good!

Desire surged like an unplugged geyser. Ely turned her head and kissed his unshaven jaw, dragging her mouth to his ear and tugging his tiny black hoop earrings with her lips, wanting to tussle him to the floor, tear off his clothes, and rub her body over his like a damn cat—

“By the dark gods, Ely, you’re driving me out of my mind!”

“What?” she breathed, frowning.

“Ely, I have heightened senses. I can smell your arousal. Dammit, of course!” he cursed, easing back, understanding dawning in his searing gaze. “I’m sorry, *laika*. Every time we were together, I thought it was just us worked up with lust. I

didn't realize the truth—didn't realize the heat spikes plaguing you also leave you aroused.”

“It doesn't matter.” She was past caring, wanting him inside her, touching her—her entire being feeling like fire ants crawling beneath her skin. “You didn't know. T-touch me, Nate.”

He rubbed her back, sliding his hands down to her bottom and squeezing her butt cheeks. *Gods*, she moaned.

Nate grabbed the hem of the t-shirt she had just put on, pulled it off, and tossed it aside. He backed her against the couch, his jeans-covered erection a hard length against her belly, his clothes a rough caress on her skin. His mouth captured hers again, his tongue sliding over hers, sucking and stroking. Desire raged into flames of raw need.

Bent nearly off-balance over the back of the sofa, Ely flung one arm around his neck for purchase, kissing him back with all the longing and desire engulfing her. Her core grew wet and achy. She strained, trying to press into the part of him she needed most.

“Soon, *laika*.” He palmed her breasts, then bent his head. His lips wet from their wild kiss, he captured one aching nub and laved the tip with his tongue, then suckled with long pulls that shot straight to her core, tightening her body. Pressure built, and she whimpered.

He drew back, leaving her panting, and lowered to his haunches, spreading her feet with his knees. She braced her hands on the backrest as he picked up one leg and hooked it over his shoulder, opening her further.

“What do you want, *laika*?” he asked huskily, brushing her swollen clit with his thumb, and she jerked at the intensity of the sensation. “Tell me.”

“Just fuck me, please,” she panted.

His mouth settled on her core, and his warm tongue rolled her aching flesh. Ely shuddered, digging her fingers into the cushion as he teased her with soft licks. A finger pushed into

her, then another, thrusting in and out of her core as his mouth worked he, driving her to the pinnacle of madness.

Groaning, Ely grabbed his head with one hand, fingers tangling in his hair, and pushed into his mouth, chasing after her release. “Nate, please—”

His lips tightened around her clit, and he tugged hard—

Stars! Blood thundered through her veins and crashed in her ears as her orgasm broke, leaving her gasping like there was no air in the room, her thoughts scattering...

His mouth trailing gentle kisses on her inner thigh had her opening her eyes again. His expression tense, Nate removed her leg from his shoulder and rose to tower over her, his mouth wet from her, and so incredibly hot.

She grasped the ends of his t-shirt and dragged it off him. His hair fell like gleaming sheets of onyx to settle on his bronze shoulders. Her gaze held his. No words were needed as emotions churned between them. Desire, yes, and something more, something so powerful as if melding them together—

And the damn heat resurged. “Nate,” she groaned.

He picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around him, her heated core pressing against his hard abs. Heavens, he felt so good! She rubbed herself against his belly.

“Hell, Ely,” he groaned, kissing her with raw need.

A low growl emitted from his throat. *Inhuman*. Despite knowing how dangerous he was with the unhinged wyvern he housed, she didn't care. This was Nate. *Her* Nate.

He braced her against the wall and mouthed her nipple, teasing it to a sensitive point, sucking with a slow, firm pull, a pull that rebounded to her core.

She whimpered, her movements feverish, needing him inside her. “Nate, now—”

She reached between them, unbuttoned his jeans, and dragged down his zipper, the sound echoing in the quiet cabin. His hot hard length sprang free. Her ankles locked around his

hips, she rose, and he grasped her bottom. Fisting his erection, she lowered down, and his cock breached her.

Gods! She shut her eyes, relishing in the sensations spreading through her as she sank on him to the hilt.

“No. Watch, Ely,” he grunted, gripping her hips.

Her gaze lowered as his cock slid free of her, gleaming wet, only the tip remaining inside. Then he pushed in again, her slit spreading around his girth. Her inner muscles tensed, squeezing his thickness.

His lean jaw rigid, he withdrew, the dragging friction stirring every nerve in her, and she panted. “Nate...”

“I know what you need,” he rasped, brushing her clit lightly with a finger, and she shuddered. “But know this, Ely. You—every inch of *you*—belongs to me.”

She met his searing flame-gold eyes, unable to speak, her mind—heck, everything in her—focused on where they were joined together. His mouth came down on hers in an intensely carnal kiss, and then he was moving, hips pounding into her, hard and fast.

Ely grabbed onto his shoulders and kissed him back, her tongue dueling with his, brushing against his teeth...no, *fangs!*

She reared back, a coppery taste flooding her mouth.

His pupils narrowed into slits. And her strumming body tensed—another low growl rumbled from deep within him.

Gods, not now!

Then his jaw hardened, his mouth compressed, and his fangs bit into his lip as he pounded into her, desire resurged, and she moved with him, chasing after her orgasm. His hand moved between them. He rolled her clit and tugged—

“*Nate!*” she cried out, her orgasm crashing through her, stealing her breath and sending her over into a place of incredible bliss...

Panting, Ely lowered her head to his shoulder, the fever easing as she came back to herself. So grateful for this respite,

she hugged him and stroked his broad back...

Then she stilled. Something felt off.

And it hit her. He'd stopped moving. Like it was over.

Her afterglow faded. He'd given her so much pleasure.

But he hadn't come.

CHAPTER 20



HIS HEAD LOWERED, Nate shut his eyes and held onto Ely's hips, his entire being teetering on a precarious edge. He'd fought and killed many, his enemies, those in the fight, and on the job, but the enemy within was the one he couldn't touch—

Finissssh thissss, the grating, sibilant hiss chafed his mind again.

No!

The one person he wanted more than his next breath, and the bastard wanted her also. Except, not *her*, but her death.

Wantsss her blood.

Not fucking happening! She's not yours, you dumb fuck!

"Nate, what is it?" Ely pushed back, trying to look at his face.

Teeth clamped down, he lowered her to her feet, his painfully erect cock slipping free of her wet warmth. Her gaze dropped to his crotch—not like he could hide his engorged dick from her—then rushed back to his eyes. "You didn't come? Why?"

Since she didn't comment on his appearance, at least he'd managed to keep the beast side of him mostly leashed. Good.

Unable to even zip the fuck up and conceal the massive erection he sported, he grabbed his tee from the floor and yanked it on, but it barely covered his sex. "I couldn't."

The lingering flush of passion on her face drained away. Her copper eyes darkened. “Is it because of me?”

Raucous laughter erupted inside his head. *Claim her, ssshe diesss by your handssss.*

Nate ignored the baiting fuck and shook his head.

When he had claimed her verbally, this wasn't what he expected at the physical act. Hell, while others had been easily forgotten, Ely was his weakness and had snuck her way into his empty heart—

A high-pitched screech splintered inside his head like spears unleashed as if determined to split his skull apart. Nate slammed down on his psychic shields, shutting out the malevolent rage tearing through his mind, but the pain bled through.

Unable to be close to Ely when he was like an unpinned grenade, Nate stormed past the small dining table, shoving his fingers through his hair, frustration and anger torquing him. If he hadn't been fatally wounded, he would never have been forced to endure the fucking symbiont! And he could have made love to Ely—

“Dammit, Nate, talk to me.”

The fear in her voice nailed him straight in his chest. Fuck! Halting at the window, he finally forced his painful erection back into his jeans, zipped up, and faced her. She'd already put on his t-shirt.

“Tell me why you let me use you?” she asked. “Because right now, I feel about this big.” Her hand shot up, her index finger and thumb an inch apart. “I thought you wanted me, too?”

Her eyes were tinged with humiliation. His fault.

For a demon who usually didn't give a fuck about anything, it didn't sit well with him. He prowled back to where she stood near the couch. “Ely—”

“If you want out, just say so. I can—”

“What? Find another?” he bit out, unfulfilled desire and anger gripping him by the balls.

“I meant I can manage.” She shot him a frustrated glare.

Now he felt like shit. Hell, he was so damn fucked up. He couldn't even do this for her when she needed him.

His hands clenched and released so as not to touch her and haul them back to a disaster waiting to happen. “It's because of what I am that I can't! When I come, I'll be at my weakest, and this damn beast could take over.” He thrust his hair back impatiently. “It wants you, Ely, and I don't mean in the way *I* do. And that, I refuse to let happen!”

Several tense seconds passed before she spoke. “So, this has happened before?”

“No. None of them mattered until you, and it senses the difference. I know, because when my emotions run high, usually in matches, it's when the bloodlust takes over, and the beast causes havoc.”

“Matches?” Her eyes narrowed, then she shook her head. “We'll come back to the matches part. What do you mean *bloodlust*?”

“I'm a monster,” he said, tone flat. “I feed on fear and terror during the fights.” *I feed on blood and death*, but he stopped short of revealing his malevolent side. It would send her running from him, and that he didn't want.

“Well, that answers a little of the matches comment,” she said with a deep sigh. “I know you house a deadly creature, Nate. I've seen a bit of it. But it's not the sum of you.”

Hell, she would still see the good in him? “It's only during the matches that it's fully satiated,” he revealed. *Giving me a modicum of peace, short-lived as it is.*

“And what about us?” She took a step closer, eyes searching his. “Won't we ever make love? Properly, I mean, with us *both* being a part of it?”

“I want that more than anything. But the creature I house is dangerous. If I ever let it free, there will be carnage. Your

Guardians brethren will take me out in a heartbeat.”

Her throat worked as she swallowed. Yes, she knew that, too.

“I don’t understand. Shadow never said anything about her symbionts overpowering her. In fact, they seem to aid her in times of distress.”

“No symbionts are alike, Ely. Shadow has had hers for five years. Yes, it was difficult for her to feed also, but her mate has probably found a way to aid her. I’ve had mine for a lifetime.” He stalked to the small dining table near the window, thrusting his fingers through his hair as helpless fury torqued him. “Every time the Black—”

“Black?”

“Because of its scales. Every time it stirs awake, it splinters my mind, fighting me for control. And every time I participate in a match and win, it grows stronger. I feel it.”

“Then stop fighting.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? Just say no to your agent or whoever signs you on for these damn matches, and you’re free!

Nate shook his head wearily and resumed pacing. How did their time together, filled with needs and longing, turn into this disaster? And another fucking thing he could never tell her about—the death fights. “It’s not that simple.”

“Why?” She stomped to him, stopping at the table. “I know I don’t know your history, but you could find a way out if you wanted it badly enough, Nate. Everything has a loophole.”

“I can’t because I’m bound to a fucking archdemon!” He crashed his fists on the wooden table, a crack echoing. The timber splintered, collapsing to the floor in two halves.

Silence rang out like a death knell.

* * *

Ely lifted her gaze from the broken table to him, her stomach heaving, his last words reverberating in her head. “What do you mean *bound to an archdemon*?”

“To save my sire, I took over his debt, a debt that should never have been.” Bitterness saturated his every word. “He took symbionts belonging to Azgor—the demon I’m tied to—and used them on me so I could live.”

Ely gripped the back of the chair. “What happened?”

His chest rose as he inhaled a deep breath, seeming to bring his anger under control. “I was shot as a child. Aba saved me.” He leaned against the low wooden windowsill. “Azgor’s an old demon who collects unattainable things. He has a craving for anomalies that shouldn’t exist—be it a person or creatures—but especially symbionts.”

“Like the demon, Mammon, had? The one from whom you took the symbiont and saved Shadow?”

“Yes. But Mammon won them from Azgor. It was supposed to be delivered to him. I stole them. I wasn’t going to let Shadow die.”

“Why won’t this Azgor let you pay off Aba’s debt and leave?”

“Because he can.” A tic worked his jaw. “Nothing is straightforward in the Dark Realm, Ely. And it’s not about money like it is in the human world, but about souls, blood, and power. When Azgor found out what Aba had done to save me, he didn’t kill my sire but took his soul instead, forcing him to do his bidding for the rest of his life. Aba hates violence, but he did it anyway...”

He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and finger as if to remove whatever gory images he relived. “My sire was trapped into servitude because of *me*. And that I refuse to have. I took over his job...” A bark of dark laughter suddenly

broke free, causing a slide of ice to trickle over her skin. Nate shook his head and prowled the length of the open-plan room.

“The adage *what you sow, you reap?*” he said, pausing near the destroyed table, “holds a world of fucking truth. I should have listened to Aba and not gotten drawn into senseless fights whenever in Ys—that’s Azgor’s territory in the Dark Realm—and called attention to myself. But assholes down there like stepping on my toes. And Azgor witnessed my destructive beast form during one of those fights.”

Oh, shit. “Is that why he bound you?”

Nate’s expression hardened. “I decimated my foes, and he revels in that. But he will wait a helluva long time to see me fully shift!”

Ely drew in deep gulps of air, unease constricting her gut. “So he took you on as a fighter? And now you must work for him for the rest of your life?”

“No, he bargained. The bastard doesn’t do straight-up negotiating. He’s out for all he can get. If I fight in his matches for a human decade, he’ll return my sire’s soul at the end.”

Her anxious heart eased a little. More so, she was relieved there was an end to this nightmare. “You love your father, Nate. And Azgor used it against you.” She ought to know. Emotional blackmail was the pits. While her situation wasn’t nearly as terrifying as Nate’s, it had also kept her trapped for a time.

“*We are your parents, Elytani. We only want what’s good for you. But you won’t see it that way by running off to another realm,*” her *materi* had pointed out after the guards had captured and returned her to Ademéras the first time.

Nate picked up the broken table parts and carried them to the door in the kitchen, and Ely slowly followed him. “So, it’s just fighting for this Azgor?” she asked.

He didn’t respond, stacking the pieces against the wall, then he faced her. “Why do you want to know more about my fucked-up life, Ely? It’s just shit and more fucked-up shit—”

“Because I care about you!” she shouted.

He blinked. And a smile started, chasing away the anger burning in his red-streaked eyes, causing them to become warm and tender. “And I do, too, about you, so damn much. But *care* is too weak a word for whatever these feelings in me are for you.”

Her heart tripped at his admission, and happiness spread like light through her.

“As to the question you asked me?” he said, leading her back to the living room. “No. Azgor also wanted me to continue with Aba’s work.”

She stopped, forcing him to stop, too. “Doing what?”

He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “Anything he wants. Procuring symbionts from the hearts of rare creatures, tracking runaway minions, killing his foes—and his so-called allies when he wants—etcetera. I’m an assassin, Ely. A killer.”

Gods, Ely rubbed her temples, hating that damn demon.

Yes, Nate was cold and dangerous when he went after his enemies, and with the beast he housed, even more so. No wonder Azgor would use him in that way, but it was also destroying him. She could see it in his weary expression, and she’d glimpsed it in his spirit the rare time he let his guard down.

Ely blew out a troubled breath. These fights were causing his symbiont to get darker and darker and more violent, stealing more of his soul. “Can’t you remove the symbiont?”

He leaned against the kitchen counter separating the rest of the place, hands braced on the edges. “You think I didn’t try? It’s a part of me, Ely. If I do, I die.”

Ely searched his hard, handsome features, a facade that hid his torment so well, wishing she could ease his agony—

Wait. Maybe she could.

“Nate...” she began slowly, closing the distance between them. He wasn’t going to like this. “Maybe there is a way. I come from Empyrea...” His expression instantly hardened, and he was already shaking his head. “No!”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I know you. You’re not going back there!”

“But it’s a place rife with magic, mages, and priestesses. I could—”

“No!” He jerked upright, his eyes flashing red. “You’re not putting yourself in those guards’ sights again after escaping them!”

“And I refuse to let you suffer any longer.” She tipped her chin at him.

At their stalemate, he growled. “Ely—”

She put her fingers on his lips, understanding his fear. “I’m a Guardian, Nate, so I will return.”

He grasped her hand and kissed her knuckles. “It’ll be fine. I don’t plan to morph into this creature. Ever.”

She bit her lip, worry bleeding through her. “And what about us, Nate?”

He put his arms around her and rubbed his scruffy cheek against hers in a tender caress. “We’ll find a way, I promise.”

Gods, she hoped so. She held on to him and pressed her face into his neck. With Nate housing a demented beast and bound to an old demon, and she tied to her oath as a Guardian, the obstacles just mounted higher and higher.

His big palm stroked down her spine, trying to ease her. Emotions constricted her chest and swelled in her throat. They had to find a way out of this. Nate was coming to mean so much to her. He might not be her destined, but she wanted him, wanted *all* of him.

Another surge of heat swept through her—

Dammit. Ely bit back a groan, hating this anomaly consuming her, hating the thought of leaving but having no choice. She refused to put Nate through the agony of unfulfilled desire. She brushed back a loose strand of hair with jittery fingers and moved away. “I have to go.”

“Where?”

“The mountains, I need to...er, Ground. The quartz found in granite aids in easing the build-up of power,” she explained, avoiding the truth.

“What about your temperature hike?” he demanded, the tic on his jaw back, pounding furiously.

Biting back a sigh, she shrugged. Like she could actually hide *that* from him. “I’ll be okay.”

Heck, maybe she’d just Ground naked.

Ely picked up her clothes and headed to the bathroom, hating having to leave him again.

Unlike her fellow Guardians, who could bring their females to the castle before mating, giving them a chance and the time to get to know each other, she didn’t have that luxury because of what Nate was. Nor could she hang around the garage during the day without raising questions.

How would they ever have time together, for themselves, to just be?

Stolen moments were all they had.

On her return, she found him standing near the window, staring out at the floating snowflakes, hands in his jeans pockets, his entire bearing stiff. He glanced over his shoulder, then turned.

“I’ll see you tonight?” she asked, draping her coat over her arm.

He gave a slight incline of his head.

Darn, she hated this too, so much. She crossed to him and pressed her lips to his cheeks, and the barely banked arousal stirred at just a touch of his skin. Dammit.

At his brooding stare, she bit her lip and dematerialized for the Catskills.

She was finally with Nate, a male she was deeply drawn to, but that darn beast had to ruin everything. Well, she wasn’t letting that damn creature come between them. Nate was hers!

No matter her own situation, she would do whatever she had to, to aid him, come hell or high water!

CHAPTER 21



LOW VOICES and cutlery clinked against chinaware later that evening as Týr and Blaéz discussed some match they watched on TV, which led to them raising the stakes for a game of pool the next day. Their mates groaned.

Ely didn't pay them any heed as she moved her food around her plate.

Grounding in the mountains hadn't helped her at all, so she'd taken to swimming in the river before returning to the castle. And the heat shimmered within her instead of raging like an inferno, thanks to Jaden's potion. Still, edginess prickled her skin like tiny spiders racing over them.

The only thing that kept her seated at the dinner table instead of hightailing it out of there like she wanted was that twilight chose to meander in. And there would be questions about why she was rushing off...

Dammit, why not. She didn't like subterfuge much, and these were her friends, her family. Besides, despite the risk, she didn't want to hide something this important to her.

"Not hungry?" Kira asked softly from her side and scrunched her face in sympathy when Ely glanced at her. "I do hope whatever this is you're going through, passes soon."

Darci, seated opposite her, nodded her support.

"Me, too," Ely murmured, her stomach churning just thinking about how to break the news. She forked a piece of broccoli, popped it into her mouth, and chewed. Gah. She hated broccoli.

“Oh, I have a date,” she said, deciding to ease them into the new state of her life. It wasn’t exactly true, but she would see Nate at some point in the night.

Silence fell like the winds had swept through the kitchen.

Then the noise restarted.

The girls grinned, dropping questions faster than she could answer, while the guys continued watching her.

“Who?” Kira demanded. “Anyone we know?”

“Ah, I knew it!” Darci said at the same time.

Vae. She wanted to deny Darci’s assumption, but who was she kidding? Even back then, when Nate annoyed the crap out of her, she’d been drawn to him.

“Maybe.” She huffed out a laugh. “And no, I’m not saying anything just yet. Give me some time.”

“Man,” Kira groaned. “The suspense is killing me.”

“*Elska*, easy,” Týr said, stroking her back.

Her friend groaned. “All right. We will endure.”

Ely smiled as she rose, aware Týr’s stare had shifted back to her, his brow furrowing slightly.

Nope, she wasn’t saying another word, but as long as they knew, this wouldn’t be too much of a surprise. The next part she needed to handle carefully. Nate wasn’t just any demon, but a dangerous one, too. A possible demonic wyvern shifter living on Earth? No, she didn’t want to put him on the guys’ radar. And after Nate’s encounter with Nik and Týr, she didn’t dare.

She took her trench coat from her chair back, put it on, then stepped out onto the kitchen terrace and dematerialized downtown.

Back in the Bowery, she reformed in the alley near a cordoned-off warehouse, the icy air barely masking the heavy stench of gas fumes and nearby dumpsters. Her boots crunched through a thin layer of fallen snow as she scanned

the area, but nothing abraded her psyche for instant elimination.

A tall figure leaning against the wall near the mouth of the alley, straightened.

Nate?

She hurried to him, and he met her halfway. His arms came around her, his presence anchoring her. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Working.” His gaze skimmed over her face, searching. “You okay?”

How did she answer a loaded question like that? “The potion I have aids me some.” Then she arched an eyebrow. “Working, huh? Shouldn’t you be at the garage, then?”

He shook his head, a hint of a smile flashing and disappearing. “I wanted to see you first.”

His mouth came down on hers, a tender kiss—a gentle caress of his lips—making her breath catch in her throat. He stepped back and grasped her hand. “Come, I’ll walk with you to the end of this alley.”

“So...” she began as they headed off. “I told them at the castle about us.”

He stopped, his gaze doing a quick up and down of the alley. “And I’m still breathing?”

She choked out a laugh, then grimaced. “I...er, didn’t mention you by name.”

“Ah.”

“It’s not that I didn’t want to tell them—”

“It’s all right.” A lazy smile lit his topaz eyes to the soft flame-gold color she was starting to love, and he started walking again. “Don’t want Blondie up my grid again. I need more time with you before I die.”

He was teasing, but she didn’t like the thought of him dying. “No one’s killing anybody,” she muttered. His lingering smile was her only response.

“Nate?” she said then, determined to address a troubling thought, one that didn’t sit well with her.

“Yeah?”

“I know you think of me as cold, but I’m not, not really.” He stopped so suddenly, she jerked back. His eyebrows tipped into a V, and she rushed to explain. “It’s just that growing up on Empyrea and being born to nobility, there are rules that must be followed, a front I must present. It’s all I know how to be—”

“I know, *laika*,” he said quietly. “We all wear masks, don’t we? I had to pretend to be normal—a human.” He shook his head. “I don’t care what facade we show outsiders as long as we’re true to ourselves.”

“Aye,” she agreed, his words igniting her heart like a candle in the dark. “I like you—”

“Like?” He lifted both eyebrows, and she laughed. “You know what I mean...” She smoothed her palms over his chest. “What I’m trying to say is that no one ever made me feel the way you do. Well, not enough to commit to a relationship.”

He grasped her hands with his. “First, I’d like to strangle all the worthless bastards. Second, why? You’ve lived a long time, and I understand there would have been others.”

“Not as many as you would think,” she said wryly. “Remember, I have a brother and overprotective parents...” She licked her dry lips. “I couldn’t commit to any of them because I didn’t feel a connection like I do with you, one I think I felt from the moment I saw you.”

“Then I’m glad—”

A splintering sound echoed. They both spun, ready for action. A wooden crate lay broken into shards on the wet asphalt. A stray feline leaped down from the others and prowled around the shattered slats.

Nate exhaled and glanced about. “I must go.”

“Yes, to work, you said.”

A tic started on his jaw. He didn't say anything. And the truth struck her. He didn't mean at the garage, but Azgor's jobs! And her stomach heaved.

What he did for Azgor troubled her, but she didn't ask since he was bound to do so, and her oath would only get in the way, especially if it were here on Earth.

"Will you be here in the morning?" she asked instead.

"Yeah. I'm not going to miss out on seeing you." His mouth came down on hers, and he deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding over hers. Desire rushed through her veins. Ely responded with all the built-up longing inside her.

His hold tightened briefly, but then he stepped back. A spike of heat surged, and she bit back a groan. "Take care of yourself, *laika*," he said, tone terse. "I'll see you later." He flashed from the alley.

Exhaling, Ely rubbed her hot face and started walking, scanning her surroundings, wishing the decade Nate had to work for that demon was over already, wishing he didn't have the darn beast calling the shots...

* * *

Sunlight reflected off the chunks of ice in the river as Ely pushed forward, lungs burning, arms slicing through the freezing water as she swam against the current river, moving on autopilot now. Grateful for the brief reprieve the cold gave her.

The last two days passed in a blissful haze, despite her problem, meeting Nate here at the cabin for a few stolen hours. Yes, making love would ease her, but not at Nate's expense, unable to find his own fulfillment with his damn beast torturing him.

They hadn't met last night. He had another job to do. Ely hadn't asked. Safer that way for both of them. But just the thought of seeing him again, a warm glow of happiness stole through her. She cut through the subzero water and headed for

the riverbank to find Nate already waiting where she'd dropped her clothes.

He remained hunkered down, forearms braced on his denim-clad thighs, a tic working his jaw.

"Hey," she gasped, taking the hand he held out. No, he wasn't happy that she flat-out refused to let him touch her, give her ease, and chose to swim instead.

Nate hauled her up onto the bank. Water sluiced down her bikini-clad body to seep into the snow, and his gaze slid over her and back up, need burning in his eyes. With a low growl, he grasped her chin and kissed her possessively. Ely groaned and leaned into him, desire pooling in her core, leaving her aching. Stars! She broke their kiss.

"Let me aid you, *laika*," he whispered, lowering his brow to hers. "I hate what you're doing to yourself."

Panting hard, whether from her exertion, her arousal, or the damn heat pinging through her once more, Ely shook her head, her wet hair raining more water down on her heated skin. "No."

"Ely—"

"Gods, Nate! I want you, too, but not when it means the beast hurts you in retaliation. I won't put you in that position." She stepped back and picked up her clothes.

"It's my choice—"

"No." She glared.

Growling, he scooped her up and flashed them to his cabin. He set her on her feet, then paced the length of the sofa, back and forth, repeatedly dragging both hands through his mussed hair.

Ely dropped her clothes on the couch backrest and grabbed another of the t-shirts he'd left there for her, and put it on, then picked up the towel and rubbed her wet hair.

He stopped in front of her, seeming more in control of himself, and she lowered the towel as his gaze caressed her face. "I missed you."

“Me, too. I mean, I missed you, too.”

A hint of a smile. *Vae*, it made her want to climb him and stay there. Before she did something dangerous like jump him—the stars knew just how she ached for him—she moved away, and her hips bumped the couch. Her clothes draped on the backrest fell.

“You hungry?” he asked, picking up her things. “Since we’re far from any fast food joints, I can whip us up some...” He frowned. “I think we have eggs—so fried egg sandwiches sound good?”

With her appetite deserting her recently, it now reared back, and her belly twinged. Heck, she’d eat the damn snow if he offered it to her. “Sounds delicious.”

His lips twitched. “Bodes well for the future since I don’t have much skill in the culinary department. Just the basics.”

And she couldn’t cook at all. Still, Ely scrunched her face.

“Okay then.” He dropped her clothes on the backrest again. “Here.” He handed over her cell, which must have slipped out of her coat pocket, and smiled at the toy car in his hand. “Yours?”

“Yes. I mean, no.” Heat rushed to her cheeks. She’d forgotten about it with all that had happened recently.

He laughed. “You like cars, so do I. I have a Charger I’m rebuilding back at the workshop...” He studied the small metallic blue automobile, the color faded a bit from her stroking it when she needed to calm down, remembering. Always remembering. Her stomach dipped, recalling the little boy she’d sought. She hoped he was safe and happy with the old couple.

“Most young kids like these types of cars,” Nate murmured, tracing a finger over it. “I had them, too, when I was younger.” Then he handed the toy back, sauntered to the kitchen, and got a loaf out of the fridge.

Ely followed. “You keep bread in the cooler?”

“You don’t?”

She blinked, taken aback. “Well, I...”

He laughed, the sound warm and teasing as he the door shut. “I don’t come here often, except, well, you know when. So the loaf’s better off in the fridge. Stays edible longer, too.” He opened the package and popped slices into the toaster. “Since we’re gonna be here frequently, I’ll stock up now.”

“Let me help you.” She rounded the counter.

He moved in her path and settled his hands on her waist. “No, you stay right there.” He walked her backward and away from his tiny workspace. “Where I can see you and reaffirm just how lucky I am to have you.”

Her heart squeezed at his words. His tender gaze skimmed her face, and desire stirred again. *Vae*. Ely bit her lip and pressed a palm to her belly, like that would help. With a soft curse, he pivoted to the kitchen and got the butter and a tray of eggs from the fridge, setting them on the granite surface.

“So, you have a brother,” he said after a few minutes of silence.

Grateful for the normalcy in conversation, Ely smiled. “Yes. It’s just the two of us...” She settled on a stool there and filled him in on Reynner living on Earth for now since he’d mated a human.

Nate snorted as he removed a pan from the cupboard and put it on the stove. “Wouldn’t have thought so of the hardass.”

“He can be rigid, but he is my brother. And you made sure to antagonize him,” she reminded him.

“It’s in my blood.”

“That doesn’t bode well for our future,” she teased, reiterating his earlier words.

Something dark shifted in his eyes, reminding her of who or *what* else made up that future. No, they could never forget his beast side. Then his mouth tipped in a smile and he shook his head.

Exhaling softly, trying to ignore her own problem, Ely leaned her forearms on the counter, her thumb stroking the

metal toy.

“So, what color was your car?” she asked, striving to keep things light, wanting this time to be just about them, without the beast and all the other problems weighing them down.

He glanced up as he worked and smirked. “Why? Plan on giving me yours?”

She laughed. Then what he said connected, and her eyes widened. “It was blue?”

“Yeah.” He cracked an egg on the side of the pan and dropped it in. The sizzle of butter released a mouthwatering fragrance. He added a few more eggs, then tossed the shells in a bowl. “It seems like ages ago now, but I still recall the color.” He shrugged. “My sire bought me more after I lost my first one. Apparently, I was inconsolable,” he said dryly.

Another punishing surge of heat gushed through her to coalesce into her core.

For hell’s sake! Ely crossed her legs, tightening her inner muscles, but it didn’t help. Her skin damp with sweat, she dropped the car on the counter, hurried to the fridge, and opened it, and the blast of cool air barely soothed her. Ugh. She got a soda and rolled the frosty can over her cheek, then the other side. *Goddds*, she groaned. The refreshing iciness felt so good—she slid the can down her throat and sighed. Could she tuck the damn can between her thighs next?

To take her mind off her discomfort, she rasped, “So, how long have you lived on Earth?”

She tugged the neckline of her tee lower and rolled the soda can over her chest. At the continued silence, she glanced back and found Nate watching her with a heated stare.

“You keep doing that, and I won’t be responsible for what happens.”

And he wasn’t even teasing.

Aware he was on edge and too dangerous to taunt, even if it hadn’t been her intention, she hastily lowered her arm and shut the fridge. His expression darkened, and he turned away.

Gods, she hated that they couldn't make love, and she desperately wanted him touching her again, wanted a repeat of the unrestrained passion she experienced so briefly with him. But if he lost control, his beast could break free and likely cause havoc on this realm. Then her fellow Guardians would hunt him down—

Finding it hard to swallow past the lump of fear and despair forming in her throat, and to keep him safe, she set the can on the counter, crossed to the couch, grabbed her clothes, and hurried to the bathroom.

* * *

Fuck! Nate stabbed his fingers against his skull, pain splintering his mind and unfulfilled desire constricting his body. He shouldn't have said that. It wasn't her fault. For all her coolness and hardass ways, Ely didn't set out to seduce him. It was the damn fever that must have taken hold of her again.

The cursed stars knew he wanted her. And making love to her appeared to ease her much longer than swimming in the icy river had. Well, he'd give her another day, then he would seduce the hell out of that stubborn female of his—and give her the relief she desperately needed—no matter how much the damn beast tortured him.

His jaw hard with resolve, Nate finished the fried egg sandwiches, plated them, and got out the sodas, including a fresh one for Ely. Since he'd spectacularly broken the dining table, he put their meal on the island counter.

Soft footsteps sounded, and he glanced up as Ely padded barefoot to the kitchen. Her long hair, unbound and damp, hung down her back.

She'd showered and changed back into her jeans and sleeveless top. Damp tendrils of pale hair framed her somewhat subdued features, but her cheeks remained flushed, and it set him on edge again.

“Eat...” He couldn’t help his gruff tone as he pushed the plate to her.

She cast him a little smile before sitting on one of the two stools. “Thank you. The shower helped.”

No, it didn’t.

She’s trying to keep things normal, you asshat!

For both their sakes, he remained on the other side of the isle—so he wouldn’t kiss the hell out of her, lick every inch of her to ease her—and took a bite of his sandwich. The food tasted like fucking sawdust. He dumped hot sauce on his egg.

She popped her soda tab, and the hiss echoed in the quiet. “Nate...?”

“Yeah?” He set aside the Sriracha bottle and ate more food he didn’t want.

She wrapped her fingers around the icy can and pushed back her damp hair. “It’s okay, really.”

He exhaled deeply, reeled in his frustration, and nodded.

“So, how long have you lived on this realm?” She sipped some of her soda.

“A little more than a decade.” He dropped the sandwich on the plate. Cocked an eyebrow. “If you want to know how old I am, ask. It’s close to thirty.”

“So...” Her mouth fell open, then she snapped it shut.

For some reason, it made him smile. “Young? Come here, *laika*, and I’ll show you just how *not* young I am.”

A flush of red darkened her cheeks then she tipped her chin up. “Good. I can handle any manner of you.”

Nate huffed. Hell, she’d kissed him in his semi-shifted form. No, nothing scared his female.

“I thought you’d be decades, maybe centuries old,” she said, taking a bite of her sandwich. “I know offspring between demons and humans can live up to two or more centuries depending on how old their sire is.”

“That is true, had I been born a *cambion*.” He winked at her. “But I took my first breath as a human. Until I died.”

“You did?” Her brow wrinkled as if working through a massive puzzle, then she stared. “Wait, is Aba not your biological sire?”

His teasing demeanor faded. “No. But we do share the same blood.”

“Then how did you get to be with him if you were human?”

His mouth thinned, anger surging. It always did when he thought of the past, which made him what he was today. “I don’t remember my childhood, Ely. I guess dying would do that. Aba was passing by when he heard the gun discharge, and me cry out. It seemed I breathed my last in his arms. Well, you know the rest of how he saved me.”

“What about your family?”

He shrugged a muscled shoulder. “Don’t know, don’t recall them. Even if they did look for me, it was too late. I’d already changed. I could never live with humans again, being what I was. Aba is the only father I know, who cared enough to put his own life on the line for me.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, reaching out and covering his hand on the counter. “You mentioned you were after the one who made you what you are? Is it the shooter?”

He drank more of his soda. “No. It’s the one who left me alone in the alley—”

Her cell rang, and he broke off. She ignored it, her gaze fixed on his. “Why would they do that? *Who did it?*” she demanded, looking like she wanted to go to war for him.

“I don’t recall, Ely. No memory of my past, remember?” He patted her hand, then pushed the Matchbox automobile to her. “Anyway, in my early teens, I met a seer of sorts in the Dark Realm.” He recalled the day clearly. It had been just before his change, and he’d gotten beat to an inch of his life. With bones broken and hurt so badly, his sire had brought Qinera to treat him. “She said, *‘the one who left me to my first*

fate would be the light who ends me.' Sounds dire for sure, but it will be hard for whoever the fuck had left me to that fate to finish the job because I will kill them—"

"Light?" she repeated.

"Yeah. I got the impression she meant angel. You know, seers and their odd ways of saying things. You going to answer that?" He nodded at her continuously ringing cell on the counter.

"What?" She blinked, and Nate frowned. "Your phone's ringing, *laika*."

"Oh." She picked it up and answered, appearing far too pale beneath her flush. "Kira, hey—?"

"I was worried when you didn't turn up for lunch and wanted to check on you." Nate could clearly hear Ely's caller.

"I'm in the mountains," Ely responded. "The freezing air helps. I went for a swim first, though..."

"Your powers are still erratic?"

Ely scrubbed her cheek. "Yes...I don't know."

"Where are you? I'll come over—"

"No, don't! I..." Her gaze rushed to his. "I'm on my way back."

"Okay, see you soon." The female rang off.

Ely pushed her cell back into her jeans pocket. "I have to go."

She moved to get off her stool, but he was faster, stopping her. "Hey." He slid his palm around her nape, caressing her warm skin with his thumb. "You okay?"

"Yes." She smiled, but her lips trembled. "I must leave before Kira decides to look for me, and she'll come with her mate."

"Yeah, I figured." He stroked her flushed cheek with his other hand, yet he swore she appeared as if in shock. "I'll see you later?"

She nodded. He kissed her, but she pulled back far too quickly. Nate frowned as she slid off the stool, crossed to the couch, and fumbled on her socks and boots, her long hair sliding forward and concealing her face. Then she jerked up, glanced around, and grabbed her coat from the backrest.

“Your car?” he teased, holding it out to her.

She blinked, staring at it as if he’d offered her a poisonous spider, then she took the toy, shoved it into her coat pocket, and dematerialized without another word.

Nate stood there, worry creeping in, hoping nothing was wrong because she sure looked like she wanted to flee. What the fuck had caused her to take flight? It wasn’t like she didn’t know about his damn monstrous side.

Well, he’d give her till the evening and then find out what the hell was going on. Because he didn’t like this feeling that she’d shut him out.

CHAPTER 22



ELY REFORMED on the library's terrace, so sure her lungs would shut down. Her legs gave way, and she dropped to the icy steps, scrubbing her heated face repeatedly as if it would clear out Nate's words pounding inside her skull.

Everything he said fit, except he was too old to be the boy she sought, wasn't he?

Goddess, she didn't want to be the one responsible for his suffering. And *she* wanted to find and beat the crap out of the fool who had done this to him. Instead, she was likely the perpetrator. Hysterical laughter bubbled in her throat, tears burning her eyes.

Again, she tried to work out the timeline, but coming to a new world for the first time and desperate to hide from her pursuers, she had no idea exactly how long ago it was. To her, it seemed like a few years had passed. Maybe it was longer?

She had to speak to the old man in Brooklyn again. He would know when the incident occurred, give her a time frame —

“Hey? What are you doing out here?”

Ely shot to her feet to find Darci peering through the slight gap in the barely opened French doors. “Went for a swim, now simply enjoying the cool weather.” The words came out of her mouth even though her mind wasn't tracking.

“Cool?” Darci laughed, opening the door wider. She grimaced. “I might no longer be mortal, but I still can't stand the cold.” She wrapped her arms around her sweater-clad

torso. “Are you okay?” Concern shone in her sunflower-hued eyes.

No, I’m not. Ely shook her head, then nodded, her rioting thoughts splintering her skull. “I am, for now.”

She shoved back her tangled hair and joined Darci. The waft of warmth from the fireplace jacked up her temperature again. Gods, she pressed one fist against the back of the couch and rubbed her hot face with the other.

“Ely, what is it?”

Her head snapped.

Shadow rose from her armchair near the crackling fireplace. “You look as if you might tip over.”

Stars, she was losing her mind. She hadn’t even noticed her friend, caught in her tumultuous emotions. But meeting both their anxious gazes, her own eyes dampened. Instead of blurting the truth, she scraped up a smile. “I’m okay, really. I just need another shower to cool off, then I’m off to—” *Brooklyn*, the word nearly slipped out. “The Village.”

“Ah, meeting Mr. Mysterious.” Darci smiled. “How’s that going? We’re all hoping to meet him soon.”

But Shadow watched her quietly because she knew.

Ely huffed out a laugh, the sound more pained than anything. She shook her head and walked out of the library. She wasn’t in any frame of mind to talk to anyone, not when her relationship with Nate could be hanging by a thread.

