

BOOK TWO  
STAR-CROSSED CELESTIALS

# MESSENGER



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# A.L. MORROW

# MESSENGER

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AN MM ROMEO AND JULIET RETELLING

STAR-CROSSED CELESTIALS

BOOK 2

A.L. MORROW



Messenger: Star-Crossed Celestials Duet, Book 2

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Unlike Shakespeare's original version of *Romeo and Juliet*, the *Star-Crossed Celestials* duet is not a tragedy. It is a romance—a love story that, by definition, concludes with a happily ever after. This isn't to say there aren't tragic moments in *Messenger*. There are. Plenty of them. Potential triggers include scenes of violence and death, implied past sexual abuse of an adult character, as well as depression, guilt, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and self-destructive behavior. Readers sensitive to these issues may wish to proceed with caution.

*Messenger* is best enjoyed as a sequel to *Watcher*, as it a continuation of the characters' story. That said, if you are jumping in without having previously read *Watcher* but are familiar with *Romeo and Juliet* and wish to quickly orient yourself, please note that *Messenger* picks up with events immediately following the banishment of Jace, our Romeo-equivalent character.

With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls, For  
stony limits cannot hold love out, And what love can  
do, that dares love attempt.

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *ROMEO AND JULIET*

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Also by A.L. Morrow

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## THE CAST

In this version of *Romeo and Juliet*, the primary roles will be portrayed by the following characters ...

- **Romeo** ... Jace, a Watcher
- **Juliet** ... Cyrus, a Messenger
- **Mercutio**, Romeo's friend ... Cassian, a demon
- **Benvolio**, Romeo's friend ... Hesper, a Watcher
- **Paris**, Juliet's suitor ... Xavier, a Messenger
- **Tybalt**, Juliet's cousin ... Eris, a Messenger
- **Balthasar/Apothecary**, an ally ... Devlin, a demon
- **Escalus**, Prince of Verona ... Astra, an Archangel
- **Friar Laurence**, an ally... Lynx, a Watcher



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**CYRUS**

**A**s far as Cyrus could tell, no one had seen Devlin in days. Not that any of the demons he'd talked to had been particularly forthcoming, of course. The male with a shaved head and bulging arms head standing behind the cash register at one of the bodegas on Sheol Street was no exception.

“Buy something or get out,” he said gruffly when Cyrus asked if he'd seen Dev. For emphasis, the demon curled one of his meaty hands into a fist and thumped it on the counter.

Cyrus sighed and glanced around the cramped shop. There was a wall of refrigerated cases stocked with beverages. A few shelves were lined with boxed food mixes, hygiene products, and batteries. And closer to the register sat a display of premade snacks and sandwiches. The place was dingy and uninspiring, and the air conditioner made a racket, barely managing to keep away the desert heat. But if Cyrus wanted answers, he'd have to play along with the demon proprietor's game.

“Fine.” Quickly, Cyrus snatched at a sandwich and tossed it on the counter without bothering to read what kind it was.

The demon grunted, then jabbed at the buttons on the register while Cyrus pulled his wallet from his back pocket. The total flickered on the screen in broken, neon-green letters—three times the amount advertised on the little white sticker stuck to the side of the plastic package.

Cyrus raised his brows. “Seriously?”

“The price is what I say it is, *angel*.” The demon’s eyes flashed like fire, amber flames daring Cyrus to argue.

But Cyrus didn’t take the bait. He wasn’t here to make trouble, especially since Sheol Street—the main road in rundown Nocturna—still hadn’t recovered from the last fight between celestials and demons. The broken glass, piles of trash, and scorch marks on the buildings outside were proof of that. No, Cyrus only wanted to find Devlin. Finding Dev meant finding Jace—and finding Jace meant peace of mind.

It also meant hope.

So, he tossed the cash on the counter, tucked his wallet away again, and reached for the sandwich. Transaction complete. He was officially a paying customer. “Now, about Dev. He’s a forger. Used to work at Perdition Market—”

The demon snorted now, his wide nostrils flaring. “Never heard of him.”

Of course. Cyrus should have figured the demon would say that, whether or not it was the truth.

“Are you sure? He’s about this tall.” Cyrus lifted his hand as though an invisible person was standing at shoulder-height beside him. “He has dark hair and a scar down the side of his face.”

To be honest, Cyrus had never actually met Devlin in person. He’d only heard about him from Jace and Astra. But he’d been able to piece together this much about his appearance from the demons who had—likely inadvertently—let some information about Devlin slip. The bodega’s proprietor, however, was not so careless.

“I already told you, I don’t know shit.” The male formed a fist with his other hand, and it joined the first on the countertop. “So, unless you want to get a cola to go with that sandwich, I suggest you move on.”

Cyrus let out a long, slow sigh. He absentmindedly squeezed the sandwich in his hand, denting the side of its plastic container. “No, I’m good. No cola for me. Thanks.”

He said *thanks*, but his tone sounded more like *fuck you*.

The proprietor glowered, but before he could reach across the counter to grab at his shirt or swing at his face, Cyrus was out of reach. He pushed against the glass door and slipped out onto the street.

Another dead end. Just like the laundromat and the bar had been.

Demons protected their own, it seemed. Especially when it came to giving up information to a stranger.

And most especially when that stranger might just be their Public Enemy Number One: a Messenger.

The hostility between Messengers and demons was not new. Nor was it unfounded. It had been built over time—over thousands of years, actually. Since the Watcher-class celestials who'd been sent to the mortal realm decided to take their orders to protect humans literally. As their name implied, they watched over them, but eventually watching turned to loving—and that loving resulted in the birth of demons. Half-human. Half-celestial. A dark integration of both worlds, conceived from disobedience—and the embodiment of it. As the demons' numbers grew, so did the destruction they caused.

Messengers had been trying to cull and contain them ever since.

It was an action Watchers disapproved of. The demons were, after all, their children. The groups had been on the verge of war for decades, Messengers versus the Watchers and demons. Tensions had worsened, too, since the Messengers corralled them all into Las Vegas. Sin City. The perfect place to hide a population of creatures known for defiance and debauchery.

But Cyrus wasn't an idiot. He knew better than to advertise his status as a Messenger. It wasn't like he strutted through the ruins of Sheol Street in his bronze-coated armor, his fluffy white wings stretched out as wide as the horizon. That was a good way to get attacked, his wings hacked off—or worse.

Still, even without his tell-tale white wings unfurled, he was easy to identify as a celestial. The soft, starry glow of his

skin, ethereal good looks, and hint of an accent gave him away. The demons didn't know Cyrus was different, that he meant them no harm.

“You're the one looking for Dev, right?”

The voice startled Cyrus—not because it was harsh and suspicious like the others he'd gotten used to hearing around here lately, but because it was soft. Soft and unsteady. Hesitant. He turned quickly. Picking through a heap of trash by an overflowing dumpster was a child. Nine years old, maybe ten.

Cyrus stepped closer. He'd been so distracted he hadn't even noticed the kid before. The boy was so submerged in the pile of cardboard, pallets, and food scraps that he almost blended in with them. And he was dirty—the kind of filthy that couldn't simply be washed off with a bath. He was the kind of unclean that sat in the soul, that came from being forgotten. From neglect.

The kid turned his wide eyes up at Cyrus, and they were a peculiar brownish-red. But it was the pair of black, stubby horns sticking up between the tangles in his dark hair that gave him away.

He was a demon.

Maybe Cyrus had been wrong about the species distrusting him after all.

“Yeah,” Cyrus told the kid. “That's right. Dev knows where a friend of mine is. I just want to make sure he's okay.”

Nodding, the boy stepped out from around the pile of trash. “I know someplace you might find him.”

He came to a halt as soon as he moved out of the dumpster's shadow. The sun brightened his face, somehow making him seem even paler and scrawnier than he had a moment ago. For a second, he gaped at Cyrus as if overwhelmed by his height, strength, and golden hair. Then, his eyes locked on the sandwich still clutched in Cyrus's hand. He fell silent and licked his lips with unmistakable longing.

He was hungry.

Cyrus cringed. When was the last time someone had fed the poor kid? Was that what he was searching for in the trash—something to eat? The half-eaten, brown-fleshed apple he noticed in the boy's hand told him it was.

Which gave Cyrus an idea.

“I was about to have lunch. Want to share?” He nodded toward the sandwich. The boy's eyes widened, and he stepped back as if startled.

Shit. He hadn't meant to scare the kid ... Or was it pride that kept him from accepting?

There was one way to find out.

Cyrus sat down on a discarded shipping crate near the dumpster. If he'd been hungry, the smell of the rotting refuse in the Las Vegas heat would have been enough to make him lose his appetite. Silently, he peeled back the seal and opened the plastic container in his hand. As he took out half of the sandwich, he saw the shadows shift on the sidewalk in front of him. The boy was watching him.

Then, he moved closer.

“Here, take it.” Cyrus held out the portion of sandwich. It was nothing special. White bread. Ham and cheese. The lettuce was a little wilted, and the tomato had seen better days, but the kid didn't seem to care. He stared at it like it was a proper three-course meal.

The withered apple fell to the pavement with a thump. The demon slid onto the edge of the crate beside Cyrus and accepted the offering.

“What's your name?”

The kid wasted no time devouring his food. By the time Cyrus finished the question, he had most of the sandwich in his mouth. “Ransom,” he mumbled as he chewed.

Cyrus grinned, his heart warming at the pure joy on Ransom's face as he ate. “Nice to meet you, Ransom.”

The boy squinted up at him for a second, his bottom lip falling open with confusion. Was it possible no one had ever

spared a kind word for him before? A crumb landed on Ransom's T-shirt, interrupting the awkwardness of the moment. The boy quickly picked up the fallen piece and ate that, too.

Cyrus cleared his throat. "You know where I might find Devlin?"

He hadn't meant to make the sandwich part of the transaction, to hold it hostage for information. He'd have given the kid the food whether or not he knew anything about Devlin's whereabouts. But there was no sense ignoring the fact the kid knew Dev—not when both of them could benefit from their chance meeting.

Ransom hesitated. He looked over his shoulder as though someone might be listening from the shadows of the alley behind them. He crammed the remaining bit of his sandwich into his mouth hurriedly. Then, he lifted a finger and pointed across the street to a building in far better condition than any of the others on Sheol Street. "There."

Kur Club.

The red neon lights of the sign above the door weren't on—it was too early in the day for that, the sun too bright—but the demon brothel was unmistakable anyway. As recognizable as it was infamous. The most popular place on the street. And because of its popularity, Kur Club was one of the few buildings not covered in graffiti. The demons might not have respected much, but they seemed to hold one timeless truth in high regard: sex sells. Cyrus had to hand it to them.

But what struck him even more was Ransom himself. Cyrus didn't know much about parenting—he could count on one hand the number of times he'd ever held an infant—but he understood enough to realize a child Ransom's age shouldn't be familiar with Kur Club.

"You're sure?" he asked the boy.

"I've seen Dev go in before."

Cyrus brushed the back of his neck with his fingers, staunching the prickle of discomfort that raised the hairs there.

Part of him wanted to sweep Ransom away from here, give him a warm bath and fresh clothes, and surround him with toys—a bicycle, building blocks, or even those gaming systems he'd heard were popular with the human kids. Anything to keep him as young as he was and as innocent as he should have been.

The soggy sandwich in his hand seemed like an even more pathetic offering now.

“When was the last time you noticed him there?”

Pathetic or not, Ransom's eyes drifted toward the remaining half of the sandwich still in Cyrus's hand. He licked his bottom lip, then looked up at the Messenger beside him, a silent plea on the tip of his tongue. Without a word, Cyrus handed over the rest of the sandwich.

“Last week, I think.” The kid had shed the plastic container and started in on the rest of his meal.

“So, before the Perdition Riots?”

Perdition Riots—that was what the reporters on the news were calling the latest battle among the celestials and demons.

More like Perdition Slaughter, Cyrus thought. But he supposed the former was more polite, even if it was a wild understatement. He'd lost his cousin, Eris, in the riots. But Jace had lost so much more: his friend Cassian, a demon, along with the right to stay in Las Vegas.

Ransom nodded.

And Cyrus sighed. The thought of Devlin, a demon, going into a demon brothel wasn't startling at all. He was no closer to finding Jace than he had been a few minutes ago.

“Is that bad?”

There was so much hope in the poor kid's eyes that Cyrus didn't have the heart to tell him the truth—that he was back to the drawing board. So, Cyrus forced himself to grin. “Not at all. You were a big help.” He reached over to ruffle Ransom's hair affectionately. “Thank you.”

The demon beamed like a little star right here beside him, but his happiness didn't last for long. Over the boy's shoulder, Cyrus noticed a pair of cops leaning against a car across the street. They stood together with matching fast-food coffee cups, swapping jokes while they ignored the scavengers, spray-painters, and—apparently—lost children wandering Sheol Street on their watch.

Assholes.

That was what Jace would have called them, and Cyrus would have had to agree.

Then, the radio clipped to the belt of the policeman closest to them beeped. As he reached for it, his eyes locked on Cyrus ... then on Ransom. The laughter on his face died immediately. The dimples in his rounded cheeks smoothed as he frowned, and he tapped his partner—a taller man, with thick, reddish hair—on the arm. Redhead followed Dimples' stare. He stood straighter, sobering.

Cyrus couldn't hear their words, but their reactions said enough. Dimples muttered something into the radio, clipped it back on his belt, and then the pair were moving. Crossing the street. Coming toward them.

The desert air felt stifling all over again, and Cyrus could have sworn his heart dropped to the bottom of his stomach. These cops might be human—and no match for his celestial powers—but they were far from harmless. They had the backing of the Messenger army here in Vegas. With one quick call, the skies over Sheol Street would be a flurry of white wings and silver-toned swords.

Maybe they'd already called for Messenger backup.

“Come on, Ransom. Let's get out of the sun, all right?” Cyrus stood and nudged the child on the shoulder, urging him to stand. The boy looked up, and panic registered in his eyes.

But it was too late.

Dimples hovered over Ransom like a storm cloud, glaring. “Where'd you get the sandwich, demon?”



Ransom swallowed the bite in his mouth and looked up at the cop, helpless. “H-he gave it to me.” He glanced desperately at Cyrus.

“It’s true—” Cyrus began to explain.

“I think you stole it,” Redhead interrupted, ignoring Cyrus completely. He spoke loudly, as though the volume of his voice could drown out the truth.

Ransom’s eyes filled with tears. “I didn’t—I promise—”

Dimples reached out and grabbed the boy’s skinny arm, pinching hard as he yanked him off the crate they’d been sitting on. The half-eaten remains of the sandwich fell to the pavement. “You’re a lying little shit like all of your kind.”

“Hey, there’s no need for any of this.” Cyrus raised his voice now. If Redhead could do it, so could he. “I bought the sandwich and gave it to him. It’s that simple.”

“Stay out of this, angel,” Redhead snapped.

The next few seconds passed by so quickly that Cyrus could hardly make sense of everything as it happened.

“Let me go!” Tears dribbled down Ransom’s pale, dirt-smearred cheeks as Dimples ripped a pair of bronze handcuffs from a carabiner attached to his belt. The boy tried to squirm away, but Dimples only gripped him harder. The two thrashed against each other as Dimples tried to lower the restraints onto the boy’s wrist.

“Hold still, you little bastard!”

Ransom’s eyes blazed a fiery red. The cuffs snapped closed on themselves as they hovered above his wrist. Then, they flew from Dimples’ grasp as if torn away by some invisible hand and smashed against the graffitied side of the building beside him.

Demon magic.

Celestials had certain powers. Born of the stars, they harnessed the energy of the cosmos that ran through their veins to form orbs of destructive energy. Demons had their own abilities. They were manipulative, able to bend objects

and humans to their will. Cyrus had never seen demon magic up close like this before. He hadn't realized children were capable of using their gifts. But that was exactly what Ransom had done.

As the handcuffs clattered to the pavement, Dimples let out a grunt of fury. He reached for the baton dangling by his hip and raised it high. Ransom screamed, cowering in the shadow of the weapon as he waited to feel its impact.

But Cyrus was faster than any human.

Lunging between the boy and the cop, he spread his ivory wings. The fibers of his shirt parted to make way for the gold-tipped feathers as they emerged from between his shoulder blades. He swept the baton from Dimples' grasp with the tip of a wing as he leaped upward.

"Ransom! Run!" he shouted.

---

**CYRUS**

**T**he handcuffs were cold against Cyrus's wrists. They pinched at his skin, just slightly too tight, and the chain that connected them to the hook at the center of the table kept him from leaning back in his seat. Still, he wasn't under arrest.

That was what they claimed, anyway.

*They* being the pair of Messengers sitting across from him.

"So, one more time for the record. The demon kid really didn't steal?" asked the celestial on the left, a male with short, tightly curled white-blond hair and a star tattooed on his neck. He'd introduced himself as Leo.

"I already told you he didn't." Cyrus sighed and shook his head. "No matter how many times you ask, I'm going to give you the same answer."

"Right ... You *did* say that, didn't you?" Leo smirked, then lazily dragged his pen across the notepad in front of him. Whatever he'd written, it wasn't Cyrus's answer. It looked more like a drawing—a doodle born from boredom.

Cyrus was bored, too. They'd been sitting here for hours—since the redheaded cop from Sheol Street had slapped his own handcuffs on Cyrus's wrist while he'd hovered just above them. The bronze alloy had done exactly what it was made to: it had stoppered the celestial energy flowing through Cyrus's body.

He'd flailed, trying desperately to stay aloft, but as impressive as his wingspan was, it simply hadn't been enough to give him the lift he'd needed to fly away. Cyrus had fallen to the pavement in a feathery heap, his shirt torn at his shoulder blades where his wings had sprouted and his palms scraped and dirty. None of that mattered, though—not really. Cyrus had other shirts back at his suite at Nova, and his cuts had healed in a matter of seconds.

What mattered was that Ransom had gotten away.

Even as Dimples and Redhead called for Messenger backup to arrest Cyrus, he'd sat calmly on the pavement, smiling to himself, watching the tread of the kid's dirty sneakers as he'd padded away. Cyrus had lost sight of Ransom when he'd rounded the corner onto Purgatory Way a few moments later. Wherever the kid was headed, he hoped it offered a safe place to sleep and another meal.

He doubted it did. But he hoped.

Now, the Holmes and Watson wannabes across the table from him simply couldn't grasp the concept that no actual crime had been committed—well, aside from Dimples and Redhead harassing Ransom, maybe. Somehow, though, Cyrus doubted that the assault of a child-demon ranked high on their list of priorities, especially considering the mess the rest of the city was in.

“If you don't feel like talking about what happened in Nocturna, we can chat about something else instead,” said Danica, Leo's partner. She tilted her head as she looked at Cyrus, her elaborate arrangement of long, dark braids swaying from the motion.

For at least the sixth time since arriving, Cyrus tried to cross his arms over his chest only to have the bronze restraints stop him with a jolt. “Like what?”

“Like where Watcher Jericho might be?” The shrug she gave him was far too careless for the seriousness of her question.

So, that was what this was really about. Jace. This whole bit about Ransom—the long, heavy silences, the repeated questions, the playing dumb—was a carefully crafted charade. Leo and Danica clearly had a strategy: wear Cyrus out, then go in for the kill.

Well played. Had Xavier taught them that trick? It seemed exactly like something out of his playbook—and Cyrus knew those games all too well.

“I don’t know.” Cyrus’s still-unfurled wings sagged. His heart wrenched. The space where his feelings for Jace were kept ached like a phantom limb. After hearing Jace’s full given name on the news at least a half dozen times these past couple of days, he should have been numb to the pain of his absence by now. But he wasn’t. He was starting to think he never would be.

“You really expect us to believe you haven’t heard from him?” Leo slapped his palm against the table for emphasis. His clear blue eyes were like ice.

He was clearly the *bad cop* of the pair.

Not that Danica was a particularly friendly *good cop*, but if the comparison had to be made, so be it.

Cyrus bristled, his wings immediately stiffening as he clenched his teeth. “Yes, I *do* expect you to believe me. He’s banished, remember? No contact with anyone in the celestial world.” His eyes narrowed. “You’re not supposed to be asking me about him, either. That’s the law—he’s excommunicated, and you can’t touch him.”

Glancing between her partner and Cyrus, Danica blinked calmly and raised her palm. “What I think Leo means is that you and Watcher Jericho—”

“Jace,” Cyrus corrected coldly.

She tilted her head in the other direction now, as if confused.

“He prefers to be called Jace. He doesn’t want to be associated with his ancestor Stellan, the first fallen Watcher.”

“All right ... *Jace*. My apologies.” She gave him a small but enormously condescending smile. “What I think Leo is trying to understand is whether or not Jace has violated celestial law by trying to reach out to you. You were ... *together*, weren’t you?”

The way Danica asked the question, full of insinuation—as though Jace had thoughtlessly abandoned him—made Cyrus’s cheeks burn. Jace hadn’t deserted him. He’d asked Cyrus to go with him. Cyrus might have, too, if it hadn’t been for Xavier.

“I don’t see how any of this is relevant to what happened on Sheol Street with the demon child—”

Behind him, the door to the interrogation room swung open. Danica’s and Leo’s stares shot up to look at the newcomer. Immediately, their demeanors changed. Danica sat straighter, and Leo cleared his throat and closed his notepad to hide his drawing.

“General Xavier, it’s an honor to have you join us—”

*Shit*. Of course Xavier would turn up. He had a way of always turning up.

At least Cyrus’s back was to him—he had a second to regain his composure.

“Get up. You two are relieved of this duty. I’ll take over questioning the subject.”

For a moment, Cyrus closed his eyes, suppressing a cringe at the sound of his former lover’s familiar voice. From the way Leo and Danica hurried to their feet, he could imagine the coldness in Xavier’s expression.

“Yes, general. Thank you, general.”

Under other circumstances, it might have been funny to watch the way Leo cowered under Xavier’s watch, the bully in him replaced with a lapdog. There was nothing amusing, though, about the way Xavier stalked across the space, pulled out the chair where Danica had been sitting, and tossed a plain folder on the table between them.

The door swung closed before he spoke.

They were alone.

“I told you Watcher Jericho was trouble, Cy.”

Cyrus didn't bother to correct him about Jace's name. Xavier would never learn; he didn't *want* to learn, either—especially not when it came to Jace. Cyrus simply frowned. “Once again, you mistakenly assume I'm interested in your opinion.”

Xavier shook his head slowly. His expression was grim, and his eyes were tired. It was no wonder. Between the Perdition Riots and the mess his Messenger soldiers had made of the Strip while chasing Jace out of Sin City, it was unlikely he'd slept much the past few days.

“I am *not* kidding, Cyrus.” His tone was sharper now, and he jammed a finger at the folder.

Xavier's bark was as bad as his bite, and former lover or not, Cyrus knew better than to assume whatever the folder contained was an empty threat. His stomach turned as he glanced down at it. Xavier had something on him, and he wasn't above using it against him. “What is that?”

Flipping open the folder, Xavier let the photograph enclosed speak for itself. Staring back up at Cyrus was his own picture. The image was grainy—pulled from a security camera and zoomed in repeatedly—but he recognized it immediately. The shot was taken on Sheol Street during the Perdition Riots. Cyrus's jaw was set with determination, and blood was splattered across his tunic. He hovered over a fellow Messenger, aiming the arrow in his quiver. The Messenger had been lunging. Though it was hard to tell in the frame, he'd been attacking Jace.

Cyrus didn't need to see the original footage or any of the other stills that were stacked beneath. He knew what he'd done. He'd shot that arrow. He'd killed his comrade. And he'd saved Jace's life.

Now, it seemed Xavier knew it, too.

Cyrus looked up at the other Messenger. As their stares locked, Cyrus gaped. That same hurt and vulnerability he'd

seen flickers of in Xavier's face since he'd arrived in the mortal realm were back.

"Fuck, Cy ..." Xavier glanced away again just as quickly. He ran a hand through his wavy, caramel-colored hair as if wanting to pull out every strand—and simultaneously trying to stop himself from doing so.

He'd been hoping there had been some mistake, hadn't he? He'd been hoping the archer in the image wasn't really Cyrus or that the Messenger who'd taken his arrow to the back had stood up and walked away afterward.

But Xavier's hope had been pointless. There was nothing Cyrus could say to change what sat before them in black and white, and if changing what had happened meant Jace would have been killed instead, he wouldn't take his actions back, even if given the chance.

Cyrus glanced down at his cuffed wrists, at the hook on the table. The restraints and questioning made sense now. He'd shed celestial blood. He'd broken the decree Astra had made only days ago.

"Am I under arrest?" he asked.

Xavier flipped the folder closed again. "No. Of course not."

"Then why am I in these?" Cyrus nodded toward the bronze links around his wrists.

"Because of them." Xavier jerked his head toward the door through which Danica and Leo had just left. "They were afraid you might hurt them."

Cyrus scoffed. "And you're not?"

Xavier's lips formed a tight pinched line, and he gave a single, subtle shake of his head. "I know that if you hurt me, I'd deserve it."