Another icy shower later, she changed into her usual day wear of jeans and a t-shirt. Hair braided once more, she grabbed her jacket and dematerialized, reforming in the narrow lane between two brownstones in Brooklyn.

Head lowered, she hurried to the building the old man had entered. The door opened, and a short, older woman wearing a bubble coat and sporting a cap of curly white hair shuffled out. A pup on a leash yapped excitedly, darting between her legs. “Patience, Pixie,” she soothed the tiny poodle.

“Hello? Excuse me,” Ely called out, running up the steps, and the woman glanced back. Her lined, round face broke into a smile. “Yes, dear?”

“I’m looking for someone who lives in this building.” She nodded at the brownstone. “An older man, this tall...” She lifted her hand to her chest. “Quite slender. Has gray hair and pale blue eyes. Uses a cane for walking.”

“Honey, most of us old folks use a cane to keep upright and mobile. But if you’re asking after Amos...” Her mouth turned down, gray eyes darkening. “The dear man passed away two nights ago.”

“What? *No*,” she whispered, her last hope fragmenting.

“He wasn’t well. His heart, honey,” she said, patting Ely’s arm. Then she scooped up her energetic pup and carefully made her way down the steps.

Ely leaned against the railing as her world crumbled around her.

You could speak to Aba.

It wasn’t like the thought hadn’t pounded in the back of her mind since she left Nate. But face the man—a demon—who’d given up his soul to save the human child Nate had been? While she’d left him with strangers to protect her own hide? Tears crowded her eyes.

You don’t know it’s him. Your guards could have accidentally killed him if a scuffle arose.

It was why she’d left him with the couple, to keep him safe... How had Nate ended up alone in an alley, dying from a gunshot wound?

With no choice, she swiped her watery eyes and headed back to the lane to dematerialize, ready to accept the consequences of whatever Aba revealed. Then she stopped and groaned. She couldn’t go to the garage, not when Nate could be there at this part of the day. She wasn’t ready to face him, especially after the way she’d run from him.

Ely sagged against a nearby building, pressing a hand to her heaving stomach. *What do I do?*

Her cell beeped, and she jerked upright.

Vae, she was going to be a wreck before evening. She fumbled out her phone from her jacket pocket. At Nate's name, her heart clipped painfully as if it would escape her chest.

Just two words. *U ok?*

She closed her wet eyes. *How can I be when I might be the cause of your eternal torment?*

Unable to swallow past the lump choking her, she typed back, *I am, now that you texted.*

A heart emoji was his response.

She bit her lip and prayed he still felt the same way, if what she suspected turned out to be true.

* * *

The night was colder than she expected. Light flakes of snow floated to the ground. Ely stood in the shadows of the alley adjacent to the garage and scanned the place. She couldn't sense Nate about, but Aba was.

The traffic drew to a halt at the red light. She hurried past the idling cars to the garage and rounded the side of the building to the back. Dim lights cast a soft glow in the silent workshop, shut down for the night.

She bypassed the parked vehicles, knocked on the open door, then stepped into the small living room. Aba appeared from the kitchen, a mug of coffee in his hand. He stopped short. "Ely?"

She nodded, shutting the door behind her.

"Nate's not here," he said.

"I know." She rubbed her damp palms down her jeans. "I'm sorry to appear without warning, but if you have a

moment, may I speak with you about something?”

Those dark eyes studied her for a second before he inclined his head. “Of course.”

He indicated the couch, but she shook her head, too agitated to sit. “It’s about Nate.”

His friendly mien vanished. “What about him?” Cold now.

She couldn’t blame him.

But she had no idea where to start, let alone how to ask him what she wanted. She inhaled deeply, the words rushing out. “Nate told me you rescued him as a child and saved him by giving him those symbionts.”

“I guessed he would tell you, and I should have known you’d come seeking answers.”

“Of course, I would. I care about him!” she bit out, and at his startled look, she winced. “I’m sorry—”

“It’s all right.” Aba sighed, staring at his coffee. He set the mug on the counter near the kitchen door and thrust his fingers through his short, dark hair. “He’s just as stubborn when I tried to explain the dangers of your relationship.” His dark stare held hers. “You won’t have peace.”

Like she didn’t know that. “It’s why we prefer to keep this quiet.”

Aba didn’t respond, his gaze skeptical, but he nodded. “All right. What is it you want to know?”

She pushed back her braid with shaky fingers. “How long ago did this happen when Nate was mortally wounded?”

“That would have been over two decades. I remember it well. I was in the Village, chasing after a target...”

Her breath caught. And her heart pounded against her breastbone as she waited for more.

“I heard a gunshot, more a thud, really. The assailant used a silencer, and a pained cry followed. A child’s cry...” Aba stared out through the window, likely drawn back to that time. “I couldn’t walk away. I saw the bastards in an alley, kicking a

small body lying on the ground. They shot at me, then disappeared before I could seek retribution. When I reached him, I was furious and would have killed his assailants. He was so small and bleeding profusely from a chest wound. He died in my arms—” he broke off, brow furrowing. “He said something before taking his last breath, asking for...” His eyes widened and he stared at her.

“What did he ask for, Aba? What was it?” she breathed.

“His car. Said his angel had it.”

Tears flooded her eyes. Without a doubt, the child she’d tried to save was Nate. She’d picked up his fallen car, but in her rush to keep them both safe, she’d forgotten to give it back to him. Nate clearly didn’t remember that. Didn’t remember her.

Her legs caved, and she sat on the couch.

“I never told him all this about the angel and the car,” Aba continued, confirming her thoughts. “Why bring back a past that would only hurt him? When he was older, he asked what had happened to him. Why he wasn’t like the other lads and had a *bad* symbiont—his words—since he had to feed constantly.” His throat worked, pain and sadness evident in his almost black eyes and tight features. “His life had changed so much, but I didn’t want to lie to him, so I kept to the bare facts and told him I heard a gunshot, found him in an alley, and took him to the Dark Realm to save him.”

Her throat hurt. Unshed tears spilled down her cheeks.

“What happened, Ely?” Aba’s gaze sought her wet ones. “It was you, wasn’t it, his angel?”

Finding it hard to speak, she nodded. Then she removed the small blue car from her jacket pocket and held it out. Aba took the toy, and he dropped onto the armchair opposite her as if his legs wouldn’t support him.

“I’d just fallen through a portal into this world,” Ely had to force out the words from a throat clogged with tears. Aba glanced up from the toy car, pale as the snow outside. “I was on the run...” She left out getting hurt and falling into the

river, and told him about her parents, the arranged matings, and searching for her brother. “Anyway, it was night here. I ended up in some part of the city and hid in an alley...”

Ely scrubbed her hot face and revealed the rest, about a woman’s anguished cry drawing her out of hiding to the little boy crashing into her and dropping his toy. “With footsteps hurrying toward us and a male snarling ‘*kill the brat,*’ and my pursuers after me, I grabbed the toy and dematerialized us, ending in a place I know as Brooklyn now. With them closing in on me, I gave him to an old couple and left. I didn’t want him caught in my fight.”

“Well, he didn’t stay with them if I found him in the alley, shot,” Aba countered, expression hardening. “Once he understood what had happened to him, reprisal was all that kept him going, wanting to find the one who left him behind and get his vengeance. But after the changes in him occurred, and he took over my job, he never mentioned it again. By the dark gods!” Aba expelled a shaky breath, staring at the ceiling. “This is a nightmarish situation.”

“He didn’t forget.” Ely shut her eyes. “He still wants retribution against the person who changed his life, for this fate he was handed—” She jerked to her feet and paced the small living room, scrubbing her hot face. She spun back to Aba, anguish flaying her. “*Me.*”

“I am sorry, Ely. Only the Fates know why they deal out these hands.” Then he frowned. “How does he not recognize you? Granted, he must have been about seven or so when this occurred. Your hair is...rather unusual. Memorable.”

Because the damn stuff glowed when she didn’t shield her angelic aura. “He said he didn’t remember anything of his past life after you brought him back with the symbionts. He only knows what you told him and a seer’s skeptic words. *The one who left him to his first fate will be the light who ends him.*”

“Yes, Qinera.” Aba nodded. “She’s a demoness, a healer, and a seer. I remember what she said.”

“I couldn’t come back to check on him.” Ely wrapped her arms around her waist, trying to hold herself together as she

disclosed to Aba what happened all those years ago... “And when I came back to Earth again, I hadn’t realized just how much time had elapsed.”

Aba nodded in understanding. “Now what?”

“I must find him a-and speak to him. T-tell him the truth.” She swiped the tears from her cheek with the back of her hand.

The seers words pounded in her head. Gods, she hated it was her who left him to his first fate, and now she would *end* him by telling him the truth?

Aba rose to his feet. “Nate simply lived, until you, Ely. You make him happy. I see it in his demeanor and his aura.”

Gods, she hoped so, and she prayed he still wanted her after learning the truth—knowing she was responsible for his tormented existence.

“Don’t despair, my dear,” Aba said softly. “Be strong.” He patted her arm, then handed her the toy. “Make him listen.”

She pocketed the car and left, hoping to Gaia she wasn’t heading to her doom.

CHAPTER 23



ELY STOOD in the shadows of the alley near the garage. A ginger cat ambled past to rummage in the dumpsters a short distance from her as she scanned the area. Humans were still about, a cheerful Christmas jingle playing in a nearby store that stayed open late.

She stilled, a chill prickling down her spine as if she were being watched. Yet, all appeared quiet, no whiff of sulfur of those pests from the Dark Realm. She sniffed the air, and a trace of aged incense and bitter citrus teased her nose...one she was sure she'd smelled before, then it faded. Whoever it was had vanished.

Shrugging off whatever harbinger of doom that odor was—there was always someone after the Guardians—she headed toward the biker's den on the borders of the Bowery and the Lower East Side. As she approached the place, she sensed Nate wasn't there.

She stopped and texted him. *Where are you?*

Several minutes passed before he responded. *Anarchy.*

Ely pocketed her cell and dematerialized, reforming near the nightclub, hoping she didn't bump into one of the warriors here, not when she had an approaching chasm to navigate.

She strode past the demon bouncer and entered the strumming nightclub. Her heart pounding louder than the music, she stopped on the landing and searched the packed dance floor of the lower level, then the L-shaped bar running the length of the wall at the far side.

Her heightened sight homed in on Nate. He stood near the back, talking to a burly, dark-haired male. She couldn't see the demon's face, but Nate's expression remained shuttered, his attention on the dance floor as he listened. Then his head lifted, and his gaze unerringly met hers. Something shifted in his granite stare, almost softened, she was sure, but his cold demeanor didn't change.

She made her way downstairs, skirting the humans and the dance floor, toward him. The dark-haired demon left, but a familiar figure detached from the bar as she neared it, Red Bull in hand. Shit. *Týr*.

And she hadn't even sensed him.

"Hey, El." He smiled. "Tracking?"

She stopped, her stomach tensing into knots, aware Nate was watching. "I was, but it turned out to be nothing. Night's too quiet," she said, trying not to glance in his direction or alert *Týr* to Nate's presence.

"Yeah. Could do with a fight." A wry grimace twisted his lips. "Coming?" he asked.

"No. I'll get a soda, then head back to the Bowery."

"Okay. Later." He strode out, swigging from his can. People parted like a huge wave, the women and men stopping dead in their tracks, watching him. Nothing new there. *Týr* was a Norse god and drop-dead good-looking with his chiseled features and pale hair. But no one compared to her Nate—

"Stop staring at the male, *laika*," his warm voice whispered in her ear as *Týr* disappeared, and she pivoted, bumping into his hard chest. "Or I'm bound to get jealous. And demons don't do well with that emotion. It'll be bloody and gory."

She laughed despite the knots forming in her stomach. "Týr is happily mated to one of my best friends."

"Don't care." He held her chin and kissed her, and she shut her eyes, his scent wrapping around her, making her feel safe. A dream, really, when she stood on the verge of an abyss.

“The day’s been too long without you. C’mon, let’s get outta here.”

Her chest fisting like a compressing vise, they made their way through the crowded club. She longed to hold his hand, but she didn’t dare chance it, not with Týr around.

Once outside, she inhaled deep gulps of cold air as they strode past partygoers waiting to get inside. The moment they cleared the club and were finally alone, he grasped her hand and headed deeper into the alley.

“What were you following up on?” she asked, trying to work up the courage to tell him the truth.

“What do you think?”

That made her frown. She would have said the one who hurt Aba. But at his dark look, then it struck her. “Oh, you mean the one who put a bounty on me because of my hair?”

“It’s because of what you represent. An angel. I’ll find him if it’s the last thing I do.”

Vae. She pressed a hand to her pitching stomach. He was already upset, but she couldn’t put this off. Instinctively, she knew if she did, it would only get worse. “Nate, we need to talk.”

“Sounds serious.” He stopped, glanced around, then moved further away from the dumpsters in the dingy alley. “First...” He pulled her to him, and his mouth came down on hers.

She kissed him back, but then she dragged her mouth away, unable to enjoy this.

His eyebrows lowered, and his gaze searched her face. “How do you feel?”

“What?”

“Your problem, Ely. The temperature?”

“The same.” She rubbed her throbbing temples and took a step back, needing distance to think, to say what she had to. “It’s not about that.”

“All right,” he murmured. “You haven’t been yourself since earlier. What is it?”

But staring into his lean, handsome face, Ely knew that no matter what happened, he deserved the truth. She removed the car from her coat pocket and handed it to him.

A smile tugged his lips and wrung her heart as he looked up. “Okay. So?”

“It belongs to you.”

He laughed, and those striking eyes glowed to that soft flame-gold. When she didn’t laugh with him, he frowned. “You’re serious?”

“I picked it up when you dropped it.”

He went dead still. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I was the one you crashed into, and the car dropped from your hand. I...I picked it up.”

“Ely, you’re not making sense. The seer said the one who left me to my fate was an angel, a Fallen.”

“Yes, me. I am an angel, too. Just not like the divine ones, and not a Fallen.”

He shook his head. “You’re not making any sense. You came to this world *two* years ago!”

“Yes, the *second* time. The first time was apparently over two decades ago. I didn’t realize back then that the time difference in the human world would be so vast since time moves differently for us. Slower.”

He went quiet, ominously quiet, as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Nate, I told you why I escaped my home. The first time was to avoid the mating from happening. I dived through a portal into this world, and with the guards after me, I was terrified. After I fell into the East River, I went into hiding somewhere in the city. That’s when I heard a woman’s anguished cry, then a faint sob filled with so much terror—”

“No!” He shook his head, thrusting his fingers in his hair as if he would tear out every strand, he trampled to the dark warehouse opposite them.

Slowly, she followed, emotions clogging her throat. “I-I came out of hiding to see if I could help. A child ran into me as a man shouted—”

“No, just no!” he snapped, wheeling back to her. “You... *you*—! I can’t do this right now!”

“Nate, please, hear me out,” she begged, reaching out to touch him, but he stepped back, shaking his head repeatedly as if to dislodge her words.

“I can’t.” Streaks of red flared in his darkening eyes, his features tense like a lit keg of dynamite about to explode.

Ely wrapped her arms around her waist, tears choking her. “I’m so sorry. I-I didn’t know this world, and I thought I could trust the people I left you with—”

He shot up a hand, stopping her. “My destiny was to die, but you—*you* changed it!”

“I wanted to protect you. I couldn’t let them kill you!”

“But they did, didn’t they?” his tone went cold. “Giving a boy a life that should never have been.”

The tears she fought hard to keep back slipped free. “I didn’t know.”

“You should have left me to my fate. Then Aba would never have come across me. I have to go.”

“Nate, please—” She grasped his forearm, her other hand pressing against his chest, trying to connect to the part of him that drew them together. “You have to hear me out.”

He didn’t pull away, but his gaze, when it met hers, chilled her to the bone. His eyes were no longer the warm flame-gold she loved but blank—empty—as if every vestige of emotion had drained out. “The one time I open my heart to another, reality comes back and fucks me up again.”

“Nate—”

“I can’t do this now. I have to go. And you have company.” He shimmered and vanished, leaving her alone.

She pressed her fingers to her trembling mouth to stop from crying out.

“*Ely?*” Týr appeared at her side, his eyes glinting beneath the moonlight like nails. “What happened? What the fuck did the demon do?” Anger vibrated in each syllable.

“Nothing. Everything’s fine.” She swiped her tear-stained, feverish cheeks with the back of her hand.

“Don’t lie.” His stare bore into hers, and whatever he saw, he swore a blue streak as understanding struck. “*Him?* Hell, Ely! Why not a human or even a freakin’ Fallen? Why him—”

“Because he’s a demon?” she snapped.

“Because you deserve happiness, and he’s not it!”

“Týr, please. You’ve got it all wrong—”

“Then tell me you feel nothing for him, so I won’t go after the fucker and kill him for making you cry.”

“It’s not him but me. All m-me. I ruined his life. I ruined *everything!*”

“What the fuck?” He gaped at her like she’d punched him in the head. “Ely, I’ve known you for two years. You don’t have a vindictive bone in you.”

She shook her head and dashed at her tears. “I did something. It wasn’t deliberate, but it happened.” She swallowed hard. “I-I can’t explain now. I have to go.” She dematerialized and shot back to the Bowery.

The need to find Nate, make him hear her out, dug its claws deep into her.

Not now. He needs space. Give him time.

As hard as it was for her to tell him the truth, her revelation was a shock for him, too. And her heart squeezed in pain, hating that she was the one who’d inadvertently changed his life, giving him a worse one. She couldn’t see how he would ever forgive her. Still, she hoped he would and prayed

he did...because they couldn't end like this. They just couldn't.

* * *

No, just no! Nate reappeared in another alley. He grabbed his head and sagged against the wall. No matter his denial, everything in him had shattered, and the fragments of happiness he'd experienced so briefly lay scattered around his feet.

Ely—*his* Ely—had left him to this fate.

His entire life, he'd hated what he'd become, merging with a symbiont that let its beast fuse with him, giving him this hellish life. He'd been eight years old, small for his age, and feeding off the demons Aba trapped for him so he could live. Those that dared to attack him, Aba had killed.

Despite not remembering his human past, what he did recall was awakening to agony and torment, reborn an abomination...*his chest burning, agony stealing his breath, spreading as if tearing him cell by cell, and the screams echoing in his ears—his own. The frenzied feeding, the blood*
—

Fuck! He lifted his head to stare at the icy moon in the dark sky, its pale light painting the warehouse rooftops in a silvery glow, the color just like *her* hair.

Agony gutted him. By the dark gods! He couldn't deal with it right now. He had a job to do, a target to hunt, and this one he'd kill with relish.

Pangur, his sire's old friend, had come through and found out who put the price on her head. Nate finally had a lead on the bastard. Why wasn't he surprised it was Derrodus?

Regressing into the cold, *immitis* bastard all of the Dark Realm knew him as, Nate flashed back to the garage and strode into the workshop. With a wave of his hands, he opened the portal, revealing its ominous swirling, like fingers reaching

out to drag one into an unknown hell. Except he knew his hell and lived it daily.

“Nate?”

He glanced back. Aba stood at the doorway. Whatever his sire read on his face, he hurried across to him. “You can work this out with Ely, *cnati*.”

So, his sire had already spoken to her.

“I’m surprised at your turnabout, Aba,” he said coldly, “considering you wanted me to stay away from her.”

“I know.” Aba held his stare, not budging on his stance. “She makes you happy.”

“Happiness is an illusion, a fool’s dream, until reality kicks you in the balls, bringing you back.” Now he had a fucking demon to kill. “I have to go.”

He tipped backward, falling into the portal...

And landed in darkness, on the hard gravelly ground, the familiar immense heat of Ys surrounding him. Jagged rocks and several worn-down boulders littered the arid lands outside the city. He straightened and flashed for the town’s pleasure dens since Derrodus owned them, scouring everyone for the fucker. Pangur had said he was in his place of business.

But through every den he prowled, he came out empty.

Hours later, Nate stalked along a narrow street, came to a door in the rockface, shoved it open, and flashed downstairs into yet another busy pleasure cavern. The smell of sex, the pounding, moans, and grunts had him clenching his teeth.

“Sicari, you finally came,” a slender demoness breathed, gliding over to him in a transparent tunic, belted at her hips, dark hair falling to her waist.

He ignored her, a familiar growl catching his attention. Nate strode around the enormous stalagmite toward the sound, and there he found his prey, half-naked, pants half-mast, pounding into a demon male bent over a waist-high bondage bench with his legs spread and tied down. A moaning female was on another, secured likewise, ass red from being paddled.

Nate strode over and yanked him away.

“I will gut you!” Derrodus snarled and pivoted. “You?” he growled, baring his bloodied fangs at Nate, eyes flashing red. “You can fuck off. I’m trying out my new merchandise—”

Nate grabbed him by the neck and flashed outside. “Did you think I wouldn’t come for you after the shit you pulled?”

Snarling, Derrodus broke free, shoved his cock into his pants, zipped up, and laughed. “This is about the female? You’re a pathetic fool, always going after what is never yours. My sire’s acceptance, now a Guardian—”

Nate punched him in the face. “Let’s get down to it, then. You always wanted a piece of me, I’m here.”

“You think you can take me out?” Derrodus snarled, swiping his bleeding mouth. The air churned, and several demons appeared, clad in green and black apparel. Guards of Azgor. “My sire will think you lost your mind to the madness and bloodlust that inhabits you, and took on his guards. Kill him!”

Swords drawn, the guards circled Nate cautiously. It showed they had some sense.

But none of these assholes knew he possessed a dangerous symbiont. Everyone thought it was his demonic side that made him go crazy. Only Aba knew the truth, and later, Azgor, and *he* certainly didn’t want anyone else to know what his prized fighter truly was.

Itching for the fight, Nate waited, hands hanging loosely at his sides. His beast stirred in excitement, sensing gore and death looming.

They attacked, diving for him. Nate leaped over their heads, the razor-sharp edges of their elongated claws missing his face by mere inches. He landed on the other side, talons exploding free. “Enjoy your next few minutes of life,” he flung at Derrodus.

If the bastard knew what the colored stones on his back truly were—not jewels like most demons decked themselves

with—Derrodus would have undoubtedly ordered the guards to dig them out.

Yeah, killing him was that easy for someone in the know. Except, they'd have to get close to him. Not so easy.

A guard rushed him, swinging an axe. Nate evaded the strike, his own blow raking the demon across the chest. Blood flowed. He spun, another swipe of his hand, and he severed the carotid. He snatched the demon's weapon and swung it, beheading him.

Swift and fast, he fought the remaining four. Heads fell as he took out the last of his would-be killers. And pivoted to his target, talons dripping blood.

“No!” Derrodus screeched, flinging out his hand and releasing a hellfire bolt. Nate ducked. The thing shot past him, slamming into the building, granite, mortar, and rubble raining to the ground.

Letsss me free, the beast growled.

Not happening! A shaft of pain splintered his head in reprisal, blinding him—a sudden blast of agony wrenching through his body. Nate staggered back, a burn on his lower ab spreading like a virus.

What the fuck? He pressed a hand to his side.

“My sire's prized fighter.” Derrodus laughed, inciting the crowd gathering there, and the ruckus grew. The ass circled him like a gutless vulture.

At the slick wetness on his palm, Nate cursed. The prick had stabbed him while he fought his inner beast.

“Tell me, *Sicari*,” Derrodus drawled the tag, brandishing his bloodied dagger. “Do you use dark spells to win your death fights? It would seem so when your demonic side is as pathetic as you. Talons and horns?” He laughed. “Even an Otium is scarier in their true demon form.”

Keeping the piss-stain in his sight, Nate pulled off his t-shirt, revealing the bleeding gash on his lower abs.

Releasssssse me, the beast's sibilant hiss ricocheted through his skull like a snapped twine.

Jaw clamped, he bolted down on his mind shields, wishing he could reach inside him and rip out the bastard. He pressed the tee on his wound to stop the bleeding, and he stumbled a step—

Shit! He steadied himself before he fell face-first on the hard-baked, hot ground.

"Kill. Kiiiiill!" the growl reverberated in his head.

"Would you look at that?" Derrodus grinned, playing for the crowd. "Jewels in his frail body. They're not even good ones. Dull, just like him. What's next, a cock ring? It's probably wasted on his limp dick. The angel will get more enjoyment riding me—"

Rage exploded. Nate dove for the fucker, ramming his talons into Derrodus' chest. An agonized shriek erupted. He yanked at Nate's hand, but he didn't budge.

"Don't ever talk about her." He squeezed harder, his tone like blades. Derrodus whimpered, hate spewing off him. "And get that bounty off her, or I will crush this useless organ. If I find or hear of anyone after her again, you will breathe your last."

Yanking his fingers free, talons retracting, Nate wiped them on the whining dickhead's shirt, wishing he could kill the cretin without putting a bull's eye on his sire or Ely from Azgor's retaliation. "And just so you know, she's likely to slice off your dick and feed it to you first."

Guffaws of laughter erupted.

Nate picked up his fallen shirt and strode through the parting crowd to find Pangur waiting for him.

The demon shook his head, pale blue eyes gleaming. "For a moment there, I thought you'd kill him."

"I will if he continues on this path."

While Ely could take care of herself, and with the kind of backup firepower she had behind her, yeah, she'd be fine. But

he was the one who put her in the weasel's sight, so he'd fix it
—

Dizziness swamped him, the ground tipped, and he lurched forward. Shit!

Pangur grabbed him. "You okay?"

Nate shrugged off his hold, checking his side and the still seeping wound, wishing the fucking thing would close...he shook his head again to clear the dizziness.

"I don't trust him," Pangur muttered.

Nate's mouth thinned; he didn't either. He dug his fingers into his temples, the foggy haze there persisting, then grunted, "What day is it?"

"If you mean when's the fight? Then that's tomorrow. The blood moon is almost upon us."

Damn. Though the night remained dark and soulless, the moon would appear soon, taunting him with its pale pink first light before turning blood red.

Nate scrubbed his face. Being with Ely, he'd lost track of time, and when she wasn't with him, she consumed his thoughts. But the shocker she'd laid on him, he still refused to accept. No matter the job she did, Ely was compassionate, and she felt deeply. She wouldn't leave a child in a dangerous alley to be shot by some damn thug—

Yessssss, she did, the sibilant rasp scraped his mind like rusty blades. "She not wantsss pitiful young."

Fuck off!

He flashed to the foothills of the Mounts of Debas at the outskirts of Ys, to his sire's two-story abode in this world. The house was far bigger than their garage apartment.

In the kitchen with its gray cupboards and cooker, he dropped his ruined shirt and found the box Aba kept for medical emergencies. Inhaling a sharp breath, he dug through it, found the gray paste, applied the goop on his wound, and then taped a dressing over it.

Fists braced on the table, Nate lowered his throbbing head, wishing for a different life, and since that was forever out of his reach, a modicum of quiet, a little damn peace.

But he had a fucking fight looming.

No one walked away from those matches. It was a definite death sentence.

“Give over,” his beast hissed. *“I’sss make it better. I’sss kill the foolssss...together we rulesss over the most magnificsssent of all placessss, Infernii Demesssne. Open... gateway.”*

The Infernii Realm? Like he would ever let that happen!

No sane demon would set foot in that place of hell and torture, where prisoners were sentenced for their crimes—

Shit! Agony splintered through his skull at the beast’s retaliation. Grunting, Nate tightened his mind shields, but pain still bled through. He fumbled for the t-shirt he’d left on the counter weeks ago, pulled it on, and made his way outside, then stopped, staring out into the endless aridness broken by mountains and lava stalagmites. And exhaled roughly, rubbing his chest as if it hurt.

No matter what happened, he didn’t want a fatal end to his life, not now, not when his thoughts, his entire being, hell, his heart had set itself on *her*.

Sssshe letsss you die, the Black hissed.

His mind reeled, and he swayed as if the ground had moved.

What the hell was wrong with him?

Fuck, he planted his feet down. First, he had to find a way and get rid of this dizziness, then get through this damn fight, along with the one escalating between himself and the Black...

And surviving either of them didn’t look promising.

CHAPTER 24



THE ARCHANGEL'S low voice drifted over Ely as the meeting continued. She barely heard him, heard anything. How could she, when her head felt like it would explode from her turmoil?

Gods. She rubbed her burning eyes with her knuckles, so sure the walls of the small study were closing in on her, aware it all came back to the one person she'd unintentionally hurt—

Hurt?

Hysterical laughter caught in her throat. Her actions had forever ruined his life. Had she not rescued him, and he died, he would have passed on to his Heaven. Had peace. Not live this tormented existence. Tears clogged her throat.

I'm so sorry, Nate.

She swallowed hard, staring blankly at her clenched hands on her lap. Was he back from the Dark Realm?

He hadn't called or responded to any of her text messages since last night. The need to get back on the street, find him, see if he was okay—see if *they* were okay—dug its claws into her. She understood he was upset, yet, deep within her, the cognizance that something was terribly off wouldn't leave.

Vae. She swiped her sweaty palms on her pants as she brooded, conscious Týr's dark gaze swung her way every so often. Well, she had nothing to say.

“Anything else to report?” Michael asked, leaning back in his creaky chair. “The blood demon on the prow? The

abduction of the humans?” His shattered blue stare took them all in with a sweeping glance.

“Nothing on the blood demon. Bastards are too canny,” Blaéz said, shifting on the armchair next to hers, his leathers creaking.

“What was the initial carved on the human’s brow again?” Týr asked, his gaze on her, and she stilled.

“An M or N,” Nik murmured. “Hard to say with so many slashes.”

“Or it could be a way to distract us from who’s truly behind it,” she shot back, eyes narrowing.

Michael frowned, flipping a pen between his fingers. “Any leads on that yet?”

Týr merely hooked his thumbs into his back pockets. Ugh. She looked away, bumping into Nik’s contemplative stare. Gods, seriously?

All she needed was for Blaéz to pick up something with his precognition, but his expression remained neutral. Only Dagan minded his business, watching them all from where he stood near the window, arms folded over his chest. With the study being so small, heck, nothing would escape their notice.

“Care to let me in on what’s going on?” Michael stopped flipping. His eyebrows arched, his gaze shifting between her, Týr, and Nik.

Crap. Before either of the guys opened their mouths, she said, “By the way, something came to my notice a few days ago. I would have told you, but with all that’s going on within me, it slipped my mind. I’m sorry.”

Michael merely waved it off with his pen. “Go on, Ely.”

“We also know that the Fae trawl this world, right?” She glanced at her brethren, avoiding Týr’s direct stare. “It seems they’ve been abducting humans, too, under the guise of them leaving of their own will, but, obviously, using mind control.”

“And you know this how?” Týr demanded.

“I have my sources.” She held his flat stare. “However, I came across the tail end of a would-be abduction”—a little white lie, but she trusted Nate and what he’d revealed about that fae—“only I wasn’t sure what had occurred until I was told. The perpetrators were glamoured as humans.”

Curses flew.

Nik frowned. “Where?”

“On the border of the Bowery and Lower East Side, the alley between the old, shutdown furniture warehouse and the metal workshop.”

“I thought that shit stopped millennia ago when we reached a compromise with their king?” Dagan murmured.

“Probably should have denied the help they sought if promises can be so easily forgotten,” Týr growled, his attention finally off her. “Evil invading their realm would keep them busy, then Aethan wouldn’t have to risk his mate, going to the damn Fae world.”

So, the Guardians had reached a compromise with the Fae eons ago? Ely frowned, rubbing her damp brow. But they were still poaching humans?

“I don’t think it’s any of the Fae king’s people,” Michael said slowly, tossing the pen on the desk. “Their promises are binding.”

“Maybe rogue Fae?” Ely rasped, shifting on her seat, seeking relief from the prickling sensation bleeding through her—from her powers or the damn heat, she had no idea anymore. “Like we get rogue angels?”

And her core throbbed. Heavens, she wanted to moan.

“Perhaps.” Michael rubbed his temples. “You come across one of them, make sure to get answers first before taking them out. I won’t have these bastards infiltrating this realm.”

Ely bit back a groan, her head woozy. The room spun—

She grabbed the edge of the desk before she fell off her chair. Gods, she rubbed her cheek on her shoulder, shutting her eyes. Maybe she should go to Exilum—

“Still no relief?” Blaéz asked quietly.

Her head jerked up, and she met his concerned cerulean-blue eyes. Seated on the chair next to her, he seemed too close. And it chafed her. For gods’ sake! This was Blaéz, her fellow warrior and friend.

She shook her head.

“You don’t look well.” Týr’s voice had a slight edge. And she knew why. Her mouth flattened. But all eyes were back on her. Dammit. “Maybe, you should go off duty—”

“I’m fine!”

“I’m sure Ely knows what’s best for her,” Blaéz said, cutting the tension between them.

She rubbed her arms, inhaling lungfuls of air, and tried for a calmer tone. “I’m going to see Reynner after this meeting. I might have to return to the mountains or Exilum to try and expend this energy.”

“Take some time off, Ely.” Michael’s tone and shattered sapphire stare brooked no argument. “You’ll be a target out on the street in this state. The others will cover your shift.”

An order she couldn’t ignore.

Sighing, she pressed her fingers to her burning eyes and nodded.

The meeting finally over, Ely rushed out, pulling on her trench coat, needing to get out of there.

“Ely, wait.”

Biting off a groan, Ely pivoted as Shadow hurried toward her, a hand on her stomach.

“*Agápi*, why are you running?” Nik demanded, bypassing Ely to stop Shadow from her near sprint.

“Hardly running. I was merely walking. Fast,” she panted, giving lie to her defense, and she scrunched her nose.

Unamused, Nik folded his arms over his chest, his pale green eyes fixed on his mate.

“You shouldn’t be running, Shadow,” Ely added, concerned at her friend’s winded appearance.

“All right...” She exhaled. “I did hurry. I wanted to catch you before you left on patrol.”

“You could have called her,” Nik growled. “Or telepathed and let *me* know you wanted to talk to Ely.”

She snorted. “I need the exercise. Soon I’ll be the size of a house, waddling about and unable to walk. You can carry me then.” She was needling Nik, but the warrior didn’t rise to her baiting. “Anyway, I was in the TV lounge, and it’s not that far —”

“Two corridors away,” Nik muttered, drawing her to him as if to reassure himself she was okay.

She rolled her striking eyes but leaned into him. “Since I knew *you* were still here,” she told him, “I figured Ely would be, too. Here—” She handed her cell phone over. “Call Aba. He’s trying to reach you. Sounds urgent.”

Nik’s gaze shifted to Ely. Confusion slowly changed to thoughtful as understanding dawned in his light eyes. Yeah, he finally figured out who the guy she’d been seeing was. Well, she wasn’t going to hide it, not anymore.

Ely called Aba. He answered on the first ring.

“Aba?”

“Could you come over, please?” he asked. Her sensitive hearing and innate knowing picked up an undercurrent of disquiet. It had to be about Nate.

“I’ll be there.” Ely handed the cell back to Shadow. “I have to go—”

“What’s wrong?” Shadow grasped her arm.

Unable to talk about this, Ely shook her head. “I don’t know. But whatever it is, I’m sure it’s nothing major,” she said to ease Shadow’s anxiety, because she was as bad as Kira worrying, when it came to family. “I’ll see you later.”

She dematerialized, reforming moments later in the quiet workshop and sprinting for the door, her long coat flying open. Aba appeared at the entrance.

“Thanks for coming.” He ushered her into the living room and shut the door.

“What’s wrong, is it Nate?”

“He left for the Dark Realm last night, really upset. What happened? Did you speak to him?”

Her heart sank. “I tried, but he refused to listen. He only heard the part of me being the angel who saved him as a child, and he cut me off...” Her throat constricted, and she found it hard to get more words out. “He left.”

Warm hands touched hers.

“If blame is to be laid, then the fault is mine, not yours,” he said, his anguish leeching the color from his face, leaving him ashen. “*I* was the one who brought him back from the dead. I couldn’t bear for a child to die when I could save him.” Sorrow darkened his eyes. “I might have lost my consort and young millennia ago, but the pain, the loss, never truly goes away. Then, two decades ago, a cry that wrung my heart made me seek it out. A child, shot, lay dying in the alley. I saved him.” His throat worked. “I was given another chance to love and have a young again, but at what cost? He suffers because of *me*.”

No. *Because I made that first fatal decision...* But if she hadn’t, then she would have never met Nate and known what happiness could be like. A huge vise clamped her chest at the thought.

So, now he pays the price? her conscience demanded. Gods, she rubbed her eyes. No, she would never have let him suffer, not this torment he lived daily.

Aba expelled a shuddering breath. “I must find him before he takes part in the damn death fight.”

“What?” Ely blinked, trying to get her emotional grid to connect at the switch in conversation. “Nate didn’t mention anything about any death fight.”

“All his fights are to the death. I fear this one might be fatal.” Aba shut his eyes. “He tries to spare me, pretends they’re normal brawls, but I know my son. I just received news there’s another one taking place in a day.”

This can't be happening!

Ely thrust her hands through her tightly woven hair, pacing the tiny living room, pain splintering her scalp as her fingers dug in.

“Reyes?” Aba’s tense voice drifted to her. He was on his cell. “I need you to watch the garage for me... Thanks... No, I’m not sure how long I’ll be away, a few days probably... Okay. I’ll see you when I get back.”

Nate was in the Dark Realm. How the hell did she go there and find him in such a massive world?

“I have to go, Ely,” Aba said, heading for the door.

“I’m coming with you.”

“No, you cannot. You will draw the demons. Your aura will be a magnet for them.”

“I’ll block it!”

He cast her a wry smile. “It’s ingrained in you, child. Unlike humans, demons would see you coming from miles. Your angelic essence is not solely in the core of you.” His gaze settled on her head. “But it reflects in your hair, too. Your light color makes it more noticeable.”

What the heck?

She couldn’t go because of her damn hair!

I’ll see about that! “Wait for me.” She swept past him into the workshop.

“Ely—”

She spun back. “Aba, if you don’t wait, I will follow. I won’t—I can’t fail him again.”

He stared at her, and after an endless second, he nodded at whatever he saw on her face. “All right. Perhaps, it would be

better if he sees you. He cares for you.”

Or, she'd killed off whatever he felt for her.

Gods, she prayed it wasn't so. “I'll be back.”

* * *

Back at the castle and in her room, Ely changed out of her leathers into jeans and swapped her boots for a lower-heeled, studier pair. She grabbed a few more things from her closet, along with her obsidian dagger, and shoved them all in a small knapsack. Her bag hooked over one shoulder, denim jacket in hand, she left her room and ran down the back stairs, tracking Kira to the TV lounge.

Shadow was with her.

“Hey?” Kira smiled, slouching on the armchair and playing with the diamond eternity ring on her finger, one Týr had gifted her recently. “You're not on patrol?”

“No.” Ely shut the door behind her.

Shadow sprang to her feet, the red specks in her eyes bright with concern. “What happened?”

“I'm not sure.” Darn, she didn't want to drag them into what she was about to do. “Kira, I need a favor.”

“Sure.” She leaped up. “As long as it's not fighting or something.”

“No, no. Nothing so strenuous.” She grimaced, unable to force even a smile, not when her nerves were strangling her to get moving. “My hair—” She pulled her braided ponytail to her front. “Will you change the color? I'd tint it, but I don't have the time.”

“What?” Kira's hazel eyes widened with disbelief. “Why would you want to do that? The color's gorgeous.”

“And too noticeable.” She sighed. “It seems my angelic glow is still visible to demons through my hair.” She had to work on her damn shields.

“Ah, okay. All right. Sit.” She waved to the armchair. “I can totally understand why, especially in your line of work. I do the same thing not to draw notice.” She touched her curly, auburn locks.

Aware that Shadow watched and waited, Ely dropped her thing on the seat and lowered to the armrest. Man, sitting made her feel like a colony of ants were burrowing under her skin.

“So, what color?” Kira asked, coiling Ely’s yard-long braid around her palm.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Dark. Yes, go black like Shadow’s hair. I like it. No white streaks.”

Shadow laughed, a little color flushing her pale cheeks. She swept back the white lock at the front of her brow. “You should try it. Skunk highlight will make anyone run,” she teased, then her features sobered. “You know this streak has a story to tell, huh?”

“I know,” Ely said, aware of the dangerous life Shadow had led after her rebirth with the symbionts, until she met Nik. “Life will hand us raw deals, and we might falter under their weight, but it doesn’t mean it should keep us down forever.”