Well, wasn't that the truth? At least Xavier knew it. This was progress, another step toward acknowledging the damage he'd caused when he'd betrayed Cyrus a hundred years ago. The general had falsified a report of misconduct against him,



sabotaging his chances of coming to Las Vegas sooner—and destroying their already fragile relationship. But, in a way, Cyrus was luckier than most of Xavier’s victims. He wasn’t physically wounded ... only emotionally.

It had taken Xavier this long to admit his guilt. Maybe in another century, he’d finally get around to changing his ways.

“Here.” The general took a key from his pocket and reached over to unlock the handcuffs. “Do what you will.”

As the bronze restraints fell away, Cyrus felt a surge of warmth in his veins—the heat of celestial energy pulsing through him once again. He stood up quickly, his chair falling backward behind him. His wings extended to their full span, blocking the door and touching the walls on either side of him. He’d forgotten how heavy his wings could be without the strength of the cosmos to help carry them. Now, they moved easily, and the ache in his shoulders eased as he stretched them.

Seconds passed by as he glared down at Xavier. The other Messenger barely met his stare. Instead, he flinched, bracing himself, as though he believed Cyrus might attack. It was what Xavier would do, after all.

For the length of a heartbeat, Cyrus thought maybe he could—maybe he *should*—do exactly what Xavier expected. He could practically hear the whispers that would haunt the halls of Nova for decades to come. Calm, good-natured Messenger Cyrus had turned into a monster, a beast. No better than the very demons he was meant to help contain.

But that wasn’t Cyrus. He wasn’t a demon, and he certainly was nothing like Xavier.

Taking a deep breath, he eased back into his chair, his wings retracting through the tears in his shirt. “And Danica and Leo know what I did? That’s why they thought I might hurt them?”

Finally, Xavier relaxed enough to look up at him. He made a gesture somewhere between a shrug and a nod. “I’ve been

doing my best to keep the footage from getting out, but word still makes its way around.”

“It always does,” Cyrus spat. He’d known that from his first few days at Nova, when he’d overheard others speculating over his past with Xavier in the officers’ lounge.

“There is a general feeling you can’t be trusted—”

“That Messenger was dying anyway, and he was determined to take out Jace in the process. What was I supposed to do? Let *both* die?”

“He was your comrade, Cyrus.” Xavier’s tone sharpened, and he clenched his fist on the table.

“It was self-defense.”

“But it wasn’t *your* self-defense.” Xavier lifted an accusatory finger and jammed it toward Cyrus like a spear. “It was Jericho’s. You chose to save a Watcher over a fellow soldier.”

“His death was inevitable.”

“He was another *Messenger*.” Flecks of spittle rained onto the table, and the tendons in Xavier’s neck tensed. He was trying to keep his anger from bubbling to the surface—Cyrus could tell in the way he kept flexing his fists—but he was losing control. “You fraternize with the enemy. You kill your own kind. And you help a demon child on Sheol Street. Sometimes, I think the others are right to question you.”

The words were out there now, hanging like a fog between them. Heavy. Dense. Impossible to see through.

Cyrus blinked, stunned by the irony of it. Xavier didn’t trust him. Xavier, who had gotten to his position by lying and cheating. Xavier, who had sabotaged his own comrades—including Cyrus himself—for his own gain.

As if realizing his mistake, Xavier pulled back his fists and cleared his throat. “I didn’t mean—”

“Yes, you did.”

The darker-haired male's head hung low, and he sighed. For a few minutes, they sat there in silence, letting the truth settle around them.

“So, what happens now?” Cyrus asked at last.

Xavier's brow was bent with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“What happens to me?” Cyrus tapped the folder. “And what happens to these?”

There were any number of things he expected Xavier to do or say, based on past history, and blackmail topped the list. Yet the other Messenger simply sucked in a deep breath and dug into his pocket. “This is what happens.”

When he opened his hand, a lighter lay in his palm. He flicked the tab on it, and a small flame burst to life. Flipping the folder open again, he pulled out the stack of photographs and lit them at the corner.

“I've already destroyed the original video. This is the only copy,” Xavier told him as they watched the print-outs burn.

It only took a few seconds. Smoke and chemicals seared Cyrus's nostrils. Then, the ashes fell onto the folder below. When nothing but the opposite corners of the pages were left, Xavier closed his fist to extinguish the smoldering embers and let those drop, too.

Cyrus stared at the remains on the table in front of them in disbelief. If what he'd said was true, all evidence that Cyrus had murdered a fellow Messenger was gone. The Xavier he had known in Themis, the celestial realm, would never have sacrificed something he could trade to gain power. There had to be a catch—a demand or a promise he'd require in return.

When the silence stretched on, Cyrus realized there wasn't.

Maybe Xavier had destroyed the images to protect himself, then. Too many people knew what he and Cyrus had once meant to each other. It wasn't a good look for him to be associated with a traitor.

But the unusual softness in Xavier's gray eyes when he closed the folder over the ashes and looked up at Cyrus told him that wasn't the truth either.

"You're free to go, Cy," Xavier whispered. "Please be more cautious."

He'd done it because he cared.

Jace had been right. After the riots, he'd said Xavier would never let Cyrus face the consequences of murdering a Messenger. His heart—whatever was left of it—wouldn't let him.

"I can ... leave, you mean?" Cyrus asked.

Xavier stifled a dark laugh at his hesitation. "You don't need to seem so surprised. Just because we're not lovers anymore doesn't mean we have to be enemies. I want what's best for you ... I always have. Even when it hasn't seemed like it."

Cyrus raised a brow. "What about Danica and Leo—and the others? Won't they wonder why you've let me go?"

"I can handle them." That sad, longing glint returned to the general's eyes, and a muscle in his stubble-speckled jaw twitched. "I'll do whatever it takes to protect you. I wish you could see that."

Cyrus wished he could see that, too.

THE STRIP WAS UNSETTLING. It was too quiet. Too dark. Too empty. From the balcony of his suite at Nova, all Cyrus saw were reminders of Jace. It was as though some part of the Watcher lingered like a ghost in the destruction he left behind.

He was in the silence—in the curfew that had been imposed on Sin City in the days since the Perdition Riots.

He was in the shadows of Cyrus's neighboring balcony. The one that had belonged to Eris, his cousin who'd died by Jace's hand. She would never turn on her light or talk to Cyrus over the railing again.

And Jace was in the portion of the Strip that had been shut down and evacuated entirely, a black hole among the glittering lights of the casinos and hotels surrounding it. Cyrus had seen it all happen. He'd rushed to the window while Astra and Xavier argued in the kitchen of his suite behind him, and he'd watched Jace soar and duck and dodge the Messengers who pursued him. The soldiers hadn't managed to catch Jace, but they *had* destroyed the peak of the Eiffel Tower replica at the resort next door.

That resort was just another one of the many messes Xavier and his soldiers now had to clean up—and one of the reasons why human police were being deployed to shifts at Nocturna. There was too much work to secure the city for the Messengers to do it alone. Even Xavier could admit that.

Cyrus had almost gone with Jace. The Watcher had asked him, and the answer had been there, on the tip of his tongue. A simple syllable yearning to be spoken. *Yes*. But Cyrus had said no instead. He'd said it despite the way every cell in his body had screamed out against him. Cyrus had blamed Xavier; he'd said he was a liability and Jace would be safer without him.

Yet while that was true, it was also a lie.

The reality was that Cyrus had been scared. Their relationship was so new. It was so much—too much—to ask. And how he regretted it now. His mind had tricked him. It had been too slow to catch up to what his body already knew: he and Jace were made for each other.

*Yes.*

He should have said *yes*.

Cyrus pulled his cell phone from his pocket, working through the screens until his fingertips hovered over Jace's number in his address book. He knew the Watcher's phone had been destroyed during the riots. He didn't know if he'd gotten a new one—or if his old number even still worked. Still, he selected the number and held the phone to his ear.

It rang. Once. Twice. Then, it went to voicemail.

Exactly like last time. And the time before that. And the time before that.

Someday, he knew, it wouldn't ring at all. There would only be an ugly beep and an automated message saying the number had been disconnected.

Hence, his need to find Devlin instead.

Cyrus hung up and stuffed the phone back in his pocket. He swallowed hard, trying to bury the lump in his throat. He brought his fingertips to his lips and traced them, remembering the way the Watcher had kissed him right here on this very spot the first night they'd spent together. He'd trade a hundred years for one more chance at that night.

Even more for the chance to say *yes*.

Sighing, Cyrus turned to head back inside the suite. He tugged on the sliding door, leaving it open just a crack. Just in case.

*I will always leave the door open for you*, he'd once told Jace.

And he meant it.

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**JACE**

“**S**on of a bitch!” Jace startled as he kicked the rock aside, stepping back from the fence at a pace some might call a jump.

The scorpion was a brazen little fucker. And a fast one. It rushed out from beneath its stony hiding spot and promptly charged him, trying to jab the stinger at the end of its dark, striped tail through the tip of Jace’s boot. Then, finding its assault unsuccessful, it raced in the opposite direction across the parched Arizona landscape.

*Look at that: assholes come in all shapes and sizes.*

Only a few days here, and Jace was already sick of the scorpions slipping out of the cracks and crevices. They were in the shed behind the tools. By the water tanks out back. Along the cool rock wall along the far edge of the property. Jace had learned to wear thick, heavy boots to do his work outdoors even before his first shift on the ranch had ended.

At least this one was just a devil scorpion, bigger but with venom much less potent than its smaller, sand-colored cousins, whom he’d heard had claimed the leg of the man who owned the neighboring homestead. To be honest, calling the grizzled, ginger-haired old man a neighbor was a bit of an overstatement. His property was at least a mile away and every bit as much off the so-called grid as this one. No one lived this way unless they had to. Unless life among the living was too unbearable or too risky not to.

Both of which were true in Jace’s case.

Now, he reached for the dagger strapped to the calf of his boot, ready to make the insect pay on behalf of its entire species.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” The words were accompanied by a deep but soft, rumbling chuckle.

Jace paused, the dagger still clutched in his hand, and turned. “Malakai ...”

“Just ‘Kai’ is fine, please. I’ve told you before.”

The hulking, brooding figure swung his leg over the equally enormous gelding he rode and dismounted. He was a celestial, his skin touched with the subtle glow of starlight, and his wavy, silvery-gray hair was long enough to be pulled back into a partial bun. Kai moved gracefully for such a large male. His log-thick thighs carried him across the distance between them in seconds. Then, he folded his arms over his chest, and when he looked down at Jace, his jade eyes as cool and clear as glass, Jace could have sworn he’d felt the temperature drop.

Only part of the reason was due to the celestial’s sizable shadow.

“That little one isn’t worth your energy,” Kai continued. “He’s more of a nuisance than harmful, at least to a celestial like yourself. There are bigger and far more dangerous predators out here to draw your wrath, believe me.”

Jace believed him.

He believed him because Kai was one such predator himself. It was one of the first things Devlin had told him when he’d brought him here. Kai was an Emissary—an angel of death, as the humans might call him. Jace had yet to see the celestial’s sleek, onyx wings on display, or watch the tendrils of the lethal green vapor he was capable of breathing strangle a creature. But he *had* seen other proof of Kai’s celestial designation: the way the feral dogs that roamed the area cowered and whined whenever the Emissary drew near. Kai hadn’t killed in years—and he hadn’t worked as an Emissary for the ruling First Sphere celestials in Themis even longer,



Dev had said—but it was as though the dogs still sensed death wherever he went.

Emissaries were the eeriest and most intimidating of the celestial classes, and Kai did nothing to dispel the stereotypes of his kind. Yet facing him was a necessary part of life here. Kai and his partner, Byron—a demon and Dev’s brother—owned and ran the ranch. It was remote, secure, and staffed entirely by outcasts from the celestial world: a handful of Watchers, a Messenger, and about a dozen demons. There was even a human who’d come here to live with her demon lover. Over the years, Chancellor Astra, the leader of the celestials living in the mortal realm, had funneled each of them here—and more, though some had since moved on.

This was their sanctuary, their safe house.

And now, it was Jace’s, too. His home for however long he wanted or needed it. The long arms of celestial law couldn’t reach him here; Astra had seen to it.

“What do you suggest I do, then?” Jace asked, slowly tucking the dagger away.

“For the scorpions?” Kai scratched thoughtfully at his stubble-speckled chin. “Peppermint oil.”

“Peppermint oil?” Jace felt his jaw drop open before he could tell himself to close it.

The Emissary nodded but didn’t offer up any further clarification. When it became clear he had no intention of saying more, Jace blinked.

“And for the rest?” he asked.

“Learn that.”

The Emissary jerked his head to the east—back toward the main homestead on the ranch, where he and Byron lived. More than a half dozen of the other residents were spread out between the front porch and dusty driveway. Grouped in pairs, they traded sharp jabbing punches and high kicks. Sparring. Byron—with his dark, fringe-cut hair and ram-like horns—walked among them. He was smaller than Kai, but his lean frame was muscular, and the way he paused the others to

refine their movements, or to give advice, left no room for misinterpretation. He was the expert among them.

“Demonic martial arts?” Jace knew the outlawed practice was still popular in underground fight clubs, but aside from a few moves in bar brawls, he’d never really seen it in action.

Kai nodded again. “Byron’s a realm champion—or he was, anyway, before he started teaching it instead.” The Emissary’s cool eyes warmed at the mention of his lover, and his fierce beauty softened at the edges. For a moment, he seemed less like an overgrown panther and more like a house cat.

As if sensing the mention of his name, Byron glanced up. His hair flopped over his eyes, and the silver hoop piercings in each of his nostrils glinted in the sunlight. He waved to them across the distance—or, he waved to Kai, anyway. Jace got the distinct impression the grin on his pouty lips was intended more for the Emissary.

“Byron can train you, too, if you want,” Kai offered as the demon turned back to his students.

“I have my celestial powers, though.” Jace flexed his hands, feeling his palms warm as he channeled the energy of the cosmos that flowed through his veins. “And I’m a good aim with a throwing knife.”

“The knife is good. This—” Kai lifted one of his hands, and a sphere of putrid green light took shape above it. “—Is unreliable. Dev tells me the Messengers are outfitting the human police in Las Vegas with bronze restraints now, since the riots. The second one of those cuffs gets slapped on your wrist, your powers will vanish.” He closed his fist again. “You’ll be vulnerable. Unless you have another skill.”

The Emissary was right, of course. Except there was one rather important detail he’d conveniently overlooked.

“I’m never going back to Vegas,” Jace mumbled. Even thinking the words made his heart hurt, let alone saying them. They conjured up images of the destruction he’d left behind—of Cassian, of Hesper ... of Cyrus.

His head hanging, he turned back to the fence he'd been mending before Kai and the scorpion had shown up. He pulled on the work gloves he'd stashed in his back pocket and resumed tugging apart the rusty barbed wire.

"Never is a long time," Kai said. "Trust me, I've been around for more than a millennium. There was a time when I also said *never* about things." His gaze drifted back toward the homestead and the demon refereeing skirmishes in the yard. "Then, I met Byron, and he changed that."

Jace had already met his version of Byron—the lover who gave him a sense of hope and peace he'd never thought possible—in Cyrus. And Cyrus, like everyone else he cared about, was lost to him. Still, it seemed unwise to argue with someone capable of doling out death in a single breath, so he didn't.

"You're lucky, then," was all Jace said.

Kai scoffed. "I'm cursed, actually. In all ways except one: Byron."

Shaking his head, the Emissary walked back to his horse. As he mounted the gelding, he gave Jace one last look before continuing his trek around the perimeter.

"Think about the training," he added. "The distraction will be good for your mind, if nothing else."

EVERYTHING FELT like it was happening to someone else, like Jace was at a movie theater, watching his life unfold on screen from a distance. He poked apathetically at the lunch Nina—the lone human among them—had made while the others sat on the porch with their plates, swapping jokes and stories. He returned to his work repairing the fence. At some point, Kai circled back to check on him, to warn him to rest during the peak of the day's heat. But Jace was stubborn. He worked until the barbs in the fence made his hands raw and bloody.

The pain didn't last—as a celestial, he healed too quickly. But until the cuts mended, they were his penance, his punishment for everything he'd done.

At dusk, he suffered through another meal in silence, grinning politely and nodding when Nina asked if his food was all right. Someone had told him she'd been a private chef to celebrities in L.A. before she'd wound up here. Cooking was a way she stayed connected to her mortal roots, and she took pride in the food she prepared, even now. Jace didn't mean to offend her. It was simply hard to feel hunger for anything but those whom he'd lost.

While he forced himself to swallow a forkful of cilantro-lime rice from his plate, he saw Devlin lean over Nina's slender shoulder and whisper something in her ear. The woman's gaze snapped to Jace across the table, and she gave him a sympathetic smile.

"I'll ask him what his favorite meal is tomorrow," Jace thought he heard her murmur back to the demon.

Nina really didn't need to bother. There was no meal that could comfort the perpetual ache in Jace's chest, the one so strong it dulled the force of any hunger. She would know that already if she'd ever been responsible for the death of her closest friend. If she'd ever broken her sister's heart. If she'd ever broken her own.

*Cyrus ...*

Memories shifted through Jace's mind as he pushed away his plate: Cyrus's reflection in the glass at Nova the first time he'd seen him ... the wind filtering through his tousled blond hair as he leaned against the railing on the observation deck at the Stratosphere ... his easy smile as he pulled him closer beneath the white sheets in his bed ... The images were so strong that Jace could almost feel the softness of Cyrus's feathers beneath his hands. He could practically smell the crispness of his shampoo when he nuzzled the nape of his neck, and he could nearly taste the sacred saltiness of the Messenger's cum on his lips after sucking him dry.

Did Cyrus think of Jace still? He had to. They'd only been apart a few days.

Had Xavier already tried to win back the Messenger's heart? Probably. Xavier wasn't exactly shy about going after

what, or who, he wanted. Worse, had Cyrus given in?

Jace didn't want to think about that.

The questions plagued him all over again, setting each nerve on edge across his body. He stood up from the table abruptly, breathing hard, the feet of his chair scraping noisily across the cool tile floor. The sound rose above the friendly chatter that filled the room. One by one, everyone's eyes focused on him.

Kai. Byron. The demons. The Messenger. Nina.

And Dev.

"Well, what're you all staring at?" Dev chuckled, breaking the ensuing silence. "This isn't a circus freak show, just a man finished with his dinner."

As the others gradually turned back to their forks, knives, and food, Devlin smirked, then nodded at Jace from across the table. Mission accomplished. The attention was off him.

And to think Jace had scoffed at first when Dev had offered to stay a few days with him at the ranch. He'd told Dev he wasn't a child; he didn't need help settling in. As it turned out, he did. Dev wasn't Cassian. Cassian had practically been his brother, and no one could ever fill the hole left behind by the loss of a family member. But Dev's presence helped. In so many ways, he helped.

"Thanks," Jace mouthed. He barely knew his way around the common areas of the large, sprawling homestead, but the kitchen was simple enough. Grabbing his plate, he started toward the sink. Only when he heard his fork rattling against the porcelain did he realize he was shaking.

"Oh, that's all right, Jace, hon," Nina called. "Just leave it on the counter. I'll take care of it."

Of course she'd been watching him. She had been all day, since Dev had whispered in her ear. She was proving almost as observant as a fellow Watcher. She meant well, he knew, even if he hated the attention.

Again, Jace forced a grin, then slipped through the side door into the star-filled night.

THE WALK to his cabin didn't take long—not even with it being the newest and furthest away from the homestead. Jace held out one of his palms and let the fiery blue orb he summoned brighten his path as he walked. Over the years, enough guests had passed through that a trail had been worn through the dirt and brush.

Not that the scorpions cared which areas had been designated a walkway and which had not. At least two of those atrocious little monsters crossed in front of him before he pushed open the door to his cabin and threw it closed behind him again.

For a moment, Jace stood in the dark. He ran his still-trembling hands through his hair, then pressed his back against the door and told himself to breathe. In. Out. In with the image of a sweet smile on Cyrus's handsome face. Out with his thoughts of Xavier. Finally, his hands stopped shaking, and his breathing slowed. Switching on the light, he snatched a half-empty bottle of whiskey from the end table and sat on the small sofa. It shouldn't hurt this much to carry on living. It shouldn't be so much effort to convince his body to do things it should know by muscle memory.

But it was.

Propping his feet up on the coffee table, Jace took a drink. His boots were still on—and the dagger was still strapped to his calf alongside them. As the burn of alcohol trailed down his throat, he reached for the handle and pulled it from its sheath. Holding the weapon up to the light, he turned it slowly, admiring its vicious beauty. One side of the blade was dangerous, silken smooth, and razor sharp. The other side was as brutal as the first was elegant, its celestial steel serrated like a saw.

Jace's throat tightened as he watched the dagger gleam and listened to the subtle, unearthly hum it gave off. Holding the weapon was like spending time with an old friend. It had once

belonged to Cassian. Dev had given it to him, along with a burner phone and a change of clothes, after picking him up outside of Nova the morning he'd fled Las Vegas. An associate of his had found it in the ruins of Perdition Marketplace, he'd explained, and there was no more rightful owner for it than Jace.

That wasn't true, though, wasn't it? Jace wasn't worthy. If he had any courage, he'd use the dagger to join its former owner in death—

“Jace?” His name accompanied the knocking at the door. It was Dev. He'd come to recognize the sound of the demon's voice these past few days.

Guiltily, like a thief caught red-handed, Jace cast the dagger aside on the coffee table and stood up to let his visitor in.

“I'm heading back to Vegas in the morning,” Dev announced without preamble as he made his way toward the sofa and sat down exactly where Jace had a moment ago.

Jace leaned against the counter of the nearby galley kitchen. Several of the other cabins on the property were larger, more like bunkhouses. But Jace's cabin was small and humble—nothing more than a tiny living area, adobe fireplace, and single adjoining bedroom. Without meaning to, Dev had taken the only real place to sit.

“What time are you leaving?” Jace asked him.

“Early. I've got some business to attend to. Meetings. Scheming new ways to fuck with Messengers now that Perdition is closed. That sort of thing.” Yawning, he stretched his arms over his head, then folded his hands at the nape of his neck and leaned back. “That's why I stopped by now—to say goodbye and to see if there's anything I can bring back for you on my next trip down.”

Even as the whiskey began to dull his senses, Jace looked up sharply at the promise of reconnecting to his old life in Las Vegas. “When do you think that'll be?”

Dev shrugged. “A week? Maybe less, at the rate things are going in Nocturna.”

A week. That was sooner than Jace had expected. His heartbeat quickened. For the first time since setting foot on the ranch, he felt hope. Hesper had said she would come to him. She’d pleaded with him outside Perdition, with Eris’s body behind them.

*You’re my only family left now, baby brother, she’d said. I won’t give you up. Go—go, and when things settle down, I’ll follow.*

Jace stood taller and nodded eagerly. He had never longed for his sister’s company as much as he did now, but in a few days’ time, they could be together again. They could help each other heal.

“Hesper,” he said quickly, as though Dev might leave before he managed to give her name. “Can you check on her for me? Make sure she’s safe and that she’s doing okay without ... Caz.”

Devlin let out a long, deep sigh. “It’ll be tough, Jericho—”

“Don’t call me that.” Jace was back to old habits. Only on Cyrus’s tongue had he ever liked the sound of his given name.

The demon shifted on the sofa, crossing a leg over his knee and looking at him more closely. “The Messengers will be all over her. Monitoring her every move. They’ll expect you to reach out to her.”

Jace shook his head. “I’m banished. Astra said they can’t come after me.”

“No ... not technically. But they might. Especially if you serve yourself up to them on a silver platter.”

“Please ... please at least try.” It would be unfair to remind Dev how he’d saved his sister’s life a couple of weeks ago in a bar brawl. The demon had already repaid him in spades for that. Jace would have to hope that Dev’s weak spot for Lola was just as soft as his was for Hesper.

It was.



Letting out another, more exaggerated sigh, Dev reached for the bottle of whiskey Jace had left on the coffee table. He helped himself to a swig, then pointed it at him like a scolding finger. “Fine. No promises. But I’ll try.”

Warmth surged through Jace’s veins again. “Let her know I’m all right, too, will you? And ask if she wants to come. We can start over together.”

Dev chuckled and twisted the cap back on the bottle. “First you ask me to check on her. Then, you want me to *bring* her here. I’ve got to hand it to you, Watcher. You have nads the size of the moon. I see why Caz liked you so much.”

The scar-faced male laughed even harder when he saw the way Jace wilted. Standing up, he placed a hand on Jace’s shoulder and gripped him reassuringly. “It’s all good, my man. It’s risky—but everything is these days. I’ll do what I can. You have my word.”

Jace nodded. “Thanks.”

“Any other last requests?” Dev asked as he headed toward the door.

For a heartbeat, Jace thought of asking about Cyrus, but he pushed the idea away again just as quickly. Cyrus hadn’t wanted to come with him. He said it put Jace in too much danger, that Xavier would never stop looking for him if he did. Maybe Cyrus had been right. Or maybe he simply didn’t care for Jace enough.

Either way, the Messenger was only a dream now.

“Some of my own clothes would be great, if you can manage,” Jace told the demon instead.