“Oh, hell to the no.” Shadow’s expression hardened. “We are far more. We get up, dust off our asses, and go out and conquer. Nothing keeps us down.”

Or, we’ll die trying.

“What happened, Ely?” Kira asked.

She bit her lip and hesitated.

“I won’t breathe a word to anyone, I promise,” Kira said. “Truth is, you haven’t been yourself in the past couple of weeks. I get that your powers are escalating, but it’s more, isn’t it? So what gives, Ely? Maybe we can help?”

She exhaled and scrubbed her hot face. “Not for this.”

“Is it the guy you’re dating—?”

“Is it Nate?” Shadow asked at the same time. “What did Aba say?”

Her heart ricocheted like a bouncing ball. It wasn't as if Shadow didn't know the truth.

“What?” Kira's mouth hung open. “Wait, isn't that your brother's name? I mean, the one who saved you?” she asked Shadow, who nodded without taking her eyes off Ely.

“Look, I can't stay and talk.” She met both their stares. “Nate's in trouble, and I have to help. Kira, please change my hair.”

“It's done.”

What? She hadn't felt anything, not surprising when her gut twisted with worry, competing with her fever. She jumped up, crossed to a framed, gilded mirror above the sideboard, and drew her ebony braid to the front. The color was so stark, she appeared almost bloodless, except for her flushed cheeks. Good. She should fit in with those denizens of the Dark Realm.

“Thank you.” She pivoted, grabbed her jacket from the armchair, and put it on. “I'll explain everything when I get back, I promise.”

“Get back from where?”

“The Dark Realm. He's there.”

“Ely, you cannot.” Shadow gripped her hand. Dammit, maybe she shouldn't have said that. “It's dangerous! Aba will do what he must. He's an old demon. They're stronger.”

Her jaw firmed. “You went after Mammon for killing Nik.”

Shadow shut her eyes briefly, then she nodded. “You're right. This world, or on another, I would have sought my vengeance for Nik.”

“And I won't leave Nate to a terrible fate. I failed him once, I won't again!”

“What do you mean?” Shadow's stare rushed over Ely's face as if searching for the truth.

She shook her head and retrieved her knapsack. “I’ll explain it all later. I have to go—”

“Wait, wait, is Nate your destined?” Kira demanded, grasping Ely’s other arm, eyes like saucers.

Ely bit her lip, emotions threatening to clog her throat. “No. And before you tell me it’s like you and Týr, that his dagger didn’t respond to you until much later, it isn’t. Nate is a demon, and I don’t know what their mating lexicon is. With my kind, the males carry the bonding gene. No, it’s not fair, but there it is. If demons bond to their mates, I wouldn’t know. And no, my dagger didn’t respond to him, either. I must go. Aba waits for me.”

She stepped away, bile tracking up her throat and making her swallow hard.

“Hey, it’s all right,” Kira said softly. “We love you and only want you to be happy.”

Obviously, she didn’t know about Tyr threatening Nate.

“Just be safe, please.” Shadow touched her arm. “I cannot lose another of my sisters or my brother. Find Nate.”

Shadow’s words had tears burning the back of her eyes. She nodded and walked out onto the terrace, shutting the door behind her. The icy air enveloping her gave her a momentary relief from the feverish hold. She got out the potion Jaden had given her, unscrewed it, and swallowed some. Bottle secured, she shoved it back in her backpack and put on her jacket.

It no longer mattered to her not having a destined mate. She only knew what her heart wanted. And that was Nate.

She dematerialized back to the garage.

The moment she reformed inside the workshop, Aba appeared in the doorway of his home. He took in her changed appearance, the little bag, and nodded. “Make sure to keep the angelic allure locked down. And be aware, time also moves differently in the Dark Realm. A day there could be a week or more passed on Earth.”

“I know.”

With a wave of his hands, Aba opened a gateway in the ground between the two vehicles, and fell through. Ely followed, falling into darkness.

CHAPTER 25



ELY LANDED IN A CROUCH, her bone-jarring arrival in the Dark Realm stirring up dust from the arid ground, making her sneeze. Ugh. She rubbed her twitching nose and pushed to her feet, adjusting her sight to the darkness blanketing them.

Despite her shallow breaths, the stringent stench of sulfur seeped through. She grimaced, then ignored the stink, taking in her surroundings. In this infernally hot realm, unable to lower her body temperature, she removed her jacket and tied the sleeves around her hips, her sleeveless top barely giving her any relief.

“It’s twilight,” Aba said.

Right. Her attention settled on the borders of a massive, medieval-like city some distance away. Everything appeared dark and grungy. And at the far side, an enormous fortress built on a hill rose above the town, with menacing spires and towers lording over the territory.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“On the outskirts of Ys,” Aba murmured. “Let’s head to the house first before searching the town.” He flashed, and Ely followed. A few minutes later, she reformed amidst craggy foothills and looming cliffs.

In this place where nothing moved stood a tall, dark, solitary two-story building with domed windows and a steep, slate roof, reminding her of Nate’s scales. A few ash-colored trees, sprouting a few branches with knotted, washed-out, root-

like tops, grew at the edge of the property, breaking the severity of the dark land.

Shrieks echoed, startling her.

Beyond the vast stretch of barren lands and where the distant mountains meandered, a volcano spewing flames every so often, two winged creatures with long tails flew around the craggy peaks.

“Wyverns,” Aba said.

Her heart hammered like a war drum. “Like Nate’s symbiont?”

His features tightened. “Aye. Most demons stay away from them. They’re usually no match for the creatures unless they outnumber the wyvern by a lot. Then they feast on its blood and flesh but not before many die in the skirmish.”

The brutality of this world had her stomach roiling. Much as she disliked the Dark Realm, this was also Nate’s home.

Thanks to me.

Rubbing her tight chest, Ely glanced up as the twilight sky deepened to a deep purplish black.

“The nights can become dead black,” Aba said as he made his way to the front door. “There are no stars here, only the moon, which comes out every quarter or so. The day is just a shade lighter than evening.”

Thank the heavens then for her keen sight, or she’d have tripped on the uneven, granite ground.

She followed Aba into the foyer of the manor. Small opaque orbs set in the walls lit up, casting a warm glow inside, revealing the almost utilitarian front entrance with a sideboard and nothing else. Light gray marble floors polished to a soft hue flowed out in front of her, and gray pillars and black girders supported the soaring ceiling.

A passage branched in opposite directions. Aba banked right. The left probably led to bedrooms. He opened a door into a roomy kitchen, much like those on Earth, and the orb lights came on.

“He’s not here,” Aba said, but she already knew that. “He stopped by, though.” Aba lifted a black fabric from the chair, and a coppery whiff flooded her nose.

She grabbed the garment, heart racing. Nate’s t-shirt was ripped in places and wet with blood. “He’s already taken part in the fight?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t sense any frenzied excitement these fights usually cause in the town.” Aba’s brow furrowed. “He did say he had something to take care of.”

Ely carefully placed the ruined shirt on the chair’s back, her jaw tensing. “I know what it is. Someone from this world put a price on my head to abduct me—”

“*What?* Why didn’t you tell me?” Aba demanded. “Now, I brought you right into the fray.”

“It wouldn’t have changed my decision to come here.” She cast him a flat look, concealing the rioting mess inside her. “Besides, who in their right mind would think I’d simply walk into this realm without coercion?”

He sighed and shook his head. “Nate will be furious.”

She didn’t know about that, but she had to find him and stop this damn death fight if she could.

Aba opened what looked like a cooling unit and got out two bottles of water. He must have stocked up on the Earth items. He handed her one. “Demons don’t generally drink water, but I have acquired a taste for it.”

Right. Ely set her backpack on the chair, unscrewed it, and drank some of the cool liquid, the unease in her intensifying.

“Maybe we should separate? This way, we’ll find him faster?” She set the bottle down.

“Before we leave...” Aba put his bottle and hers back in the cooler unit. “Ely, remember this is the demon world. Unclaimed females are fought for here. May I?” He held out a hand.

She frowned, not understanding.

“You don’t wear Nate’s scent.” He cast her a wry smile. “I mean, you do, but it’s not strong enough to get the demons here to back off.” He drew her into his arms and gave her a hug. “You make him happy, Ely. He just needs a little time to accept this, and he will once he gets his stubborn head back on track.” Smiling, he kissed her brow, adding his scent. He smelled of warmth and toasted cinnamon with a hint of woodsmoke. “I think we should search for him together.”

He meant it would be safer.

She nodded, removed Jaden’s potion from her backpack, and swallowed a little more.

Aba didn’t ask questions as she shoved the bottle into her bag again. Then they left the solitary manor. Ely dematerialized and followed Aba to the town of Ys.

Several searches later, through taverns and brothels, they made their way down the cobbled path as the night grew oppressively dark. Only the subdued glow from the buildings revealed where they were. A small, purple creature—like a cross between a tailless, fat cat and a rodent with six squat legs—waddled past, casting her a woeful look from shimmering pink eyes.

“Oh, he’s cute. What is it?”

“A *carackathus*.”

“Sounds like a cat.”

He huffed a laugh. “It’s someone’s pet. Not like the ones on Earth. Their hugs can suffocate you because those short legs can extend if it’s not happy. So, don’t pet it.”

Whoa. Hastily, Ely stepped back. She skirted the dangerous pet and continued down the heat-baked street, the dull lights on building walls casting little puddles of murky yellow. They neared a huge domed building, a club of some sort. Eerie, muted music resounded. The windows were darkened, and in the dim glow behind them, the place appeared as if the denizens were hyped about something.

Two demons clad in green and black shuffled out of the club.

“Azgor’s guards,” Aba murmured, putting a hand on her arm in a proprietary manner. The demons stopped at the entrance. “Wait here. This is not a safe place for females. I’ll check inside. Won’t be a minute.”

Ely nodded and retreated into the shadows as Aba slipped past the guards and disappeared into the club. This wasn’t about her, how powerful she was or wasn’t, or about facing prejudiced demons in a world where females were seen as less than even second-class citizens. This was about finding Nate and talking to him.

She swiped her damp face on the hem of her sleeveless top, grateful Jaden’s potion aided her some while in this infernally hot place.

“The fight tomorrow’s going to be ep-epic,” one of the guards slurred. “The deals and bets are rocketing. Did you wager?”

“Aye,” the taller one rumbled, rubbing the shorn-down spikes on his brow. “Always a guarantee with *Sicari* fighting.”

Who the heck was *Sicari*? She had to warn Nate.

Aba strode out to her and shook his head, mouth tight. Guess he heard the topic of conversation, too.

“C’mon.” He put his hand on her back, and they headed down a pitch-black, narrow road to a place where the ruckus reached them before the building came into view. Another gathering hole. This one had more red lights than any other building they’d searched.

Aba walked inside, but Ely hesitated in the doorway. The place reeked of sulfur, liquor, and...sex. Not a tavern but a brothel. Or pleasure den, as the demons called them.

Veins of fire lit the walls sporadically, brightening and revealing tables and chairs occupied by demons, and the gods knew what other kinds of entities with their skull-like features and tall, razor-sharp horns, all of them drinking. But most were human in appearance until their eerie stares flashed her way—with piercing red, black, and acidic yellow eyes—

making her a little leery. Hell, a whole volcano's worth of leery if she were honest.

Keeping her breathing shallow, Ely hurried after Aba and tried not to think about why Nate would be in a pleasure den. She wasn't blind or deaf at the sounds coming from the corridor leading to an archway and the area beyond. Moans erupted, followed by long-drawn grunts—

Her gaze connected with a demon with ebony eyes seated to her left. Cascading silver hair framed his pale and incredibly stunning face. He smiled. But recalling Aba's warning, she avoided eye contact and searched the packed place. Instinct had her looking to the opposite side. And her heartbeat stuttered.

Nate sat in a darkened corner, his back to the wall. No surprise there. Usually, one did so to take in the rest of the place and be alerted to trouble, but he wasn't watching anything because he wasn't alone. A female—a deeply tanned demoness sat at his side. His eyes were shut, features taut. His shirt was bunched up, and her hand remained hidden behind the table, slowly moving over his...groin?

Pain burst free, an excruciating punch in her chest. Nothing went in or out of her lungs, yet she was breathing because she was still standing. An agonized sound escaped her throat.

Nate's eyelids snapped open and flashed around the whorehouse to slam into hers, where she stood frozen in the crowded den next to Aba. His brow furrowed, then his eyes narrowed. The demoness said something, snagging his attention.

Anguish abraded every cell in her body. Goddess, she was such a fool. She'd worked herself into an ulcer, thinking he was in a death fight and badly wounded. Obviously, he wasn't when he was in this...this *brothel*, seeking solace with another female.

He couldn't have made it clearer how he felt about her.

Why would he want her anyway? Why would he want the person who'd changed his life so irrevocably, setting him on the path to a fate worse than death?

"Hullo, beautiful," a low, gravelly voice with a compelling accent murmured, breaking her out of the stranglehold of pain. It was the silver-haired demon from moments ago, standing at her side. His irises glowed a searing silver, eclipsing the ebony for a second, capturing hers.

"A face that beautiful shouldn't wear so much sadness." His voice, a sensual croon, wrapped around her. "Let me buy you a drink, hmm?"

Ely blinked, shaking off the haze, trying to gather her broken thoughts.

"I won't bite, promise. Or maybe I will...if you want me to." A slow, seductive smile curved his mouth. "I'm called Kyser. What's your name, beautiful?" When she didn't respond, he stroked her cheek with the back of his knuckles and lowered his head to her, his nose brushing her skin. "Don't worry, my company is known to perk up anyone," he whispered, putting his hand on her hips. "Come."

A chair crashed somewhere, adding to the cacophony, jarring her free from his hypnotic voice. She pushed past him and dashed for the exit. As she cleared the doorway, a body flew past her to land in the dust. Another darker figure leaped for the fallen demon.

Nate.

They fought fast and furious, like blurs.

Aba appeared at her side. "This isn't helping."

Ely barely heard him, realizing then, the other part of the fighting duo was the demon who'd just spoken to her. Rage broke through her pain. "Stop this *now!*"

Her yell froze them both.

"I don't belong to either of you! I'm with him!" She stuck her thumb over her shoulder at Aba, since he'd added his scent

to her earlier. Gods, this unclaimed female nonsense was freakin' irritating!

Nate swiped the blood from his mouth, chest heaving. His stormy gaze swept over her, searching for what, she had no idea. Probably for the capital L of the *liar* he thought she was, one who broke promises easily, stamped somewhere on her skin.

But the fact he'd moved on so fast—without even giving her a chance to tell him everything—exacerbated her torment.

The demon gingerly touched his swelling jaw, then shoved his long hair off his face, revealing his pointed ears. A dark fae.

He cut her a smirk. “You are a regretful loss, beautiful. I might have to visit your mortal world and find another like you.” He strode off, ignoring Nate's growl.

She wiped the sweat from her brow with her forearm. The fae thought she was human?

“Dammit, Aba! Why did you bring her here?” Nate demanded.

A harsh breath caught in her throat at his cold words.

“She's probably the only one who can talk some sense into you!” Aba shot back.

“Fighting my own battles,” Ely retorted. And realizing how that sounded, she threw out the only excuse she had. “I want the one who put the bounty on me.” No way would she reveal the terror she'd endured worrying about him, only to find him with, with...

Breathing hard, it took a moment to be able to speak again. “What did you find out?” she reiterated when he continued glowering at her like *she* had done something wrong. Okay, she had, and she would live with that regret for the rest of her life.

Chest still heaving, Nate thrust back his tangled hair. “What the hell did you do to your hair?”

That was important in this mess between them?

“Incognito.” She folded her arms beneath her breasts and waited, the pain of his betrayal shredding her insides.

“Best we do this back at the house,” Aba said, breaking through the tension thickening between them as the patrons stopped to watch this shitshow. He put a gentle hand on Ely’s back. She dematerialized, following him, Nate’s frustrated curse echoing behind her.

Back at the manor, she reformed at the front and found both Aba and Nate already there.

“I have things to attend to,” Aba said and strode into the building.

Unable to look at Nate, she bit the insides of her lip, she glanced around her. At the eerie pinkish light filtering over the scorched land, she looked up as an enormous, pink-tinged moon rose above the cliff peaks, casting a pretty glow over everything.

“It’s the blood moon rising,” Nate said, and her foolish, foolish heart leaped at his calmer tone. When she didn’t respond, he asked, “Why did you come here, Ely?”

“I...” *came for you.* The hole in her belly expanded, and the unsaid words died, recalling what she’d witnessed at the bar. She straightened her spine and brought her attention back to him. “To talk...” she said instead.

His shadowy gaze met hers, probably seeing her for what she was—a horrible person who’d left a child to his terrible fate. Her stomach heaved at the thought, hating herself for what she was responsible for, and just as fast, getting mad at him for straying.

She wiped her damp brow with the back of her hand again.

“The fever still troubles you?”

“I’m fine.” She lowered her hand.

“You’re not.” He came closer and gently touched her cheek. “You’re burning up—”

“Don’t.” She jerked back, unable to bear him touching her after seeing him with another.

His hands fisted. His expression hardened. “You didn’t say that not too long ago when I was so deep inside—”

“And I wasn’t the one who had another’s hand on my crotch hours later, seeking relief,” she bit out, regretting just as fast that she’d shown him her pain. “It doesn’t matter. I was the one who left you alone all those years ago and changed your destiny—” she choked out, knowing she’d probably sealed her fate, cutting him out forever. “And gave you this life.”

He cut her a flat look.

Goddess! Did he hate her that much? Tears burned her eyes, but she blinked them back and pushed on. “There’s one other thing before I leave. You cannot fight in your match. Aba is beside himself with worry.”

A tic worked his jaw. “But not you?”

“Why should how I feel matter to you?”

“Because it does! When you think—fuck!” He wheeled away and paced to one of the bleached trees with tangled knots for leaves, slamming a palm on the gray trunk. Then his shoulders slumped. He seemed...so weary. And so alone. It tugged at her.

Unable to stop herself, Ely followed.

“I admit I was furious at first...” His low voice drifted to her as she approached him. “It was my only defense while growing up, using anger to cope through the years, but now...”

She stopped a foot behind him and couldn’t see his face, but his tone and the way he hunched by the tree betrayed his torment. Tears clouded her eyes, hiving her own despair, aware she was responsible for this.

Then he was speaking again. “No, I can’t change the past. I know that, and it’s not because of what *you* did...” His shoulder lifted and fell. “But to be abandoned by my family without a second thought hurts like a deeply embedded splinter, one I can never dig out.” He faced her, raw pain darkening his beautiful eyes and bleeding into every facet of

his handsome face. “Knowing my family didn’t even care enough to look for me is a sobering thought.”

“Nate, no,” she whispered, unable to endure his suffering. And hoped she could give him the closure he needed. “That is not true...”

* * *

Hell, just talking about his past, and the crater in his chest eroded deeper. Nate glanced out into the vast, gloomy barrenness, where nothing existed, just like his entire life... empty.

But meeting Ely and being with her had soothed some of the wounds, filling the void and chasing away the darkness, showing him a ray of happiness before it all went to hell—

“There is something you should know...” Ely’s soft voice tugged him out of his anguish, and he turned. “When I first found you—well, just before you ran into me—I heard a woman cry out with so much terror, she said, ‘*Hide, baby.*’ It drove me out of my hiding place, wanting to help...”

Nate stared at her, his chest compressing.

“After I hid with you,” she continued. “I heard running footsteps, then a male snapping, “*Find the brat and kill him, too.*”

“*Too?*” he repeated, voice hoarse.

She nodded.

“So, my family, they’re dead?”

She bit her lip and then lifted a shoulder in a helpless shrug. “I don’t know.”

But gut-deep, he knew. “They are.” He shut his eyes, inhaling a harsh gulp of hot air into burning lungs. “And I’ve hated them for so long for not looking for me.”

“You have Aba. He loves you.”

“I know.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, he gave me life again, but at times, I hated him, too, for the torment I had to endure just to live. The feedings, the—”

“Do you think it was right to keep the *death* fights from him?”

His eyes snapped open. “He knows? Dammit!” He thrust his fingers through his hair, shaking his head. “I didn’t want to burden him further. I always made sure he was on Earth when I had to fight. He doesn’t know about my deal with Azgor for these fights.”

“He’s your sire, Nate. He’s always going to put you first,” she said softly, pulling free the bottom of her top sticking to her skin, drawing his attention to her sweaty, taut belly. “He was frantic when he found out you had a fight approaching. It’s why he called me. He seemed to think I could somehow sway you.”

Nate didn’t respond, his gaze skimming her face. Her cheeks were flushed with her fever, her internal agitation scraping at him like gravel. He could feel her distress, but he didn’t ask because she’d brush it off. More, knowing what she needed.

“So, you came to the Dark Realm for *me*?” he asked softly, instead.

Her fingers fisted her top. “Shadow’s my friend, and I would do anything to keep her happy after all she’s gone through. Besides, I like Aba. I don’t like seeing him hurt or troubled...”

“I see.” His chest compressed like a vise tightening, wanting her to say she’d come for him.

“I came for you, Nate,” she blurted, causing his heart to stutter. Her eyes shone with tears. “Because I couldn’t bear this divide between us, but you obviously can’t forgive me for what I’ve done. You’ve moved on...”

CHAPTER 26



HADES! Ely's tears undid him.

Not that he could blame her for thinking that he'd moved on.

Much as he abhorred what had happened to him as a child, once the agony of betrayal at learning she'd inadvertently changed his destiny had abated, the truth glared him in the face.

Ely would never leave a child alone in the face of danger. She was a warrior, but one with a soft heart.

"Ely." He reached out, needing to touch her, but she stepped back, eyes dark with hurt. "Don't, Nate. This is hard enough for me—"

"I haven't moved on with anyone, Ely," he said quietly. "Qinera is a healer. She had her hand on my lower *abs* and was healing me." Anger gushed through him, thinking about why he wasn't healing, recalling what else Qinera had revealed. Hands fisted, he glared at the twisted branches of the ash tree lining the edge of the property. A spelled dagger! The cretin, Derrodus, had used a fucking *spelled* weapon on him.

"In a *brothel*?" Ely snapped.

Hell, he could understand her anger at what she thought had happened when she saw another female with her hands on him in an intimate manner, especially in a pleasure den. Because *he* still wanted to skewer the damn fae for not only touching *her* but daring to ask for her name!

He met her glare, dragging in lungfuls of air to keep his anger bolted. “I got hurt while here, Ely. I was in a fight. I wasn’t healing as fast as I should have. I needed help. I heard Qintera was treating someone in the pleasure den. I went over and waited for her.”

Her throat worked. Her lips trembled, then she stepped past him to the edge of the land, staring out at the black river slithering through the cliffs’ foothold in the distance, arms wrapped around her waist as if to hold herself together.

She didn’t believe him?

* * *

The demoness was a healer—a *healer*!

Ely lowered her head and blinked back her tears, a knot of emotion choking her, trying to get her unraveling mind leashed. He hadn’t gone to another female.

She remembered the name *Qintera* from before. When what else he said registered, recalling the bloodied t-shirt in the kitchen.

“Ely, dammit, speak to me.”

She spun to him. “You were hurt?”

His mouth tightened, and he nodded. “No matter what happened between us, I wouldn’t do that to you. You must know this?”

“It’s just that past experience...” She shook her head. All the pent-up hurt deflating. “It’s not important.” She swiped her sweat-dampened face again with the back of her hand, the heat within scorching her like a rolling flame. Worse, there was no icy river to dive into in this place.

“Someone hurt you?” He gently grasped her by her upper arms. Gods, his touch felt so good, soothing. She wanted to strip off and wrap herself around him.

“It’s all in the past. All that matters is that you know just how sorry I am for-for—” She found it hard to get out the

words. “For being the one who set you on the path to this torment you live daily.”

“I’ve wanted vengeance for so long...” his gaze held hers, “and when you revealed what had happened, I couldn’t accept it. But a part of me broke. I didn’t even know there was any more left in me to break...”

Dear goddess! The rawness in his eyes, the suffering, nothing could ever ease her remorse. “Forgive me—”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Ely.” He put a finger on her trembling lips, stopping her words. “You tried to save a child, a child who shouldn’t have run from safety and wouldn’t have ended up shot. There are so many *shouldn’ts and wouldn’ts* in the situation, but nothing can change the past,” he said quietly, lowering his hand to stroke her biceps again. “However, I didn’t leave Earth because of what you revealed. I left because Pangur found the proof I needed. He overheard the one who’s after you crowing to his cohorts just how easy it would be to get you, and that it was only a matter of time before he did. I was already struggling to keep a lid on my anger when you sought me out. I guess it just exacerbated everything.

Her entire being shuddered, and she lowered her head. He didn’t blame her.

“Hey...” He tilted her head with a finger under her chin, his tender gaze skimming her doubtless, emotion-ravaged features. “Just so you know, I don’t care about or want anyone else, never have, just you. I could never betray you.”

Tears spilled from her swimming eyes. She pressed her face into his chest, hugging him like a vise. His arms tightened around her, easing some of her despair. His mouth brushed a kiss on her head when another thought took hold. “Nate—”

“No, just let me hold you, Ely mine.”

Minutes passed, and she breathed in his comforting scent, hoping she’d somehow eased his anguish by revealing that his mother did care about him.

A soft exhale feathered her cheek before he spoke. “What is it?”

She pulled back so she could see him. “Was the demon who hurt you in this recent fight, the one who put the bounty on me?”

He scowled. “I wanted to kill the bastard right where he stood.”

“But you didn’t. Good. Because I’m going to. His name?”

“You aren’t taking him on,” he growled. “You’re in a demon world! This place is duplicitous. Most would pretend to help just to lay claim on you. I know you locked down your angelic allure and changed your hair color, but you’re too fucking beautiful to remain inconspicuous. The malevolent bastards here thrive on seeing someone as pure as you owned and locked away, or worse, debased.”

Ugh! For a second, she’d forgotten where she was. Outnumbered in the demon realm. As much as she hated the damn cur for putting a price on her, she wasn’t an idiot to put herself in his sights in this place. “I won’t. Not in this world, anyway. Who is it?”

A growl rumbled deep within him. “Azgor’s spawn. He knows if he doesn’t get the bounty off you, I will send him to Purgatory.”

“Nate—” She clutched his t-shirt, recalling the other reasons why she’d come to this world with Aba. “Please don’t take part in the mortal combat.”

A deep sigh escaped him. “I cannot run from this fight, *laika*, you know that.”

Dear goddess, how could she forget? “Because of Aba’s soul,” she whispered, a sense of helplessness taking hold. “But you’ll get his soul back after a decade of these fights, right?”

He nodded and then wavered like an unrooted fir. “Shit—”

“Nate!” She grabbed him, slipping her arm around his waist. “What is it?”

He shook his head. “Nothing dire. A little loss of blood from the fight earlier.”

“What? You’re not healing even after Qinera aided you?” She grasped the hem of his t-shirt and lifted, frowning at the dressing taped on his lower abs. “Why?”

He tugged his tee down again. “Nothing suitable here, blood-wise.”

“Okay.” She stuck out her hand. “Then take mine.”

A hint of a smile. “No. But I know another way that can help make it better.”

Frustrated, Ely growled and summoned her dagger from her backpack. She sliced her wrist. Pain shimmered, and blood pooled on her skin.

His eyes flashed red. “What did you do?”

She held up her seeping wrist. “Helping you. Now drink up.”

A pissed-off rumble emitted from his throat. He grasped her hand and quickly licked her bloody lesion. “I don’t want your scent drawing every fucking demon to this place!”

He slipped his thumb over the cut, keeping the wound closed, and dragged off his shirt with his other hand, holding it to her wrist.

“And I don’t want anything to happen to you. I don’t want you to die!” Scowling, she pulled her arm away and licked her wound, sealing it, wishing she could get through to him just how much he mattered to her.

“I don’t need your blood, Ely,” he said quietly. “My blood loss will fix itself, eventually. Yes, after my change, everything was a mess when feeding, and blood was a part of it. Now, I know. It’s just the dark, destructive emotions the symbiont needs...” His gaze drifted over her face to stop at her lips. He palmed her cheek and kissed her, moving his mouth over hers in a slow caress. “*This* is what I want from you.”

“I missed you when you left,” she whispered against his mouth, sliding both hands up his bare chest, the other still gripping her dagger. “So much.”

“Ah, Ely, mine. I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me.”

“Good, ‘cause I’m like glue...no, a magnet.”

He laughed, the husky sound melting her heart. “A magnet, you most definitely are.”

His mouth returned to hers, and he deepened the kiss, his tongue finding and sucking hers in a carnal mating of unadulterated need. Ely tightened her hold on him, kissing him back with all the longing within her. His hands squeezed her bottom—

“Nate, wait, wait. Aba,” she gasped, grabbing his hands off her ass. “He’s inside.”

“By the dark gods, Ely, you’ll make me lose my mind,” he grumbled. “No, he isn’t. He’s gone, probably to town. C’mon.”

He grasped her hand and headed indoors, down the corridor to the enormous room at the back with its high ceilings and exposed support beams. A huge bed with a black headboard abutted the stone wall on the opposite side. Several arched windows revealed the gloomy view, the pink moon highlighting the few bleached trees and miles and miles of barren land with sporadically strewn lava rocks.

The room smelled like him of anise, sandalwood, and a hint of leather, along with the faint, pervasive odor of sulfur. And that ever-present heat and need chafed at her. Ely rubbed her sweaty palms down her jeans.

Heck, inside the house was unbearably warm, too.

“There’s no place here I can take you to that’s safe,” he said, stopping at the foot of the bed. “I long to show the entire Dark Realm who my female is, but I don’t want the news that I have a Guardian here to spread. It would be dangerous.”

“After all, I killed many of this world’s plagues.”

“There is that.” He took her dagger and tossed it on the bookshelf. “But once Derrodus learns you’re in Ys, he’d strut over and demand I hand you to him because he thinks he

carries sway here, and *that* would make me lose my mind. You are mine, Ely.” He brushed the back of his knuckles gently over her cheek. “*My mate.*”

“What?” she gulped, staring at him in shock.

His brow arched. “Did you think this is just casual?”

Her heart tripped at the words she longed to hear. “For me, it wasn’t,” she whispered.

“Good. Because it’s not...” He kissed her jaw, his hands sliding her denim jacket from around her waist, and it fell. Her sleeveless top and her bra followed straight after. Nate ran his callused palms over her arms, and she groaned. His touch felt so good against her feverish skin.

“Too much?” he asked.

“No, gods, *no!* Don’t stop!”

A smile played on that too-tempting mouth as he cupped her breasts and squeezed, flicking both nipples with his thumbs. Her breath quickened, her jittery body tensing. His head lowered and his warm tongue laved one hard nub. He suckled, a pull that shot straight to her core, and she grabbed his hair and whimpered.

As he played her nipple like a finely tuned *clavile*, he unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans, slid his fingers into her panties, and stroked her aching flesh. And she shuddered, sensations crowding her.

“Should have worn a skirt, *laika*,” he rumbled against her breast.

“I didn’t know *this* would happen,” she panted.

He looked up, an eyebrow quirking. “Do you not know me at all? Every time I see you, I want to be inside you.”

She half-laughed, half-groaned, and would have rolled her eyes. But then she remembered what had happened the last time they made love or attempted to. “Nate, wait, wait.” She grabbed his hands as he started to tug her jeans down. “I don’t want to do this if you cannot finish, too—”

He cast her an intensely sensual look as he hunkered down on his heels and unzipped her footwear, removing and setting them aside. “I’ll be fine. I know what to expect now. But I must have you, Ely, all of you...” He dragged her jeans and underwear down her legs, and she stepped out of them. His scorching stare slid over her body. “You’re so godsdamn beautiful! Every inch of you.”

He ran his palms up her limbs and pressed an open-mouthed kiss right on her core, ratcheting up her feverish ache. Then meeting her gaze, he slid his palms up her body as he licked her sweat-slicked skin, from her belly to her breast, tugging her nipples with his mouth and fingers. She panted, grabbing his hair.

He straightened, his skin stretched taut over the bones of his gorgeous face. A palm on her chest, he gently pushed her onto the mattress but didn’t follow. “Feet on the bed, *laika*. Knees apart.”

Her body aflame, Ely shifted up and braced on her elbows and did as he ordered, spreading her thighs open.

His eyes glittered, gliding over her, the pinkish moonlight casting an eerie glow in the room as if sealing them in a dream. Nate settled on the bed between her thighs, and she watched as he opened his mouth and ran his tongue between her cleft, his midnight hair trailing over her skin like a million fingers caressing her—

Gods! A moan caught in her throat, her knees falling further apart. He licked her clit, pushing his thumb into her core in tormenting little dips.

A whimper broke free. Ely fell flat on her back, her legs sliding over his shoulders. The sensation of his lips grasping and suckling her aching flesh had all her nerves tautening. She moved her hips against his mouth, seeking more. He grunted in satisfaction, cupped her backside, and thrust his tongue into her opening. Pressure built. Her core tightened, sweat dampening her body.

“Nate—” She reached for him.

He flipped her over onto her belly and pulled her hips up. She braced on her knees, face in the bedding. He kissed each butt cheek, then a sharp sting followed.

“You bit me?” she breathed in shock.

A slow lick now, his tongue warm and wet, changing the slight pain to something beyond her comprehension, contracting every cell in her core.

“Didn’t I say I know ways to make you lose your mind?” She heard the smile in his voice as he squeezed her bottom. “The things I can show you, my mate.” He trailed his tongue between her butt cheeks, caressing a part of her where no one had touched before, and her breath caught, a darker desire stirring. A finger gently probed her, teasing her, and she stiffened.

“Another time, I’ll take you to the darker side, my angel...” He dragged his lips lower to her slit, kissing her netherlips as he had with her mouth, parting her wet flesh and licking and sucking. A calloused finger pushed into her, then he added another, thrusting in and out.

So close. Ely panted, her body ablaze. “Nate, please...”

“I got you, *laika*.” A zipper opening echoed in the quiet room. A soft rustle of clothes being removed sounded, then he climbed back behind her. His warm, muscled thighs settled between hers. His hot hard length slid against her sensitive core, bumping her clit, and she groaned into the bedding.

“You like that, hmm?” His hand moved between her legs, and his cock hit firmer on her clit. Gods! She grasped the covers. Her core throbbed, sensation flaying her, demanding fulfillment. And then he was pushing into her, stretching her—

“You’re so damn tight, Ely,” he grunted, stilling, waiting for her to adjust.

“I can take it. I’m not fragile,” she panted. “Now, move.”

Soft laughter, then in one hard thrust, he sheathed himself to the hilt, stealing her breath. And then he was moving, forcing her to accept his girth with every thrust, sending her mind spinning. She lost all rational thoughts, her entire being

focused on the sensation of his cock funneling in and out of her. Harder, faster. The sounds of sweat-slicked flesh slapping flesh grew.

He found her clit and rolled her swollen nub, and she whimpered, gripping the bed covers. Pressure built as he thrust in again. Then, a sharp tug of her clit—

“Gods, yes!” she cried out as her orgasm exploded, shattering through every part of her...

* * *

Nate gripped Ely’s hips, a shriek splintering inside his skull. *Wantsss, now—*

Fuck off! He wasn’t stopping. Ely was *his* to claim! His mate!

He thrust harder and faster, desire streaking through him, tightening his balls—a blitz of a million talons lashed out, tearing through his head—

“Nate!” she cried out, her gaze rushed back to him, fear in her eyes.

Something wet smeared his fingers. A fresh flood of copper drifted to him—

He snatched his hands away, staring in horror at the bloody smears marring both sides of her pale hips.

No!

He reared off her and flashed, his back slamming into the far side bedroom wall behind him, his heart hammering against his sternum. Chest heaving, he stared at his splayed fingers and the bloodied, black talons.

I hurt her! Fucking hurt her! Drew her blood!

Pain and despair swamped him, while in another part, deep within, satisfaction rolled through him.

CHAPTER 27



“NATE!” Ely twisted around and scrambled to her knees on the bed, her momentary pain forgotten. “I’m fine. Really.”

“No!” He grabbed his hair with clawed fingers, yanking it viciously as if he would rip it out, the horror in his eyes tearing at her. “I hurt you. I fucking hurt you!”

“I’ve already healed. Look.” When he didn’t, she said softly, “Remember, I take a lot more hits, bruises, and bleeding wounds during my job as a Guardian.” She smiled when his head snapped up, and he glared. She knew his anger was self-directed.

This male, who hated everything about himself, meant everything to her.

No, he might not have always walked a straight path in his life, but he didn’t see what she did when she looked at him. Despite his hazardous job, killing for the demon he was bound to, and the dangerous beast side of him, he cared for and protected the people he loved. Aba, Shadow, her...

Ely held out her hand. “Nate, please come back. I want to hold you.”

“How can you so calmly accept what I’ve done to you?”

“A little pain while making love with you, I don’t mind,” she said softly, giving him the truth. “But had it been deliberate, I would already have my dagger in your throat or your heart.”

He stared at her for a second, his chest rising and falling. Then his talons retracted as his anger faded, and he huffed out a laugh, the sound turning her insides to mush.

“I like my female dangerous, who doesn’t give a fuck for rules.”

“Good, because that’s me.”

He leaned against the wall, gloriously naked, but made no move back to her. Heck, she wanted to jump him, but the damn beast might strike again. Instead, she remained on the bed and studied his handsome face, the shape of his tempting mouth, then met his gorgeous twinkling eyes. Her chest fisted into a tight knot...hell, she was falling hard for him.

His smile lingered. Again, the feeling that he reminded her of someone stirred. Try as she might, she still couldn’t place who it was.

Putting it aside for now, she held out her hand, needing him to overcome his fear of hurting her.

Exhaling a massive breath as if fortifying himself, Nate strolled back, the moonlight backlighting his tall, naked form. He hunkered down in front of her, his powerful thighs bulging with muscles, his cock, still hard and flushed darker than his normal bronze skin, jutted out to her. But at the pulsing nerve on his jaw, she knew he had to be in pain, unable to find his release.

Before she could speak, he stroked her hips where he’d unintentionally hurt her, and then his head lowered, and he licked one of the spots, his silky hair stroking her healed skin like caressing fingers. “Your blood tastes like sunshine, like the sweetest nectar, angel.”

And the smile she adored, a little tug of his lips, appeared.

“Nate, let me...” She reached out and stroked his rock-hard length.

“No!” He hissed and fell back on his ass, the vein on his forehead throbbing harder. He shot to his feet, his bearing stiff. His lips tightened as he struggled to block the pain and

discomfort from his thwarted release. “Ely, I’m trying to calm the fuck down and get my damn dick to ease up—”

“Well, I don’t want you to suffer.” She moved off the bed, grabbed his hand, and, walking backward, she pulled him along.

His brow lowered, his stare wary.

She smiled.

When her back hit the warm granite wall opposite the bed, she lowered to her heels in front of him, his thick, hard cock at eye level.

“Ely, no! This is too dangerous!”

He tried to step back, but she tightened her grip on his wrist. “Put your palms on the wall,” she ordered, ignoring his growl. His eyes narrowed. She rolled hers. “I’m not going to do anything you won’t like, you intractable male. This way, if the talons appear, I’ll be safe.”

She gripped his hot length with both hands, and he stiffened. And as she stroked him from root to tip a few times, spreading his precum, his jaw clenched. When she licked the crown, his hands at his sides fisted.

Finally, she ran her tongue along his length, tasting them both on his skin, and it spurred her on. This wasn’t about wanting to break his control but to give him pleasure, too.

She licked him like he was a decadent ice cream, then lapped the round head. His eyes blazed like an inferno as she took his cock into her mouth in increments, using her tongue and tightening her lips as she sucked and released, taking him deeper and deeper.

A groan escaped him. He slapped his palms on the wall when she retreated, dragging her mouth over his flesh to the rounded head. She started working him harder, faster, with firmer sucks.

And then he was moving his hips, thrusting in and out her mouth, and she fisted the inches she couldn’t quite reach. “Slow down, Ely! I’m gonna come!”

She squeezed his balls in response, ignoring his warning, and tightened her lips—

“Fuck!” He grabbed her braided ponytail, hauled her up, and came hard, squirting his warm release on her body for several long seconds, as if marking her.