He looked down at his T-shirt, another in what was becoming a long line of items borrowed from the other guests at the ranch. Jace was lucky today in that this shirt fitted all right. He was unlucky in that there were some intentionally made holes in it—ones torn out of a misguided sense of fashion. The kitschy logo of a popular local beer company didn’t do much to help, either.

Jace fucking hated beer.

“You got it.”

Dev’s hand found the doorknob, and as Jace watched him step outside, he remembered something else.

“Oh. And peppermint oil.”

The demon laughed again. Then, he was gone.

Alone, Jace’s gaze drifted over the newly quiet room. Cassian’s dagger still sat on the coffee table. This time, he pulled the knife sheath from his boot, slipped the dagger back inside, then put it in the drawer of the end table.

Out of sight. Away from any temptation to use it on others ... or himself.

Yes, maybe Kai had been right earlier: a distraction would be good for him.

## CYRUS

Ransom haunted him. Cyrus tried to sleep, but every time he closed his eyes, he saw the little demon's disheveled clothes and slim, dirty finger pointing toward Kur Club. He sighed as he stared up at the ceiling of his darkened suite. The blue-tipped gray feather Jace had left behind on the balcony when he fled was pinched between his fingers. The single feather was a poor substitute for the feel of those full, soft wings beneath his palms, but it was one of the few keepsakes Cyrus had of the Watcher. So, he'd kept it and cherished it, along with Jace's throwing knives. He twirled the feather relentlessly now, his thoughts turning over in his mind at the same speed.

There would be no rest without answers. He knew himself, and so he knew this, too.

*Screw the curfew.*

Abruptly, Cyrus placed the feather on his nightstand and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He'd never shied away from an adventure as a child, and he wouldn't now, either.

And make no mistake about it: going to Nocturna in the middle of the night was an adventure.

But it was worth the risk if Ransom had been right. Maybe Devlin *did* have some special connection to the brothel after all. Besides, he was hardly the only one out after hours. Curfew or not, darkly dressed figures ducked from shadow to shadow along Sheol Street, eager to reach their destination—but not so eager to be seen.

Kur Club was packed when he arrived. Cyrus stood in line in the lobby, listening to the raucous combination of chatter, thumping, and moaning, while he waited to be greeted. The scent of cum and cigar smoke hung so thick in the air that not even the lavender candles scattered across every surface could cover it. His nostrils flared and his dick twitched with interest despite the way he tried to remind himself he wasn't here for sex. He only wanted Jace—and so did his cock, even if it didn't act very much like it at the moment.

Stupid physiology betraying his heart.

Despite the sounds and smells, it was a classier place than Cyrus had been expecting from its reputation. Everything was clean, and the lobby was secluded from the less-tame rooms beyond. With its damask-print wallpaper, crystal chandeliers, and plush velvet furniture, it seemed more like a room at the Palace of Versailles than a brothel in Nocturna. Half the Strip might be closed, but Las Vegas glitz and over-the-top glamor were still on full display here.

“Ah, a virgin ...” The female behind the counter directing patrons grinned widely when she spotted him.

Cyrus took a step forward. He glanced around with uncertainty. She couldn't really be talking to *him*, could she? “Um, I'm *not* a virgin.”

Throwing back her head, she laughed, her glossy red lips glistening like glass apples beneath the chandelier. Their shine was nothing, though, compared to the sparkle of the rhinestones that lined the pair of polished onyx horns on her head.

“Not *that* kind of virgin. I wouldn't out you like that, sweetheart—though you'd be in good hands if you were,” she told him. “I meant this is your first visit to Kur Club, isn't it?”

Cyrus eased. He supposed he was rather obvious, staring at everything, his hard-on straining against his jeans.

Amber swirled in the demon's eyes. “I'm right, aren't I? I can always tell, and most Messengers wear a hood or baseball cap when they come here.”

He frowned again. Of course. He should have thought of that. That was one of the first things Jace had told him about the pleasures of Sheol Street: Messengers treated their trips here like a dirty little secret.

The demon giggled again. “You’re cute—and don’t worry, I won’t tell.” She winked, then pulled a silver, plumed masquerade mask from a shelf beneath the counter and slid it toward him. “For you, if you prefer to go incognito from this point on.”

Sucking in a deep breath, Cyrus waved away the mask. “That’s really not necessary. That’s not what I’m here for—”

“What are you here for then, sweetheart?” The demon leaned over the counter. Her breasts heaved along her neckline, and she lowered her voice. “We have the means to suit almost any preference or fantasy. Males. Females. Intersex. Orgies. Role play. Toys. Kinks. What do you like?”

“Oh, none of that—”

She raised a sleek, black brow. “The indecisive type. No worries. We have rooms where you can watch, figure out what you’re interested in—or, if you’re feeling adventurous, I’d be happy to pick a partner for you.” She pursed her lips a moment and studied his face. “You’d make a pretty pair with Saxon, if you like males. He’s very considerate. Perfect for a first-timer.”

Cyrus shook his head. “There’s someone particular I’m looking for, actually.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” Her smile brightened, and she clasped her hands beneath her chin as if waiting to hear a secret. “Who? We’re always happy to oblige special requests, if possible.”

“I’m trying to find someone called Devlin.”

Immediately, the grin disappeared from the female’s face. She straightened up and took a step back from the counter. Her candy-coated tone of voice fell flat, and her eyes flared dangerously. “Dev doesn’t work here.”

Of course. Demons protected their own. He should have been used to this sort of reaction by now. But her response told him something few of the others had. She knew Dev—not in a casual way, either, like Ransom or the demon at the bodega. She truly knew him.

Ransom had been right. Dev *did* have ties to Kur Club.

“I know,” Cyrus said quickly. “I just want to ask him about of friend of mine. I thought Dev might know where he went. I was told he stops by here sometimes.”

Seconds passed as she tapped her long, glossy fingernails on the countertop. The moaning overhead grew louder—or it seemed that way, at least.

“Please,” Cyrus added, rather desperately. She almost believed him; Cyrus could tell. He had to convince her. So, he tried again. “You mentioned fantasies before ... Well, that friend I mentioned is mine.”

The demon let out a deep, drawn-out sigh. “I’m a sucker for romance. We don’t see too much of it around here,” she told him. Then, keeping her still-cautious stare on him, she called out, “Dolly!”

That was when Cyrus noticed a hidden door—one that had been constructed to blend in with the wallpaper—located further back behind the counter. After a moment, it swung open. A curvy female celestial with a round face and pink complexion slipped through. She tucked a loose strand of platinum-blond hair behind her ear, and her flared skirt swirled around her knees when she walked. She looked less like a brothel manager and more like an actress in one of the mortals’ old black-and-white sitcoms that Cyrus had seen on TV.

“What is it, Lola, love?” she asked as she approached the demon behind the counter.

“This guest wants to talk to Dev.”

While the two stood side by side, gaping at him, Cyrus noticed the resemblance between them. Dolly’s eyes were blue, and Lola’s were tinted with amber, but their shape was

the same. They were related, maybe even mother and daughter.

But that wasn't what caught Cyrus's attention the most. Instead, it was a third female—another celestial—who did. She followed Dolly out of her office, wiped a tear from her cheek, and stalked past Cyrus and the rest of the guests waiting for admittance to the brothel behind him. She was strikingly beautiful, yes, but there was something else, something *more*, about her. The moonlike sheen to her skin, dark hair, and glistening eyes seemed familiar in a way Cyrus couldn't quite place.

She almost reminded him of ... Hesper.

No, not reminded him. She *was* Hesper. Jace's sister.

Cyrus had only ever seen her from a distance that night he and Jace went to Nocturna together. Still, he was sure—sure enough that, when Dolly asked him why he needed to talk to Dev so badly, he shook his head.

“Never mind. I think I've made a mistake,” he blurted out before turning to go.

He had to move quickly. Hesper was leaving. In a moment, she would pass through the main door, and Cyrus might never cross paths with her again. Sure, he was sacrificing the chance to talk to Devlin, but the risk was worth it. If anyone had managed to get in touch with Jace recently, it was her.

“Hesper!” Cyrus shouldered past a few celestials wearing hooded sweatshirts and at least a couple of demons waiting in the queue. The sound of her name only seemed to make her pick up her pace. “Wait!”

She tucked her head down and pushed forward, then turned down the hallway.

“I just want to talk—”

She pushed through the tufted velvet double doors at the entrance to Kur Club and hurried down the front steps. “Fuck off, asshole!” she called over her shoulder. “I'm a bartender, not an escort, and I didn't even get the job.”

Charming.

Not that Cyrus could blame her. She'd been through a lot these past few days, and she undoubtedly had ample experience fending off creeps. Unfair as it was, it came with the territory of working in bars. And being pretty.

“Please—”

Without turning around, she raised one of her hands—and her middle finger. Then, she glanced up at the roofline. There were no Watcher guards surveying this part of the street tonight. No Messenger soldiers, either. Cyrus knew this; he'd checked for them himself on his way here earlier. Realizing this, too, she ducked down a side street as though trying to lose him.

Cyrus jogged to catch up. “Hesper!”

He wanted to say Jace's name so badly. That would make her stop. He wanted to tell her he knew him. They could talk for hours about him, comfort each other about their loss—plot ways to find him. Maybe she already knew who Cyrus was. Had Jace ever mentioned his name? It wouldn't be the ideal way for them to meet, but it was better than nothing at all.

It was too dangerous to speak freely, though. Nocturna was quiet, thanks to the curfew, yet it wasn't abandoned.

And they were far from alone.

Of all the side streets Hesper could have chosen to turn down, she'd picked the one with an active robbery in progress.

Flashing blue lights bounced off the graffiti, brick, and broken glass. No less than three mortal police cruisers were staggered along the street at odd angles, cutting off any other traffic. A handful of cops stood outside, guns drawn beneath the moonlight, shouting at a pair of large-horned demons outside the shattered window of a shop—looters, taking advantage of the spoils of Nocturna.

“Drop your weapons!”

“This is demon territory, mortal! We do what we want here.”



The guns wouldn't do much good against the shimmering blades clutched in the demons' hands. Ordinary bullets were no match against celestial steel. The police would never even get close enough to use their fancy bronze handcuffs to stop the demons from healing. If the Messengers thought they'd equipped the mortals well enough to handle crime in Nocturna, they were mistaken.

"Shit!" Hesper stopped short as soon as she realized the danger she'd led them into.

Cyrus grabbed her arm, tugging her back a step, deeper into the shadows. He pressed a finger to his lips to signal for silence.

For the first time since leaving Kur Club, she actually bothered to look at him. Her eyes widened with what seemed to be a mix of surprise and fear. Then, she scowled and ripped herself from his grasp as though he'd scalded her with hot water.

"I can take care of myself," she snapped in a whisper.

He had no doubt she could, but she didn't get the chance to prove it.

Incoherent shouts rose through the air.

Someone screamed. One of the demons had thrown a knife, stabbing one of the police officers in the forehead.

"On the ground—on the ground!"

The cop slumped to the pavement, while his fellow officers advanced on the demons.

Then, a gun went off.

"Get down!" Cyrus didn't wait for permission from Hesper. There was no time. They were too close to the line of fire. He dove toward the pavement, taking her with him, extending his wings like a shield over them both.

She was his last lifeline to Jace. Nothing could happen to her. He wouldn't let it.

Hesper didn't resist this time.

One after another, gunshots echoed along the otherwise abandoned street. A fiery, bloody rain. They drowned out the roar of Cyrus's heart inside his chest as he crawled behind a nearby parked car, nudging Hesper to follow.

Together, they leaned against the passenger side of the vehicle, barely breathing. Hesper tucked her head against his wing for good measure. Cyrus squinted up at the apartment building towering above them. One by one, the lights went out in the windows.

“Check the body! Check him now!”

Just as quickly, the storm was over. An eerie silence overtook the street. Then, the wail of sirens approaching filled the void. Softly at first, then louder. Nocturna snapped back to life. Voices. Lights. Movement. It was as though time had paused and was moving forward again at twice the speed.

Cyrus clenched and unclenched his fists. He hadn't realized how tightly he'd been gripping the curb beneath him.

Hesper lifted her head from the tufts of ivory feathers he'd wrapped them in.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She was shaking, and she swallowed hard as she put distance between them, but she nodded. “You?”

He nodded, then peered around the bumper of the car they'd hidden behind.

Cyrus had never seen a gun go off before—not really, anyway. Sure, there had been movies and TV shows, but firearms didn't exist in Themis. Celestials opted for classic, more elegant weapons—for swords and daggers, bows and arrows. The sound had surprised him.

But not as much as the blood.

His stomach lurched as he stared at the scene. Both demon looters were on the ground, motionless, their torsos riddled with red stains.

*Get up, he thought. Why aren't they getting up?*

They were demons. Guns could only injure them. They'd have wounds to nurse, and it would take time for their bodies to expel the bullets and heal. It certainly wouldn't be pleasant, either—though some celestial salve could speed up the process if they were allowed it when taken to prison. Still, they didn't move.

A police officer approached the closest demon. Tentatively, he kicked at the male's boot.

“Dead?” asked one of the others hanging back by the cruisers.

The cop crouched over the body. He grabbed one of the demon's horns and tilted his head to see his face better in the moonlight. Cyrus expected the demon to grab the mortal's arm and pull him closer before jamming a hidden dagger into his guts. But he only stared at the stars, eyes unblinking.

Cyrus knew the answer even before the cop said the word.

“Yeah.” The officer stood up. He ran a hand through his buzz-cut hair with relief. “As a doornail.”

“Holy shit. The bullets worked.”

Bullets?

Yes, bullets.

Bullets had brought down a demon. Cyrus noticed the casings scattered across the pavement. One had even rolled beneath the car, just an arm's length away. Silvery. Faintly glowing. Softly humming.

Somehow, the bullets were made with a celestial alloy.

Cyrus inhaled sharply and staggered backward, nearly losing his balance. The mortals had celestial steel weapons. Someone was arming them beyond the standard-issue bronze handcuffs. They were far from defenseless in the Messenger-demon war now. This changed things. This changed everything.

“Is the coast clear?” Hesper's whisper was warm and minty against his ear.

In the horror of realizing the mortals were armed, he'd nearly forgotten she was still beside him.

“Looks like the shooting's over,” he said.

She was already standing up and spreading her wings. “Good.” She flicked her long, glossy hair over her shoulder. “Sorry I called you an asshole, by the way. You're not. You might've even saved my life.”

“Wait—” He still had to ask her about Jace.

But it was too late. Hesper's violet-flecked feathers fluttered, and she darted upward, into the night.

She never even questioned how he knew her name—or asked him for his.

Cyrus sighed. Tonight had been a total loss where Jace was concerned, but there was still the bullet casing beneath the car. He reached for it, turned it over in his hand for a moment, then tucked it into the pocket of his jeans.

Astra would have to hear about this.

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**CYRUS**

**T**he symbol had been sloppily scrawled over the door to Cyrus's suite at Nova, and although the paint had dribbled in places, it was legible enough. A celestial rune. And it wasn't just any celestial rune. It was the one that demons had emblazoned between their shoulder blades, so deep beneath their skin that, this far from Themis, only the touch of celestial steel could make it glow.

Pronged like a trident, turned upside down like a pitchfork. A sign that its bearer was disgraced.

And underneath the symbol was written the word *lover*.

Demon lover.

Xavier had been right about the other Messengers questioning his loyalties.

Cyrus glanced around him in the hallway, half-expecting to see whoever had drawn it peering around the corner, waiting to see his reaction. But he was alone. The vandal must have done this early in the morning, after Cyrus had gotten back from Kur Club, and left while he was still sleeping. He supposed he was meant to feel insulted. Or bullied. Or threatened. And he did. Mostly, though, he was angry.

It couldn't be a coincidence that this had happened less than a day after he'd helped Ransom escape the mortal police. Someone was watching him. Someone knew what he'd done.

Jaw clenched, he reached out to try to chip away some of the paint with his fingernail. It didn't budge. Shit. He'd have

to call housekeeping later and see if there was something they could do about it.

For now, he had something more important on his mind: finding Astra. The chancellor had been harder to get in touch with since the Perdition Riots. Endless meetings. Visits to the battered portions of the Strip and Sheol Street. Constant reassurances to the mortals' leaders that everything was being done to secure Sin City.

The riots were an opportunity for true human-immortal cooperation, she'd called it in the interviews she did on TV.

In truth, it was a diplomatic nightmare—one scrutinized even more heavily because of her upcoming fiftieth anniversary as the celestial chancellor. The kinder pundits said she was losing her edge. The crueller ones were starting to call for her replacement.

The celestial steel bullet casing Cyrus turned over in his pocket as he headed toward the elevators wouldn't make her job any easier. Still, she needed to know about it.

“Cyrus, wait—”

As he stepped off the elevator and onto the governance floor, a familiar voice echoed down the corridor. But it didn't make him pause. Instead, Cyrus walked faster. Ignoring Xavier did nothing to discourage him from approaching anyway. In a few seconds, he was beside Cyrus, matching his pace.

“I'm sorry about what happened to your door,” he said.

That was one way to make Cyrus stop. Abruptly, he turned to Xavier, tugging him into a quiet corner. “What do you know about that?”

Xavier blinked. “Know? Nothing—not what you're thinking I know, anyway. I had nothing to do with it. Someone reported it this morning. I recognized the number to your suite immediately.”

Cyrus wished he was surprised to hear the last part. His jaw flexed as he tried to find words. “How did this happen? You said you had it under control. You said my safety—”

Xavier's eyes flickered dangerously. He squared his shoulders, immediately on the defensive, and poked a finger at Cyrus's shoulder. "I also asked you to be more cautious about your ... extracurricular activities."

A passing Messenger glanced over as if startled by the tension between them. Cyrus forced a strained grin before turning back to Xavier. The commander of the celestial army raised a suspicious brow.

"Have you *been* careful, Cyrus, or did you run back out to Sheol Street the second you walked out of the prison level?"

Cyrus scoffed. "I'm not indulging that question with answer." Technically, it hadn't been the *second* he left the prison. A few hours had passed. Xavier didn't need to know that, though. Poking a finger back at the general, Cyrus did his best to look smug. "You know, I'm glad you're investigating, Xave. When you find the pricks who did it, you can tell them to fuck off. I'm not so easily intimidated."

Xavier gaped at Cyrus as if he barely recognized him anymore. Maybe he didn't. So much about him had changed in the short time since he'd come to Las Vegas—the company he kept, the words he used, the way he carried himself. To be fair, there were moments lately when Cyrus didn't recognize his former partner, either. But before the general could argue further, Cyrus ducked through the closest open doorway, the one to the Messenger officers' lounge. Immediately, he regretted it almost as much as if he'd stayed behind in the corridor.

The lounge was bustling, wall to wall with celestials getting coffee or breakfast before heading off to meetings or outside assignments for the day. Cyrus sighed as he pushed his way through the crowd. He'd been avoiding the lounge for days—since before the Perdition Riots—and the graffiti on his door this morning hadn't made him any more eager to visit. Only the knowledge that Xavier lingered outside kept his feet moving forward.

One by one, the other Messengers' gazes turned toward Cyrus as he made his way across the room. Voices dropped.

Movement slowed. How many of them had seen his vandalized door?

It didn't matter. Let them stare and wonder and whisper. Astra was here, standing beside the beverage station with a to-go cup in her hand. As she chatted with a small group of advisors, her ethereal, copper-toned beauty and powerful but gentle presence seemed to fill the room.

"How are arrangements progressing for your upcoming jubilee, chancellor?" a female with a shaved head was asking as he approached. "Fifty years in leadership is most impressive."

Astra looked thoughtful, somber, into her beverage. "Ah, yes. Thank you, Aurelia. I haven't had much time for planning lately, I'm afraid. It feels strange to carry on with celebrations, given all that has happened in Nocturna. It will be a more subdued ceremony than initially anticipated. Of that much, I'm certain."

"May I speak with you, chancellor?" Cyrus didn't wait for a break in conversation—or even for her to notice him behind her. The celestial-steel casing was too important to wait.

Aurelia glared at him as if he were a gibbous fly buzzing in her ear. If she could, she probably would have swatted at him, too. But Astra was already turning her warm stare upon him and nodding.

"Of course, Messenger Cyrus," the chancellor said before excusing herself from the others. "You look as though something grave is on your mind."

At last, the chance to talk with someone who shared his views. Someone who understood.

"How are you faring these past few days?" she asked as they exited the lounge. Everything about her seemed to float: her voice when she spoke, her hair when she moved, her body when she walked. "You seem tired. Are you well?"

She gazed at him meaningfully, and he knew what she was really asking: how was he getting along without Jace? The wrinkle between her brows gave away her worry.



Cyrus pushed past the lump in his throat. His response to any mention of Jace was intense—and immediate—but he couldn't allow himself to shatter. Not here. "That's not what I came here to talk about, but I'll admit I've been better."

Astra nodded. "If you need someone to listen—"

"You are too busy for me to burden, chancellor."

Her gaze drifted toward the wall of windows on the opposite side of the corridor. Beyond the glass, the barriers and traffic cones that had been set up to close the nearby Strip served as a reminder that Cyrus was right. She frowned. "I wish that wasn't the case."

"Me, too."

They weren't friends. They weren't confidants. They weren't really even mentor and mentee, and yet Cyrus believed she meant her words. She did wish she could help him.

"So, if our mutual friend is not the reason, what have you come to tell me about today, Messenger?" she asked.

Cyrus waited until fewer people were milling about the hall to see them. Then, he reached into his pocket and took out the casing. "This, I'm afraid."

Astra looked down at the tiny piece of metal as he pushed it into her palm.

"It's celestial steel, chancellor. I found it in Nocturna last night. The humans had it—and from the way they spoke, I'm certain there's more."

Quickly, she closed her fist around the casing, hiding its glow from others. "Yes, I am aware."

"You're ... aware?" Cyrus stammered over the words. Of everything she could have said, he hadn't expected this.

"I've always known it was only a matter of time before someone on our side thought to do this," she explained. The way she stayed so calm never failed to impress him.

"Someone on ... *our* side?"

She nodded. “A Messenger has done this.”

Cyrus’s pulse quickened. “You did not approve the order, though?”

“No, I did not. I signed off on the bronze handcuffs. They are harmless to humans and necessary so they can help us keep the city safe during these difficult times. Weapons, on the other hand ...”

“But who would go this far? Arming the humans is against everything we believe in. We’re here to bring peace, to protect them from the demons. We’re meant to keep them from doing harm, not give them more tools to cause it.”

Astra reached over to rest a hand on his forearm. “Oh, Cyrus, you’re such an idealist. It is one of your greatest strengths. It helps make you so beautiful.”

From someone else, the words might sound condescending. They might make him feel naïve. But even though he wanted to scowl, she smiled so sincerely at him that he couldn’t.

They were almost at the end of the hallway now, past the elevators and close to the row of government offices where Astra spent most of her days.

“Can you really think of no one who might be inclined to do such a thing?” Her gaze narrowed and shifted toward Xavier. The general was still milling about the area. This time, he stood outside Astra’s office. He leaned over the desk of one of her assistants, pointing to something on a screen she had tilted toward him—a schedule, from the looks of it.

Cyrus lowered his voice. “You mean to say *he*—”

Astra gave a terse, single nod. “*That* he is, I am certain. *How* he is, I have yet to find out.”

This was low, even for Xavier, and yet Cyrus didn’t doubt Astra’s instincts. The general had access to plenty of celestial steel, thanks to the Perdition Riots. And he had channels for distribution—the same ones already in place for bronze handcuffs. Restraints with a side of bullets.

“I still don’t understand *why*,” Cyrus murmured, dazed.

The chancellor sighed. “This has been a long and brutal war, Cyrus. Some are keen to see it end regardless of the means used to do so.”

They were close enough now that Astra smiled and raised her voice to greet Xavier with a warmth he didn’t deserve. “Ah, general.” She reached out to clasp his hand. “Dropping off my morning security brief in person, I see. How good of you.”

Unlike Astra, Xavier didn’t even pretend to bother with niceties like greetings or small talk. He barely shook her hand before brushing her away again. “Yes. I’ve made an appointment with you, too, chancellor. I’d like to discuss security plans for your upcoming jubilee celebration.”

“Excellent. I look forward to our conversation, general.”

Xavier’s eyes flicked to Cyrus then. He stared him up and down with his brows raised, as if to imply that aligning too closely with the chancellor wasn’t helping Cyrus’s status with the other soldiers. “Good day, Messengers,” he finally said, terse, before moving along.

*Prick.*

Cyrus turned back to Astra. “He’s suspicious of me.”

“Don’t worry about him, Cyrus. Or our little problem,” she whispered. She held up her fist with the bullet casing as a reminder before gliding into her office. “Xavier may have his so-called secret weapon, but I have one of my own.”

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**JACE**

**J**ace's head snapped back abruptly at the impact. A metallic tang washed over his tongue, and he realized he was bleeding before he felt the pain.

“Fuck! Did you see that?!” Someone on the sidelines snorted. Jace couldn't see who it was as he staggered back, clutching his nose, stars blurring his vision. “That hit was unbelievable—almost as good as Byron.”