Panting like there was no more oxygen in the room, he stared at her, eyes like the scorching sun, then dragged her to him, kissing her deeply...tenderly.

Nate lowered his forehead to hers. “You undo me, Ely. Every fucking time.” He swept her into his arms and strode to the bed, glancing at their cum-smearred bodies as he set her down. “I’ll be back. I made a mess of us both.”

He reappeared a moment later with two damp towels and sat at her side, draping one on his muscular thigh. But his eyebrows drew into a slight V, almost like he had something on his mind as he carefully cleaned her, not leaving a trace of him behind.

“I don’t mind wearing you,” she teased, trying to wipe away his somber expression, unease threading through her.

He dragged the towel between her thighs, but she took over and cleaned up, then dropped the used terry cloth on the floor. With the other, he gently wiped her unblemished skin where his talons had injured her, then he stroked her hips, fanning her desire again. And she panted.

“What is it?” he demanded. “Your temperature’s up?”

She bit her lip, then nodded. *And I’m horny again*, but she refrained from saying so, grateful the musk of their love-making still permeated the air. “I’m sorry.”

His jaw tensed. “Don’t be. Let me ease you—”

“No. My backpack’s in the kitchen. I have my potion there. It’ll aid me. You need to rest for tomorrow.”

The tic powered up on his clenched jaw. He didn’t say anything, just dropped the towel and flashed, returning with her backpack a moment later. She got out the pink potion, drank the last bit, and pushed the empty bottle into her bag.

Ely looked up as she dropped her bag on the floor and met his brooding stare.

“Come...” Ely grasped his hand and tugged him. “Lie down next to me.” She patted the mattress, moving to the center.

After several long seconds, he lowered her to the bed, his hard body aligning with hers. He stroked her spine, then, “Ely, there’s something I want to ask you.”

Wary now, she sat up, her gaze roaming his supine form. He appeared like some fallen angel, the dark pillow a perfect backdrop for his gorgeous face. “Sounds serious.”

He didn’t smile, just stared at her through those thickly lashed, fiery topaz eyes. “It is.”

She nodded, bracing herself for whatever was to come. And hoped it wasn’t anything grave or detrimental, like breaking up.

“Once we’re back on Earth, I’d like you to move in with me. Seeing you while you’re on patrol or the stolen hours at the cabin isn’t enough. I want to spend every waking minute with you.”

Her heart collided with her ribcage in a hard thump because it was the last thing she expected, but happiness spread like a warm light through her.

As immortal Guardians, they all lived in one place, under the radar, and out of sight from humans. At the garage, she’d be right in their midst, that is, if Michael didn’t have a coronary first when he learned of their relationship.

“I want that, too,” she said softly. “But let’s talk about this when we return to Earth, okay?”

Heck, she was probably in a shitload of trouble anyway for coming to this world without Michael knowing. But she was off duty, and what she did on her time off was her business. Right?

Nate didn’t say anything for an endless second, then he nodded. “Are you hungry?”

The thought of food almost choked her.

“Don’t worry, the victuals here at our house are more like Earth meals. Nothing scary, scaled, or with a mouthful of chompers,” he teased.

She smiled. “I’m not very hungry right now.” How could she eat when thoughts of tomorrow had her stomach churning? “Nate, about the fight—”

“Come here.” He drew her to him, and she settled on his inked chest. “Don’t think about it. It’ll be all right. I always come out of it breathing.”

“Yes, but—”

“Shh, Ely. Let’s get some sleep while we can, ‘kay?” He pressed his lips to her head.

She stroked his chest, gently tracing the puckered scar beneath his tattoo of a ruined clock with symbols and wings, realizing it was from the gunshot wound as a child. More abstract ink spread out in a chaos of symbols and swirls, wrapping around his biceps.

“Nate, there’s something you should know.” She lifted her head to meet his eyes. “When Aba and I were looking for you earlier, I overheard two of Azgor’s guards. They have you fighting someone called *Sicari*.”

He stilled his caressing of her hips.

She jerked upright on the bed again. “Nate, who is he?”

A smile tugged at his mouth. “Me.”

“What?” Her eyes nearly bugged out.

“It’s what they call me here.”

She frowned as he drew her back into his arms, her gaze fixed on his amused features. “What does it mean?”

He sighed, his warm breath coasting over her skin. “Assassin. Killer. And there’s *immitis*, the cruel. Take your pick.”

She blinked, not sure if she should feel relieved or horrified. But one thought plagued her. “Won’t the beast get stronger with all the violence?”

“Don’t worry about it.” He went back to stroking her spine. “I have never shifted before, and I don’t plan on doing so now.”

Dammit, that didn’t reassure her in the least.

She slid her arm around his belly, careful of his new wound, and held on tight, fear creeping through her. Tomorrow he’d be fighting for his life. And all she had to hold onto was that he’d fought many times and won all because of the beast he housed. A beast who hated her and would kill her in a heartbeat if given the chance.

* * *

As the night withered away and morning drew close, Nate reluctantly eased away from Ely’s warm body. Hell, he didn’t want to leave her.

Bracing on his forearm, he studied her beautiful features, relaxed at finally having some respite from her temperature hikes and roiling powers. More, he hated that she had to rely on potions to help her do so. Gently, he smoothed back her hair, the strands as dark as his own. This female who made him smile now owned his heart. He had even more reason to survive this fight.

While he’d made love to her, it wasn’t in the way he wanted because his damn beast side didn’t want her.

Nate couldn’t understand that.

As vicious as wyverns were, they mated and remained in pairs until death.

He frowned. Did they have to make love properly—for him to release inside her like with a mating fever—for her temperature hikes to subside? He wasn’t sure.

No matter, he wasn’t giving Ely up!

He'd find a way to subdue the damn shit within him and claim his mate properly—

A bolt of pain ricocheted through his skull in payback for his vow. *The fucker!* Nate blocked his thoughts, refusing to let the Black latch onto them again.

Too restless to remain still with the fight looming, everything in him focused on keeping Ely safe and here at the house while he was gone. Or better yet, get her to leave this world and wait for him on Earth. He stroked back the strands of hair escaping her ebony braid, hating that she had to hide behind a disguise in this world because of the peril to her kind from these demon assholes.

Exhaling roughly, he pressed his lips to her brow, got off the bed, and headed for the bathroom.

A few minutes later, barely refreshed from his warm shower—hell, in this place there wasn't any other temperature level except hotter—he put on another pair of jeans, socks, and boots, grabbed a t-shirt, and made his way to the kitchen. The smell of freshly brewed coffee drifted to him.

Aba looked up from his seat at the table, stirring his coffee. Nate knew the mug must contain a ton of sugar. His sire possessed a sweet tooth that made his chompers ache.

He tossed his t-shirt on a chair back and scratched his bare chest. The wound on his side from Derrodus' weapon still ached though a scab had formed over it. At least the dizziness had eased.

He eyed his sire. “You were gone most of the night?”

“Aye,” Aba murmured. “Had some things to take care of. You and Ely okay?”

“Yeah.” Nate got out a mug from the cupboard and poured his coffee. Beaker palmed, he leaned against the counter and took a deep swallow of the hot, black liquid. But his attention shifted to the doorway and corridor leading to his quarters. Even though he knew Ely was asleep and close by, this short distance away from her had him on edge, everything within

him yanking at him to get back to her. Keep her safe. Claim her—

“How does one recognize a fated mate?” he asked his sire, reeling in the desire gripping by him the balls.

“With us demons, they’re known as consorts, and there’s a mating fever, and both are affected badly. We are a violent breed.” A droll smile. “But you are different, so it’s hard to say —”

“Yeah, started out as human, and reborn as a malevolent demonic beast,” he muttered, then shook his head as his sire’s smile faded. “It’s all right. You didn’t know what the symbiont would do to me.” All that fucker within wanted was gore and death. At least his rampant need was his own. “Aba, I want you to take Ely back to Earth—”

“There’s something you need to know,” Aba said simultaneously, then he shook his head. “What you just requested? You know she won’t leave. That female is as stubborn as you.”

His jaw clenched in frustration, aware he was grasping at straws. But what Aba saw as him being *stubborn* was Nate having his hands tied and bound to an old, avaricious bastard who valued his possessions more than a being’s life. And to keep the male who’d been a father to him safe, he had to do as Azgor wanted.

But Ely? She *was* maddeningly stubborn.

With him mere hours away from taking part in a deadly fight, yeah, she would refuse to leave. But he didn’t want her to see this cold, monstrous side of him. More, he didn’t want Derrodus’ sights on her.

He set his mug on the table and stuck his fists in his jeans pockets. “That bastard Derrodus put a bounty on her. If she appears at the pit with you, he’s gonna know and would use the time I’m focused elsewhere to get at her. Hell, I know she can take care of herself, but dammit, I don’t want his filthy hands on her! You know he would torture her just to get even with me. And that I won’t have.”

“She is a Guardian,” Aba reminded him.

“I don’t care if she were the creator of this damn place! I don’t want a scratch on her!” He thumped the table, his usual, formidable control shattering. Head lowered, he shut his eyes, dragging in deep gulps of air, struggling for calm.

“I will keep her safe,” Aba promised.

Fists braced on the wood, Nate lifted his gaze to his sire. “You haven’t been active as Azgor’s enforcer for decades.”

“Don’t write me off just yet,” Aba drawled. “Enforcer was just a mockery of a title. I was a *Sicari* like you, *cnati*. So, there’s still some fight left in these old bones.”

A wry smile broke free. When he was so much younger and needed to feed, Aba stopped at nothing to kill those he first fed off, especially when they came after him to kill him at the insult of a ‘*human*’ child feeding on them.

“I remember.” Nate changed the conversation. “What is it I should know?” He asked, then lifted a hand, stopping Aba’s reply, his gut churning. The blood moon pulled at him to get moving, and his beast side battered at his mind shields for release.

Not fucking now! It would have its moment when the time was right.

A snarl ricocheted through his skull like metal shards nailing him in the brain. Shit! He clenched his teeth, jabbing his fingers against his temples. Several deep breaths later, he straightened and met Aba’s troubled gaze.

“The blood moon grows stronger,” he said, glancing outside through the window where everything remained shrouded in a darkening pink glow, then back at Nate. “It’s time.”

For the fight? “Yeah, I know.” He picked up his t-shirt from the chair backrest, then said, “She is my heart, Aba. Keep her safe.”

“I will, *cnati*.”

Nate swallowed, fighting back the emotions clogging his chest. “Keep her away from the fight. I don’t want her to see *that*—see *me*.”

See the cruel side of me.

Aba inclined his head.

Nate pulled on his t-shirt and swiped his brow at the sweat forming there, his mind going hazy. He shook his head to clear it. “If anything happens to me, make sure she gets back to Earth.”

“Then you fight to live, and *you* to take her back,” Aba retorted. “Because she won’t go without you.”

Hell, didn’t he know it? “Try. Please.”

Aba sighed and nodded. “Now, tell me what’s wrong. Something seems off with you.”

Everything. And now a fucking dizzy spell. “Nothing. I want this fight over. I’ll see you later.”

Nate headed out, finding it hard to walk away from his sleeping mate. But he did, needing to shut down every facet of emotion he possessed to become the killer he was to get through the upcoming battle.

And he hoped he at least came out breathing because a fight of this caliber, during a blood moon, was one of the riskiest ever, especially where his beast was concerned.

His mouth thinned in cynicism. His thoughts might be consumed with having Ely in his life and hunting the ass who set the bounty on her, so, yeah, he was a little slow to figure out Azgor’s ultimate strategic endgame! But did the damn demon think he was a fucking idiot?

He knew *exactly* why Azgor had scheduled the match during this period and so fast after Nate’s last one. Azgor wanted the beast to emerge fully. It was probably what he had wanted all along and why he’d given Nate a part of Aba’s soul to seal the deal.

In the past, when he wasn’t bound to Azgor, he’d managed to call the shots to a degree in having the fights not happen

during the blood moon. Now his hands were tied, and that sod Derrodus had made things worse, stabbing him with the fucking spelled dagger.

This fight, however, wasn't just between him and his opponent, but another more deadly foe lurking within him.

With him weakened, the odds weren't in his favor.

And it pained him that he could lose his life just when he found his heart.

CHAPTER 28



ELY AWAKENED to a room trapped in a reddish gloom. Yet she sensed it wasn't night any longer. Her hiking temperature had eased somewhat, but it still lingered beneath her skin—even if it were transient—she'd take it. But emotionally, she felt happier than she ever had in a long time...

Nate.

Just thinking about him, her smile bloomed. She turned over, the thin sheet tangling around her body, and frowned at finding Nate's side of the bed empty. Dammit. Had he left for the fight already? Because she couldn't sense him about.

She leaped out of bed and dashed to the bathroom. Her gaze darted to the window. In this place, she had no idea if it was morning, midday, or evening.

A quick shower later, she found her backpack in the room and changed into the extra clothes she'd brought. Boots on, she smoothed down the stretchy black tank top over her jeans, grabbed her denim jacket, and hurried to the kitchen.

She found the coffee pot and mugs on the table and no sign of Aba, though she felt him nearby. Unable to leave until Aba was back, and with hunger gnawing at her belly, Ely left her jacket on the chair and poured coffee. She might as well fuel up while she could.

In a plastic container on the table, she discovered chocolate chip cookies and cinnamon muffins. Aware of Aba's sweet tooth, she wasn't surprised he'd stocked up on the Earth goodies. She took a muffin and bit into the crumbly top, then

drank some of her coffee as she waited, trying to ward off the restlessness creeping through her.

As she finished her meal, Aba walked in, carrying a box. He smiled when he saw her. “Had to get water. Rested?” he asked.

Heat suffused her cheeks. Hastily, she picked up her mug and sipped, hiding behind it, like that would help. “Yes, thank you. Where’s Nate?”

Aba gave a slight shrug, set the box on the table, and began stocking the cooling unit with water bottles. “He said to wait here for him.”

With his back to her, Ely couldn’t see his face to decipher his expression or even from his body language. “Why, where is he?”

“Mentioned he had some things to take care of today.”

What things? Okay, last night, with all that had occurred between them and emotions running high, some stuff was left unsaid. “He’s coming back here before the fight, right?”

A sense of foreboding took hold when Aba didn’t answer straight away.

“Aba?” She set her mug down. “Don’t cover up. I know something’s amiss. Where is he?”

He sighed and faced her, shutting the cooler door. “At the fight. We really should wait here—”

Her heart tripped. *Dammit, Nate!* “You do what you must. I will find my way to the damn arena!” Anger charging through her fast and furious, she grabbed her jacket and stormed outside.

“Ely, wait.” Aba hurried after her. “I told him you wouldn’t like being left behind.”

“Yes, because I’ll calmly accept that he’s simply going out there to die, so no biggie! Why trouble little frail me about something like that?” she snapped, yanking on her jacket. She’d give that stubborn demon a piece of her mind!

As her emotional frustration hiked, the heat within rolled to the surface in a wave. *For hell's sake! Give me a freaking break!*

She gritted her teeth, scrubbing her prickling arms, aware she'd no more of the damn potion left.

"You know Nate can take care of himself?" Aba pointed out.

"Yes, but the symbiont within him grows stronger!"

"And if it emerges, he doesn't want *you* caught in the onslaught—"

"Well, I won't sit by idly." Dammit, getting mad wasn't helping her problem. She forced herself to reel in her panic and calm down. "Aba, please, I need to be there."

His chest expanded then he exhaled, mouth twisting a little. "Very well. Let's go. Whatever happens, Ely, never leave my side. Promise."

Ugh. He was worse than Nate. But in this place? "Okay."

Aba nodded and flashed. Ely dematerialized, following him.

Moments later, she reformed in front of an arena ringed by dark mountains and immense dry heat, almost suffocating her. And trying to lower her temperature was like cranking a broken knob. She pulled off her jacket and tied it around her waist, not that it helped. But the constant noise in the place swarmed her like a mutiny of critters at war—

Raucous erupted, and her heart hammered. These fights tore at Nate, killing a little piece of him each time because the male she knew him to be abhorred the senseless killings. But these demons rejoiced in it!

Aba's tight expression spoke volumes. "Stay close," he said as he strode up to the massive gates guarded by a pair of granite-gray demons with hollowed features and spiky horns, crouched on tall pillars like stone gargoyles. Their anemic yellow eyes were the only thing that moved and now watched her.

Mouth tight, Ely lowered her gaze as they hurried through the gateway, shoving through the thick crowd. Some parted when they saw Aba. Others grinned.

“Come to see *Sicari* rip his prey apart?” A skinny demon smirked.

The glee and hunger for blood and violence in their maniacal grins had Ely grinding her teeth. A coppery odor hung over the pungent stench of sulfur, and it stung her nose.

Beneath the current uproar, eons of pain and gore abraded her sensitive psyche—her angelic nature unable to cope with the negative energy nailing her from all directions—draining her. Breathing hard, Ely slammed her protective shield shut, so she didn’t weaken in this dangerous place.

She came to a halt in front of the metal barrier keeping the crowd away from the massive fighting arena. Her throat dried out as she watched a bare-chested, barefoot Nate face his opponent, a mammoth seven-foot-tall, hairless demon with reddish-black skin and massive double horns sweeping back along his skull. His long, barbed tail whipped about in anticipation, causing dust clouds as he circled Nate.

Despite Nate’s heavily inked torso, Ely could clearly see the many wounds riddling his body.

The cacophony from the crowd grew. The bear-sized demon thundered toward Nate and lashed out with an enormous, clawed fist straight into Nate’s torso, sending him flying back to hit the arena barriers. He fell to his knees. Blood ran down his chest from the fresh slashes, drenching his pants.

Harsh breaths sawed in and out of her lungs as she watched, gripping the steel bars with a death hold.

The scaly demon thumped his chest and roared, eyes like flashing like black craters in the reddish, twilight day.

“Kill him, kill him,” the crowd chanted.

Nate, please, please get up! “Why isn’t he fighting back?” she demanded.

“I don’t know.”

Her gaze pinned on Nate, she watched helplessly as he stumbled to his feet.

Something was terribly wrong.

Then, as if the vile energy here fed him, his horns shot free of his skull. Even from a distance, she could see his fangs had lengthened, too, slicing into his bottom lip. Blood ran down his chin, joining his many wounds, and his feet had elongated, now scaly and clawed.

A snarl broke free, guttural and terrifying, and he dove for the demon. The sounds of flesh hitting flesh resounded in the dusty arena.

The spectators' shrieks grew, deafening her, and the chanting amped up, "*Sicari! Sicari!*"

"Why?" she whispered to Aba, her heart hurting, watching Nate fight to live. "What enjoyment is it to kill another just for fun?"

"The dark world is different than what you know, little one," Aba murmured. "It's our way of life. It's all about power. Demons are born with dark souls, and the males without much emotion. The older they get, the less they feel. Fights like these, the energy it releases, gives them..." He flicked a thumb to the arena stands. "Their fix."

"Like an...an energy vampire?"

"Aye. Each sect of demons has a different way of getting what they want. Azgor doesn't have natural emotions like I do. Though, he has his energy sources when needed. My Maita, she released them in me when we mated. And now..." His expression became stony. "He uses my son in retaliation."

Retaliation? She wanted to draw and quarter this Azgor. Scowling, she cast a quick look to the seating area to her left, where the old demons took up space, and they had to be old, because power rippled from the place like nettles stinging her skin.

One sat there without moving. Enormous horns curled back from his pale brow, and long green-streaked dark hair flowed down his shoulders. A massive, black hellhound with

two heads sat at his side, a spiked collar around the animal's thick throat.

"Which one is he?" she asked, instinctively knowing who it was anyway.

Aba didn't turn. "The one with the hound."

A quiet rage emitted from Azgor, like an abrasive cloud sweeping over her. No emotions? "Then why does he reek of anger," she whispered.

Aba's mouth thinned. "He must have heard the news."

Her gaze shot back to Aba. "What news?"

"His offspring was slain sometime during the night."

Derrodus? "Nate didn't kill anyone," she hissed.

"I know."

Then she forgot about Derrodus' death, her breath trapped in her throat as the bald demon struck another blow. Nate flew several feet into the air and landed on his back. He crawled to his knees. The demon thundered toward him—

Noooo! Nate! Her cries caught in her throat.

A crackling like bones breaking echoed through the yells. Something dark fluttered out of Nate's back. Massive leathery wings sprouted from his shoulder blades, with jagged, red-streaked edges, the added weight unbalancing him as he stood.

Terror clamped her lungs in a vise. He was shifting?

"Hades, no!" Aba breathed. "It cannot be."

"What—*what* is it?" she demanded.

His features ashen, Aba shook his head, seeming frozen to the spot. "I didn't realize when I took the symbiont to save Nate what it truly was. I mean, I knew it was a wyvern, just not this type. Those serrated, red-edged wings..."

"What do you mean?"

His horrified gaze remained fixed on Nate. "Unlike the wyverns you find here on Ys and other places, that creature dwells in the deepest depths of the Infernii Realm. They are

the Wraconis—soul destroyers. There is no rhyme or reason to their thought process. Any living being these creatures get a hold of, they take over their mind, feeding on their emotional suffering and terror, before ripping them apart. Demons are sometimes sentenced to the Infernii Realm to die at the whim of the soul destroyers.”

Now it all added up. And her heart ached as she watched Nate stagger about, trying to get back into the fight.

“Fear is how Nate wins his fights,” she whispered. Once his opponent finally experiences fear before death, it gives him the edge. But at what cost? His soul tormented for the rest of his life because of his symbiont’s needs?

“Believe me,” Aba bit out, “most deserve what they get with the perverted lives they lead when tossed in that hellish place.”

But Nate didn’t. He didn’t deserve to be saddled with this kind of symbiont.

She was the one who entered his life and changed his destiny, setting him on *this* violent path when she left him with the old couple who let him run off, only to die in that alley.

Faced with his reality, despair and guilt almost brought her to her knees. *Forgive me, Nate. I will do whatever it takes to ensure your life is different now. Better. Just get through this fight and live, please—*

The bald demon grabbed Nate and flung him away. The weight of his wings had him tripping back, and he hit the arena barriers.

No, no! *C’mon, Nate, you can do this!*

He lurched back to his feet, his grunts reaching her despite the ruckus of the arena. The enormous demon flashed toward Nate and grabbed his wing, spinning them around like a cyclone. The sound of flesh tearing free, bones breaking, filled her ears—

A scream exploded from her throat. “Na—!”

“No!” Aba slapped his palm on her mouth, suppressing her cry. “Hush, it’s almost at the end, don’t distract him.”

End? Her knees shook, her sob cemented in her throat as the cur tore off Nate’s wing. Ely stood there utterly powerless, her gaze fixed on the man she loved, who might not leave the pit alive. The bear-like demon tossed the wing aside, horrible sounds of grunts and scratches echoing, and she realized the bastard was laughing.

Nate staggered around, listing to one side from the weight of his single wing, blood pouring off his back like a broken faucet.

“Come on, my love, you can do this,” she begged, tears burning her eyes.

A snarl suddenly erupted, and despite being gravely wounded and with one appendage getting in his way, Nate leaped up into the air. His arm arched like a sword, his impossibly long talons like deadly blades slicing clear across the bald demon’s neck before he landed on his clawed feet and stumbled several steps.

Growls and sounds of choking resounded in the arena.

Shouts tore across the crater of death. “Finish him, finish him!”

Ely had no idea who must finish whom. Her heart thundered in her ears as Nate slowly turned, then he leaped up at the demon, grabbing his head. He grunted, trying to yank Nate off him, and staggered about. Nate’s biceps bulged as he twisted, his face contorted into an unrecognizable mask of rage and hate, the symbiont stone on the middle of his back glowing red.

The sheer horror of what was happening froze her in place as he broke his opponent’s neck and tore the head free.

The headless demon collapsed to his knees, blood spraying everywhere like an unplugged geyser, then he fell forward. Nate tossed the head down. A second later, the demon’s body and head shimmered and vanished. Cheering erupted, almost deafening her.

A screech of rage tore free, and Nate fell to his knees. His skin darkened, scales rippling over his torso.

A squad of demons appeared in a dust cloud, surrounding him, their deeper green cloaks billowing around them, blocking Nate from her sight.

“What’s happening?” She grabbed Aba’s arm.

“Those are Azgor’s personal guards,” he growled. “He’s being taken.”

“What? *Why!*”

“Because the bastard knows the change is happening and wants his prized possession with him.”

“But he gave Nate a decade to work off his debt. Said he would return the other part of your soul!”

“Mere words, child. Azgor doesn’t care about that as long as he gets what he wants. My son. This fight should never have happened! C’mon.” He stormed off.

Ely pushed past the crowd, following Aba, but her attention remained fixed on the arena. She couldn’t see Nate with demons surrounding him or hear anything either, with the uproar in the place. Aba stopped, and she nearly crashed into him.

He glared up at the private box, at the tall, green-haired demon. “Azgor!”

The archdemon cast her a narrowed look before dismissing her and staring down his nose at Aba, his hand on one of the hellhound’s heads. “You dare confront me?”

“And you can’t let the past be,” Aba retorted. “I’ll take my son now. Release him.”

“He belongs to me.”

“You brokered a deal with him for a decade!” Aba snapped. “He won this fight. Release him!”

“Be careful with your tone when speaking to your Lord, *minion*. You took what was mine. Never again.”

“Maita was *my* mate,” Aba spat. “She chose *me!*”

Azgor’s aloof features morphed to granite, but Ely picked up his simmering rage. Shit. This demon hated Aba and was determined to make him pay. Just because he lost a female to another? The sorry-ass loser!

“Natek has lost all his rights with the slaying of my offspring,” Azgor said in the same chilling tone.

Natek? He meant Nate?

A roar broke free in the frenzied excitement around them, fresh blood drenching the air. Ely’s gaze snapped back to the arena. Body parts and ragged fragments of green and black fabric flew about. A cacophony of yells broke free.

“He decimated all the guards!” someone shouted. *“And with one wing only.”*

“Where is he?” another yelled.

“Gone! He just vanished.”

“Find him!” Azgor roared and flashed from the death crater with his two-headed hound.

The crushing pressure of dread in her chest exploded as relief gushed through her that Nate had escaped, but it was stained with fear, too. Ely combed psychically for his familiar vibration, but with so many demons about, and the place thick with violence and death, it was hard to pinpoint him.

“I can’t locate him,” Aba growled. “We need to find him before he’s completely lost.”

And Ely knew.

Aba didn’t mean losing him to Azgor, but to Nate’s beast side.

CHAPTER 29



REFORMING at the outskirts of the Ys, Ely tried scanning for Nate again, and nothing.

Where are you?

“I can’t pick up any trail of him,” Aba said from her side. “Even the familiar blood vibration we share is gone.”

“*You* feed him blood?”

“Only when I tried to prevent him from dying as a babe, but that didn’t work.” His expression turned bleak.

“You did what you had to do to save him, Aba.” She rubbed her sweaty brow and neck in frustration, unable to get a read on Nate’s whereabouts. “I would have done the same.”

“He doesn’t require blood most times unless he’s badly hurt,” Aba said then.

“I gave him some of mine, my blood, I mean, last night when he wasn’t healing. Of course, he wasn’t happy about it.” She focused within her, searching for a tug of his familiar vibe... A barely-there awareness coasted through her.

God, she hoped it was him. “Found something.” She dematerialized, following the sensation.

Moments later, she reformed in another barren plain with more mountainous terrain under a reddish purple sky. She walked the gravelly, cracked ground, bypassing jagged rocks, and scattered boulders. Hot winds enfolded her, burning her eyes and stealing her breath as she continued tracking

psychically, holding onto his too-faint vibration, her dread growing—

She tripped and went sprawling on her hands and knees alongside a prone, familiar figure lying near the boulder.

“Nate!” She crawled over to him.

He remained in his human form, thank the gods. But he appeared almost skeletal and bigger than usual. He lay slumped on his side, his single, huge, leathery wing twisted at an awkward angle. The side missing the appendage bled profusely. Several chitinous spikes, like serrated ridges, protruded along his spine, separating the four dull, lifeless nodes. But the last ruby symbiont pushed out and pulsed like a detonator.

Tears clogged her throat as she quickly examined his many grievous wounds. He wasn't self-healing. She held her hands over his injuries, letting her healing ability flow...

The slashes stopped bleeding—

Patches of black scales rippled over his abs, catching her attention. They crept up his bare chest. More scaly blotches appeared on the left side of his jaw and cheeks. Double horns protruded through his damp inky hair, behind the thick front ones. Another shorter pair emerged from his blackened, ridged brow. His face appeared gaunt, eyes sunken.

“He's stuck mid-shift,” Aba said hoarsely. “The symbiont is powering up, feeding—”

“Feeding? But there's no death or gore here.”

“It feeds on his very being. Hades! Forgive me, *cnati*.”

By all the cursed gods and Fates who seemed determined to fuck with them, she wasn't going to lose him to some hellish creature!

Blood pounding in her head, Ely picked up Nate's hand. His fingers, scaly black and gnarled with bony knuckles, tipped with dangerous, blade-like talons, were longer than what he usually sported. His deadly fangs dug not into his lower lip like she'd seen before, but into his chin.

“Nate?” She brushed back his sweat-drenched hair. “You have to fight this, you have to, my love. You’re so damn strong, don’t give up, not now, please!”

He remained still. Not even an eyelash flickered. Dread deepening, she pressed his scaly hands to her mouth, tears blurring her sight. Then she leaned down and kissed him, gently moving her lips over his contorted mouth and the frighteningly long fangs, hoping he could sense her... But his mouth remained unresponsive.

Fight, my love, please.

Harsh breaths sawed in and out of her lungs. Her tears fell onto his face. She swiped her eyes with the back of her hand and looked across at Aba. “We have to wake him up before he shifts—”

A low rumble broke the stillness, almost animalistic. His eyes snapped open, his irises a molten red, pupils shifting between circular and vertical. A smidgen of recognition flashed and disappeared.

“Nate?” she whispered, hope warring with fear.

His growls intensified. With a swipe of his hand, he shoved her away, and she landed on her ass, pain jarring up her spine. He shot to his feet, his single wing causing him to list to the side.

“Stay away from me—” A screech tore free. Guttural and petrifying.

He grabbed his head with his black-taloned fingers and tugged as if he would yank his skull free. More blood dripped down his face.

Aba reached for him. “Nate—”

“No!” He flung out his clawed hand, revealing more black scales creeping up his forearm.

“We have to get you away from here!” Aba yelled. “Azgor has his guards looking for you.”

Without a word, Nate waved his half-morphed claws but stumbled back, unable to balance himself. Ely grabbed him

before he fell.

“Don’t!” he snarled, baring his dangerous fangs at her. “Leave—”

“I’m not going anywhere without you!” Terror backed up her ragged voice. Gods, he was impossibly heavy.

His eerie red eyes swiveled to hers, cognition flickering in them again, and the anguish in there gutted her. “Go. Please,” he rasped, dragging himself away from her, his clawed feet raking up the dust. “I don’t want to hurt you, Ely mine.”

“Then don’t.”

“I can’t control this side of me anymore. You have to leave me, *laika*. Our life was never meant to be. Go, find another to give you the happiness you deserve.”

Hurt as he was, and in such a precarious state, he would still give her orders? A part of her was filled with relief, while another was strangled with fear.

“It’s the second time you’ve told me that,” she retorted. “Fine. After I’ve helped your stubborn ass, I’ll go find someone who will make me happy and give me loads of young. I’ll name one of them after you—”

A low growl rumbled in his chest. Tears blurred her eyes at the sound. Her Nate was still in there, fighting. It was all she wanted.

He stumbled away from her.

“Where are you going?” she asked, keeping her tone hard, the only thing which seemed to work with him.

“Where *it* wants to go, back to the Infernii Realm.”

“What?” She glanced at Aba, who seemed frozen, then back to Nate.

His tormented gaze came back to hers. “I can’t live this way any longer, *laika*.”

“But you’re giving in to it by going there!”

“It’s the only way it will stop tormenting me in here—” He stabbed a finger against his skull. “I cannot think. I have no peace. All I feel is...” He shook his head.

Agony? Dear goddess! Anguish daggered her chest at his suffering. “Then we will come with you.”

“No, I don’t know what this place is like.”

“Intolerably hot. Inhabited by the wraconis that feed on fear, blood, and death,” Aba whispered.

“You knew?” Nate’s tortured expression was one of betrayal. “And still you gave it to me?”

His features ashen, Aba shook his head. “No, I didn’t harvest this one. I have no idea how Azgor came to have it. I thought it was a Ys wyvern when I stole it from his private collection. Today, at the fight, I learned the truth of what your symbiont was when I saw your red-tipped wing, and knew it was why Azgor kept us bound to him.” He swallowed. “Nate, when I found you in that alley, I knew a symbiont was your only chance at life,” he again. “You were human. I wanted you stronger than these demons. But I didn’t know, didn’t realize the consequences—”

“Open the portal,” Nate cut him off.

His despair a dark cloud, Aba nodded, and lifted his hands. The air split, revealing a swirling blackness. Nate lurched into the opening, and the abyss swallowed him.

No! Ely leaped through the portal and into a blast of oppressive heat, dead sure she’d fallen into a hot, suffocating oven. The immense dry heat and sulfur saturating the land had her pressing her nose into her biceps. Sweat dripped down her face and back.

Sporadic orange glows flared, lighting up the place, revealing several furious volcanoes, spitting flames and dotting the desolate landscape. New cracks split open in the trembling ground, bleeding lava, joining the molten rivers flowing down the mountainside.

Shit. This place was a death trap!

Aba appeared at her side, jaw clenched, watching Nate as he continued forward, dragging his feet and massive, single wing over the heated granite ground toward a narrow crack in the soaring black cliffs some distance away. But the fractured fissures running along the granite rockface between the mountainous volcanoes Nate approached appeared to be closing.

“Aba, we can’t let Nate go through with whatever he plans!”

“I know,” he rasped. “I wish I knew what else to do. I could hold him down and remove the symbiont, but then he would die. If we don’t, we still lose him.”

No, she refused to accept that! “What about those other symbionts on him?”

Aba shook his head. “Dead. It’s been years, and none of them have ever awakened. I kept watch—”

Screeches echoed. Furious flapping stirred the dense air. Two, massive ashy-black wraconis, the size of a five-story building, appeared high above, beating their immensely long, leathery wings with the jagged, red-tinged spines throwing off even more flames. Her Gaian weapon tattooed on her biceps pulsed at the evil closing in on them.

“They would sense fresh meat—us—here,” Aba muttered, lips twisting.

The screams grew louder, almost annihilating her eardrums, and Ely winced, grateful they hadn’t noticed Nate yet.

Too damn bad if they wanted him. She’d never let that happen. *He is mine!*

She flexed her tingling fingers, threads of gray streaking beneath the pale skin on her hands. Her breaths escaping in harsh pants, she waited, ignoring the pulsing weapon inked on her biceps. The beasts came closer, their flapping wings sending a scorching gale force toward Aba and her, and she stumbled back a step. Grunting, she flung up her hands and snagged the Wraconis’ shadows reflected on the opposite

rockface, immobilizing them in their flight trajectory. Thunderous shrieks erupted.

“Go!” Aba yelled. “I’ll deal with them.”

Ely took off after Nate, ducking the dangerously thrashing wings with spikey ends, but a sharp spine caught her biceps. Shit. She gritted her teeth, ignoring the searing pain, and pushed forward, but the oppressive air slowed her down. Nate entered the narrowing crevice, and the rockface creaked, continuing to close around him—

No, no, no! Breathing in a huge gulp of hot, stinky air, she pressed harder, but it was like moving through molasses. The gap shut.

“Open, godsdammit!” She rammed her fists against the burning rockface. *You’re not fucking stopping me!* Her heart pounding inside her head, she stared up at the looming cliff.

Jaw hardening, she stepped back, shut her burning eyes, and lunged into the granite—

And stumbled into burning heat on the other side.

Searing orange-red flames brightened everything. She squinted, barely able to see in the immense heat. *Nate!*

Her heartbeats uncountable with terror, her breath trapped in her dry throat, Ely shuffled along the narrow ridge, the lava river moving sluggishly far below, praying she’d find him in time. She had a bad, bad feeling about this.

* * *

Nate lurched toward the flickering light, his mind, his body, a mass of seething agony, his sire’s words ringing in his head. *A wraconis.*

One of the deadliest demonic beasts that roamed the fiery depths of Hell. And he was morphing into one.

“Yesss,” the sibilant voice screeched inside his head, sending more shards of pain tearing through his skull. *“Now we’sss be one.”*

Nate didn't respond, just wanted the unending anguish to end. He pressed a hand against the rugged, searing rockface, then blinked at his black, scaly limb and long talons.

He exhaled. He was losing this battle. *No*, he refused to let this monster that had tormented him his entire life win. He stopped at the ledge, his single wing weighing him down. Far below, the slow-moving lava churned and spat its fiery bits of magma, beckoning him with promises of peace—

“Nate—*no!*” An anguished cry erupted. Arms came around him, pulling him back. Warm and heavenly, holding him so tight, causing more pain to explode from his many wounds. “Don't. I'll find a way to end this and help you.”

He knew that voice, one that brought him a brief moment of happiness in his endless darkness. His beautiful moonlight.

By the dark gods, despite his never-ending agony, he wanted to bury his face in her neck, breathe her in, seek comfort in her.

He didn't. Couldn't.

“It's too late for me, *laika*. This is where it ends. I won't let it win.” He slowly turned and grasped her face in his bloodied, taloned hands. Hell, he shouldn't touch something so pure.

But for one last time...

He pressed his mouth to hers, except his fangs got in the way. And her sob gutted him. “Don't cry, *laika*. I'm sorry I failed you. We were doomed right from the start, weren't we?”

“No, dammit! It's not the end for us!” She grabbed his thick, scaly wrists. “I won't let it be—”

He gently wiped her cheek with his clawed thumb. “From the moment I saw you in the alley, flaying me with your death glare, I knew I wanted you—”

No! The screech in his head amplified in rage. *Kiill her. We don't needsss her!*

“But I fell in love with you when you came back with your salves and potion to heal me.” At the anguish in her eyes, the

pain in his chest imploded, crushing his heart into billions of fragments. It hurt so fucking much, knowing he would never be with her again.

“My only sorrow is I will never grow old with you, never have the chance to wake up in your arms again. But death is just another journey, I hear. And one of peace, I hope. Spare a little thought now and again for the demon who loved you, my beautiful angel—”

“No, damn you!” She smacked his chest, but he barely felt the hit, agony twisting his inside as if his bones were stretched to their limits.

Her tears fell like rain, leaving wet tracks on her grimy face. “I love your stubborn ass, too, and I’m not letting you die out here! We’ll find a way out of this. The Guardians will aid us. They were gods in a previous life. Please, please come back with me.”

He shook his head. “I cannot cross into the mortal world in this form. I am...evolving. There’s no going back for me, my...Ely. I cannot become this monster, trapped forever in this...form. I won’t.”

The beast within chuckled, the sound like shattering glass.
Kiill her!

A groan of pure anguish escaped him. His bones cracked, reforming, spasms of blinding pain splintering through him. He grabbed his head, his wrists scraping the spikes shooting out of his brow.

Kiiill! the beast shrieked. *Needsss blood.*

His morphed hand lashed out as if of its own accord, missing her neck by millimeters, hitting flesh lower on her body. Ely stumbled a step, gasping in pain.

“No...no!” Nate reared back in horror at the blood seeping from the gouges along her clavicle and chest. Then there was no more ground.

And he was falling...

Falling through the thick, oppressive sulfuric air, down the ravine, toward the bubbling, torpid magma far below, Ely's anguished cry echoing in his ears. "*Nate, noooo!*"

He flashed or tried to, her torment tugging at him, but nothing worked. His mind, his entire being slipping beyond unadulterated agony as if all his cells were dissolving, scattering into infinite fragments in this godsforsaken place.

Forgive me, my heart.

He was so tired, even breathing hurt...then he let it all go.

It's better this way. The creature would consume him soon enough. It was the nature of this beast, and it would kill his love. A truth it had shown. And that, he couldn't bear.

Better his own death than hers.

The heat intensified, searing his skin—stealing his breath. He shut his eyes.

I'm so sorry, my love...

I wish I'd found you sooner...loved you longer.