“Hey, sorry, man.” That was Corbin, Nina's lover. The demon she'd left mortal civilization to be with. The one he'd been sparring with. And the one who'd probably just broken his nose.

Correction: the one who'd *definitely* just broken Jace's nose.

Corbin clapped Jace on the back and put an arm around his shoulders, helping to steady him.

“It's all goob. I should've blocked it.” The blood pouring through Jace's nostrils made him sound like he was drowning. In many ways, he felt like he was.

So far, Demonic Martial Arts 101 wasn't exactly a screaming success. Jace might have preferred taking his chances with the scorpions.

“All right, all right. Good effort, you two.” Byron clapped and nodded as he crossed the dusty yard toward them. He pulled off his T-shirt, balled it in his fist, then handed it to Jace

to staunch the bleeding. “Corbin, nice hit. Jace, next time he comes at you like that, try this instead.”

Byron pulled Kai toward him. Together, the two mimed in slow motion an exact replay of how Corbin had punched Jace—with one critical difference. Instead of standing there like a statue and taking the hit, Kai grabbed Byron’s wrist with one hand. Then, twisting, he brought him to a hunch and struck him in the back with his opposite elbow.

The two moved together seamlessly, their steps more of a dance than a fight. Kai’s silvery hair fluttered in the breeze. The sun glistened off the perspiration already gathering across Byron’s back. They were elegant. They were beautiful. And when they parted, there were no blood or bruises between them, only warm grins and a loving glance.

The others applauded the demonstration. But as Jace pressed Byron’s T-shirt to his nose, he could only think of Cyrus. They should be together the way Kai and Byron were. They should be trading touches and stares. They deserved a second chance.

Fuck his nose. That was the least of Jace’s problems. It was his heart that was truly broken.

Byron turned toward him. The hazy adoration he reserved only for Kai fell from his gaze, and his smile weakened. He placed his hands on his hips and looked up at Jace through the dark hair dusting over his eyes.

“You’ll get it, don’t worry,” he assured him as he reached out to pat his shoulder. “You’ve probably had enough for today, anyway.” He jerked his chin up, nodding toward Jace’s bloody nose. “Let’s get some ice to bring down the swelling, then get you cleaned up.” He glanced at the Emissary beside him. “Kai, do you mind taking over?”

Kai nodded, and Byron turned toward the homestead, then waved for Jace to follow.

“No hard feelings, right, Jace?” Corbin called as the sparring pairs separated off again.

Jace nodded. “Right.”

Of course there were no hard feelings. Jace felt too much as it was. He had no room for anything else.

GOING to the bar had been Talon's idea. He'd taken one look at Jace when he came through the door to the homestead with Byron and proclaimed that taking a hit like that was something to be celebrated.

"That is seriously badass," the demon had said, standing up from where he'd been crouching by the kitchen sink with a wrench. He'd let out a whistle. "You are one tough bastard."

Jace wasn't sure that standing there like a celestial punching bag necessarily took talent. Maybe if Talon had seen the way it had actually happened, he'd feel differently. But Jace was in no position to turn down the offer of company. Or booze.

"Watch yourself with Tal," Byron had warned, keeping his voice low. He'd handed him an artificial ice pack he'd gotten from the first aid kit in the bathroom, then fished through the box for a roll of gauze. "He's a bit of a loose cannon. Likes to party."

Jace had nodded like he'd take the advice to heart, but the truth was, getting seriously fucked up had sounded like a pretty good idea to him. It would help numb the pain. And the broken heart. And the way he hated himself for what had happened to Cassian. After throwing out his bloody T-shirt, showering, and spending the rest of the afternoon with gauze shoved up his nostrils, trying to heal, Jace even thought it might be fun.

Fun seemed like a distant memory lately, a concept that existed only in the abstract.

So, Jace had eagerly jumped into the back of the mud-smeared pickup truck with a few of the other ranch guests whom Talon had convinced to go with them. He'd tried to ignore the way the Kai had stood on the porch, his arms folded across his chest, giving them the side-eye as they headed down the driveway.

But now, watching the way Talon ground up against one of the local mortals on the stamp-sized dance floor, his horns curled against his head and his eyes blazing, Jace understood the words of caution. The secret had long since been out that angels and demons walked among the mortals in their realm, but for Talon to advertise his species—especially this far outside of Sin City—was reckless. There were reasons they lived off the grid, and he put them all in danger.

“Don’t worry,” Corbin told him, slipping onto the stool beside Jace at the bar with a bottle of beer. “The owner here is cool. He’ll make sure no one calls us in.”

Jace picked up his tumbler of whiskey and took a sip. “Byron and Kai didn’t seem to think this was so ‘cool.’”

“They worry. They worry less when me and Nina are here.” He leaned back, and Jace caught a glimpse of the petite woman ordering a glass of wine beside him.

“So, you two are our babysitters, then?” Jace stifled a dark chuckle as he thought of Cassian’s antics—different but equally wild. “I was the babysitter for my best friend before he died.”

“Perdition Riots?”

Jace nodded.

“That’s rough, man. Sorry for your loss.”

Jace’s heart thudded to the scuffed wood floor beneath his feet. This would never do. He’d come here expressly *not* to think about Cassian. He polished off the rest of his whiskey in one gulp and looked out again at Talon dancing with his new friend. Talon had taken off his T-shirt and tucked it into the waistband of his jeans now. Tattoos covered his muscular arms and chest. Black and white with pops of color. Skulls, snakes, symbols, and runes—there were too many to count, too many to distinguish.

The mortal’s jaw dropped as he ran his fingertips over Talon’s chest, tracing their outline. The demon grabbed the young man’s ass to pull him closer. He kneaded his cheeks over his jeans and pumped his groin against him.

“You can join them if you want,” Nina said. The bartender slid a glass of red wine approximately the size of her face toward her. As she picked it up, she smiled. “You’ve earned the right to some fun ... and Tal’s single, you know.”

Great. Now the human was playing matchmaker.

Jace’s thoughts shifted to Cyrus. It was proving harder to dull the ache than he’d thought it’d be. More whiskey might do the trick. Catching the bartender’s eye, he raised his empty tumbler. As quickly as it was filled, he emptied it.

Fuck it. He needed this, and celestial metabolism worked quickly. It would take a lot more alcohol than he’d had to even feel a buzz.

“Another,” he said before the bartender had even put the bottle back on the shelf.

The bartender turned, hesitated, then nodded and began to pour again. Corbin and Nina exchanged a glance but didn’t protest. They simply watched as Jace finished off his third drink in five minutes.

“You know what?” Jace looked back at Talon and his human writhing against each other a few yards away. “I think I will join them after all.”

The moment he slipped off his barstool, Talon’s eyes locked on Jace’s. He wet his lips and grinned mischievously. Shit. Maybe Nina was playing matchmaker for a reason. Maybe she knew something he didn’t about Talon’s interest in Jace.

“Took you long enough,” the demon shouted over the wild beat of whatever Top 40 drivel was blasting through the speakers. “Will and I were wondering if we’d ever manage to tempt you.” He nodded toward the human gyrating against him.

Will. His name was Will. And he was already snaking a hand up Jace’s chest, then giving each of his pecs a squeeze through his shirt. Talon might have been the demon, but Will was clearly a bit of a fiend himself.



“Guess I needed a little liquid courage,” Jace said. “I’m not much of a dancer.”

“It’s easy. Just move your hips,” Will chimed in.

The mortal turned to face Jace now, and while he ground his ass against Talon’s groin, he laced his fingertips through the beltloops on Jace’s jeans and tugged until his slender body was sandwiched between the demon and the Watcher. As the next song came on—a slower one, this time—both he and Talon stared at Jace like he was a three-course meal and they hadn’t been fed in weeks.

The slower beat was easier to move to. Will reached up to put his arms around Jace’s neck. He touched his forehead to his for a moment, then dusted his lips against his cheek. “That’s it. You’ve got it.”

Damn. It was easy to get lost in these two. Talon was large, dark, and masculine. And Will ... there was something about Will that reminded him of Cyrus—something more than his sandy hair. The human was much smaller than the Messenger, shorter and almost delicate, and although he was slim, he lacked Cyrus’s lean muscles.

It was the shape of his face, maybe: the sharp cheekbones and cleanshaven jaw, the slight pout to his full, garnet-colored lips. Yes, that was it. His lips. Jace shivered as he remembered what it was like to have Cyrus’s mouth trailing over his body. The way his lips eagerly parted when Jace pressed his tongue against them. Their soft cushion as the Messenger sucked at his neck. The pecks down his chest and across his abs. And his cock—his hard, weeping cock—enshrined in paradise between them.

“Kiss me,” Jace found himself whispering to Will as they rubbed their bodies together. “Please. Just once.”

Will nodded eagerly, and Jace’s cock stiffened. If only for an instant, he could relive his memories of Cyrus.

But it was wrong—all wrong. Jace could tell the instant he wrapped his arms around the human. He was too thin, too frail. He felt like a feather in his arms. Even with his eyes

closed and his determination trying to persuade him, Jace could tell the difference.

It didn't matter how similar their lips were. Will wasn't Cyrus.

Quickly, he stepped back, breaking the kiss. Will blinked, startled, his pretty mouth still ajar—only now with a gasp of disappointment.

“I can't. I can't. I thought I could ... but I can't,” Jace murmured. He nodded toward Talon then. “Kiss him, not me,” he told Will. “Tal's the one you should want.”

Talon wrapped his arms around Will protectively, his brow furrowed with confusion. “Jace, wait—” the demon started to protest.

Jace turned quickly, not bothering to hear the rest of what he had to say, and in the process, he nearly collided with a waitress in a pink ten-gallon hat.

“Want a drink, hon?” She lifted the tray of shot glasses lined up beside a half-empty bottle of tequila.

The bar might have been a dirty dive in the middle of nowhere, but at least they kept the alcohol flowing.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Ignoring the shot glasses, Jace reached for the bottle instead. The waitress opened her mouth to argue, but when he tossed a hundred-dollar bill on her tray in the bottle's place, she shut it and shrugged, then moved on. Out of the corner of his eyes, Jace saw Talon and Will accept shots from her. They clinked their glasses together, gulped them down, and began dancing together again.

Good. They *should* be together. Jace would only find a way to ruin whatever was developing between them, just like he ruined everything else he touched.

Suddenly, the room felt suffocating. The loudness of the music. The bodies jostling around him, bumping into one another. The smell of booze and too much cologne. Jace

tugged at the collar of his shirt and took a swig of the tequila. He had to get out of here.

As he stormed past the bar, Corbin tried to wave him over, but he pretended not to see. Only fresh air and the starry sky would do right now.

“Watch where you’re going, asshole—”

“Sorry,” Jace grumbled. He barely even looked at the ugly son of a bitch he’d bumped into—or felt the tequila that sloshed down the front of his shirt. He simply pushed through the front door and stumbled into the night.

Outside, the desert heat had retreated with the sunset. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting the coolness wash over him.

Cyrus. Good-natured, kind-hearted Cyrus.

They’d made no promises to each other. They’d made no plans. There hadn’t been time. Everything had happened so quickly that last morning they’d had together. First, Astra showed up to warn them. Then, Xavier pounded on the door. But somewhere in there, Jace had asked him.

*Come with me when Dev shows up.*

If only Cyrus had simply said yes ...

Gulping down more tequila, Jace made his way to the pickup truck they’d driven in from the ranch. He listened to the crunch of his footsteps on the gravel of the parking lot and watched the headlights of the cars passing by on the adjacent highway. Finding the vehicle locked, he slumped against the side of it, then slid to sit on the ground before leaning back against the tire.

He thought of Cyrus. Of rubbing his thumb along the Messenger’s bottom lip before kissing him. Of the brightness in his laugh and the glint in his eyes when he teased.

Jace ran his hands through his hair and took another drink. If he tried hard enough, he could still hear the Messenger’s voice in his mind. That soft, deep rumble. His genteel, English-like accent. The way he said his name.

*Jericho.*

Somehow, he was the only one who could make those wretched syllables sound beautiful. A lullaby in a single word.

One quick phone call couldn't hurt, could it?

He reached for the burner Dev had given him. It was an older model, a flip phone with buttons instead of a miniature on-screen keyboard. Dev had been clear: the burner was only for emergencies. Until they were certain the Messengers were going to leave him alone, anything more was too risky.

Jace cycled through the menu anyway. There were just two numbers programmed in—Dev's and Hesper's. He stared at the keypad, trying to remember Cyrus's number. They hadn't been together long, but he had to remember something. Even one digit would help. The rest could come later. He had to hear Cyrus's voice. To know he was all right. To ask him again to please, *please* say yes.

One moment would be worth the risk.