But the Fates were never on our side.

CHAPTER 30



“*NATE!*” Ely screamed as he tripped and fell over the ridge. Ignoring the pain searing her chest from Nate’s—no, the damn beast’s blow—she pushed through the heavy air to the ledge. Without thought, she jumped in after him, wave after wave of intense heat scorching her skin as she fell.

No, no! He was closing in too fast to the flaming lava river, his single wing dangling uselessly.

Teeth clenched, she propelled herself faster, letting her molecules take on her shadowy form so the flames spitting upwards didn’t incinerate her. She hoped her new abilities would work the way she needed. If they didn’t... Then she would die with him.

Her body the consistency of air, she dove under Nate, cocooning him with her smokey-gray alto-ego, and prayed it held.

He opened his eyes, his tender smile a macabre twist of lips under fangs. “I see you, my shadowy angel. Let me go, *laika.*”

Never! Adrenaline hiking, she thrust up again. Shit, even in her shadowy form, it was an effort to push up through the oppressive heat, and Nate wasn’t a lightweight. But she didn’t let go of him. Tightening the solid bands in her shadowy form, she strained upward, heat licking through her...

And in what felt like hours later, she reached the ledge.

Panting hard, Ely reformed and stumbled, the weight of her mate with his remaining wing dragging her to her knees. A

bloodied Aba waited there, clothes torn, a gash bleeding profusely on his abs.

He hurried forward. “Okay?”

She nodded, her throat too dry to respond. He lifted Nate from her and sprinted through a hole in the rockface where he’d broken through, dodging the piles of newly fallen rocks and boulders scattered on the ground.

Chest heaving, Ely jerked up and lurched after them, scrambled over the debris, through the hole, and out of the mountain. In the desolate place lit by the flaring volcanoes, two massive wraconis lay dead, heads missing. More screeches echoed, and several of the creatures dove toward them. Shit!

Aba opened a portal and stepped through with Nate in his arms. Ely leaped through the gateway, landing back in Ys. Armed guards swarmed the area as the portal hissed shut behind her, and her mystical Gaian weapon inked on her biceps pulsed like crazy, warning of the danger surrounding her. Several pivoted. Swords pointed at them.

Dammit! Could they not catch a freaking break?

Teeth gnashing, Gaian weapon summoned and split them into twin glaives, Ely faced the guards. She didn’t come this far to lose the man she loved to these assholes. Aba set an agitated Nate down behind them, against a rock, and he moved to her side, his own sword taking form in his hand. “We have no quarrel with you.”

“Just with Lord Azgor,” the leader grunted.

Some of the guards eyed her like she was easy pickings. “She’s mine,” Aba snarled. “Touch her, and I will kill you.”

Damn this society that treated females as possessions and unclaimed females as fair game.

The guards attacked.

Aba’s eyes glittered red in anger, his features morphing into his demonic form. Horns jutted from his brow and curled back over his head, his skin gone leathery and dark. He dove

into them, weapon swinging. Power flashed out from him, and he sent the demon guards scattering.

Ely swung her deadly glaives, slicing her foe across the chest and ramming another in his belly. A guttural snarl erupted. He flung out a hellish red bolt at her.

She ducked. Damn cur!

Jaw clenched, she spun, her glaive flying and decapitating him. She fought hard and swift, her only thoughts were to kill these vermin as fast as possible and get Nate out of there. Weapons clashed, the clang echoing across the arid lands of Ys—

A power blast struck her in the back, and she flew forward, crashing into a stalagmite. She grunted, unable to breathe, dead sure someone had rammed their fists into her back and torn out her lungs.

A roar ripped free behind her. She pivoted and gaped as Nate leaped up from where they'd left him against the rock and rammed into the guards like a wrecking ball, his wing throwing him off balance. He twisted around.

With a shriek like those wraconis emitted, he lunged for her, his half-morphed face twisted into a snarl. He knocked her away with a swipe of his hand. Her weapons flew from her sweat-drenched fingers, and she went careening, landing on her back some distance away from the fight. Her bones jarred, terror freezing her as Nate, in his half-beast form, turned. He snarled and lumbered toward her—

Then dove straight past and into the demon who would have decapitated her with his enormous sword. Nate's hands flashed, the sounds of tearing flesh echoing above the ruckus. Severed limbs flew as he decimated the demon.

Her heart thundering in her ears, Ely scrambled to her feet and summoned her fallen glaives. The cacophony grew.

Gods, so many of them!

They circled Nate as he lurched about, unable to stay upright. He was weakening. He wouldn't survive this. No dammit!

Breathing hard, she dismissed her weapons. Hands upraised, and with her mind, she used the demons' own shadows, trapping them in place. But more appeared, like roaches crawling out of a hole. Shit. Even if they opened a portal and ran, some of these vermin would follow. They didn't have the time to finish this fight.

With everything in her, she beckoned the shadows again, and there was plenty in this place, with its massive blood moon casting an opaque, reddish glow everywhere.

She swung her hands upward and clenched them as if in prayer, and every shadow, from the looming cliffs to the stalagmites and boulders, detached and shot forward, slithering around the horde like monstrous tentacles. They skewered and dragged the demons back into the shadows. Screeches grew, neon-red eyes flashing in rage. More guards appeared, weaving through the shadows, their zinging powers hitting the sudden forcefield surrounding her and Aba. One, Aba must have thrown up.

Growling, Ely worked the shadows, impaling them.

"Never underestimate the power of a woman in the throes of losing her man!" she snarled and flung out her hands. Power surged out of her like a tsunami—

Ely tripped back, gaping in shock at the empty, barren land before her.

No demon horde surrounded them. They'd all disappeared.

"That's some ability," Aba rasped from behind her.

A pained grunt echoed, yanking at her heartstrings, and she pivoted. Nate stumbled, pulling out a dagger embedded in his side. His fingers had fused, forming three deadly talons.

"Nate!" She sprinted to him.

"*No!*" He flashed out his clawed hand, stopping her dead. Eyes gone red, slit pupils visible. Black scales crept up his biceps, covering more of his chest. Serrated spikes pushed out of his hard, chitinous brow. "*I'ssss kill you,*" he garbled, the sibilant hiss chilling her to the bone. This wasn't her Nate!

A grating groan rumbled free. He clawed at his head and face, leaving bloody streaks where his skin remained.

“Nate, fight it!” she begged. “You have to retain control!”

Another shake of his head. “The change...*iss*...here. You have to...*hafta killll* me.”

“What?” she breathed. “I won’t kill you! I can’t!”

Tormented red eyes lifted to hers in the twilight day, his suffering crushing her.

“It will *killll* you...and him.” He lifted a clawed hand to Aba. “I beg you, *releassse* me from this agony, *lai-laiiika*.”

“Aba, what do I do?” she implored.

“The symbiont,” he choked out. “It’s the only way. I don’t understand why this change is happening so fast.”

“And then after?” she demanded. “How long will he have?”

“An hour, maybe...”

Swallowing hard, pain intensifying at just how little time there was, she took a step closer. Nate snarled, spurts of fire shooting out of his flattening, almost snout-shaped nose. Heat encased her, and then he lumbered forward in attack mode.

Her heart fragmenting, Ely mentally called on the shadows once more. *Trap him*. They swept over the cracked, heat-baked ground in a wave as Nate neared her, and netted him like gray fog.

He snarled, the agonized raucous sounds of an animal in torment, splitting her in two. The shadows locked him down, cutting off the flames. His snarls grew into deafening roars as he fought her restraints. He tripped, toppling down like a felled redwood, the huge, single wing twisting under him.

Anguish cramped her chest. *Dear goddess, please, give me the strength to do this.*

She dashed over and crouched at his side. His snarls continued as he fought harder against the invisible restraints, spurts of fire hitting the invisible barrier around him, singeing

his skin and hair. She heaved and grunted, trying to turn him over. Aba came around and pushed Nate's massive form onto his side.

There, amidst the bony protrusions poking out on the middle of his spine, Ely found the pulsing red, soul-destroyer symbiont fused in the spine node. She summoned her dagger. Hands shaking, mouth pressed in a trembling line, she pushed the tip of the obsidian blade into his spine. A guttural shriek erupted from him.

Tears flooded her eyes. "I'm so sorry, my love. I'm so sorry!" She pushed deeper, twisted it under, and lifted out the gleaming, reddish-black, pulsing symbiont. Blood flowed. Long ligaments protruded and swayed from the oval-shaped symbiont, then it softened to a bloodied, wormy thing. It curled around her hand, trying to get into her skin now, its malevolence abrading her psyche like rusty, serrated blades. But couldn't. Her Guardian oath bound her to the ancient goddess, a bond more powerful than this wretched parasite could ever manage.

Nate groaned, his half-changed body stiffening, then he slumped face down and lay deadly still.

"*Nate!*" She didn't dare go closer in case the symbiont leaped from her palm back into him.

"I'll take that."

At the strange voice, Ely jerked upright, putting distance between the newcomer and herself, keeping the malevolent symbiont away from him.

"Pangur?" Aba shot to his feet, seeming to know the burly, black-haired demon. "You cannot! It's not safe."

"Not safe? I'm no weakling." He laughed, cutting Nate's body a dark look. "Give me the symbiont, female," he ordered, pale eyes pinned on her.

Maybe she should hand it over and let the darn thing kill him instead.

A gust of hot wind swept past, and Aba grabbed the writhing worm from her. A flame shot out of his palm,

incinerating it.

“No!” the demon roared, throwing himself at Aba as the symbiont turned to ash, but Aba side-stepped him. Roaring, Pangur pivoted and flashed across. Before Ely could register what he would do, he grabbed Nate’s remaining wing, and yanked—the sound of bones breaking and flesh-tearing echoed as he ripped off the appendage. “He had more. Where are they?”

“Get away from him, you bastard!” Rage exploding like a living entity, Ely summoned the shadows and flung out her hands, the smoky projectiles ramming into Pangur like a hail of arrows, sending him flying back.

With a skreisch, Aba dove for the demon. “You *fragmen stercore!*”

“Nate!” She rushed over, falling to her knees. Her eyes fixed on the new, gaping lesion on his back. He remained motionless. How would he ever survive these injuries and blood loss?

The sounds of flesh hitting flesh, grunts and snarls surrounded her as she pressed her palms to the long, open tear. Using her depleting healing powers, she tried to seal the wound. The gush slowed but didn’t stop, her own abilities weakening, exhausted from use. *Goddess, please!*

“Why?” Aba’s snarl reached her.

“Because *he* was always the fucking favored one, by you, Azgor, now her—*everyone!* I tried to flush him out by sending a horde after *you*, but they failed. The symbiont would have made *me*—an actual demon—someone to be feared! Instead of that pathetic human upstart you found and saved, and now a grotesque beast who can’t even shift!”

If Nate weren’t in such a precarious state, she’d carve this Pangur twit from groin to throat and strangle him with his innards!

Ely hastily tore off a wide strip from the bottom of her tank top, then stretched and wrapped it around his new

wounds. His breathing slowed, became labored, his life force fading. Shit, they didn't have an hour.

"Nate, hold on for me, please, my love," she begged, knotting the fabric.

"*Cnati!*" Aba fell to his knees, brushing back Nate's singed hair with blood-soaked hands. "Hold on, you hear? I won't lose you after everything—"

"Not so fast," a cold voice said. "He belongs to me."

"*No!*" Ely leaped up, keeping Nate behind her. "He doesn't!" she yelled, so fucking tired of this lot.

Then she saw who it was.

Azgor, with his two-headed hellhound. And a dozen guards behind him.

Dark power emitted from him, curling around Ely like millions of dagger pricks, but not by a blink did she show her uneasiness. His eyes narrowed as if trying to place what she was.

"Leave him alone!" Aba snapped, undaunted by the powerful demon. He stalked to the intimidatingly dangerous male.

Her feet nailed to the surface, Ely remained dead still, not daring to take another breath to draw closer attention, but ready to banish this lot to wherever the others had disappeared to.

"The wraconis is no more. It's dead. The symbiont's dead. The one you want for Derrodus' death is there—" Aba stabbed a finger to his left, at Pangur's unconscious form on the ground, several yards away from them.

"Enough!" Azgor snapped, his form growing taller and larger. "There were witnesses to Natek's threat."

Goddess, she'd had it with these damn posturing demons! Ely stormed back to Nate. She wasn't leaving her mate open for this ass to make off with. Sure, they might try to kill her, but they'd find it freaking hard to accomplish.

Azgor shot up a hand, and Aba rose off the ground.

Shit! Ely dropped in a protective crouch next to Nate, fingers clenching as her powers roiled.

“By Hades, Azgor,” Aba growled, sounding like he’d had enough of these clashes with this cold demon. “Pangur set this all up. He wanted the symbiont Natek had, so he killed Derrodus, knowing Natek would take the fall, and *he* could get the symbiont. He confessed it all. Go ahead, let me take the *hascu’ri*—the truth test—if you think it’s all lies. *My* mistake was saving Pangur all those centuries ago. You want your revenge?” he spat. “Then kill *me*. But Natek is free of this servitude you trapped him into.”

Aba hung above the cracked, arid ground, heat shimmering around them, waiting for the death blow.

Nothing showed on Azgor’s remote features, but red flowed in his dark eyes, then he flung out a hand, and Aba hit the gravelly ground in a hard skid, raising dust.

“Why would I kill you? I want you to live with the knowledge that Maita is dead,” Azgor said coldly. “Natek is useless to me and would die soon enough. As of now, *your* servitude reverts to me. I still own half *your* soul, Aamon.”

“Servitude?” Aba reiterated, rising to his feet, tone flat, and ignoring the taunt about Maita. “Because I used your symbiont to save my son?” He stalked closer.

Azgor folded his arms over the charcoal leather doublet he wore, no give in his rigid features. The hellhound growled. “I don’t have *my* symbiont, do I? And I lost my prize. My *Sicari* would have been my perfect creation, a hybrid wraconis shifter.”

A shifter?

It was all about fucking possessions with this insufferable cur! Ely wanted to ram her obsidian dagger through him. Heck, just a tiny damn cut, then he could rot to death. But Azgor was an ancient demon, and not easy to kill. For all she knew, her dagger would rebound and hit her instead.

“Here!” Aba pulled out two small vials from his pants pocket. “The heart’s blood of two wraconis.” He tossed the ampoules to Azgor, who caught them faster than she could track.

Azgor’s eyes flared red...in avaricious excitement? She couldn’t be sure since the glint disappeared as fast as it appeared. He lifted his head, his expression still molded in stone, and clicked his fingers. A small metal box appeared in his hand. He tossed it over. Aba grasped it and slipped it into his pocket.

By Gaia, she hoped it was the return of Aba’s soul.

“Be careful who you give those to,” Aba warned. “They are not the kind of symbionts you can command.”

“I don’t need advice from a minion.” Azgor glanced at the spot where Pangur had been, now empty. “Find Pangur,” he ordered.

He and his hellhound vanished into the dense air without even a smidgen of black smoke in his wake. His guards departed in an eddy of dust.

Aba hurriedly opened a portal, picked up an unconscious Nate, and stepped through the swirling gateway. Ely snatched her dagger from the ground, shoved it in the back of her jacket tied around her waist, and leaped through the gateway, and back into the garage workshop. The portal hissed shut.

Her gaze latched onto Nate. He lay so pale and gaunt in his sire’s arms, fading fast from this life, and her lips trembled as she fought to keep her emotions breaking free, keep the tears from falling. “Aba, *we* can’t save him.” She met his anguish stare. “But one of my Guardian brethren can.”

“Then let’s go.”

Ely touched Aba’s biceps and dematerialized the three of them back to the castle. No time to call and ask for permission. Later, she’d deal with the repercussions.

CHAPTER 31



ELY REFORMED them on the castle's front portico, the freezing night air surrounding them.

"He's slipping!" Aba dropped to his knees, gently laying Nate's limp body on the icy tiled floor and applying pressure to Nate's chest. "Barely a heartbeat. Breathe for him, Ely!"

Her heart in her mouth, Ely cupped Nate's badly bruised and swollen face—the snout still visible, his fangs and teeth more serrated than usual—and pressed her mouth to his. *Feel me here with you, my love. You cannot leave me, not when I finally found you!*

"Blood, Ely," Aba snapped, tone frantic.

Ely jumped. She grabbed her dagger from her jacket, slit her wrist, dropped the blade, and pressed the seeping lesion to his unresponsive lips.

And prayed her immortal plasma would help.

"Come on, my love, you have to take this." She licked his bloodied lips and breathed into his mouth again, then pressed her wrist against his lips. "Come on, Nate!"

"Ely?"

Her head jerked up. A tall figure with pale hair appeared in front of her, followed by another dark-haired male, both looking like they shoveled coal amidst a battlefield, soot and blood streaking their faces and arms.

She blinked her wet eyes. "Týr? Nik?"

“You’re damn hard to catch up to. We just got back from Ys,” Týr said, his tone hard. “Michael sent us after you...” His attention shifted to Aba, and settled on Nate. “What the hell —”

“Why is Nate in that semi-shifted form?” Nik cut him off, hunkering at her side. “What happened?”

“Save him, please!” she begged Nik. “Later, I’ll explain.”

“Ely, he’s a demon shifter,” Týr said, tone like granite. “The worst kind—a wyvern from what I’ve heard *down under*—the kind that can’t be allowed on this realm.”

“He isn’t! Not anymore! It’s why I brought him here, hoping someone can save him. Please, please, help me. He’s dying...” Tears she struggled to keep at bay slipped free.

“Hell.” Nik put his hand on her back. “You know I don’t have that ability.”

Týr just stared at Nate’s still distorted face, then growled, “I kill, Ely. Not save.”

She knew that. And Aethan, the only one who could, was in another realm.

More tears fell as Aba continued pumping Nate’s chest, trying to keep his heart beating. She brushed back what was left of Nate’s hair, chunks of it having been burned away by lava.

“I can’t lose him, Aba,” she whispered. “I just can’t.”

“I know, child. I don’t want that, either,” he said, his anguish making him appear as if he’d aged decades. “We should go back to the garage. Better he’s in a place that is home and where he is loved in his last moments.” He shot dark glares at the warriors.

The front door flew open. Kira and Shadow stood there, eyes wide.

“Nik? *Nate!*” Shadow sprinted to them and dropped to her knees, grasping his other scaly, clawed hand. “Oh, Christ! His face, his hands—what happened?”

“I dug out his symbiont to save him from the beast’s control,” Ely choked out. “But without it, he’s dying...”

“What?” Shadow lifted panic-stricken eyes to her.

Ely shook her head, refusing to accept it. “I won’t let him die. I’ll go back to Empyrea, find someone—”

Power flowed over her, and all heads snapped up as Lore—Echo’s angelic tutor—appeared, his sunset wings closed against his back, his flamed-hued hair like a halo.

He was her last hope.

“Lore, please, please help him. You’re a heavenly angel.”

His calm gaze settled on Nate’s gaunt and bloodied body, bits of his burned hair sticking to his scorched bleeding face. “It is not my place to heal, and especially not those who are our natural foe.”

“Why are you here, then? To see him die?” she snarled.

The angel glanced at her. “I was simply curious at the unnatural commotion in this place.”

“Maybe Aethan can help?” Kira cut Lore a furious glare as she knelt near Shadow.

Hope sprung. “He’s back?” she rasped.

“I don’t think he’s in any shape to be of help,” Týr grunted.

“It’s been two days since their return from the fae realm, Týr,” Kira informed him, her eyebrows tipping in a V.

The gods knew Ely was aware of how dangerous this time could be for his mate, as Echo lay in a healing sleep after mending a supernatural rent between realms—one that depleted her natural life force. She’d seen it happen. *But what about my mate?* Ely wanted to yell. Instead, she pressed Nate’s scaly hand to her heart. Head lowered, she shut her tear-filled eyes.

Aethan, please, I beg of you, help me, she telepathed him.

No response.

Goddess, why would no one help them? More tears slipped free as hope slid further and further away from her...

Voices murmured. Feet shuffled.

“What’s wrong, Ely?”

At that quiet voice, her head snapped up, and she met Aethan’s gunmetal-gray eyes. Somewhere in the back of her mind, it registered he appeared as if he’d been through hell, too.

She smoothed back Nate’s singed hair, and some charred parts broke off. “He...he’s dying.”

Aethan studied her for a silent second. Nik rose, and Aethan hunkered down at her side, his attention on Nate’s gaunt features, the scaly snout still visible. “Your mate?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “He is badly wounded. I’m not sure if what I do will bring him back—”

“No.” She dashed her wet face with her fist. “Don’t say that.”

He exhaled deeply. “Let him go. This will hurt you.”

“I’m not leaving him alone to face this.”

“She’s what keeps him here,” Aba said, then he added at Aethan’s frown, “I’m Nate’s sire. And Shadow’s.”

Aethan inclined his head and raked back his multi-hued blue hair, a tic working his jaw. Arms braced on his leather-clad thighs, he waited.

“Why aren’t you doing anything?” she demanded, barely hearing Nate’s heartbeat any longer.

“I need true death for this to work.”

“What—?”

A sharp inhale broke through her anguish. It seemed to come from the depths of a soul as if the person was starving for oxygen or taking their last breath.

“Nate, no!” she cried. “Don’t leave me!”

A soft breeze coasted over her.

And then his eyelids flickered open, revealing dull, pain-drenched, red-hued eyes.

“Ely?” he croaked, the word barely audible. “*Ma’laika?*”

She blinked in shock, blood thundering to her head. He had awakened? A smile trembled. She could barely see him through her tears. “Aye, it’s me.”

“Don’t cry...” He reached up, but his arm fell again as if it were too heavy. “I’m not worthy.”

Ely grasped his icy hand with its deadly talons, bringing them to her cheek. A sob strangled in her throat. “You are, and so much, *me’morae*.”

She thanked every god in the universe and the billion stars gazing down at them that he still breathed. And he recognized her.

He grimaced. Then his large, bony frame stiffened, and he groaned, his red-streaked eyes rolling back. A harsh, rattled breath escaped, and his eyelids shut. He passed out again, and the air around him swirled like snow in a storm.

“Wh-what’s happening?” she croaked, her gaze rushing around. Her Guardian brothers watched, seeming as startled as she was.

“I’m not sure.” Aba reached through the air storming around Nate and pressed a palm to his bare, tattooed chest. “His heart beats, but he’s deathly cold. We have to take him indoors, keep him warm.”

Silence.

They would leave Nate here on the portico because he’s a demon? “Please, don’t all agree at once,” she snapped.

“He’s my brother, we can’t leave him outside!” Shadow protested, swiping her wet cheeks.

“Never mind.” Ely put her hand on Aba, keeping the other on Nate.

Before she could dematerialize them, Týr growled, “Wait. But only while we sort this out, Ely. You know this is against the rules.”

Hell, she’d broken so many, she’d deal with it when she came to that bridge.

“I’ve lowered the wards,” Hedori said.

Then shocking her, Týr moved forward, picked up her gaunt mate, and stalked to the opening front door.

Ely leaped up and hurried after him into the warm foyer.

“Yo. Something’s happening to him.” Týr hastily set Nate down on the massive Aubusson rug near the grand staircase and hunkered down next to him.

Ely fell to her knees at his side. She reached out to touch Nate, and it felt like her hand was moving through molasses, the white glow surrounding him thickening the air.

Aba crouched next to her, turned Nate onto his side, and lifted the fabric she’d tied around the wounds where his missing wings had been.

Ely gaped. The deep cavities were healing faster now, and the dull oval stone at the top of his spine flickered in a dim yellow glow, streaked with red—the color reflecting in the three smaller ones. The bleeding, empty node where the wraconis symbiont had been had healed, too.

“Is it awakening?” Ely asked, terror and hope warring with each other. Hope that he would live, and terror that those symbionts were from the same beast he’d once housed. “Please, please tell me it’s not from the same creature.”

Gods, she didn’t ever want to see that monster again!

“No, it’s not from the beast you destroyed...” Aba’s brow furrowed at the flickering symbionts. “I gave him my blood first after he was shot and needed an infusion, but mine, like most beings’ plasma, don’t form symbionts,” he said, frowning. “The male wyvern ones tend to, not that I knew it wasn’t that creature’s blood at the time, and the wraconis do as well—”

“What do you mean *wraconis*?” Týr demanded.

“They are similar to wyverns but bigger, stronger,” Aba said. Ely remained silent, grateful Aba had left out just how perilous and malevolent they were. “Anyway,” he continued. “It took hold faster and brought him back, but the others faded, leaving behind the dull stones.” He gently touched the smaller ones and shook his head in disbelief. “I thought they died,” he murmured almost to himself.

Apparently not. For which Ely was eternally grateful. But the red streaks there worried her. *Goddess, please, please don't let the wraconis' blood revive.*

A door opened and shut, sending a waft of icy air through the foyer. Pounding footsteps echoed.

“Ely?” a voice roared.

Her friends parted.

Her brother barreled toward her like the warriors of old, minus weapons, determined to save her.

“Michael just informed me you were back. Dammit, Ely! You can't just vanish without a word—” Reynner hauled her up, his terrified stare rushing over her, studying the visible bruises on her face and arms and the bloodied slashes on her biceps and chest. Since she'd been healing Nate, her self-healing had slowed considerably.

“Shit! You're hurt and bleeding! Why aren't you healing?” he demanded, then picked up her dark, much shorter strands. She hadn't realized so much of her hair had burned off. “Your hair...”

“I'm okay, I'm okay.” She wiped her wet cheek with the back of her hand. “It'll grow back—”

“Ely, look, look!” Shadow called out from where she sat next to Nate's head with Nik hunkered at her side.

Ely dropped to her knees and gaped as Nate's wounds started knitting closed, and his body transformed. His forehead smoothed back to his own beautiful bronze skin, his burned hair restored back to his luxurious, silky mane—and the fangs,

talons, and snout-like nose receded, revealing his gorgeous visage once more. But while the miracle occurred, he still remained skeletal. She placed her palm on his bloodied, scale-free, tattooed chest, his heart beating far too slowly. Not that it wasn't the norm with immortals—and he was one, since he'd died as a child from the bullet and was reborn again—but the beats felt off. “Why is his heartbeat so sluggish?”

“He needs to feed the symbionts,” Aba said, watching Nate.

“Blood?”

“I don't know. But he will, once he awakens.”

“He's not going anywhere near her,” Reynner snapped.

Ely's gaze shot to him. “Nate is *my* mate. I will do whatever it takes for him to survive.” She held her brother's hard stare with her own inflexible one. “You aren't going to stop me. If it were Eve—”

“Don't bring my mate into this,” he growled.

“Oh, right...” Disappointment fisted her heart like a punch to her chest. Her beloved brother did not understand. “Because I'm only his consort, not a soul-joined mate, so it makes our love less in your eyes.”

“Godsdammit, Ely!” He crouched at her side, scowling. “You're my sister, I don't want you hurt. And he—”

“He's what? A demon and can't be trusted, is that it?” She glared at him. “He would never hurt me. He's shown me this over and over again. He would rather kill himself first! And he tried!” Her eyes swim with tears.

She swiped them away with the back of her hand. “I've waited eons for someone like him who'd awaken my heart and want me for who *I* am, not because of who our parents are! I'm tired of being the little sister and daughter living my life to other people's standards and demands. I love him, and if you can't accept that, then—”

A low groan reached her, fisting her heart, hauling her attention back to Nate. Lips pressed in a tight line, she put the

demands of others out of her mind, concentrating on Nate.

Agony twisted his features at whatever the symbionts were doing to him. She smoothed back his sweat-drenched hair, helplessness taking hold of her. “Was it like this the first time?” she asked Aba.

“He was a babe back then, so I managed to keep him under as he healed, the same way he did with Shadow when her body had to accept the symbionts.”

Ely met Shadow’s watery eyes. “I don’t remember any of it. I only knew I woke up with an insatiable hunger for...well, you know.”

For the dark energy from a demon’s soul.

“You have me now, *agápi*,” Nik said, drawing Shadow up and into his arms.

Nik was a magnet for the souls of demons he killed, a curse left over from his incarceration in Tartarus eons ago, and he aided her by giving her those souls. But Nate had needed something worse, *fear*, which briefly satiated the wraconis. *Death* was what it truly wanted.

Ely blew out an exhausted breath, needing to get to Nate a safe and quieter place.

Was the boathouse still hers?

She clasped Nate’s still scaly hand and looked up, only then realizing everyone was there—Jenna, Shae, Darci, and even Bob, the cat, who sat a short distance away, watching everything with unblinking amber eyes like a small mountain lion.

Then she finally met Hedori’s quiet orange-green eyes, dark with sympathy and understanding. He inclined his head as if he understood. “It is yours to do with as you like.”

“Thank you.” She exhaled in gratitude. “Aba, let’s go.”

Reynner frowned. “Ely, wait—”

“I’m not running off,” she muttered, still mad at him. “We need a break. It’s been a long couple of days. And I want Nate

in a *bed* while he recovers, and not on the darn castle floor.”

She dematerialized Nate, Aba, and herself to the boathouse, praying they wouldn't follow.

CHAPTER 32



ELY APPROACHED the quiet boathouse as the moon slipped past the dark clouds, casting a muted silver hue over the gently undulating ocean and snow-patched shores. She coasted over the boathouse's deck, and the mystical wards glimmered.

Mentally, she undid the protection spells, and they shimmered and fell silent. She willed the door open and then shut, reforming in the bedroom, and settled Nate on the massive bed that wasn't there previously. *Thank you, Hedori.*

Aba pulled the throw from the bottom of the bed and covered him. Ely found more blankets in the closet and added those. She lowered to her knees at his side and put her palm on his chest.

His heart beat slowly but steadily now, and she sighed in gratitude.

Whatever his needs were to feed his symbiont, they would find a way to work through it. His chest rose and fell, then his jaw clenched, revealing his internal struggle for control even in his healing sleep.

"Nate, calm down. It will be all right now. Let yourself heal. I want you at full strength because I have a lot to say to you once you're on your feet," she threatened. "Telling me to find someone else. As if."

Ely could sense Aba's amusement. She smoothed the blankets over Nate's chest, then lifted her gaze. "So, Aamon, huh?" she asked, remembering what Azgor had called him.

“Not something us old demons want anyone to know. Names give power to those who do. Aamon is just part of an ancient title.” He fingered one of the many slashes on his bloodied shirt.

“I know...” *Wait, what?* “A title?”

“Aye. After the loss of my family eons ago, it no longer held much interest to me. Azgor, as the head, rules over everything.” Sorrow darkened his brown eyes as he glanced back at Nate.

“Wait, wait, back up. Azgor rules? What do you mean?”

“He’s my...sibling. It’s probably why he didn’t kill me when I stole that symbiotic blood, but punished me instead. He knew I hated a violent life and made sure I had one, anyway. But my son lived, and it was the only thing that mattered.”

So she’d learned. “And Maita?” Ely asked.

Anguish flashed briefly. “My consort. She was a gentle soul who didn’t belong in the darkness of Ys and its violence. It’s one of the reasons she fell for me, and not Azgor, though he went after her, too. While I was away on the job, she and our young were killed by my enemies—”

“Did Azgor not protect them?” Ely asked, horrified.

His expression hardened. “He cared little once Maita and I mated, cut our filial connection, so no. But he made me stay on as his enforcer. After my loss, my life became an eternal wasteland, and I didn’t care what I did.” His attention settled back on Nate and gentled. “Then millennia later, I found him. He filled that emptiness.”

“I’m so sorry. Does Nate know about you and Azgor?”

Those dark eyes lifted to hers. “Aye. It’s not something we speak of since Azgor didn’t treat me any different from any other minion bound to him, except for not killing me. Once I had Nate, I decided to live on the earthly realm. I didn’t want him to lose his humanity, but he did anyway because of me—because of the symbiont.” His throat worked. He turned and made his way to the floor-to-ceiling window, stopping near the

small coffee table and the navy sectional. He slid his hands into his pants pockets, staring outside.

She didn't know how to comfort him but tried anyway. They all made mistakes. "You saved him, Aba. And Nate is much stronger than we gave him credit for. After what we saw in that fiery volcano in the Infernii Realm, and then later—as hurt as he was—he could have just let go of his formidable control, and his beast would have killed us."

"Yes, he has an indomitable will."

"See? He still retained some of his humanity. Aba—"

"It means father in my world," he said softly, glancing back at her.

"Oh...I'm sorry. Should I call you Aamon?"

He smiled. "You are mate and consort to my son, so yes, I'd like it if you'd continue to call me Aba."

Voices drifted to them, distracting her.

Drat. They'd followed her. At least they hadn't stormed into her new home.

Soft footsteps sounded inside the apartment. She picked up on Kira's sparkling essence, then her friend's steps faded. The others waited outside.

"I'll stay with him," Aba said, returning to the bed. "They are your family. They care about you."

What she longed for was a shower and a moment to get her breath back while Nate healed.

"You have a much bigger heart," she muttered, still feeling a little betrayed and frustrated.

Ely scrubbed her grimy, soot-covered hands over her cheeks, rose, and crossed to the bedroom door. Then she stopped, her gaze rushing around the room, realizing only then that Hedoru had not only replaced the bed but had redecorated the place while she'd been gone.

It wasn't anything like the castle with its priceless paintings and luxurious décor that was, in a way, far too

reminiscent of her old home in Ademéras. The enormous new bed was an improvement over the futon, though, and the new corner sectional overlooked the ocean.

She left the bedroom. In the galley-sized kitchen, the smell of food permeated the air. The isle separating the open plan living room and serving as a two-seater dining spot now sported a large wicker basket.

Her stomach pinched, hunger finally making itself known. But it seemed she had to reassure everyone she still breathed, then hoped they left, that is, if Michael didn't turn up to throw her off the island first.

Back straight, keeping her expression even, she crossed the living room. Her painting spot remained in the corner with her covered easel and stacks of canvases. Now the once empty room sported navy suede couches and a carved wooden coffee table facing the tinted glass wall, through which she could see the entire length of the spacious deck overlooking the sea. A deck currently occupied with her overprotective visitors.

Ely stepped out into the chilly air. The moon hid behind the clouds but casted a muted light over everything. With her adrenaline almost flatlining, heat zinged through her once more. She blew out a tired breath, hoping the coolness would help as she faced everyone.

No, not everyone had gate-crashed the boathouse. Only Kira and Shadow were there, along with their mates. And her brother.

Her friends smiled in support.

Reynner leaned against the wooden railing, his pale hair loosened from its tether, looking like he raked through it several times. He straightened the moment he saw her and strode over.

“I'm sorry, Ely. I overreacted,” he murmured. “It's just that it was a damn shock to hear my little sister was in a place where innocents are captured and preyed on.”

Only then, with her heart not breaking over Nate, did she notice the fatigue in his navy eyes, the skin stretched over the

bones of his handsome face.

He worried.

And remorse pinged hard. Maybe she should have told him, but when she was held in the grip of terror, not knowing what was happening to Nate, she hadn't been thinking straight. But she knew, too, neither Reynner nor the other guys would have let her go to the Dark Realm. So, she didn't regret her decision. Besides, she still breathed, didn't she?

"I didn't mean to worry you," she said softly.

His chest rose and fell, he shut his eyes briefly, then nodded. "If you don't mind, I'll wait a while before I leave."

"We won't let any harm come to her," Týr added, his implacable features not giving an inch. Man, this male was as hard as her overprotective and equally inflexible brother, maybe more so.

"I don't think he'll hurt her," Nik said, earning Ely's eternal gratitude.

Her brother and Týr just stared at him.

Nik shrugged. "I have my mate because of him, so he can't be all that bad."

Frowning, Reynner leaned against the railing again. But his expression remained unyielding, as if he had reason not to trust demonkind.

And she thought she could get rid of them fast?

Wait. She studied her brother's hard features, not that she could read him. Reynner had been gone from Ademéras for millennia before she found him again on this world, two years ago. Her stomach pitched, remembering how he reacted when he heard she'd gone to the Dark Realm, realizing then something terrible must have happened for him to hate demonkind. Later, she'd speak to him, find out—

A wave of power rolled over the place, and she stilled. Crap. Her time of reckoning was here.

Michael appeared in a swirl of silvery sparks, his expression as stern as the night was long. Ugh. No rest for the wicked, er, the runaway Guardian.

She rubbed her damp palm down her jeans, the freakin' heat simmering within her. Not that it ever subsided. In Ys, hell, everything was hot there and she was running high on adrenaline—

“Ely,” Michael murmured, and her heart clocked hard. Those shattered blues had doubtless already taken in her grimy appearance, bloody chest, burned dark hair, and of course, the stench of sulfur on her. Heck, *she* could still get a whiff of it.

She chinned up, straightened her spine, and locked her knees, despite exhaustion almost felling her.

“You are well?” he asked.

What? A puff of air could have toppled her over. She barely stopped her frown, confused at his question, then hastily nodded. “Yes.”

“Heard what you did with Azgoreth’s army of guards, thrashed them almost singlehandedly. Well done.”

Her jaw dropped.

Nik smiled.

Týr snorted. “Should have killed the lot!”

“What?” Her gaze did a tennis ball match between all three. “I couldn’t kill them all. There were too many.”

“You could have,” Nik said. “But you did better. We tracked you to the deadland and heard of a female who’d singlehandedly vanquished an army of demon guards, sending them to Purgatory.”

She blinked, then shrugged. “I did? Oh, good. I would have killed anyone who stopped us from leaving. I just wanted to get Nate out of there without any more obstacles. He was more important than worrying about those who disappeared and would have killed us.”

Maybe she had become ruthless like her Guardian brethren after all.

Reynner came back into the loop, his eyebrows drawn in a V. “What?”

“My abilities have awakened,” she answered quickly. She understood now that Nik and Týr had gone to Ys, looking for her and learned what happened, but Michael? “How do you know all this?” she asked him.

A rare smile tipped up the corner of the Arc’s mouth. “I have...*eyes* everywhere.”

Of course, he did.

Michael had angels and Fallen working for him, patrolling other parts of the world. So, why not a few winged beings in the Dark Realm, too?

“It was quite something to behold, I’ve heard,” Michael said.

“Aye,” Aba agreed from the doorway, dragging Ely’s attention away from the archangel. “Especially when she trapped two malevolent wraconis. In the face of peril, she was calm, collected, and dealt with the situation swiftly, making it easier for me to kill the beasts.”

Everyone’s stares swung back to her.

“From the Infernii Realm? Good.” Michael nodded. “It’s an ability that can be used on this realm if needed, instead of weapons, which can sometimes be a liability.”

She cast Aba a grateful smile. This demon, reviled by many because of his species, had a gentle heart and was capable of immense love. No wonder Nate would go to any length to protect him, and she would, too.

“And Nate, my *mate*?” she finally asked the most vital question. “He’s...*was* a human given a wraconis symbiont when he died as a child.”

Michael’s eyes narrowed.

“He no longer has it,” she said quickly. “The symbiont was consuming him, taking over, evolving. To save him, I dug it out...” The terror she went through daggered her chest, remembering the horror of how close she’d come to losing him.

“The symbiont’s dead now, but the other ones he has, have activated...” She laid it all out, then waited for the other shoe to fall. Because the Arc’s easygoing manner didn’t mean he had forgotten the crux of the situation. Demons weren’t allowed into the castle, let alone to live there. And she *had* gone AWOL.

“Then we will wait and see what this symbiont turns out to be before I decide. And Ely?” His stern gaze held hers. “A violent, demonic being cannot live at the castle, let alone in this world. I know what the wraconis are capable of.”

And there it was.

“But it’s dead,” she protested.

“I’m aware. We will wait,” he reiterated. His attention shifted back to the apartment behind her as if scanning for said demonic vibration, then back to her. “And what you did without consulting me...” She froze. “I’ll let it slide for now. You were off duty.”

She exhaled in relief, thankful for the reprieve. Then she realized she hadn’t introduced Aba, who remained in the doorway. “This is Aba, Nate’s sire,” she said. “He saved Nate as a child after he was shot and left for dead.”

“And Nate saved me,” Shadow spoke up, coming to stand next to Ely. “I lay dying in the alley after those demons tore out my throat. He did the same for me, gave me my symbiont, as I breathed my last.”

Michael pinched the bridge of his nose, then shook his head as Kira stepped to her other side and slipped her arm around Ely’s waist.

Michael raised an eyebrow at her reinforcements. “Very well. Let’s hear it, Kira?”

Týr sighed, but his stare was of a male utterly besotted with his mate, waiting patiently for this to play out.

“I brought food,” she said with an irrepressible smile, dimples flashing. “Oh, I left it in the kitchen, Ely. You must be hungry, yes?” Concerned hazel eyes flashed to hers. “I don’t think you stopped for a meal—I mean, a proper one in the Dark Realm?”

“No, not really.” Heck, hunger was the last thing on her mind.

“Then go eat something. Take a shower...” She glanced at Michael. “Oh, and yes, I am with team Ely on this.” She squeezed Ely’s waist. “Nate saved Shadow, he makes Ely happy, and that is all I care about. Besides, Ely wouldn’t fall for some malicious male, demon or not.”

“*Elska*, you don’t know that,” Týr groaned. “He hasn’t awakened yet. We don’t know what symbiont he has now—”

A wave of power swept over the place, curling around Ely. She pivoted, searching for the source, then she glanced back at Michael, who frowned. Not him. His sway and abilities were shielded.

“*Ely!*” A growl resonated through the apartment and out to the deck, startling her.

Reynner flashed to stand in front of her. Týr and Nik blurred over and flanked him.

Dammit. She peered above her brother and Týr’s shoulders.

The living room door opened, and Nate shuffled outside on bare feet, his inked chest heaving. The ripped and bloodied black jeans he wore hung loosely on his lean hips. His topaz stare locked on her, he shuffled over. At seeing him up and walking, even if he appeared a little on the grumpy side, tears of gratitude filled her eyes. So tall, completely healed now, with no scaly black patches or horns, but still gaunt and heartbreakingly handsome.

She pushed through her guards and hurried over.

“Ely.” He dragged her close and just held her, his long body aligning with hers. “You weren’t there,” he rumbled, trailing his nose along her neck.

“I wasn’t far. I’m here now.”

“You smell amazing.” He ran his palm down her back in a slow caress, stirring every nerve awake. Stars, she wanted him so badly, needed to reassure herself he was all right. Their intimate moments had always been fraught with an underlying tension, aware of the sinister beast lurking within him. Now that he was free of it...

He slid one hand to her butt and cupped her chin with the other. His mouth came down on hers in warm kiss, a bit of fang teasing her tongue—

He still had those? Then she didn’t care, kissing him deeply as well—

A throat cleared.

She stilled. For a second, she’d forgotten they weren’t alone. Inhaling a shuddering breath, she forced herself to break away from Nate’s tormenting mouth. He glowered. She put a hand on his chest and petted him. “Nate, I want to introduce you to everyone.”

“Why? You are all I need.” He didn’t even look at them as most would do.

Ely bit back a smile. She missed his, *don’t give a shit about others or what they thought of him*, attitude. “Because this is where I live, Nate,” she said softly. “And they are my family.” She stroked his warm back, her eyes beseeching him to understand, to meet her halfway, and she saw the moment he gave in to her plea. He let her go and faced the gang.

“That’s Kira with the auburn hair, another dear friend, and her mate, Týr.”

Enclosed in Týr’s arms, Kira wiggled her fingers in a little wave and smiled while Týr remained silent.

“You know Nik and Shadow.” Her friend leaned against her mate, but her eyes were shiny and wet. Her expression was

one of profound relief. “I’m so happy you’re okay, Nate.”

He gave Shadow a little nod.

“You’ll meet the others later—” Ely could almost feel the unimpressed stare he cast her and didn’t look at him. Choking back a sigh, she continued, “You remember my brother Reynner. And that’s Michael, our leader.”

Her fellow Guardians watched quietly, but she knew they were on alert, at the ready, if Nate suddenly went berserker.

However, Michael’s expression remained inscrutable. Nate eyed him, equally cool. A light breeze picked up, and the clouds parted, the moon casting a bright light over the deck.

Nate frowned and rubbed his chest, the corded tendons on his neck tensing.

Frowning, Ely caressed his spine, and the symbionts there slowly pulsed under her fingertips. A shuddering exhale escaped him. And she knew, he needed to feed.

“Nate?” she whispered, facing him, hoping the others couldn’t hear her. “What do you require?”

His gaze skated from her to the vast open ocean. Without a word, he let her go, sidestepped everyone, and shuffled to the corner of the wooden railing. The sudden remoteness in him had her breath catching. What if this symbiont didn’t want her near him like the last one?

He gripped the guardrail and lifted his face upwards. Moonlight beamed down on him, silhouetting him in a silvery glow. Then the night air grew denser around him. The three smaller symbionts lining his upper back pulsed, the dull reds merging with amber. The murkiness in the amber one above the others faded, revealing the warm gold, almost like his irises when he smiled.

A groan escaped him, and his head lowered, the tendons on his forearms tensing. The wood of the railing creaked under his fists.

“Nate—!” She darted over or tried to, but strong hands held her back.

“Don’t,” Michael ordered. “Let him be.”

“Why? So you can kill him if he becomes another demonic creature?” She yanked at the archangel’s hands, terrified for her mate. Growling, she elbowed the Arc in his belly. “Let me go!”

“Dammit!” he grunted, holding her with arms like steel-freaking restraints. “And I thought the males were a pain in my—”

“Ely, you need to calm down,” Reynner warned, coming to stand next to her.

“He’s growing agitated,” Aba blurted. “Ely, please.”

What? She froze as the air around Nate started to shimmer and grew heavier.

The scabbed lesions running down his shoulder blades where the black leathery wings had been swelled, becoming red and distended, and then they split. Blood dripped down his back, bones creaking—breaking—

Dear goddess! Was he transforming again?

A pained moan escaped him. *No, no, no!* Her nails dug into the forearms trapping her. *Nate, no!*

His skin began to shimmer between silver and his natural bronze.

“I think he’s drawing power from the moon!” Shadow whispered in awe. “Look. Can you feel it?”

What? Ely leaned forward, peering at him. The moonlight, as usual, cast its cold rays down on Earth, but a part of it streamed to him in a silvery miasma. His entire body glowed like the celestial orb shone from within him. He groaned, and his head lifted again, chin tipping upward, and it appeared as if he were growing larger.

Ely gaped, her breath stuck in her throat as the silver swirls of dust surrounding Nate started to spin like a tornado, moving faster and faster...and bigger.

“Aba, what’s happening?” she croaked, half dreading the moment the storm around Nate stopped.

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

She could barely see him. Then as fast as it started, the churning haze dissipated, leaving Nate standing there, still clutching the wooden guardrail, which miraculously hadn’t shattered. A shuddering breath escaped him.

Soft gasps echoed next to her.

Ely stopped breathing, fingers pressed to her mouth. Her heart thudded as if it would crash through her ribcage. Tears flood her eyes, blurring her sight.

He had wings.

Again.

CHAPTER 33



BREATHING HARD, blood swooshing through her head, Ely gaped at Nate, unable to look away.

How could she? When wings, not those black, leathery ones he had so briefly, but massive ones as pure as the driven snow, blocked his entire back and swept the wooden deck. The primary flight feathers shimmered a silvery gold, glinting like stars.

A low grunt of irritation erupted from him. He probably felt the weight of his new appendages. His forearms and biceps bulged as he gripped the rail. His back muscles flexed, his wings fluttered, and a shower of silver and gold dust rained down around him. Then his immense appendages spread out, revealing his sexy muscled physique once more. *Aaand* he was as naked as the day he was first born.

“What the fuck?” Týr growled.

Nik cursed.

Ely shot them a frowny look, and found both her friends staring, mouths hanging.

Týr dragged a gaping Kira to him, blocking her view, no doubt.

Heck, as far as Ely was concerned, Nate was incredibly gorgeous. But before he did a full-frontal, revealing just how truly magnificent he was, she willed a towel to her and hurried across, draping it around Nate’s lean hips.

He appeared a little bigger than before, she was sure. The gauntness he sported after the deadly fight, and from the symbiont attacking him, had disappeared.

Because of the energy, he drew from the moon?

She prayed it was so.

Luminous topaz eye met hers as she straightened. But lines of weariness bracketed his mouth, his exhaustion clear in his taut features. “Ely...”

His body had been through a lot, hence his fatigue.

“I’m here.” She smiled, her lips trembling at the cascade of emotions rushing through her, because this was no demonic symbiont that had awakened but an angelic one. She’d stake her life on it.

He grimaced and rolled his shoulders, likely trying to adjust to the heavy weight of his wings. Then that intractable jaw hardened, and he faced her Guardian brothers and the archangel.

Man, Ely hoped this wouldn’t turn into another argument or, worse, a fight because none of them appeared welcoming of him right now.

Just her girlfriends.

“Now, what?” Ely demanded, and waited for the verdict.

* * *

Nate grunted, his mind in a haze, nothing connecting...but his shoulder blades were back to being heavy once more.

Dammit to hell and back! He had those blasted wings again, didn’t he?

He eyed these males Ely called brothers, who eyeballed him like something out of their worst nightmare, doubtless waiting for a sign of his demonic side to emerge.

Yeah, well, too bad. He couldn’t change whatever the fuck he was now.

He put his arm around Ely and tucked her under his chin. She settled perfectly into him. He kissed the top of her still dark hair.

The Guardians' leader and Ely's boss watched him with eerie, splintered blue irises.

Michael didn't speak. Nothing showed on his face or those of the other males. But they all watched him like he was a fucking oddity. He hated this shit, having already lived through it once before.

Ely's calloused palm gently caressing his back reeled in his ire. This female, his beloved mate, who went to literal Hell with him to bring him back, was all that mattered.

His gaze softened, meeting her warm copper ones.

"Let's go inside," Ely told him. "This has been a hard few days."

Did she think him unable to handle these broody mofos? "I'm all right, *laika*. Just these new damn nuisances I gotta get used to." He flickered his thumb over his shoulders, and his wings rustled. She glanced at his back.

"I love them."

Nate stared at her, confusion stealing through him. Then shook his head. "The symbiont revived, it's why I still breathe."

"No, Nate. You had more than one symbiont. Aba gave them to you because not all symbionts take or are compatible with the host."

Like the damn Black.

"Aye," Aba said, standing near the open door. "The wraconis one is dead."

Nate shook his hazy head. So what the fuck was he now? His gaze landed on the tinted glass front of the boathouse—

With the moon above reflecting its silvery light, he could clearly see his reflection and the white annoyance spreading out from his back. And then the truth struck him. His hands

fell from Ely. His heart tripped, and he shook his head, trying to connect to the reality of what he was seeing.

He was an...angel?

A fucking *angel!*

Why the hell couldn't he just be normal?

Ely moved to his side. "They're beautiful," she whispered.

Well, damn. If she liked them, and for her—for a life with her—he'd do anything, even endure the wings. Though he wasn't sure exactly what this symbiont required in sustenance. His stomach twisted at the thought but he pushed it aside for the moment. Later, he would figure it out once this motley crew left.

But the archangel stared at him like he'd seen a ghost or something.

"Let's cut to the chase. You want to know what I am?" he said, casting the males a flat stare. "I started life as a human, died and became a demon—after all, I do possess their blood..." More so because he still felt the connection to his sire, which started all those years ago when Aba first gave him plasma to save him. "But here I am, an anomaly once again with white wings this time," he drawled. He glanced at his sire for confirmation. "It's from an angelic symbiont, right?"

Frowning, his sire walked over and studied his appendages.

At Aba's sudden, harsh inhale, Nate pivoted. Hell, it took some balancing not to fall on his ass with these weights attached to his back. "What?"

Aba appeared like he'd been walloped across the head.

"It's been so long," he whispered. "But I remember the male, our meeting unusual. I was on Earth for a time when our paths crossed. He slashed his chest, filled a vial with blood, and handed it to me, said it was for me alone to keep safe, and that I'd know when to use it..."

His brow furrowed, and then he paled, a sliver of pain crossing his face. "Forgive me for what you endured, *cnati*.

When you lay dying in the alley, all I thought of was to save you. I'd forgotten about this blood and gave you the one I thought was a wyvern first. You were in so much pain, going through the metamorphosis so fast, I was terrified for you. It's when I remembered the angel who'd given me the vial and hoped it would counter what was happening to you. I gave you that blood as well. It stopped the change and...and I think it's what blocked the Black's complete control of you," he whispered.

Right. Nate pressed his lips to Ely's dark hair, absorbing all his sire revealed. "It doesn't matter any longer. I'm finally free of the Black."

Not totally. He could still feel the darker blood sliding through his veins as if waiting. Waiting. But why mention it when the warriors' eyes on him appeared not so murderous now?

"I had thought those symbionts dead until a few hours ago," Aba admitted.

Ely's grip tightened on his waist, and she leaned into him. He could feel her exhaustion like a lead blanket. And heat.

He frowned. She was too warm, but there was more, something else he should remember, but his mind was still fuzzy with all that had happened—

"Michael?" Ely's voice distracted him.

The archangel blinked as if coming back from wherever his thoughts had been.

"Nate no longer possesses the deadly monster from the dark world," she reiterated.

"I am aware." He rubbed his forearms sporting five tiny smears of blood like someone dug their nails into his skin. "It was never about who you mated, Ely. But about how dangerous he would be living on this world and to the mortals here," Michael told her. "Hedori mentioned he'd gifted this place to you. The choice is yours where you prefer to live. Here or the castle."

“Thank you,” she said. “I think we’ll stay at the boathouse.”

Thank fuck for that. He preferred the privacy.

Nate met the archangel’s fragmented blue eyes with the flashing silvery fissures as if power oozed free. He had no idea what happened to the angel, but he’d never seen such deadly eyes. And he crossed paths and fists with some crazy motherfuckers down in the Dark Realm.

“Do you mind if we continue this conversation in the daylight hours?” he asked. He had to tend to Ely and find out what the hell was wrong with her. “My mate’s had a stressful few days and needs rest.”

“Very well.” Michael inclined his head. “We’ll convene tomorrow at the castle. Let’s get back on patrol.” He departed in a swirl of silvery sparks.

Blondie—hell, *Týr*, he had to let go of his rancor—cast him an unreadable stare, but he nodded, as did Nik.

Shadow and Kira smiled and gave them a quick wave, then they were all gone.

Reynner walked over, his navy blues settling on Ely.

“I am happy, Reyn,” she said softly. “Nate makes me happy.”

“I can see that.” He cast her a wry smile and nodded at Nate, in acceptance or what, he had no idea. Reynner frowned, picking up her black braid, a part of it hanging by mere strands. “It’s still strange to see you with hair this dark.”

“Kira will fix it,” she said, smiling. She let Nate go and hugged her brother.

“When you’ve recovered from your ordeal, come visit us. I know Eve will want to meet your mate.” Then he dematerialized.

Finally alone. Nate rubbed his nape wearily, his gaze on Ely, trying to figure out what the hell was wrong.

“Well, I’ll take my leave, too, now I know everything will be all right.” Aba dragged his fingers through his short hair. “I’m tired. Never thought I’d say that.”

“Wait, wait,” Ely said. “Take some food with you. You also haven’t eaten since Ys.”

Intense emotions flooded Nate, hearing Ely. Hell, her huge heart was what saved them both.

Unable to resist her, he grasped her arm as she walked past to enter the apartment, pulled her back and kissed her tenderly.

Sighing, she leaned into him—

Suddenly, she pushed him away. “Nate, your sire’s here,” she hissed.

“Don’t mind me, I’m enjoying the view.”

Ely groaned, hiding her hot face in his bare chest. Smiling, Nate glanced over her head and found his sire leaning his forearms on the railing and looking down below at the sailboat moored there. Pushing away from him, Ely hurried indoors. Her scent of arousal had him going rock-hard, and he pressed a hand down his dick.

Nate followed her to the kitchen. “Make it quick, *laika*,” he said softly, determined to put things right. “I’m real *hungry*, too.”

“Shh!” she shushed him, her gaze darting outside.

Nate laughed, settling on the bar stool next to the isle counter, tucking the sliding towel around his hips again. He held off with his questions. His sire would be gone in a few minutes.

He watched Ely as she worked, packing a container with food, unable to let her out of his sight even for a moment.

Now, after the storm that had been his life passed—one of constant agony and darkness, of abrasive taunts, threats, and terrifying needs—nothing felt as good as the quiet did in his soul right then. It was like he’d been ripped apart, then slowly put back together, all his pieces aligning perfectly this time.

And it was all because of her.

CHAPTER 34



ELY SIGHED, her shoulders sagging, fatigue dragging her down as she tried to ignore the heat wave and arousal consuming her as she watched Nate see Aba off.

Hell, she wanted to grab him and drag him off to the bedroom—

The door shut, and Nate stalked to the kitchen, massive wings dragging behind him, the muscles beneath his inked skin slipping and sliding.

Goddess, he was a temptation beyond reason, one she wanted so damn badly.

His gaze did that heated up-down caress of her and had her desire teetering on the edge as he reclaimed the high bar stool, part of his gorgeous wings resting on the floor.

She frowned at that as she set the basket on the back counter. “Can you conceal your wings?”

“I don’t know...” He picked up a slice of strawberry pastry from a container, took a bite, and as he chewed, he glanced over his shoulder. “I’ve never had them before.”

“My brother has wings. Maybe he could show you.”

“What?”

She groaned. “Forgive my addled mind. I’m just tired.” And *horny*. “Okay, a quick 411. Emphyreans don’t generally possess wings. But my sire was a Celestial angel when he mated my *materi*, and that’s why Reynner has them...” Ely studied his appendages. “Yours truly are majestic. Look,

you're shedding gold and silver dust." She pointed to the dark wooden floor and the light sparkly trail he'd left behind, glittering like a galaxy of stars.

A ghost of a smile tugged at his mouth as he glanced down at the shimmering floor. "Okay."

"That is something else my kind doesn't possess—"

He reached across the counter and fed her the other part of the strawberry pastry. The decadent sweet-tart taste had her blinking.

"Wow, this tastes good." She chewed and angled her head, studying the glitter, fingers drumming on the marble counter. "I'm not sure if Shae's wings do that. Her sire was a Throne, but she rarely has hers appendages visible—" She frowned at his indulgent smile. "What?"

"Why is it important I know all this?"

She scrunched her nose. "Because people, humans, demons, and Others are drawn to angels. It's their allure, so you should know this."

"Ah. Right. I was drawn to you after all."

She huffed out a laugh and rubbed her damn palms down her jeans. "But seriously, Nate, you must keep your allure shielded and your wings hidden, or this dust will undoubtedly send them into a frenzy. It won't go well with those beings in the Celestial Realm. And I don't want anyone coming after you. Not again, after everything that happened."

"It'll be okay," he said softly. "I won't be using these extremities in front of mortals."

"Okay..." Her gaze shifted back to his beautiful expanse. Unable to resist the call of his wings and the need to touch him, she moved around the isle, laid her palm on his cool skin, and gently caressed the arch with her other hand. The feathers were like a slide of silk under her fingertips.

He stiffened.

Oh, crap. She yanked her hand away. "Did I hurt you?" *Vae!* He'd just transformed, evolved, or whatever into this new

being. He must still be sensitive. Darn her curiosity and horniness. “I’m sorry—”

Nate shook his head and pulled her between his spread thighs, his scent surrounding her. He nuzzled her neck, and desire blazed. “You turn me on, doing so.”

She did? She tucked away the information for later. Stars, he smelled so good, fresh, mouthwatering licorice, sandalwood, and now a hint of cool ice—no whiff of sulfur on him. Was it because of his new symbiont—or his moon bath? Or both?

Heck, she didn’t care. She wanted to lick every bronze inch of him, wanted him to lick her...

“You’re burning up again,” he said against her throat.

“I know.” She sighed. “I was more worried about you, and managed not to let it overcome me, but...” She bit off a moan as he sucked the skin on her neck, the sensation tugging at her nipples and core.

“But what?” He gently tugged her hair, encouraging her to look at him, his stare equally intense.

“I need you. But I can wait for a bit. Eat first.” She nodded at the food on the counter. “I need a shower to wash off this sulfur and sweat—”

“Eeep!” she squealed as he scooped her off her feet, and the food containers and plates she’d laid out magically moved aside.

He settled her on the marble surface.

“Nate, what are you doing?”

“My mind’s a little hazy after this change, but I remember!” he growled. “Do you honestly think after everything you’ve done for me, putting your life, hell, even your relationship with your family on the line, I would go and calmly eat while you suffer through this damn fever?” He looked a little annoyed. “Do you not know I would lay down my life for you?”

“Or kill yourself,” she muttered. She moved to hop down, but he planted his hands on either side of her hips, caging her, his gorgeous, serious face a few inches from hers.

He sighed. “Ely, at that point, there was no other way out for me, or so I thought. The only time the Black gave me relief from my tormented existence was when I decided to go to the Infernii Realm. Except, I had no plans to let it complete its evolving.”

“I know. You told me to find another, and then you dropped off the ledge.” Tears stung her eyes. “Do you have any idea the terror and anguish I went through when I thought I wouldn’t reach you in time?” She thumped his chest. “If I couldn’t save you, well, I would have ended up the same way as you, becoming ash.”

He went pale beneath his bronze skin, expression stricken. “Ely—”

“Now that I found you, I cannot bear to live this life without you, Nate. I just can’t.”

“Nor I you, *laika*,” he said huskily. “The thought of you gone...” He shook his head. “It’s not something I can endure. But with the wraconis taking more and more control, I saw no way out, and the only thing that mattered to me was not hurting you. The beast wanted your death, and that I refused to let happen.” He cupped her face. “Forgive me, Ely. All I thought of was you.”

Between his words, the tender expression on his face, and breathing in his scent, the constriction in her chest and her flashback of terror subsided. No one and nothing could control him in such a horrific way again.

She cupped his scruffy jaw and pressed her lips to his. “I know.”

With a low groan, he kissed her.

Gods, his mouth felt so good on hers, soothing, but she wanted his hands on her, in her. She wanted everything. And she clung to him, sucking on his tongue, legs wrapping around his towel-clad hips. Somehow, she dislodged it and he was

naked. She reached down and grasped his hard erection, his cock heavy in her palm.

“Fuck, Ely,” he grunted, breaking their kiss. Chest heaving, eyes bright with desire, he grasped the ragged edges of her torn tank top and dragged it off, tossing it aside, leaving her in just her bra. His gaze settled on the three long scabs formed on her chest from the wraconis’ slashes, and his expression darkened.

Gently, he pressed his lips to each one, then lifted his gaze to hers. “I love you, Ely. I’m going crazy at just how much I do...” His eyes burned with the same powerful emotions and need consuming her. His wings fluttered and spread out, looking like the angel he was. “From the moment I saw you in the grimy alley, all riled and furious, nailing me with your cold stare, I knew I had to have you. And in my pursuit, I came to understand why... You were the mate of my heart, the truth in my soul,” he said huskily. “It’s why I couldn’t stay away from you.”

Her smile trembled. “I love you, too, so much...” she breathed, then scrunched her nose. “While I wanted to kill you the first time—”

“I know. I have the scar to prove it.”

She grimaced but gently caressed the faint scar on his abs. “I didn’t mean it literally. You just brought that side out of me.” Amusement lit his eyes. “But I think I was more terrified of these feelings you awakened in me.”

“Good. Because you are mine, Ely.” He trailed kisses along her jaw, and she sighed, tangling her fingers in his silky hair. “Now, tomorrow, until we both take our last breaths, whenever that is.”

He unbuttoned her jeans, and the rest of her clothes soon followed her discarded tank.

Naked now, Ely wrapped her legs around his hips, and his rock-hard cock slid against her heated folds. Stars! He felt so good, and she rubbed herself on his rigid length, needing relief from the wildfire razing through her.

He squeezed her breasts and tugged her nipples, a pull she felt straight to her core. Ely inhaled sharply.

His mouth covered hers in an intensely carnal kiss. He tasted so, so good. His hands slid over her limbs to stroke her inner thighs—*gods, sooo* close to where she wanted him.

“Nate...” she breathed, her desperation growing for him to take away this constant fire raging within. “I don’t need foreplay! I’ve been in this state of arousal for too long. Just fuck—”

He gently pushed her onto her back, and she braced her elbows on the countertop, her legs sliding over his shoulders, brushing his silky wings. They shimmered and vanished. As he put her feet on the counter, a tic worked his rigid jaw. “I have you, my beautiful mate.”

He ran his tongue between her folds, circling her throbbing bundle of nerves as he worked two fingers into her core, thrusting in and out. Sensation drowned her, her body coiling tighter and tighter. She whimpered, grabbing his hair and moving her hips frantically against his mouth, chasing after her release. He hummed with approval, the sound a tormenting vibration against her clit, then he suckled, once, twice, and a firm tug on her aching flesh with his lips and the light scrape of fangs—

Her orgasm crashed through her, sending her hurtling over...

And desire reared again.

“*Gods,*” she groaned, reaching for him. “Nate, now, please, I cannot endure—”

He straightened, stroked his thick, rigid cock, notched it at her opening, and pushed into her, stretching her. Her breath lodged in her throat.

“Okay?”

“Yes—no!” Ely shook her head.

He scooped her up, and she sank on his erection, taking him deeper, sensation stealing her thoughts...

* * *

Her expression dazed, her face flushed and feverish, pupils dilated, Ely gripped his neck, nails digging into his skin.

Nate kissed her again, stroking the inside of her mouth as he carried her over to the couch. He sat down with her astride him, dick impaling her.

Teeth gritted, he locked down the urge to move, too close to the edge. Hell, every time he'd made love to Ely in the past, he'd never moved past this point with the malevolent Black stopping him.

“Take what you need, *laika*. Fuck the hell out of me—”

She grabbed his shoulders and sank slowly down his cock as if to feel every inch of him filling her again. He palmed her breast and squeezed as she worked his cock with a rhythm that grew, tensing his body. He tugged at her nipples.

“Gods, yes,” she groaned. “Like that.”

He mouthed one nub and tugged with his lips, and she whimpered, but with her moving on him, he couldn't suck her nipple without hurting her. With a grunt, he grasped her hips and had her flat on her back on the couch. He cuffed her wrists, holding them above her head, and thrust into her deliciously sexy body again. She moved in tandem with him as he pounded harder and faster, the sounds of flesh slapping against flesh echoing as their sweaty bodies moved in a sensual rhythm as old as time.

He licked the column of her throat, and she shut her eyes.

“No, Ely, eyes on me.”

Her eyelids flashed open, her pupils almost eclipsing her coppery irises. She bowed her body, taking him deeper. Hell, he grunted. “You feel so fucking good, Ely, fisting me like a damn vise.” She was close. “Do you like me taking you this hard?” he rasped with another upthrust of his hips, and her core contracted around him.

“Yes, yes!” she panted.

He freed her wrists, grabbed her hips, and rocked into her. She clutched the armrest behind her head, her inner muscles clenching and releasing his dick. He slipped his hand between them, to where they were joined, and rolled the sensitive bundle of nerves, then tugged—

“*Naaate!*” she cried out, her sensuous body bowing beneath his, her orgasm sweeping through her and gripping his cock like a fucking steel vise, hauling an answering response from his own body.

He grunted and let go of his control. Release zipped down his spine like a tempest gathering, squeezing his balls. He gripped her hips and pulled her tight into him as he pounded, and then it all broke like lightning flashing through him—

Fuck! He shut his eyes, indescribable pleasure crashing through him, a warm white, transcendent light flaring deep within him, soothing and calming his soul with a peace that started with Ely and now intensified.

“Nate!” she panted, nails digging into his forearms again, her inner muscles gripping his cock in another climax. And he kept pounding, his dick sliding in and out of her, face buried in her neck, breathing in the scent of his precious mate, reveling in this moment.

“Oh, heavens!” she groaned, arms and legs wrapped tightly around him.

This was his heaven.

His light.

His love.

When he finally found his breath again after the intensity of their lovemaking, he kissed the fast-beating pulse on her throat.

She sighed. “That was *a-mazing*.”

He grunted out a laugh and lifted his head, bracing on his forearms to look at her beautiful, flushed face, and then he stared. *What the—?*

“Nate, your eyes—” she blurted his question.

Her irises blazed like the moon had settled there, emitting a silvery-white light.

“You mean they’re like yours? Glowing a silvery-white?” he asked.

No, noooo! The shocked thought flickered into his mind. *It cannot be!*

“What do you mean, *it can’t be?*” he demanded, not liking this negativity after such a transcendent moment. *Hell, my fucking cock’s still buried deep inside her.*

She shook her head, tears crowding her eyes.

He tensed. “Ely?”

She pushed back his hair and palmed his face with both hands. “Nate, do you know what this means?”

“Just tell me,” he growled.

She laughed. “*Hell, my fucking cock’s still buried deep inside her?*” she repeated.

His brow furrowed. “How do—”

“Nate.” She pressed her mouth to his. “It means we are mates—”

“I know that. I claimed you as my consort.”

“Yes, yes. Demons have consorts, but we immortals have something different. It means we are destined mates, fated for one another long before we were born. We are soul-joined, my love. It’s what the white light from you seeping into me was all about. We are one. It’s why our telepathic pathways opened up, and I can hear your thoughts. I never thought it would happen for me—for us.” Tears slipped down her face.

“Then why are you crying?” he demanded.

“Because I’m so happy.”

Okay, then.

And she was talking again. “It also means if one of us dies first, then the other would follow unless one of us severs the

mate bond.”

A smile started, the elation within stealing the air in his lungs. He could actually pinpoint her warmth and happiness in him, mingling with his own. He had to take several deep breaths just to speak. “I feel you, Ely, my heart. In here—” He gently rubbed his fingers over the bullet scar on his chest. “This...” He swallowed. “I never expected, and I’m eternally grateful for these symbionts allowing me this joy of soul-joining with you.”

He kissed her gently. “How do you feel? The fever? Your powers?”

Her brow creased as if taking stock of herself. “My powers no longer storm within me. The heat’s gone. I feel good. Great, actually!” She sighed, her relief a happy sound.

It still hurt his heart at just how much she suffered and risked to save him. Tenderness for his mate consumed him.

Nate tucked back the loose, short strands of her messed-up hair. “Yeah, that’s likely from the mating urge demons usually get when they find their other halves. We did taste each other’s blood come to think of it. It probably affected you with the mating fever.” And he *had* been rebirthed as a demon. “But the wraconis symbiont I housed not only prevented me from making love to you properly, it also blocked my own mating fever.”

“Well, whatever it was, the Black couldn’t compete with our attraction to each other,” she retorted. “Stars, I’m so glad it’s over—”

An eerie sensation swept through him, like nails scraping his psyche, and Nate stilled.

Ely went motionless under him, too.

They weren’t alone.

“Someone’s here, and it’s not the guys,” she whispered, her copper eyes narrowing.

Nate hadn’t met them all, but he trusted her senses. He moved off her, regretting the loss of her warm body. “Wait

here.”

Her snort echoed behind him as he strode outside to the deck.

This female of his, always making a point. But she was his, and he was *her* protector. However, he knew better than to say so.

Nate scanned his new surroundings. The freshness of pine, conifer, and all things green, snowy, and earthy seeped into his senses...and a hint of fading incense merged with something bitter like citrus...

Ely bypassed him, the towel he'd discarded earlier wrapped around her. She glanced down at the pier. “Whoever it was disappeared.”

“I know.” He joined her at the railing, taking in the quiet quay and the massive sailboat gently bobbing on the undulating water. “It’s not a scent I recognize.”

Her brow creased as she sniffed. “I smelled this before...at the garage!” She spun to him, eyes wide. “You need to warn Aba, just in case.”

Damn. “I lost my cell.”

“Use mine.” Her phone appeared in her hand, and she handed it over. When he saw Aba’s name on her contact list, he exhaled in relief.

His sire answered on the first ring. “Ely?”

“It’s me. Someone followed us to the boathouse.”

“Demon?”

“No...” Nate rubbed his whiskered jaw. “Ely said she’d smelled the odor of er, incense, and...bitter citrus.” Ely nodded, confirming what he’d smelled, too. “At the garage recently.”

“I’ll take care of it. You and Ely take your rest.” He rang off.

Nate was so on board with that, not the resting part just yet, but another round of devouring his mate. He handed her

the cell, and she rolled her gorgeous eyes. “You know I can sense your emotions, right?”

His mouth twitched in amusement. “Are you saying you don’t want all of this?” He drawled the words, waving a hand over his naked self.

She choked out a laugh.

The sound of her happiness had him forgetting the intruder for now. The bastard would regret coming after them when he got hold of him. Smiling, he put his arm around her, and they returned to the apartment. He shut the door behind them.

She pivoted, worried copper eyes on him. “Nate, how do you feel? Do you need to feed your symbionts? You have four active ones, just so you know. The oval amber one at the top of your spine, and three smaller ones below, also amber but with a tinge of red in them.”

He did? “The red must be because Aba gave me his blood.” His tongue stroked the fangs he still possessed, probably a leftover from the darn wraconis. Well, he could live with that, but he willed them away, and they retracted.

Nate stopped near the isle counter and took stock of himself, remembering the cool outpouring of light, his symbionts absorbing the energy as if thirsty, and strength powering through him...

“Moonlight.” He chuckled. “These symbionts thrive on moonlight. Hell, from one end of the spectrum to the other.”

“I, for one, am darn glad.” She hooked her arms around his neck, then the minx pressed her lower body to his and moved her hips. His cock stirred against her belly. She cast him an innocent look. “You deserve this peace, my love. Let’s go shower.”

His eyes narrowed. “Oh, my beautiful mate, I’m so gonna make you beg for that tease.” He scooped her up, and her legs wrapped around him, his erection sliding between her folds to bump her clit. She bit her lower lip, stopping a moan.

With one arm around her bottom, he grasped his cock and pushed into her. Gritting back his own groan as she sank onto

him. A flush started on her chest, rising up her neck and cheeks. But cool as fuck, as if not affected, she shrugged. “I’d like to see you try.”

This female.

You’re so gonna regret that comment, he mind-linked with her and took her mouth in a *slow* kiss as he headed for the bathroom, taunting her with promises of how he was going to make her beg...

CHAPTER 35



ELY WOKE UP TO BRIGHT, wintry sunlight streaming into the bedroom, the rich aroma of coffee scenting the air, and no sign of Nate. She lay there for a moment, absorbing the quiet, unable to believe all the danger and anxiety was finally over.

Of course, there was still the meeting with Michael, but she didn't think it was anything dire. Her stomach stripped, remembering last night when Nate carried her off, nailed on his cock, to the shower.

Gah! Why did she even bother to taunt him?

He'd reduced her to a mass of need during the long shower as he made her scream and then curse, demanding release. Darn male!

Gods, she was crazy in love with him.

Love you, too, his soft voice coasted through her mind. Are you getting up anytime soon?

The teasing note made her smile. *What time is it?*

Long past one—

What? Shit! Gimme a sec.

She threw off the covers and dashed to the bathroom, sweeping back her much shorter, shoulder-length hair, not used to the lighter weight. Nate had cut off the seared part of her mane last night, making it manageable.

A short while later, showered and with a towel wrapped around her, she hurried back to the bedroom and found the

clothes she'd left behind in the closet and used when she painted.

For now, she put on an overlarge, navy t-shirt—an online buy she didn't bother to return—and smoothed a hand over its screen print of a paintbrush dripping all the colors of a rainbow, forming a puddle above the words, *inspiration strikes anywhere*.

Man, so true. Nate inspired her now.

Smiling, she brushed her still inky-dark hair and pinned it into a topknot that held and didn't slide off for a change. Barefoot, she hurried to the kitchen and found Nate leaning against the isle counter, wearing jeans and nothing else, a gray t-shirt tossed on the barstool.

She blinked. "You have clothes?"

He smiled. "Morning, my beautiful mate. Yes, I do, now." His stare slid over her, slow and sensual, then lingered on the print. "Nice shirt."

She laughed. "Bought it for motivation when I was trying to keep up with my painting."

"So, the canvases in the corner are yours?"

He checked them out? She scrunched her nose. "Yes. It relaxes me. Did you go to the garage already?"

"No. I found a backpack at the door this morning with a note from Aba. Said he thought I might need clothes. Not that I was complaining..."

She snorted. "You need them. We're going to the castle," she reminded him. "It's enough that the girls got an eyeful of your sexy butt last night."

Nate shot her a smirk, and it made her want to bite his lickable lips, but that would lead them back to bed, and there were things she had to tell him before they left for the castle.

She crossed to the sink for a drink of water. But he blocked her, cupped her nape, and kissed her slow and deep, tasting of coffee and her man...then he let her go.

Ely grasped the counter, so sure her shaky knees would take her down. And tried to recall what she was going to do. But her mind remained blank.

“Here.” Nate set a steaming mug of coffee for her on the counter.

“Have a little mercy,” she grumbled, trailing around the isle and plopping on the stool.

His eyes gleamed with amusement, and she wrinkled her nose. He laughed, the light sound soothing her soul. Man, if she didn’t reel it in, she’d be a constant drooling mess around him, and he’d enjoy it.

Sighing, she took a deep gulp of the steaming, fragrant brew to kickstart her foggy brain and boost her defenses against his devastating magnetism, and she nearly suffered third-degree burns for her effort. Gah.

From a plate piled with tempting toasted sandwiches, she selected a grilled chicken and mayo. “You made this?”

“Yeah. Had time.” He leaned against the opposite counter, mug in one hand, and massaged his temple with the other.

She frowned. “Headache?”

“No...” He slowly shook his head. “Remnants of a dream from last night. Images of a child. A face I can’t seem to place...”

“Don’t push it. Whatever it is will reveal itself, I’m sure.”

“Probably...” He exhaled deeply. “So, a meet and greet with the rest of the castle inhabitants today?”

“Yes.” She bit into the crunchy sandwich, almost moaning around the delicious chicken and mayo snack. “Oh, I’ll need to move my stuff to the boathouse. What about your things?”

“I’ll get them this evening.”

Right, then she grimaced. “And I have to get back to work tonight.”

He watched her over the brim of his mug as he sipped, brow lowering.

“You know I’m a Guardian, right?”

“And I’m a mechanic,” he countered.

And he was.

He crossed to the isle, picked up a sandwich, and took a bite. “I’ve been thinking,” he murmured, in between bites. “I’ve always helped Aba at the workshop, so I’ll continue working there, but at nights now. We can meet up when you’re done with patrol and head back here.”

She swallowed the last of her toast, and felt his resolution like a warm glow deep within her. “Oh, I’d like that.”

Ely wrapped her fingers around the warmth of the ceramic mug, remembering then what else she wanted to tell him, but she wasn’t sure how he’d take it.

“Nate,” she began as he made quick inroads into demolishing his sandwich. “There’s something you should know.”

“About what?” He picked up his coffee.

“Your sire’s friend, Pangur?”

“Yeah?”

“He was behind the demons who attacked Aba at the garage.”

Nate went motionless, then he slowly set his mug down. “He’s going to regret ever crossing me,” he said in a tone so cold, Ely knew without a doubt Nate’s reprisal would be as brutal as when he killed his opponents in those hellish death fights.

“I think Azgor already had the honor. Pangur killed his son.”

“What?” He stared at her, gripping the edge of the counter. “*Derrodus?*”

“Aye.”

A furious growl rumbled free, sparks of red flickering in his bright eyes. “Of course! That fucking bounty on you

wasn't at Derrodus' order, but Pangur's!" He stormed the length of the galley kitchen like a barely leashed gale force. "What the fuck did he want so badly that he would—" He stopped dead. "Me! He fucking wanted *me!*" He spun back, jaw clenched.

Much as she wanted to comfort him, Ely understood his anger and helplessness at being denied revenge. "Pangur believed he should have had the kind of power you did."

He blinked. "What?"

"He wanted the wraconis symbiont so others would fear him like they did with you..." then she told him about Aba burning the symbiont, Pangur's retaliation, tearing off Nate's remaining wing, and about the ensuing fight. "He escaped while Aba spoke with Azgor. But Azgor's guards must have found him by now."

Nate thumped his fists on the counter, jaw clenched so hard, it hollowed out his cheeks.

"Nate?" She reached across the granite surface to grasp his hand. "He's gone. It's over."

He looked up, those fiery topaz eyes blazing like the sun. "He deliberately put you in danger, Ely. Who knows how many more are still hunting you for the supposed riches?"

"But when they learn he's dead and no one will pay the fees, the bounty will be forgotten."

"Ely, being dead means nothing! This is the Dark Realm we're talking about. It's all about powerplay, conquering the unconquerable by any means. They'll fucking come after you just to sell you to the highest bidder!"

His fear for her made her get off the bar stool and round the counter to him. "Nate." She hugged him from behind, pressed her face to his back, and caressed his abs. "I think I've proven I can take care of myself."

He pivoted and drew her to him, holding on so tight, she could barely breathe.

“You are my heart, Ely. I cannot bear the thought of those twisted fucks after you—” he buried his face in her neck. His chest rose as he inhaled a deep breath.

Heck, what did it matter if she could breathe when it gave him comfort? Besides, she loved being in his arms. She caressed his spine, and the symbionts pulsed lightly beneath her fingertips.

“After enduring a life of constant torment, never knowing what it felt like to experience happiness, you appeared like a glimmer in that darkness, drawing me out of my tortured existence. Now that I have you, I cannot bear the thought of even a scratch on you.”

“I’ll be fine, my love,” she murmured, pressing her lips to his scruffy cheek, then met his dark stare. “Remember, *I* cannot die.”

“That doesn’t convince me. All immortals can if the right weapons are used.”

“I know...” And since he was her soul’s other half, she revealed the Guardians’ truth. “But not *me*, Nate. Not forever, if it does happen. I’m a Guardian, and...and our goddess watches over us.”

Like a switch flipped, understanding dawned in his gorgeous eyes. “She resurrects you? Like with Nik?”

“Aye.”

After a second, he shrugged. “No matter, you are still mine to watch over. I don’t want you harmed in any way.”

Oh, man. Nate was a tough one, but she let it be. She understood his fear. Not so long ago, she’d been there, too.

Several moments passed, then his tense body finally relaxed. Heck, she’d take it. “Hey, you could become a Guardian?”

“Yeah, no. I like what I do.”

“Fixing cars?”

“Yes.” He swept her up into his arms, striding for the bedroom.

“Wait, wait!” She clung to his neck. “What are you doing? Nate, we’re supposed to leave for the castle—”

“Not when you’re dressed to torment.” He nipped her chin. “The castle can wait.”

Ohhh. Yep, he was definitely delaying the visit, but she didn’t care. There wasn’t anything important hanging over their heads anyway. All was dealt with last night except for Nate meeting the rest of her friends and Guardian brothers.

“I find I have an insatiable appetite for something more...” he cast her a lecherous leer, “carnal. Want me to pin you to the wall and fuck you, *laika*?”

That darn mouth of his which could bring her so much pleasure, could also torture her verbally. But his eyes shone with tender amusement. Without a doubt, he would take them to the very edge before they found their release.

“Eh...” She feigned indifference, aware it would stir him up. “I think you already did something like that in your room at the garage.”

Those striking eyes narrowed. “With my mouth, yes. But not my cock, *laika*, not my cock. Now you’ll have both,” he growled, capturing her mouth...

* * *

“When you said we’ll stroll to the castle, I thought it was a stone throw from the boathouse,” Nate drawled, stopping in the middle of the dense forest. Hands on his hips, he stared up at the looming evergreens. They had been walking for more than an hour. Not that he minded when it gave him alone time with his mate.

But damn, this island sure was massive. And well hidden from human eyes. With gods and angels in residence, it made sense.

“Aw, poor baby’s tired?” Ely teased, leaping onto a large boulder, then looking down at him, her dark, slightly wavy, much shorter hair framing her beautiful face. Dressed in paint-smearred faded blue jeans, a gray sweater, and tan boots, she looked like an innocent, not some badass fighter. “If you like, we could use the path around the cliffs on the other side. It’s shorter but will take twice as long scrambling over boulders and rappelling dangerous rockfaces.”

He bit back a smile at her taunt. “Ely, I can take you on the rock you stand on and show you just how not tired I am.”

“I’m sure you can.” She rolled her eyes, leaped down again, and slipped her arm through his. “We can dematerialize to the castle if you like.”

He shook his head. In those last moments in the Infernii Realm, when he thought they’d never have more than those few stolen hours, it had torn him apart. “We’ll walk. I want every minute I can have with you, Ely.”

“It’s what I want too, and why I suggested a stroll.” She rubbed her cheek against his biceps, and tenderness for his mate seeped into him. He slipped his arm around her, and they started off again, tramping through the decaying leaves and twigs, avoiding the sludgy snow patches.

“So the boathouse is yours?”

“Ours,” she corrected. “It was gifted to me.” She filled him in on Hedori, a fellow Emyrean, who’d given her the boathouse, then spoke about her life in Emyrea...

“Wait.” He stopped her after a few minutes, eyes narrowing. “This Aethan who lives here now was your betrothed?” Through their bonded souls, he felt her amusement.

She laughed. “If my parents had their way. It didn’t matter that I saw him as another sibling. He’s my brother’s best friend...” She explained about him being banished for accidentally killing his little sister.

He frowned at hearing that, feeling the loss as if it were his own. Absently, he rubbed his chest and the ache there,

recalling his dream.

“What is it?” she asked, eyes dark with concern.

“It’s nothing,” he murmured. “It must have been painful.”

“Yes.” Her expression turned somber. “All of Empyrea grieved. Aethan lived with the guilt for millennia. I think meeting and falling for Echo, his mate, helped him overcome the self-blame. It was an accident. The child had somehow gotten into the fighting arena when his sword slipped from his hand...”

Silent now, they continued through the tall trees, the tops reaching up as if to touch the heavy gray clouds with promises of more snow to come and disperse them. Weak sunlight filtered through the vaporous mass as they cleared the forest, the soft beams caressing the acres of landscaped gardens currently covered with a layer of snow from the night before.

Nate halted, staring at the soaring castle some distance away. “Damn, that’s some serious pile of bricks.”

Ely burst out laughing. “It’s home.”

No matter the scenic setting, the massive, gothic castle with several imposing towers, crenelated battlements, and many turrets loomed over everything. Some kind of thick, creeping plant covered parts of the somber gray walls as if to hide its aura of peril. And failed.

“Come.” Ely grasped his hand and navigated the rolling gardens toward the building. They rounded the castle, passing many, many terraces.

“So, where exactly are we going?”

“The kitchen. It’s where they are right now. Well, most of them, anyway.”

Damn. Just how many of these Guardians were there? He knew a few of them by sight, had to, to stay off their radar, especially with the gory work he did for Azgor.

Then Nate stopped dead as a huge creature—a miniature mountain lion?—with thick soot-gray fur and an orange ruff

waddled past, ignoring them, its belly almost dragging on the ground. “What the hell is that?”

“Oh, it’s the king of the castle and our pet, Bob.”

“A cat named Bob?” He shook his head, and could feel Ely’s grin as the feline went into stalking mode. Who the hell knew what it saw in the snow-covered garden?

“He’s actually Echo’s pet. Don’t worry, sooner or later, he’ll let you know if you’re acceptable or not.”

Ely tugged him away from the cat, and they approached another terrace cleared of snow and edged with potted plants. A wrought iron table and chairs took up space on his left, the icy air heavily scented with fragrant herbs.

Her grip on his hand tightened as they took the few steps up. Hell, he wasn’t one for talking to groups of people, let alone his former enemies, but for her, he’d rearrange the stars in the sky if she wanted.

Ely opened one of the French doors and entered. He followed, stepping into the warmth of an enormous, open-plan kitchen and dining room, the air redolent with the scent of something savory cooking.

Several females were there, chatting and laughing with a tall male with steel-gray hair who worked at the window counter. The woman with the spiral auburn hair he’d met last night, Kira, hacked away at some veggies on the isle counter. His kin, Shadow, stood opposite her and was laying...salami? On bread already slathered with peanut butter. She rolled the thing up and took a bite.

Hades! That didn’t look good at all.

Since they all were facing away from the doors, no one noticed them. Yet.

Then Kira looked up, and grinned, revealing dimples. “Hey.”

Shadow pivoted. The chatter dropped. All eyes focused on them.

“You guys are here!” A wide smile split Shadow’s face. Weird sandwich in hand, she hurried over and gave them both a quick one-armed hug.

“Shadow,” he greeted.

“We, ah, overslept,” Ely said, her cheeks reddening, giving lie to her comment.

Shadow waved it off. “No worries—”

“What do you mean, *no worries?*” Kira laughed. “When we’re all dying with impatience here, waiting for you two to come over.”

Nate felt an unexpected smile start at the female’s effervescent exuberance. The other three females seated at the table with cups in front of them rose. All of them watched the scene with little smiles.

A beaming Ely put her hand on his arm. “Nate, these are my dearest friends. That’s Shae with the red hair, her mom, Jenna,” she pointed to the smaller woman with darker red hair, “and Darci.” She waved to the taller, curvy brunette. “Echo’s not here. She’s in a healing sleep. You’ll meet her in a few days. And that—” She indicated the male with the steel-colored hair. “Is Hedori. Our friend, butler, and bodyguard extraordinaire.”

“Everyone, this is my mate, Nate.”

Hello and hi, Nate, erupted from the females.

Hedori nodded. Though his expression remained neutral, his eyes were warm. Nate could feel the male’s affection for Ely.

“It’s good to see you happy, finally, my lady.”

“Hedori, please. It’s still Ely.”

Smiling at her grumbling, he inclined his head.

“It’s lunch soon. You guys are staying, yes?” Kira asked, scooping all her greens into a bowl.

Are you okay with that? Ely telepathed him.

I'm not gonna deny you time with your family, laika.

“Yes, we will,” she said, a wave of her happiness sweeping through him like a caress. “Anyway, I also need to move my clothes and other stuff to the boathouse.”

“Oh, Ely,” Shadow said, picking up a familiar obsidian dagger from the sideboard. “You dropped this outside on the front portico.”

Since Nate was closer, he accepted it. About to hand the weapon to Ely, the thing heated in his palm, glowing like the sun. *What the hell?*

Shocked gasps echoed through the kitchen.

Nate frowned. “What’s happening to the dagger? It never did this before.”

Ely laughed, grasping his hand holding the blade as the glow settled. “It’s yours now...” *It didn't connect with you previously because of your beast blocking our mating bond.*

Right. “Good to know. I had thoughts of taking it,” he teased. “After all, you did stab me with it—”

“What?” Kira gasped, and the others stared.

Her cheeks gone signal-red, Ely groaned, “He was being a pain in my butt when we first met. We fought...and yeah.” She bit her lip.

Nate smiled, giving her a break, studying the intricate design of the guard.

“Stealing it wouldn’t have worked anyway, not with this blade.” He looked up at the speaker, and the brunette, Darci, smiled. “No one can with an obsidian dagger. It’s a Guardian’s mate’s dagger.”

“That’s true,” Ely said softly. “It’s gifted to us when we first take our oaths with Gaia. This weapon can never get lost or stolen. Only our true mate can command it. And trust me on this, it’s a darn deadly blade when dealing with evil.”

Oh, he already knew that, considering the malevolent creature he’d housed, not that his past had been any better. But

thanks to his mate, he'd healed.

“*Oooh*, this is so exciting!” Shadow said, rubbing her rounded belly. “I’m so happy for you both. I just telepathed Nik that you guys are here.”

Nate set the dagger on the counter near him, glancing from one speaking female to the other, including his precious mate, feeling as if his eyeballs were a ping-pong ball, bouncing between them all. But he realized the significance of the blade. Always his to command. Good, because he didn’t have any weapon currently, didn’t even know what abilities he had with the new symbionts or if he still possessed the killing rage of the wraconis one—

The door opened, and two huge, tall males sauntered inside, one with cropped dark hair and electric blue eyes, looking more like he should be on some men’s fashion ‘zine, and the other with several warrior’s braids and animal-like yellow eyes Nate was sure never missed a thing. He’d had glimpses of both of them in the past couple of years but from a distance.

The door opened again. Nik and Blondie strolled in, and the latter cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Nate,” Nik nodded in greeting.

“Demon,” Blondie baited.

“He’s not.” Kira elbowed her mate in the ribs. “You saw those beautiful wings last night, Týr. He’s like Michael and Shae.”

“Oh, right,” he murmured, like he’d forgotten.

Asshole.

“You’ll get used to their warped attitude,” Ely said with a deep sigh. “Nate, that’s Dagan with the braids, he’s mated to Shae, and Blaéz is mated—”

“To this gorgeous female,” Blaéz said, slipping his arms around a smiling Darci. “So, do you play pool, foosball, or basketball?”

“A little of the first two, the latter, no.”

“No problem, you can catch up on basketball soon enough. We play—”

“Oh, no, no!” Ely muttered, followed by the other females’ groans.

“You don’t want to play with them.” Kira’s focus snapped back to Nate. “Especially Týr and Blaéz. They’re ruthless. They’ll take the clothes off your back if they can.”

“Just know, the bets are set at ten bucks for any game,” Ely added, casting a gimlet stare at the two males in question.

“Damn, El. Why would you ruin our fun, huh?” Týr grumbled.

And then Nate saw. These guys really were like brothers to his mate, the teasing, the affection, and protectiveness, even if the latter used to be against him. And for that alone, he let his irritation with Blondie slide.

“By the way, Nate,” Ely said suddenly, looking innocent as all hell. “I have a vintage Corvette, and I’d like to get a fresh paint job done. I’m thinking purple.”

Blondie froze, and the other guys chuckled.

He wasn’t sure what this was about, but he played along, sensing that somehow it was to nettle Blondie. “I can do that for you,” he said, then added, “Since it’s a girly car, how about a pink stripe along the body?”

“Awesome, I’d love that!” Her eyes gleamed now.

“Aw, El, I take it back. *You* do have a vindictive streak,” Blondie groaned. Then he smirked at Nate. “Let’s go, demon. And acquaint ourselves with these skills of yours.”

Nate snorted. He didn’t even care about the tag. He would never deny it was also a part of him. “It’s nice to have some serious competition, instead of drunk bikers and petty demons who don’t know how to lose with grace,” he drawled, casually tossing it in there that he wasn’t a newbie. “And yeah, you’re welcome to try, Blondie.”

Guffaws of laughter exploded.

The door behind them opened, and the archangel strode inside, bringing the icy chill of outside with him.

“Good, you’re here,” Michael said, pushing his aviator shades to the top of his head.

The archangel oozed so much power, it was a miracle the others weren’t struck unconscious, but they still chattered on. So, just him feeling it, then.

“Can we talk?” Michael asked him, and silence fell.

“Sure.” Not like he could say no because that wasn’t a request. But the stares from the others had Nate feeling a pow-wow alone was a rare thing.

Ely grabbed his hand, and they followed the archangel down the wide, elegant corridors. He could feel his mate’s wariness and wondered if his nads were on the line.

CHAPTER 36



IN THE ARC'S STUDY, Ely stopped near the French doors to the terrace, her heart knocking around her ribs. Nate shut the inner door behind him and crossed to her, his expression as unreadable as Michael's.

The Arc leaned against the shorter side of his L-shaped desk. "Tell me about your past, your meeting with the demon who's your sire."

Ely frowned.

"Aba?" Nate's expression hardened, and Ely felt his protective urge rise to the forefront. "He *saved* me when I was eight—"

"Actually, I met Nate first," Ely cut in.

The Arc's fractured blue eyes shifted to hers and narrowed. "What do you mean? This meeting would have occurred over two decades ago, Ely. You came here recently—"

"I know." She met Nate's warm gaze, then she told Michael what happened all those years ago, about escaping her world to this one, and to a young crashing into her. "I couldn't leave him alone. He was just a child," she said. "Then I heard one of the thugs chasing after him yell, *kill the brat.*"

Michael slowly straightened, his expression icy. "And it was Nate?"

"Yes. That's when I took him and dematerialized to another place. It was a suburb I now know as Brooklyn. I left

him with an older couple who'd stepped out of their brownstone."

"Obviously, I didn't stay with them. I mean, I'm here," Nate added, gently rubbing her back. "I don't remember my former life after the change, but it's likely I must have run after Ely." His caressing fingers slowed. "However, I recalled something last night. Probably going through the changes again triggered it."

Ely's gaze snapped to him. "And you didn't tell me?"

"I would have, *laika*. But so much has happened since Ys. I was simply trying to figure out everything." He said to Michael, "I remember looking for someone else—"

"Your mother?" she asked.

"I don't think so..." He rubbed his temples, brow creasing as if trying to dig out thoughts of his past. "All that lingers is immense pain at being shot and nothing after, until I awakened again."

Michael didn't speak for several seconds. Then, "Would you ask your sire to come over? I want to speak with him and see if he can shed more light on what happened back then."

"I don't have my cell," Nate said.

"Here." Michael handed his phone over before Ely offered hers.

Nate's mouth tightened, but he accepted it.

Did he not want Michael to speak with Aba? Ely frowned. His tension wrapped around her in a chokehold.

He tapped the number, then deleted it, and slowly tapped it in again, a tic working his jaw. She recalled the last time he put *his* number on her cell, he'd been the same way.

"I'll make the call," she offered, removing her phone from her jeans pocket.

"I got this." He put the cell to his ear. "Aba, could you come over to the castle? Yeah, I'm fine, thanks." He returned

the cell to Michael. “He’ll be here. He’s finishing off with a client. The wards?”

“Will be lowered,” Michael said, still studying Nate, making Ely uneasy.

Nate nodded, opened the French doors, and stepped outside as if needing space.

Ely bit her lip and followed. “Nate, what is it—”

“Echo, dammit, wait!”

At Aethan’s yell, Ely wheeled around. Nate stepped closer, putting his hand on her back as a panting Echo rushed past a frowning Michael. She grabbed the doorjamb, breathing hard, dressed only in pajamas and thick socks on her feet. Her face was far too pale beneath her honey complexion, and her spikily cut hair stood out in every direction. Wide, panic-stricken bi-colored eyes latched onto them.

“Dammit, Echo,” Aethan grunted, stopping at her side, his gunmetal grays dark with worry. “You could hurt yourself and give me a damn heart attack, bolting awake and rushing out of our quarters like the very devil’s after you.” He put a woolen coat on her shoulders and dropped her furry slippers on the floor.

Echo didn’t respond or seem to hear Aethan, but she pushed her feet into the slippers, then shuffled across the terrace to where they stood near the few steps leading down to the snow-covered lawn, stopping a foot from them. She stared up at Nate, blinking rapidly, her overlong bangs falling into her eyes.

“Echo?” Ely said softly, concerned now. “What is it?”

But her friend didn’t look at her, her focus only on Nate.

He stared at Echo for a long second, then blinked, confusion rolling over his features.

“Keta?” she whispered, reaching up to touch his jaw.

Aethan growled.

Ely’s stomach clenched.

Nate looked like he'd been tasered. He rubbed his chest as if it hurt. Hell, Ely could feel his utter shock even more through their soul bond.

"I know you," he whispered. "Your eyes..." He let Ely go, reached out a hand, and gently brushed back strands of the shaggy bangs dipping into Echo's eyes. "Unforgettable."

Aethan growled and strode across or attempted to, but Michael grabbed his arm, stopping him. "Wait."

The warrior glowered but stood by like a barely leashed tiger.

Ely watched Nate and Echo, unsure what was happening. And hastily shut off her thoughts from going elsewhere. She trusted Nate. Whatever this was, they'd find out soon enough. Because Nate would never look at another female the way he looked at her, a soul-joining assured that.

"How could I have forgotten you?" Nate asked roughly, still staring into her eyes. With a soft groan, he drew her into his arms, his expression broken. "I'm so sorry."

His roiling emotions blasted Ely like she'd been shot, followed by immense pain, guilt, and then joy.

"You left me," Echo choked out.

"It was never intentional."

Echo pulled back, her face wet with tears, and at the agony and confusion on Aethan's face, Ely could understand. A part of her was starting to feel the same way.

"A while ago, the dreams started," Echo whispered, and Ely stilled. "Always flames surrounding me...then I saw you. I didn't know you, but somehow, I knew you in here." She touched her chest, over her heart. "And it hurt that you were leaving again, forever. There was so much fire around you, I tried to stop you. You left anyway."

Ely froze. *She saw Nate falling off a ledge in that volcano?*

"No, I didn't—I mean, I did." Nate shook his head, his raven hair so like Echo's, shifting about his shoulders, caught Ely's attention.

“I lost my memory of everything,” he said, voice like gravel. “And that of my family, too.”

Wait, what? Ely gaped. And then the pieces fitted, the familiarity when she first saw him. Goosebumps flooded her arms, her heart beating violently as if it would crash through her ribs, too scared to believe the truth glaring at her, but hoping—gods, hoping it was true.

Aethan stepped closer to Ely. “You know anything about this?” he asked.

Ely shook her head, her mind still reeling.

Then Nate was speaking again. “I’m so sorry, Esha. I only know that now because of...” He looked at Ely, and with a tender smile, he held out his hand. Ely crossed to him, and he drew her close. “It was because of this female, my mate. She gave me back my life, and now you.”

His joy flared brighter than the sun, like a galaxy of stars coalescing within her.

“Ely, this is my sister, Eshana.”

CHAPTER 37



DEAD SILENCE FELL as if a wind had swooshed in and wiped out every sound at his revelation.

Nate kissed Ely's head. Oh, he might have been talking to his sister, but the peril nailing him from the warrior with eyes like titanium bullets, as if he would rip Nate apart, had him snorting. Like any female could take the place of his incredible mate.

A wave of her warmth seeped through him, and he hugged Ely.

"Actually, it's Echo now," his sister said with a wan smile. "I was adopted, and my name changed."

Right. He only hoped she had a better life than him.

His *sister*. Hell, it hit like a punch in the solar plexus. She, he realized, was whom he'd been searching for in the memories from last night! Hers was the face of the child he dreamed of recently because he now recalled those bi-colored eyes, the shallow chin dimple...

"Ely?" His sister held both of his mate's hands, her wet silver and gold eyes bright with happiness. "It's a miracle that the Fates led you to my brother and brought him to me eventually." She dashed her cheeks with her knuckles, glanced over her shoulder to the blue-haired male, reached out, grasped his hand, and towed him over.

"Keta, this is my mate," she said with a shaky smile. "Aethan, my brother, Ket...Ketan—" Her eyes widened. "I remember your full name." She laughed.

“It...feels familiar...” he murmured, gripping Ely tighter. Her presence alone kept him focused and upright because this discovery of his sister made him feel as if his knees would cave.

I’m always here for you, Ely telepathed.

He cast her a quick, grateful smile.

“You feel different from yesterday,” Aethan told him, brow furrowing, the death glare gone.

“Yeah. The change,” Nate said.

“Wait, wait.” Echo held up a hand to her mate. “*You* know my brother, too?”

“No, *me’morae*, I don’t.” He brushed her overlong bangs falling into her eyes, and Nate could feel the warrior’s concern. Despite her honey-gold color, she appeared far too pale, almost ashen.

Was she sick?

“What change, Keta?” she asked Nate, distracting him.

“Long story. Later, I’ll fill you in.”

“Whoa—” She swayed and grabbed onto Aethan’s arm. “Don’t feel so good.”

“Yes, because you shot out of bed like a bat from hell, running around when you should still be in a healing sleep,” Aethan muttered his displeasure, sweeping her up into his arms.

“I wasn’t running around.” She sighed wearily and settled against him. “I felt this pull and couldn’t stop myself.”

“You’re sick?” Nate asked her.

“Not exactly, long story for later,” she reiterated his words.

“Let’s take this inside,” Michael, who’d stood aside as all this unfolded, finally spoke.

Aethan strode indoors with his sister—hell, his *sister*!

“Who would have thought,” Ely whispered, giving him a single-arm hug. “When I found the love of *my* life, that *you*

would find your sister.”

“I never expected it, but this...” He shook his head, emotions overwhelming him. This female who fought for him even when he’d given up, she believed. Now here he was.

“You knew about this?” Aethan demanded of the archangel after seeing Echo seated near the burning fireplace.

“No.” Michael’s expression hardened. “Not until last night did I have an inkling.”

“Echo?” Ely hurried over and took the seat next to his sister. “Are you all right?”

“I don’t know.” Echo grimaced, seeming as if it was an effort to do even that. “I guess it’s because I still feel drained like I’m about to collapse.”

Nate frowned, her weakness and exhaustion tightening around him like barbed wires. Before he was even aware, he found himself crossing to her. He hunkered down by the two females who meant the most to him. He took both Echo’s hands in his.

She blinked in confusion, then she slowly sat up as his instincts took over...and his energy flowed to her...

Both her eyes started to glow an eerie, swirling silver—

“What are you doing?” Aethan growled.

Nate ignored him as he let his sister feed on his energy...

Right in front of him, her paleness vanished, her lethargy faded, and her eyes shone, one sparkling like the cool moon, the other bright like the sun.

Echo exhaled sharply, seeming to come back to herself. She blinked, seeming to take stock of herself, then she grasped his hands. “I don’t know what you did, but thank you! I feel so much better!”

“Echo?” Aethan crouched at her other side, studying her face. She smiled at him, curling a blue ribbon of his unbound hair around her finger, and Nate rose. He grasped Ely’s hand and drew her away.

Damn, the room was small. He stood at the open door once more, breathing in deeply, aware he needed to recharge soon. Thank the damn stars he only had to wait for night and the moonlight to do so now.

“Nate?” Ely stepped in front of him. “What is it?”

He smiled and wrapped his arms around her. “Nothing I can’t handle.” He met Michael’s gaze. So many things weren’t adding up, yet he sensed this angel knew the answers. “What’s going on?”

“In a minute.”

A knock sounded.

“Come in,” Michael called out.

The door opened. Hedori stood aside, and Aba walked in.

“Thank you for your time,” Michael said to his sire.

Aethan rose to his feet, as did Echo, looking much better now.

Aba nodded in greeting, his dark gaze taking in everyone. He crossed to Nate’s side, and Ely smiled at him and did the intro. “Aba, that’s Aethan and his mate, Echo.”

“She’s my sister,” Nate added.

Aba’s head snapped to him. “Your what?”

Nate smiled. “Later, we’ll fill you in.”

“Just as well you’re both here,” Michael said to Echo and her mate. His attention shifted back to Aba. “You mentioned an angel gave you the symbiotic blood?”

* * *

Ely still couldn’t get over her shock that one of her friends was a biological kin to her mate. Or that Nate had actually aided her recovery.

“Symbionts?” Echo asked, dragging Ely’s mind back. “You mean like Shadow’s?”

Aba nodded. “The angel’s plasma retained a glow through the millennia I had it until I gave Nate the blood to save him from going through a painful change.”

“What?” Echo gasped, her features ashen again.

“It’s okay. I’m good now,” Nate reassured her.

“Exactly how long ago?” Michael asked.

“Humanity was still in its infancy,” Aba said, and the archangel went dead still as if he’d stopped breathing. “I was in this world for a brief period when our paths crossed. I remember him, not only because of the way he cut himself and gave me his blood but because of the tragedy that occurred soon after our meeting.”

“What tragedy?” Ely frowned.

“Hundreds of angels were killed soon after,” Aba said. “It seemed they’d strayed from their Heavenly cause to aid burgeoning humanity, broke their vows, and took on human females as mates.”

Aethan and Echo both appeared as if they’d been tasered. Ely had no idea what was going on. And Nate didn’t either, judging by his frown. But Echo and Aethan had an inkling, given their tense expressions.

“Description?” Michael asked, sounding like he had gravel lodged in his throat.

“Tall and built like a warrior, flowing silver hair and wings to match. No—” Aba’s brow creased. “His wings were white, yes, white with the silver and gold flight feathers...like the ones Nate now possesses.”

Michael pivoted to the French doors and slammed a palm on the doorjamb. He shook his head, staring outside.

“What the hell’s going on, Michael,” Aethan growled.

After several seconds, he turned and faced them, those shattered blues roiling with the power, the silvery fissures flashing like a lightning storm. “Zarias.”

“Zarias?” Echo whispered.

Ely's gaze bounced between them. She'd heard that name mentioned a time or two. Mostly of Echo grumbling at having to learn about those angels long gone.

Michael's lips thinned briefly, and he nodded. "Zarias was the leader of the Watchers. Both Nate and Eshana are his descendants. As Aba said, they strayed from their cause. My duty back then was to right the wrongs. It seems he had an insight into their oncoming demise and took steps to ensure his line survived."

Then Ely recalled hearing the rumor even back on Empyrea about these angels being executed. She'd been a child then and hadn't paid it much attention.

"But why kill angels for falling in love?" she demanded, shock and anger churning her stomach. "People, no matter what they are, should be free to love whomever they want."

"Not for those in service to a higher Being."

"You mean God?" Echo asked.

Michael nodded. "It is the decree. When you deviate from your vows and fall, you lose your wings and powers. The latter started because of the Watchers."

"What does this mean? Why would this Zarias do that?" Nate asked, his expression grim. "Give his heart's blood away?"

"Foresight. He was always aware of what could happen," Michael murmured. "I think I understand now why after I witnessed what you did for Eshana. After all, she is the *Curantii*, the Healer of the Veils. And while Aethan is her protector and keeps her safe during those times, it seems you are the one who brings her back with healing."

Aethan's gaze snapped to him, then he strode across and embraced Nate, startling and pleasing Ely.

"Thank you for what you did and will do," the warrior said. "These rift healings were slowly killing an important part of her. I feel it more after every ruptured veil she heals. She comes back like a part of her spirit has faded. And this last one was bad."

“You didn’t tell me you knew?” Echo whispered from behind him, eyes dark with shock.

Aethan faced her. “We are soul-joined, *me’morae*. I feel you. But how could I give you my pain when you endure so much? It was eating me alive, knowing your longer sleep wasn’t aiding you much, because replenishing your essence is the one thing you couldn’t do. So I tried to be your strength. But it wasn’t helping you, either.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered, her expression stricken. “I didn’t want you to worry. I thought I needed more time and sleep to get stronger again.”

“Never hide these things from me, Echo.” He brushed her overlong bangs from her bi-colored eyes.

Ely pressed her face against Nate’s biceps, her own eyes damp. While she merely killed evil, Echo did so much more that it cost her, her health, and none of them knew a thing.

“I’m glad you’re here for her,” she told Nate softly, then her gaze shot up to his. “Does healing Echo affect you in any way?” she asked, anxious for her mate now.

“I’m fine, *laika*.” He tucked her hair behind her ears. “I don’t know what the long-term repercussions will be, if there are any, but I’m okay.”

“You will tell me?”

His eyes softened, and he nodded. “Being who we are, nothing is straightforward, is it?”

“Keta—I mean, Nate,” Echo called out. “Do you know what happened to our parents?”

“A little, and what Ely told me she’d heard that night.” He exhaled deeply. “I don’t recall where we came from, but it was...a mugging, I think. There was a scuffle...gunshots went off. Our mother pushed me to run and hide when I tried to help her. Our father...he lay there unmoving. There was so much blood...” He massaged his temple with one hand, the other gripping Ely hard. His anguish—fresh for him as he recalled fragments of his past—swept through her. “She told me to run, and I did...I’m so sorry.”

Echo shook her head, eyes bright with tears. “You were a child, too.”

“But I was older, I should have protected you!”

Ely rubbed her chest, their torment puncturing her heart.

Nate moved away from Ely to the bookshelves at the back of the study. Head lowered, he scrubbed his face as if to get control of himself. Then he pivoted, but his features were pale beneath his bronze skin, eyes stark with grief. “What happened to you?”

Echo swiped her overlong bangs away from her wet eyes. “I don’t remember anything of our past, only that our parents died in a mugging. It’s what my foster family told me...” She frowned. “I’d awakened in a hospital, so I must have been hurt, too. There was no next of kin, and I ended up in the foster care system, but when that got too hard... The-the family I lived with weren’t nice people.” Her lips trembled. Aethan put a hand on her back, steadying her, and she leaned into him as she continued. “I escaped and lived on the street for a few years until I was found by a savior who adopted me.” Her voice hitched.

He nodded several times before speaking. “I’m...I’m sorry for what you endured. Life truly fucked us up.”

“Fate is a damn bitch,” Aethan muttered, a dark note to his tone.

Michael, who remained near the French doors, appeared as if he’d been carved in granite, listening to Nate and Echo uncover what they recalled of their past.

But Nate’s anger and pain settled over Ely like a dark cloud. She crossed to him and put her hand on his back, trying to comfort him. “At least you have your sister now, Nate,” she said softly.

He glanced at her, and the sorrow in his eyes lifted a little. “I have her because of you, *laika*.”

“If there is no further need for me,” Aba’s voice broke the dense atmosphere, “I must get back to the garage.”

All eyes turned to him. *Vae*, they were so involved with their own pain that they'd forgotten him.

"Aba—" Nate was already walking across. "I didn't mean to ignore you—"

"It's all right, *cnati*." He waved it off. "It makes my heart happy to know you found your kin. However, I do have to get back to the garage."

"Thank you for your time," Michael said then, and Aba nodded.

Nate hugged his sire. "I'll be by later this evening to work on those jobs waiting."

Aba pulled back, blinking in surprise.

"My personal life changed, Aba," he said dryly. "Not my relationship with you or my work at the garage," he clarified. "Being Azgor's *Sicari* isn't a label I want on me any longer."

"Job?" Michael asked, expression thoughtful.

Ely had an inkling of what played in his mind, recruiting another powerful male into Guardian life, and she took great pleasure in informing her leader, "Oh, Nate's a mechanic, did you know? It's what he wants now. He's rebuilding a Charger between his other work, and it looks good." Not that she'd seen it.

Nate merely shrugged. "I like what I do. I want a quieter life."

"Pity," Michael said with a faint smile. "You change your mind, let me know."

Nate snorted. "Unlikely. I've had enough of killings and bloodshed."

Aba crossed to the French doors, then glanced back. "It will be good to continue having you in my life, *cnati*." He stepped out onto the terrace.

"Wait, wait!" Echo hurried after him, and Aba turned. "Thank you for taking care of him. Keta means everything to me."

“He is my son. I would do anything for him.” Then he frowned. “Keta?” he asked.

“Ketan, actually. That’s his name,” Echo explained. “I couldn’t say his name properly as a child. But you call him *Nate*?” Her eyebrows tipped together.

“Natek,” he murmured. “It’s what he revealed to me as his name.” His gaze slipped to Nate. “He didn’t speak for a while after I saved him. I understood trauma could do that. Then, one day he wrote it down for me as N.A.T.E.K., since he didn’t like being called *child*.”

And the truth struck Ely.

Are you dyslexic? she mind-linked with Nate.

His jaw clenched briefly then he gave a barely perceptible nod. *Yeah.*

Finally, she understood his frustration with the cell digits, and then typing her name when she first gave him her number. It all made sense.

“He wrote it backward...?” Echo murmured, her forehead furrowing.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “I hated things like writing since it always came out the other way around. Aba homeschooled me, and it helped. Now, it’s not so bad. Just numbers annoy me at times.”

Echo laughed, and Ely smiled, her heart squeezing at his droll, self-deprecation. More, she was glad he’d worked past what had obviously been a handicap, and considering what he’d gone through, aye, Nate was amazing. And hers.

With a nod at them, Aba left in a flash.

“Well,” Ely said. “If the meeting’s over, I have things to do. Stuff to move—”

“You’re moving?” Echo asked, cheeks paling. Her gaze rushed to Nate. “But I just found you.”

“Only to the boathouse,” Nate said. “I like the sea. It’s... soothing.”

“Thank God!” she expelled a deep breath, her relief palpable. “Besides, we have so much to catch up on.”

“So,” Aethan said. “You don’t want to be a Guardian. Do you play pool, foosball—”

“Aethan, stop,” Ely groaned. “Týr already tried that, took him through the whole spiel. He knows.”

“Wasn’t doing anything.” Aethan laughed. “But good that he knows.”

“Ely, I know the girls are dying to talk to you,” Echo said, hooking her arm through Ely’s. “Let me help you pack, and you can fill us in on how you met my brother.”

“Oh, she stabbed me.” Nate deadpanned.

Ely glowered. “You put me on a rooftop!”

“Only to keep *you* safe, *laika*.”

And there was no rejoinder for that, so she rolled her eyes.

He smiled. *Go, do what you need, my heart, and I’ll get to know these males you call brothers.*

Ely nodded, happy that he and Aethan seemed to click, and her heart squeezed with happiness for her mate, who’d never known what true friendship was all about.

“When your heart lives outside your body,” Aethan’s low voice drifted to her. “It’s damn terrifying.”

“As I’m starting to learn,” Nate responded.

Echo cast her a covert glance and said quietly, “They don’t seem to understand we feel the same way about them.”

CHAPTER 38



“BE careful out there at nights, Ely,” Nate said the moment they reformed in the alley near the garage later that evening. Night cloaked the place with a dense black, broken by the building lights. The freezing air had their breath escaping in a vaporous mist.

“I always am,” she murmured, pushing her hands in her pockets.

Nate shoved back a swathe of inky hair slipping free of his tethered ponytail to frame his gorgeous face as he glanced about. Somewhere in the distance, the cheery sounds of a Christmas jingle played. Ely knew those tunes because Kira played them often.

“Remember, I’m at the garage if you need me, a mind-link away.”

“I know.” She let his protectiveness slide because she would have said the same thing had he been going off on patrol. “And you be good,” she teased. “No feeling up the body of the Charger.”

He cast her an amused sideways stare. “Why? When I have a living, breathing dream with me now, a dream I want to take right here, against this wall, and remind myself I’m one lucky bastard.”

Her heart fisted at his words.

“What’s stopping you?” she taunted, aware she was provoking him. But how could she resist when her mate looked like something out of an erotic fantasy? He didn’t

bother with a coat since he didn't feel the cold and would be working at the garage, and he looked delicious in a black tee, jeans, and biker boots.

He slowed his steps. She looked back, arching an eyebrow. And the next minute, he had her against the wall, his hips pressed against hers. Even though she wore leathers, she could feel his hard cock between the V of her thighs. He sucked her lower lip before kissing her, his tongue finding and sucking hers in a deeply carnal kiss. He slid his hands up her torso and under her breasts to hold her against the wall, and her breath caught, desire stirring.

"Next time, wear a skirt," he said against her panting mouth. "Then sinking into you will be a damn sight easier."

She stifled a moan and scoffed, "Not in some cold, stinky alley."

"Hell, Ely," he groaned. "Reacting to your baiting isn't good for me or healthy for my dick."

"C'mon." She smiled, hooking her arm through his and tugging him out of the alley. "I'll walk up with you and say hi to Aba—"

Icy prickles cascaded down her arms. The Gaian weapon inked on her biceps stirred, alerting her to peril. "Trouble."

"The garage!" he growled.

They both dematerialized, reforming a second later behind the garage workshop near the huge dumpsters and a small lot. A horde of demons fought a lone figure. Aba.

Though he fought fast, his blows deadly with the dagger he wielded, he bled from several slashes. But those asses weren't so thoughtful, using perilous hellfire bolts, hitting the walls, the sounds like thunder booming as debris exploded. Damn curs!

They would have humans calling the cops to report this.

Nate dove into the scourges, fighting with his bare fists, evading their blows. Hell, he fought in death fights, so she

wasn't surprised he knew every move there probably was in any fight category.

Her Gaian weapon moved in agitation. Staff summoned, she spun and found the two sneaking up on her. They grinned as if high on some trippy narcotics, apparently believing she was an easy target.

“That little stick?” one taunted, revealing his fangs. Blood demons.

In preternatural speed, she moved, weapon spinning, slicing him and his pal across the chest in one blow. Staff split in two, she hurled the deadly glaives, and they jammed in their throats. They gurgled and grabbed the blades, lurching backward, trying to remove them, but couldn't.

Damn *fossers*. Always underestimating her.

Weapons recalled and palmed, she blurred forward, wheeled around, glaives swinging in a deadly arc. Heads fell. Blood gushed. The demons fell to their knees. She didn't bother watching them deflate and vanish; she spun to the rest of the horde Nate battled singlehandedly.

Where was Aba?

About to dive into the fray, a pained moan distracted her. Near the boundary wall, a human curled against the stacked crates, reeking of terror, his hand pressed to his throat, blood seeping between his fingers. It was the clerk who worked in the convenience store at the garage.

Torn at wanting to help Nate, she knew, too, she couldn't let the man die.

Weapons dismissed. Ely sprinted toward the human. He scrambled away from her, his fear scraping her psyche like rusty nails. “I'm not going to hurt you,” she said softly. “Just the bad guys. Let me help you, okay?”

Ely crouched at his side and moved his hand away. Blood gushed from the puncture holes in his neck. Assholes missed his carotid, or he would have already been gone to his maker. She held her palm over it and let her healing power flow into his injury.

“Angel?” he whispered.

She smiled, letting him have something to hang onto while she worked.

“They appeared out of nowhere,” he panted. “Vampires. Red eyes. They started knocking things down in the shop. Then they grabbed me, dragged me to the back, and drank my blood,” he gabbled on. “Aba came out. More of them appeared, and the fight started. But vampires don’t exist, do they?”

Damn insufferable *fossers*. “Look at me...” she added a compulsion to her tone. When his gaze met hers, she scrubbed his mind clean. But faced with the blood stains on his collar, she made a small cut on his palm to explain the bloody mess, adding the thought he’d tripped and hurt his hand. Then she sent him off.

“How are you not dead?”

At the grating taunt, Ely shot to her feet. A tall, androgynous demon with pale skin and hair confronted Nate, holding Aba in a chokehold, his other hand fisting a dagger plunged into Aba’s chest. Two minions guarded his rear.

“You had your wings ripped out, couldn’t shift properly, and here you are, back to a frail human.”

“Let him go,” Nate said, ignoring the baiting, but Ely felt his rage, and she itched to gut the wretch. “My sire’s done nothing to you! It’s *me* you want.”

“True. You’ve been a blight on my existence for too long. Even *my* sire sees you—a *vyerav’k*—as more fucking important than his own offspring!” His eyes flashed a dark neon red, revealing the vile plague he was.

This insipid reed was Derrodus? Then she recalled where she’d seen him before. In the alley, the first time she’d bumped into Nate. He’d reeked of rapacious hunger then.

For what?

To feed on emotions? Steal souls? The latter would turn him from demon to demonii. And she would have killed him.

“So you faked your death to get at me?” Nate growled.

“I even spelled the damn dagger I stabbed you with before your fight,” Derrodus retorted. “But that shit didn’t work. It didn’t even make you vulnerable to death.”

What? Ely froze. Nate never told her about any spell.

“What is that smell?” Derrodus inhaled deeply, then he groaned, long and slow, his eyes flickering to where she stood. “You brought the unicorn. Beautiful.”

Her jaw clenched at the nickname. The urge to kill the cur had her clenching her fingers, seconds from using the shadows to wring the life out of him.

* * *

Nate ground his teeth, surprised the enamel didn’t crack from the anger gushing through him. How dare this piss-stain inhale his mate’s scent! Her arousal from their brief kiss had faded, but this mofo had picked up its trace. The need to kill the fucker dug its claws deep into him, but he couldn’t, not with the asshole using Aba as a shield and with that damn dagger plunged into his sire’s chest.

“Go, *cnati*,” Aba panted. “I can die in peace knowing you are well.”

“No!” he snapped.

“Son? Really, Aamon?” Derrodus snorted. “This *vyerav’k* weakling? That’s what he is now, isn’t he? Back to his true self? I’ve waited for this moment.” He sneered at Nate. “Always strutting about as if you’re above all of us when you are *nothing*. My sire’s *symbiont* was what gave you that strength.” He shook his head in disbelief. “But you had to be the one fuck that could keep a dangerous shifter symbiont under control even with a spell on you. Yes, I found out the truth about the symbiont when you lay, supposedly dying in Ys, and the unicorn destroyed it.”

Nate wanted to tear the bastard to shreds, but his talons were no more—why wasn’t Aba fighting? His sire was ace at

combat, yet he appeared resigned, letting this asshole hold onto him by the dagger lodged in his chest—

Shit! The smug piss-stain must have used a spelled weapon or something to bind his sire. It was Derrodus' signature fallback.

“Let him go, and you can have me.” Nate spread out his arms. “I no longer have the shifter symbiont and none of its powers, either.”

Derrodus chuckled, the sound like ice shattering. His minions behind him tittered.

“You make it so easy, *Sicari...*” His avaricious gaze shifted to Ely. “*I want her.* The human females in the other demesne, their sexual energy is like sewer water, but hers...” He groaned, twisting the blade deeper into Aba's chest. His sire's jaw clenched. “It's like a life-giving sustenance.”

A dark rage swept through Nate—*Ely's* fury. She moved—
No! This is my fight, Ely. My vengeance!

Nate held onto his bubbling anger as her frustration swept through him. This bastard was pushing him, testing him. If he made any move, the coward would kill his sire. He had to get him away from Aba.

“You and Pangur?” Nate snapped, trying to distract him, had no idea if they were in cohorts with each other.

Amped up on his ego, Derrodus snorted. “Pangur wanted power. He hunted you for your weakness and symbiont, making everything so easy for me...” In a blur, the cur flung out a power blast with one hand.

Nate barely evaded the perilous blow to his chest, Ely's anxiety rolling within him. And he shut down their mate bond, he didn't want her sensing his unease at not knowing what his abilities were now, or if he had any at all. No matter, he could still fucking fight without weapons—

“Powerless, indeed.” The ass laughed. “Finally, I get to be the one to take down the champion of the death arena.” Derrodus couldn't stop his freakin' crowing. “Know this,

Sicari, I will fuck her in my pleasure den. Don't worry, she will enjoy it. Everyone will revere me when I let them feed on her sweet orgasmic energy—”

Nate's tightly leashed control snapped. He flashed out his hand, and Derrodus froze for a second, then snarled, “You will regret that!”

Red-faced, he pulled out the dagger, and punched his fist into Aba's chest, a pained grunt echoed. The vermin yanked hard and held out his sire's pumping heart, dripping blood. Aba collapsed to the ground.

“*No!*” An icy wave of rage slung out of Nate and shot toward Derrodus, freezing him along with the flame he'd produced to incinerate Aba's beating heart. Something else within Nate uncoiled as if all his cells, every single atom stretched and shifted then coalesced together, reforming. Nate flung out his hands, and Derrodus rose from the ground.

“What the hell?” he snarled.

Ely blurred toward the demon, leaped high, and grabbed the shuddering heart. “Get Aba!”

Males—Guardians—appeared, and one of them carried his sire's crumpled form away. Power roiled within Nate, and he watched it all unfold as if from a distance.

Derrodus screeched. His neck tendons bulging, he fought Nate's invisible restraints, grunting as he strained to summon his powers and break free. Then he stilled, brow creasing in confusion. He stared at his pale hands, beading with red dots, and scrubbed furiously at his skin, but only succeeded in spreading the bloody smears. More globules of red formed on his face and neck, plasma seeping from every pore, every orifice.

His two minions shrieked and flashed away.

“I'll get those scourges,” a male grunted.

Nate's rage didn't subside. Retribution burned through his every molecule. His back grew heavy.

Derrodus' bleeding eyes widened. "What blackened spell is this?"

"No spell," Nate said, tone flat, his massive appendages fluttering out behind him. "Payback."

"*Angel wings?* No! You're *nothing*. A weakling with no symbiooooo—"

Derrodus folded over. Nate released his psychic hold on the vermin, and he fell to the asphalt on his knees, shrieking and grabbing his head.

"I am your reckoning, scourge!"

The demon's eyeballs rolled out of their sockets and fell in messy plops to the ground. His body caved and started to melt, his screams morphing into whimpers of pure agony.

Absently, Nate watched as the demon's head compressed, and his sniveling stopped. Gray matter and gore oozed from every orifice. He collapsed to the asphalt in a bloody mess of liquified flesh and bones.

"Damn. That power's similar to what Jenna once possessed," someone muttered.

"Guess it had to go back to its source," another said. "But that sure is some scary shit."

A ball of churning dark fog lifted out of the puddle of Derrodus, hovered, then flew off to the side. An annoyed grunt echoed in the absolute stillness. "Shit, that's one soul of pure malevolence. I feel it..."

The convo faded.

As the rage within Nate settled, his thoughts crashed back online. The moon cast a pale light over the grisly scene marring the slushy asphalt. Nate inhaled sharply and shut his eyes, letting the silver rays seep through him. His pulsing symbionts siphoned the light's energy as his entire being resettled...

He opened his eyes and found himself several feet in the air, and Derrodus, a pile of gory decomposing mess on the asphalt.

Fuck, he was back to destroying.

Bloodier than ever!

Without even throwing a punch—

Ely!

Nate spun around in the air, wings flapping, to find the Guardians next to his mate. She knelt on the asphalt, holding his sire, who still breathed. Thank fuck! Gratitude swamped him. His mate had clearly healed Aba.

No one spoke, everyone looking up at him.

“Well,” Týr said. “That’s some seriously scary-ass ability. You should join us.”

Nate shook his head, inhaling another harsh breath, his mind—his heart—on the one person who mattered. Who hadn’t said a word, moved an inch, or even blinked as she stared at him.

Ely had seen him at his worst, in the death fight, and now this.

Wings spread, he coasted back to the ground, then concealed his appendages in a smooth whoosh.

And then she was sprinting to him. “Nate! Are you all right?” Her gaze rushed over him, searching.

“I am. *Now.*” He dragged her close and simply held her. “I thought I left all this killing behind, that I was normal now, or as normal as one like me can be. But, apparently, it’s not to be.”

Ely pulled back. “You’re a descendant of a powerful angel, the leader of the Watchers, Nate. You could never be normal.”

“Who also possesses demon blood,” he muttered, stroking the tip of his fangs with his tongue as he scanned his sire. All appeared well. “You okay?” he asked anyway.

“I’m fine. And healed. That idiot seemed to forget I’m as old as his sire. As if a spell would take me out.” He rubbed his healed chest, then grimaced at the blood on his shirt. “The incantation merely kept me immobilized.”

“I figured,” Nate said.

“But he had to rip out my heart.” His lips twisted, then he smiled at Ely. “Thank you, child, for gifting me back this old heart.”

Her shock rolled through Nate. “I would never destroy your heart! Only evil ones,” she added.

Aba shook his head, smiling.

“Nate?” She grasped his t-shirt, worry darkening her beautiful eyes. “Won’t Azgor come after you? Now that his son is truly dead by your hand?”

Aba answered. “It’s unlikely Derrodus revealed his trickery to his sire. As far as Azgor knows, Derrodus is already dead. And it will remain that way.”

Blaéz appeared in a swirl of night air. “Got those two fuckers. Why do they think they can run once they’re in our sights?”

“Maybe they like you chasing them,” Týr taunted, and Blaéz smirked.

Did you call them? Nate mind-linked her.

No. They can sense supernatural evil. And this demon was reeking of it once his cloaking fell.

“Well, we certainly have more excitement in our life now,” Aethan drawled, kicking snow over the spot where Derrodus’ remain had been. “You good?” he asked Nate, raking back his unbound blue hair, revealing a glint of the small, silver earrings he wore.

“Yeah...” Hell, he’d done worse in his life, but having a power like that still boggled his mind. “Just never expected this kind of ability to happen.”

He nodded. “Later, then.”

Then they all dematerialized, finally leaving them alone.

Ely smiled and hugged him, but her heart still pounded hard against his chest. “I’m so glad your abilities have

appeared, and deadly ones at that. I know you hate it, but at least you'll have the upper hand if trouble comes."

"Why do I need them? When I have my gorgeous, badass mate to keep me safe?"

"You can bet your sexy butt, I will." Then she sighed and eased back. "I have to go, too."

"Wait." He pulled off his tee. It was ruined anyway, with his wings shooting out. He took her hands, still sporting smears of his sire's blood, and cleaned them for her.

Smiling, she gave him a quick kiss as he finished up, then with a little wiggle of her clean fingers, his mate glided off in her high-heeled—and sexy as fuck—boots, disappearing around the corner.

Dragging in a deep breath, Nate rubbed a finger over his lips, savoring the imprint of her mouth.

"You'll see her soon enough, *cnati*."

He snorted at his sire's teasing. "I know. I didn't expect to ever feel this way about anyone. And she..." He glanced back at the corner. "It's like she's the other part of me." Hell, Aethan was right. "It's like my heart lives outside my body, and I'd do anything to protect her."

"You love her." Aba patted his arm, then rubbed his healed chest again. "I can understand your need to keep her safe, but that female can take care of herself. Did you know she not only commands the shadows to do her bidding, but she can also walk through walls? I need a clean shirt." He strolled off into the workshop.

Nate gaped at his sire's retreating figure. He flashed and caught up. "What do you mean, walk through walls?"

"How do you think she got into that mountain in the treacherous Infernii Realm when it shut, locking us out after you walked through the closing gap?" Aba laughed at his confusion. "Come, *cnati*, let me tell you about your mate..."

CHAPTER 39



ELY MADE her way up the dark alley in the early hours of the morning, her boots squelching in the mush as snowflakes drifted down. The hours moved at a snail's pace, the chill encapsulating her. She shuddered and hastily upped her body temperature, so ready for patrolling to be over, and she could meet up with Nate.

Just thinking about him made her smile. More, she hoped he was all right after the fracas from earlier in the evening and the emergence of his deadly power—

She stumbled to a halt, an odd impression curling around her, like fingers stroking her senses. It tugged at her entire being, compelling in its desire to obey, needing to bask in the sensation.

Eyes narrowed, she cut into another alley, following the magnetic draw, and stopped dead.

A short distance from Club Anarchy, where patrons trickled out of the venue in the early hours of the morning, a tall, shadowy figure wearing a long black coat leaned against the building. The cell in his hand cast an aura of light over his somber features, his allure tugging at her.

What do you know? It was an otherworldly being. A human turned demon turned angel.

Frowning, Ely strode to him, and his head lifted. Glowing topaz eyes met hers.

“Is there a reason you’re letting your allure free for everyone to feel?” She raised an eyebrow, stopping in front of

him, his warmth, his heavenly scent making her want to lean in and lick off that smirk kicking up one corner of his mouth.

“It brought you to me faster, didn’t it?”

She rolled her eyes. “Nate, behave. I’m working. You want me pulled off duty for not doing my job?”

“Wouldn’t complain.”

She snort-laughed. “You’re impossible.” But she sensed more. Felt his edginess. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head, then stopped. “I don’t know. And it’s not about what happened with Derrodus, his death, or my new ability. It’s just an uneasiness that won’t quit.” He glanced around, brow furrowing. “I usually let nothing keep me on edge since I kill what or whoever is after me, but this—”

“So you decided to check on me?”

“Before you say anything, I’m always gonna put you first, Ely, and make sure you’re fine. You’re the only one who affects me in every way possible, and who lives in here.” He tapped a finger to his chest, and his coat parted, revealing a gray, grease-smudged t-shirt. He must have thrown on the outerwear and come after her when whatever troubled him started.

“There’s nothing to worry about. I’m fine. See?” She waved a hand over herself.

He narrowed his eyes, apparently unimpressed. “I don’t like this feeling is all I’m saying. You done for the night?”

She grasped his hand and glanced at the time displayed on his cell. A half-hour more. “It’s been a fairly quiet night, well, except for the demon scourge you eliminated earlier. We can leave. The guys will call if anything urgent comes up.”

He nodded, grasped her hand, and dematerialized them. Moments later, they reformed on the upper deck of the boathouse. As he ushered her to the front door, she recalled something else, and spun to face him. “Why didn’t you tell me about the spelled blade Derrodus used on you the night before the death fight?”

He rubbed the base of his nape, a sheepish expression flickering. “I didn’t want to worry you. Besides, Qinera had weakened the spell a bit.”

“Weakened?” She glared at him. “Yes, that helped big time, didn’t it? It made you lose control, brought out the beast to the point of no return. I nearly lost you!” She wheeled around, willed the door open, and stomped inside—

Arms came around her, stopping her. He pressed his face into her neck. “My hands were tied back then, Ely. Hurt or not, there was no way I could get out of the fight, you knew that.” He turned her to him. “I missed you. The few hours away from you felt endless.”

“I missed you, too,” she said on a deep sigh. “In the future, Nate, please, please don’t keep things from me.”

A smile hovered. “From my dangerous mate? Never. It’s all in the past now.”

Breathing a little easier, she snorted. But secretly, she liked that he was protective. While her family had been, too, it was accompanied by a sense of suffocation, of being the only daughter whose life was mapped out for her.

Still, it surprised her that they hadn’t sent any more guards after her. Maybe they finally understood she wanted her own life. Besides, she wasn’t heir to Ademéras—thank Gaia! Reynner could deal with that stuff.

She shut out the past, removed her coat, and rolled her tense shoulders, happy the long night was over as she headed for their bedroom.

“I need a shower, I won’t be long.” She dropped her outerwear on the sectional, then pulled off her skinny sweater. “Oh, I meant to ask—” She spun to him. “Shall we eat here or join the others at the castle for the morning meal?”

Nate didn’t say anything, just dropped his coat on hers, dragged off his grease-paint-stained tee, muscles slipping and sliding beneath his bronze skin, and tossed his shirt on top of their things. He undid his jeans button as he prowled over.

Her breath caught in her lungs at the heat in his eyes.

“The only thing I’m ravenous for right now...” He took her sweater and tossed it aside. “Is you. So be a good girl, take the rest of your clothes off, get on the bed, and let me satiate myself.”

Heck, she wanted to leap on the bed. The stars knew she was so on board with what he wanted, too. Instead, she undid her hair, and let it drop to her shoulders. “Yeah, you’re just going to have to wait a while. It’s been a long night, and I’m starving...” His eyes narrowed. Biting back a smile, she trailed her fingers down his inked chest, over his cut abs and his stomach clenched. “...for you,” she whispered, unzipping him and sliding her hand inside his boxers to grasp his hardening length.

His eyes darkened as she swiped the head with her thumb, spreading the wetness there, and she lowered to her knees...

* * *

Her cell vibrating on the bedside table awakened Ely, and she groaned, keeping her eyes shut. Man, the night had been long, sleep short, and now her friends would trouble them.

A warm hand came around her waist, holding her.

“Ignore it,” Nate mumbled into the pillow.

“Then whoever it is will come over. I know my friends. And remember, your sister is dying to spend time with you.” She answered the call to stop the infernal ringing.

“Do you know what time it is?” Echo asked, laughter in her voice.

Ely glanced at Nate, aware he could hear the conversation. A part of his face was buried in the pillow, he opened one eye, and she smirked a *told you so* look.

“And just so you know,” Echo continued, “Kira insisted I call you after her many, many unanswered calls.” She happily laid the blame at their friend’s feet.

“It was only three!” Kira protested in the background.

“Six!” someone else piped out.

Ely groaned out a laugh. “All right, all right. What is it?”

“Happy Christmas Eve, girl!” Kira shouted. “So c’mon, we’re having a late lunch. You can get back to your hanky panky later.”

“I guess she did deliver the message herself after all,” Echo said, choking back more laughter. “You need to come over real fast, Ely, before she decides to come and get you both herself.”

With that threat, the call dropped.

Ely tossed her cell on the nightstand and flopped on her back.

Nate shifted and burrowed his face into her neck. “Are they always like this?”

“Worse,” she said, smiling, her fingers tangling in his hair. “But they mean well.”

Nate trailed little kisses up her throat, and she made a noise of need as desire stirred, warm and languorous. Then she remembered the invite to the castle and groaned, “We can’t. You heard Kira. C’mon. I need to pee, anyway.” She rolled off the bed.

He fumbled her pillow to him and buried his face in it. “You wore me out. I can’t move.”

Huffing out a laugh, she rushed off to the bathroom. Ten minutes later, showered and toweled, she hurried out.

“Okay,” she drawled at Nate’s prone form as she pulled on her underwear and bra. “Whenever you’re ready, you can join me at the castle. I’ll enjoy the noon walk by myself—

He got off the bed and cast her an unimpressed stare before stalking off, raking back his mussed, inky hair. Darn, but he was a sight for sore eyes, his tight backside flexing, making her want to drag him back to bed.

Biting back a groan, she changed into jeans and a sweater, then straightened the bed covers, and tidied the room when

Nate reappeared, rubbing his hair dry with a towel, another wrapped around his lean hips.

Ely watched him in the full-length vanity mirror in the corner as she hung up their coats. He stopped behind her, picked up her shorter, dark hair, and kissed her nape. “You gonna keep this color?”

“Maybe for a while.” She leaned against his warm, hard body. “If you don’t like it, I can ask Kira to change it once we get to the castle.”

“Ely, you could wear your hair pink, sport a dome if you want, and you’ll always be gorgeous. It’s you.”

The guy certainly knew how to turn her to mush.

“Besides...” He moved away, picked up his backpack from the floor near the bed, and set it on the bench. “Won’t it take time tinting your hair? It’s already past noon.”

She laughed. “No. Kira has the ability to change color. Before she and Týr became a couple, they had a tumultuous relationship. She turned some of his hair red.”

Nate smirked, opening the bag. “Would have been something to see Blondie sporting the reds.”

Ely shook her head. Guys.

A deep sigh escaped him as he dumped the contents of the bag on the bed. “Three t-shirts and socks. No extra pants. With everything that occurred last night, I didn’t want to leave the garage and bring my things over.”

Yes, she could understand that. “Go get them,” she said, twisting her hair and fastening the topknot. “I’ll make us something to eat in the meantime.”

A glimmer of a smile appeared as he dropped the towel and pulled on his boxers.

“What? I can make sandwiches,” she protested.

“Didn’t say anything.” He finished changing, wearing the used, greased-stained jeans again. “Be right back.” He walked out.

Knowing him, it would take five minutes, tops.

Ely put on socks and her boots, then headed for the kitchen and started the coffee pot.

As she got the mugs out from the cupboard, prickles skidded down her spine, and she stilled.

Someone watched her.

Not her friends. This felt different, a scraping of her psyche like a steel brush. It put all her senses on alert. Setting the beakers on the counter, she crossed to the front window wall.

A light layer of snow had fallen in the early hours, coating the deck. She couldn't see anyone outside, and no footprints, either, except for Nate's one marring the white stuff near the entrance before he dematerialized.

Darn it, they'd dealt with the pests in their lives, but then there were always those who crawled out from the gutter to cause more strife. But whoever this was had tracked them to the boathouse, and that annoyed her. Not even a moment to enjoy her off time with her mate without some *fosser* infringing on their home lives, too.

She opened the front door and stepped out into the chilly air, wrapping her arms around her waist. "I know you're there. Show yourself."

The abrasive vibration grew stronger, the scent of smoky incense, bitter citrus, one she'd gotten a whiff of recently. The damn stalker!

Then a scuffle sounded. A growl emitted.

Ely darted to the guardrail. Two males fought on the pier, their cloaks getting in the way, hiding who they—

But those colors? Her stomach tripped. Colors of the guards from her homeworld of Ademéras—the deep maroon of the personal guards and the dark gray of the deadly enforcers!

Crap. Four more gray-clad enforcers stood aside, then two of them grabbed the fallen, maroon-cloaked guard, and they

dematerialized.

The male who fought straightened his gray cloak and smoothed back his disheveled hair.

Only one reason they were here.

For her.

Capture and retrieve, back to Ademéras.

Not freakin' happening. But she didn't want Nate tangled in this battle, and knowing her mate, he'd lose his mind. This was her fight to finish, once and for all.

She shut down her mind-link with him. Resolve melded in steel, she leaped over the railing, landing on the pier. Ready for battle as the three remaining enforcers faced her.

The fighter, with short pale hair, stepped forward. "It's been a while, my lady."

And his familiar features registered. Shit.

"Toren?" Ely eyed him warily, braced for a fight, wishing it hadn't come to this. He was the head enforcer and utterly dangerous. She liked the male. He'd been a friend to her, and not in lust like the idiot who stabbed her. But she would fight if it came down to it. A warning was all she would give. "I'm not going back."

CHAPTER 40



NATE STILLED from zipping his duffle, a tinge of fear-streaked anger shooting through him. A quick scan revealed all was quiet in the garage. His sire worked in the back office of the workshop.

Laika? he telepathed.

Silence.

Ely? he tried again, mind-linking with her...and still nothing. She'd shut him out. Only one reason she would.

Trouble.

Dread twisting his gut, he grabbed the bag and dematerialized to the boathouse. At the sight of the guards surrounding his mate on the pier, rage tore through him. Then one of them reached for her—

Everything within Nate flashed red.

He dropped the duffle and leaped for the bastard, taking him down and ramming his fist into the bastard's face. "Never touch my mate!"

"Nate, no!" Ely yelled, grabbing his arm, stopping another punch, and pulling him back. "Stop, please!"

Chest heaving, his furious gaze swung to hers. "Why?" he snapped. "Who the fuck is he?"

She stood between them. "A friend."

"I'm Toren." The male responded at the same time, on his feet now. He grimaced, rubbing his jaw. The charcoal-gray

cloak, with a silver insignia of some tree branch pinned on one shoulder, swung around him. “We are the enforcers of the ruling house of Ademéras.”

Empyrea?

Growling, Nate pushed Ely behind him, every molecule in him aligning to eviscerate the threat. His wings fluttered out. “You’re gonna have to go through me.”

“I see you are in good hands, my lady,” the male said dryly, eyeing Nate’s massive appendages. “Your sire would be pleased.”

“What?” Ely’s gaze rushed to him, her brow creasing. “Toren, why exactly are you here? Who was the guard you fought...*ohhh*.”

The way she said the *ohhh* had Nate’s eyes narrowing at her. “What’s the *oh* for, Ely?”

“Marex hurt our lady Elytani a while ago,” Toren explained.

Ely grimaced.

And Nate knew. It was the bastard who put the scar on her side. “Where is he?”

“He’s no longer here,” Ely said quickly, grasping his forearm. “Toren, this is my mate, Nate.”

The male gave him a half bow, but Nate didn’t let his guard down, not when it came to Ely. Hands fisted, he waited.

“Her former, personal guard was hiding in this world,” he told Nate. “We finally tracked him here. He’s no longer a threat. Lord Araton awaits his return.”

“My *pateri*?” she asked, seeming startled.

“Aye,” Toren murmured. “Your sire has long since called off the search for you. He did send a message for you, however. He and your *materi* wish you well with your new life and ask that you visit them if you can.”

Ely’s eyes widened in shock. “They did?”

Toren inclined his head. “That, and the archangel, Michael, paid your sire a visit some time ago. Something about you being a Guardian of this world.”

“Ohhh...” She blinked. “And my *materi* didn’t throw a fit?”

The male’s stoic features finally cracked, and his eyes lit with amusement. “No, she didn’t.”

“Well, now.” Ely smiled. “No wonder I had no one on my back this time around.”

“I will notify your parents of your mated status.”

“Oh, and inform them I’ve met my *destined* mate.” Her soft gaze met Nate’s, and his ire faded. “His name’s Nate.”

“Congratulations, my lady, my lord.” Nate lifted an eyebrow at the address. “Farewell,” Toren said, then he and the two silent enforcers gave them a half bow and dematerialized.

“That was somewhat entertaining,” someone said from behind them. “Thought for sure there’d be bloodshed as usual.”

Nate glanced back and found Aethan, Nik, and Dagan standing near the boathouse. Blaéz, Týr, and an angel with fiery-hued wings were up on the deck.

Blaéz leaped down onto the pier and joined them. “We sensed something was off and came out here to check, but you appeared to have it all under control.” His blue eyes twinkled. “So, they’re from your realm, Ely?”

“Yes.” She sighed, then said, “Unrequited lust is a pain in the ass.”

Blaéz grinned. “Better than murder on the mind.”

“I suppose.” Her attention shifted back to Nate.

“I would have killed the idiot who hurt you had I been a moment earlier,” he said straight-up.

“Have to say never a dull moment here whenever a new couple takes up residence,” Nik drawled. “You’ll get past it.”

Trust me.”

“Agreed,” Aethan added.

Ely smiled at her Guardian brothers. “Yes, I recall those incidents.”

“Indeed.” Blaéz nodded. “In some form or another.”

Nate frowned, then telepathed Ely, *Did they all have to fight off other males after their mates?*

Not exactly, Ely responded. *More like law-keepers and such. I’ll tell you about it later.*

“We always know when trouble comes to the island.” Aethan glanced at the calm sea. “Besides, Blaéz has the gift of foresight. He’ll tell you even if you don’t want to hear it.”

“And mind-reading, too.” Týr smirked, leaning his forearms on the guardrail. “But then you die.”

Nate arched an eyebrow. Seriously? Were they fucking with the new guy?

Blaéz merely shrugged, but his eyes glinted with mirth. “Told Ely darkness awaited and to beware. And here you are.”

At his teasing tone, Nate wryly inclined his head. Damn males and their shitty humor.

“Oh, one more thing,” Týr said and leaped off the top deck to land on the lower one.

Dagan remained with the angel, arms folded over his chest. He was a vampire, Ely had told him, Nate had dealt with otherworldly beings who thrived on plasma and the greedy, blood-sucking demons, but never a vampire. This male appeared a little on the reserved side and always watching like a cobra, and likely as deadly, too. Hell, all these mofos undoubtedly were.

“Since her brother isn’t here,” Týr said, expression morphing to lethal, “I’ll do the honors. Hurt her...”

“Hear, hear!” the others threw in, eyeballing him like he was minutes away from being dissected limb by limb.

“Guys, stop!” Ely groaned.

Let me handle this, Nate telepathed her.

Exasperated copper eyes met his. She huffed and nodded.

He calmly met the warriors’ stares, a cold breeze picking up as it started snowing again. “I never expected Ely. Not at all. And then there she was. A revelation for me in every possible way,” he said, feeling her love like a huge warm hug enclosing him. He reached out an arm and drew her close. “Finding your other half is the most singular experience in anyone’s life. She makes everything right in mine—better. If we were ever under attack...” *I’ll lay down my life for you*, he telepathed her, and to the others, aloud, “I’ll use her as a shield and protect this place and myself.”

Dead silence dropped.

He could feel Ely’s confusion, then his telepathic words registered, and she bit her lip, trying to hide her grin.

Their eyes narrowed, but Aethan snorted, getting the jibe. “Welcome to the *posse*—the *gang*? No idea what you young’uns are calling a band of protectors these days.”

Young’uns? Really? Then reality struck. These males were thousands and thousands of years old compared to his not-yet full three decades of life. Shit.

“Someone has to protect the old men here,” Nate deadpanned. Before they picked their jaws off the wooden pier, he nailed Blaéz with a dead-serious stare. “I don’t want to know anything—wait, scratch that, as long as Ely is safe, then the rest I don’t give a fuck about. Anyone comes after her, I will decimate them.”

“Knew I’d like you.” Blaéz chuckled, the falling snow dusting his hair and shoulders. “You coming up to the castle?”

“Yeah...” Nate nodded. “Echo insisted.”

Aethan shook his head. “She’s been like an energizer bunny on full throttle wanting everything perfect for the first lunch with her brother.”

“It’s also Christmas Eve, remember?” Ely said then. “And we have presents to exchange.” She arched her eyebrows at them. “You guys didn’t forget, did you?”

“I’m good,” Nik said.

The others nodded.

Nate’s attention settled on the angel on the upper deck, his arms folded, watching them, wings in full display, his halo bright like a homing beam. “Who’s the poser?”

“A pain in the ass,” Aethan muttered. “Echo’s tutor. He’s got another think coming if he assumes my mate’s gonna spend Christmas Eve studying about her—your—ancestor.”

Right. The Watcher’s leader, Zarias. Nate still couldn’t wrap his head around that. He’d not only inherited whatever the angel’s abilities were but his wings, too. Guess he’d learn more about his ancestor soon enough.

“And not important to us,” Týr added, eyeballing the angel evilly, who seemed not to hear them.

“Yo, Lore?” Nik called out, stepping onto the pier and sliding his hands into his jeans pockets. He looked up, all casual and shit. “Remember what I told you back in Romania coupla months ago? And who my sire is? He said it’s done. Happy Christmas!” He smirked.

The angel stiffened. “I’m in service to God and do not celebrate human traditions,” he said coolly and vanished with a flutter of flaming wings.

“He sure shot off like his tail feathers were on fire.” Týr frowned up at the now empty deck.

“What was that about?” Nate asked Nik.

“Just messin’ with him,” he said, tone dry. “Let’s head back. Our mates are probably anxious for our return.”

“We’ll be there shortly.”

As they dematerialized, Nate grabbed his duffle, wrapped his arm around Ely, and flashed them to the balcony. He

ushered her into their apartment, shut the door, and found her watching him.

“You okay?” she asked.

He dropped the bag and drew her to him, breathing in her calming scent. Her arms came around him, and she hugged him. “It’s over, my love.”

“I know.” He pressed his lips to her crown, and she rubbed his back, then eased away.

“Ready to go to the castle?” she asked, heading for the bedroom and taking a jacket from the closet.

Nate followed and leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb. “You ask me that, waiting for me to say *no*?”

She bit her lip, but a smile snuck through. “Because I know you.”

He snorted. True. Usually, he didn’t like hanging around people who gushed after him. But this was his sister. Besides, these males and their mates were different; they mattered to Ely.

“That reminds me. Here—” From his jeans pocket, he retrieved a small package wrapped in shiny red paper decorated with snowflakes and handed it to her.

She stared at it, eyes wide.

“It’s not gonna bite,” he teased. “Open it.” Nate wondered if she’d understand its significance.

She huffed out a laugh, tore the wrapper off, and opened the small metal box with the gray velvet interior, in which he’d placed the gleaming ebony ring inlaid with five amber stones.

“What is this?” she breathed.

“I know everyone’s exchanging holiday keepsakes later this afternoon, but I wanted to do this with you alone. It’s my mating gift to you.”

Her gaze rushed to his. “How—where did you get it?”

“Made it. I like working with my hands. I finished it tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I started the ring before I met you. It’s from the same metal as these,” He tugged one of his tiny black earrings. “Since I had the sanding machine and other things I needed, it didn’t take long to make the adjustments. Aba aided me. He’s good with melting, embedding, etc.”

Nate watched as she reverently ran a fingertip over the stones.

“The obsidian metal is from Ys. I’ve had it since a teen, and the stones I found as a youngster in the mountains where Aba and I have our home. Amber is said to carry the knowledge of a million years. And black is supposed to signify strength and endurance...” A smile started at her frown. “But for me,” he murmured, “it symbolizes my utter adoration for you, my crazy, impulsive, sensitive, beautiful mate. For now, for always.”

She bit her lip and blinked, eyes crowding with tears. “It’s beautiful.”

He frowned. “You aren’t supposed to cry.”

“I’m not.” She wiped her eyes. “It’s happiness.”

“Okay. That, I’ll allow.”

Her laughter a little shaky, she hooked one arm around his neck and kissed him. “Thank you.”

Nate took the band from her, and she hastily held out her left hand. “Darci and Kira wear their rings on this finger.” She lifted said digit.

Smiling, he slipped the obsidian ring on her finger.

“I don’t have anything for you...” she trailed off when he cocked an eyebrow. “What?”

He stalked to her canvases stacked against the wall in the corner of the living room, rifled through them, and pulled out an 18 x 24 canvas still covered with linen.

“What is this, then?” He removed the cloth and glanced back to see her face flush a deep pink. “You don’t want to give it to me?”

“Man,” she groaned, rubbing her cheeks as he set the canvas on her easel. “It was a painting for Echo. That’s Bob.” She pointed to the long-haired, soot-gray feline with an orange ruff he’d encountered recently, napping on a stool near the window. “And then that happened...” She trailed her finger up to a familiar pair of eyes beneath dark eyebrows, ones he’d seen in the mirror for as long as he could remember.

“Me.”

“Aye.”

He looked up. “So, why don’t you want me to have it? It’s my sister’s pet, and that’s a bit of me you painted. I like it.”

Her eyes widened. “You do?”

“Yes, because *you* painted it. Although...” He frowned. “I don’t know when you found the time to do this with everything that happened since our return from Ys.”

Another deep inhale. “You’re right, I didn’t paint this recently. I, er, I painted it just after I met you.”

His gaze shot back to hers, an eyebrow quirking. “You did?”

She scrunched her nose. “It was supposed to be a gift for Echo, and the next thing I knew, your eyes were staring at me from the canvas.”

“Ah. So, you were thinking of me.” He couldn’t help the smirk that started.

“Apparently.” She rolled her eyes, bright with amusement and love. “I mean, you vexed me so often, I was furious, and then this happened.” She gestured to the painting. “I guess my heart wanted what it wanted.”

“You changed my fate, *laika*, outplayed destiny,” he said quietly. “And it led me to find you and a love I never expected.”

She put her hand on his chest, where he'd been shot. "Our fate was written long before we were even born, Nate. But I never want to go through what we did again."

"That's all over." He palmed her cheek, his eyes tracing every line of her ethereal features, belying her core of steel. This female, who fought for him, took on the terrifying wraconis, then the deadly demon guards of Ys for him. Finally, she was his in every way possible. More than anything, he treasured being soul-joined to her, to feel her within him even when she wasn't there.

His mouth lowered to hers in a tender kiss. "My soul is finally at peace because of you."

Her love spread through him in a warm glow. "I would go beyond and above anything for you, my love."

As I would for you, my heart. As I would for you...

And because he couldn't resist, he trailed his lips along her jaw, then whispered, "Now, where was I?"

She pulled back and blinked, then snorted. "On our way to the castle. Later, I'll jump you." She grabbed his hand and dragged him to the door.

Nate chuckled as he followed.

Hell, he couldn't wait.

He couldn't wait to start this life with this feisty female, his previous *laika*, who became his heart...

THE END...for now.

AFTERWORD

Hi there you guys!

If you're here at the end, then an enormous **Thank You** for staying the course and reading Nate and Ely's tumultuous, tormented journey to its HEA.

While Ely didn't have the tortured past of the male Guardians, her hero, as you've seen, certainly did, and the reason why it made this book sooo much longer—seriously, I never meant for it to be this long, but with Nate's background, it needed to be told without rushing it.

But man, I'm so happy to finally get this story that was at the back of my mind since the conception of the FG series, told. And I do hope you enjoyed **Beyond Destiny**.

So, the next FG book will be shorter...yeah, that's the thought, but my characters, sheesh, they're a whole other ball game!

On another note, yes, I was gonna ask this. :) If you've enjoyed the book, please leave a review, I would appreciate it forever. Reviews are so important to authors in getting their books out there.

And if you do, an enormous thanks in advance, and thank you for being a fan. **Hugs.**

Up next is book 4 in the **Warlords of Empyrea** series.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to these amazing ladies:

Anne, Coleen, and Tana for ALL your support and for working with me on this book. And to **Carolyn** for catching those pesky typos during the final read, and my wonderful editor, **Celia**, for your incredible input and for making this book shine.

This year has been a hard one for me in my personal life, and writing took a back seat for several months, but hubby's doing so much better now, thank God. And I got this book finished. So Yay!

To my other **Half**; despite the dark times and what life had thrown us, you came through it all with a smile on your face. You are incredibly brave. Love you, babes.

To my daughter, Tana, thank you for being with me on this long journey and working on all my previous covers. I know life is hectic, and you're going on a different path now, but I still treasure troubling you and bouncing ideas off your wonderful mind when writing these stories.

To my wonderful new cover artist, **Nico, of the Book Brander**, thank you for your amazing rendering and take of my hero and heroine for **Beyond Destiny**.

Finally, to my **ARC reviewers, reviewers, and readers**, thank you for loving my stories. It's what makes all the hard work worth it. An enormous cyber hug to each and every one of you!

Stay safe.

Love, Georgia ♥

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FALLEN GUARDIANS

Absolute Surrender #1

Echo, Mine #2 (novella)

Breaking Fate #3

Tangled Sin (Standalone)

Guardian Unraveled #4

For You, I Will #5 (novella)

Heart's Inferno #6

Shattered Dawn #7

Beyond Destiny #8

WARLORDS OF EMPYREA

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Warlord's Storm #3

CONTEMPORARY (SERIES COMPLETED)

PLAYERS TO MEN

Breathless #1

Impossible You #2

#playerdown #3

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Georgia Lyn Hunter loves to create characters who'll take you to the far and beyond, to unforgettable adventures, steamy encounters, and heart-stopping love stories...

She grew up in the sultry climate of South Africa and currently lives in the Middle East with her family. An avid reader from a young age, she devoured every book she got her hands on. When she's not writing or plotting her next novel, she loves trolling flea markets and buying things she'd never use (because they're so pretty,) traveling, painting, and being with her wonderfully supportive family.

And there you have it, all the boring stuff.

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