But nothing came to mind.

Frustrated, he snapped the phone closed again and shoved it back into his pocket. In the distance, the door to the bar opened. Muffled laughter, music, and footsteps followed. A car engine started, and a fresh set of headlights blazed on the highway. He lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

Then, Jace had an idea.

Taking another drink, he stood up. His vision wavered. His footsteps were unsteady. Dropping the bottle, he stepped onto the highway and spread his wings. With his dark clothes, dark hair, and dark feathers, the next car to round the turn wouldn't see him until it was too late.

The hit wouldn't kill him. Mortal cars weren't made from celestial steel. But with any luck, it would knock him unconscious. For a short while, he wouldn't have to think, feel, or remember. He wouldn't have to hurt.

The door to the bar opened again.

“Jace?” Behind him, Nina’s voice cut through the night. Her tone was shrill, panicked, as if she’d been calling his name for a while. Vaguely, he wondered if she and Corbin had been looking for him this entire time.

A pair of headlights flickered up ahead, drawing closer. The driver was speeding, closing in faster on him than Nina ever could.

Jace closed his eyes and held out his arms. A soft smile formed on his lips as he waited for impact. Sweet fucking relief.

“Jace!” Nina screamed.

She’d spotted him.

And although he heard the crunch of gravel as she rushed toward him—and although he smelled the burn of rubber on pavement as the driver of the incoming car slammed on the brakes—it was someone else entirely whose body collided with his.

Strong arms wrapped around him. Then, Jace was weightless, airborne and rising, the breeze in his hair. Wings fluttered, but they weren’t his own. He opened his eyes to see silvery hair streaming back from a stony, fiercely beautiful face.

“Kai?” Jace choked. “What’re you doing here?”

The Emissary glanced down at him as he carried him away. Kai’s cool jade eyes warmed with sympathy—but only a little. “I had a feeling Corbin was in over his head tonight. I wish you’d proven me wrong, Watcher.”

**CYRUS**

**K**ur Club was busy again tonight. From where he stood on the roof of the building across the street, Cyrus couldn't see inside the front windows well, but he could see the number of people coming and going. Slinking through the shadows, checking over their shoulders, hoping to avoid the mortal police on patrol.

Cyrus had only one visitor to Kur Club in mind: Devlin. Last time he'd come looking for the demon who'd helped Jace escape, he'd made a fool of himself. He hoped to hell he'd spot the male as he arrived, or he'd have to go back in there and do the same all over again.

He also hoped Dev got here soon. Each second that passed was one without knowing whether Jace was all right. Each minute, a waste of time. Every hour, a deeper descent into desperation.

This would be easier if Cyrus were a Watcher—if he had sharp sight and superior hearing. But since he wasn't, he paced, his ivory feathers rippling behind him as he stalked back and forth. Where was the demon? Dev had ties here. Cyrus was certain of it. It was only a matter of time before he showed his face.

Then, Cyrus spotted a slim figure darting from building to building. Shaggy black hair. A somewhat twitchy walk. Dressed in a classic rock T-shirt and distressed black jeans.

Devlin.

Cyrus would have to get closer to know for sure, to see his scar and call his name. Still, as he unfurled his wings and dove from the rooftop, he felt hope like he hadn't in days.

But the second his feet hit the pavement, a scream shot through the night like an arrow. Cyrus's head whipped in the direction of the sound. He glanced back at maybe-Dev, making his way up the steps to Kur Club.

The scream came again.

The voice was a female. And she was nearby—a block away, maybe two. Not far from the street where he and Hesper had seen the shooting, maybe.

He ran his hands through his hair, tugging on the strands with frustration. Dev—if the male he'd seen had actually been Dev—could wait. The demon would likely be inside the brothel for a while anyway. But the female could be hurt—bleeding, battered, or worse. He had to help her. He *had* to.

Veering right, Cyrus jogged in the direction of the screams.

“Please don't—I'll give you anything you want—”

Whimpered pleas joined the shouts. Cyrus turned when they grew louder, clearer. Down an alley to his left, he heard a growling voice reply.

“This is what you deserve, bitch.”

Cyrus summoned an orb in his palm, ready to strike, as he approached. Then, he stopped short.

Something was wrong.

This was where the voices were coming from, but there was no one in distress. There were only Messengers. Nearly a dozen of them. Their white wings stood at attention at their backs, and black knit masks covered their faces and heads. They surrounded him slowly, seeming to multiply in numbers as they emerged from the shadows. Cyrus stepped backward, trying to put distance between them, but he collided with another, even larger Messenger approaching from behind instead. The celestial corralled him deeper inside the alley.

“I told you he’d turn up,” a female sneered. It had been her voice that lured him in. “Can’t resist helping the demons and Watchers, can you, Messenger? Or were you out killing Messengers again tonight?”

He’d walked into a trap. The vandalized door to his suite this morning had only been the beginning. They knew he’d shot a fellow soldier during the riots, too.

His throat felt dry. The sphere of celestial energy in his palm flickered, then faded. He couldn’t concentrate well enough to maintain its strength.

“It’s not about being celestial or demon,” Cyrus snapped back. “It’s about being an asshole or not.” He reeled, searching for a gap between the Messengers, but with every second, they drew closer, tightening the circle around him. His only way out was up.

One of the Messengers snorted with disgust. “So, you consider your own kind to be assholes.”

He had to keep them distracted, talking. And when the moment was right, he’d unfurl his wings. They would pursue him, of course, but he’d have a better chance of escaping in the air than on the ground. “Not all of us. I, for one, am not. At least, I try not to be.”

Another Messenger grimaced and shoved him. “Maybe after you’ve been here a hundred years trying to stop the madness, the crime, the violence—maybe after you’ve held your partner’s hand while she bled out from a demon attacking with a black-market celestial sword—maybe then you’d understand. But until then, to the rest of us, *you’re* the asshole.”

Cold metal clicked around one of Cyrus’s wrists then. He’d been so desperate looking around him, he hadn’t even noticed the Messenger closest to him had a set of bronze restraints strapped to his belt.

*Fuck.*

His wings felt heavy on his back. He tried to retract them, but they simply sagged and weighed him down. Panicking,



Cyrus tried to channel the celestial energy flowing through him, but his palms didn't warm, and no light flickered at his fingertips.

No, *no*. This couldn't be happening. He was about to star in the exact role he'd been trying to spare someone else from experiencing only a few minutes ago. He would have to scream, call for help. It was unlikely anyone would come—he'd seen the demons shutter their windows and turn off the lights himself—but it was the only defense left to him.

“Hel—”

His cry turned to a cough as a swift punch to his stomach stole his breath. Gaspng, Cyrus doubled over. Something warm and moist dribbled down his chin. He drew his hand across his mouth. Blood.

The next hit came quickly after. Stabbing pain in his chest. A broken rib, probably. Clutching at his side, Cyrus groaned. Then, someone kicked his lower back. He couldn't tell how many Messengers were attacking him—three, four, five of them. Maybe more. Maybe all. They encircled him, their arms and hands obscuring his vision as they punched and pulled and shoved him, passing him around for the next to abuse.

“Get off me!” Cyrus thrashed and kicked, trying to strike back. It only made the others beat him harder.

The handcuffs snapped closed around his other wrist then. Both his hands were restrained in front of him. There would be no defending himself at all now.

Warm breath found his ear, followed by a cruel, cold hiss. It was the large Messenger again, their apparent leader. “Seems to me you need a lesson in loyalty, Messenger Cyrus.”

“Wait—that's *Cyrus*?” someone asked in a panicked whisper. Cyrus didn't recognize the voice, and whoever it was clearly didn't recognize his face. They had likely never met. “We shouldn't be doing this—Xavier said he was off limits.”

“General Xavier has lost his way,” someone else snapped. “He's incapable of thinking straight when it comes to Cyrus. This will remind him.”

Shit. Xavier had been true to his word when he said he'd handle the other Messengers, but he'd been overconfident. There was too much dissent among the soldiers. They were torn between fearing his wrath and obeying the code of conduct that had been drilled into their heads for so long.

“But Xavier will be furious—”

“Silence!” the leader ordered. “If any one of us did the things Messenger Cyrus had, we'd be punished. This is what's fair. And since the general won't seek justice, *we* will.”

The next instant, everything went black. Cyrus blinked furiously, trying to see what was going on around him, but it was useless. The scratch of fabric against his cheek and the lingering heat of his own breath as he gasped told him his head was covered. A bag—a blanket—a pillowcase—he didn't know what it was, but something had been put over his head.

Cyrus jerked his head, struggling to shake off the covering. His attacker only pulled it tighter around his neck. He choked. “Can't breathe—can't breathe—”

“Oh, we want you to breathe, demon lover. We're not done playing with you yet, and we want you well enough to feel every little thing we do to you.”

The attacker gave the bag another quick jerk, choking Cyrus momentarily once more before letting it go slack. Then, hands were on him again. They clawed at the back of his shirt.

“Here, use my dagger.” Someone else had spoken this time.

The sound of fabric ripping followed. He felt a rush of cool night air against his spine as his shirt was sliced open and pushed aside. Someone shoved him to his knees.

“Grab that shipping crate,” someone ordered.

Cyrus heard the scrape of wood against pavement, then felt the crate shoved against his thighs. He knew the kind—splintered and dirty, just like the ones he'd seen by the dumpster where he'd met Ransom. One of the Messengers grabbed his cuffed wrists and pulled him forward over the

surface until he was stretched across it, his back exposed in the moonlight.

The ruthless voice returned. “You like spending time with demons and Watchers so much, you might as well be marked like them, too.”

Cyrus shivered—and not just because of the breeze. “No, please—whatever you’re going to do, it isn’t necessary—”

No pleading would rescue him. He already knew that, even if his mouth hadn’t quite figured it out yet.

“Shut the fuck up!”

He felt the tip of a blade against his skin then. Icy and sharp. Pressed between his shoulders, not far from the nape of his neck. Were they going to cut him? Sever his wings? Skin him alive? His heart raced, and his stomach clenched. Even with the hood over his head, Cyrus closed his eyes, bracing himself for what was to come. The sear of the first slice. The warm ooze of blood. The burst of pain.

He was going to die.

*I tried, Jace ... His mind screamed for the missing Watcher. I’m sorry. I tried to find you.*

But the cut never came.

Instead, there was chanting.

The voices were eerie, practiced and precise. Morbid tones in a language Cyrus thought he recognized. It was ancient celestial—the spoken version of the runes that formed the first angelic alphabet. Cyrus couldn’t speak it—that knowledge was granted only to a few, to the Seraphim. But, like most celestials who grew up in Themis, he’d been taught to read it. And he was sure about what he heard.

The sounds were guttural and grating. Cyrus opened his eyes inside his hood. The alley had brightened around him. Golden light, bright as fire, crackled overhead. The chanting grew louder.

“Are you sure they’re doing it right?” asked the same dissenter as before. “Nothing’s happened yet.”

“Shh. You’ll break their concentration,” another Messenger scolded.

Whatever was supposed to happen, Cyrus had the bleak suspicion it wouldn’t be pleasant.

There was a short pause, another crackle. The light grew brighter. Then, the litany began again—this time, in reverse.

The pain started immediately. Blinding. Burning. It was as though the sun itself was scalding him. Cyrus cried out, his screams drowning the strange, monotonous chants around him. It was the blade. The blade pressed between his shoulders was the conduit for whatever cosmic force his attackers were summoning. Although the dagger hadn’t moved, it felt as if the steel was burrowing through his skin, digging through sinew and muscle, and cutting out the rune between his shoulders.

No, not cutting it out of him. Turning it.

Watchers and demons were born disgraced, their runes already turned beneath their skin. But not Messengers. They could be punished the same way later, though—and this was how.

Cyrus was going to pass out. He *wished* he’d pass out.

But he wasn’t that lucky. He simply vomited inside his hood instead.

After what seemed like far too long, the chanting stopped. The lightning coursing above him dissolved.

“Shit ... is he dead?” someone asked.

Cyrus had given up screaming. He had no voice left. He could only let out a whimper.

“I dunno, but let’s get out of here.”

“General Xavier’s going to be pissed.”

His arms went slack as whoever had been holding him still let go. There was a shuffle of footsteps and a fluttering of wings as the Messengers began to leave the alley. One of his

attackers kicked the crate out from beneath him, and Cyrus fell to his side on the pavement.

“Demon lover.” The asshole spat on him.

Then, the alley went quiet.

Cyrus was alone.

He’d been right about one thing earlier: he was going to die here.

He groaned and curled up into himself, shivering. “Jace ...” He would never see the Watcher again now. Knowing this hurt the most of all.

A few minutes passed—or maybe it was an hour. Cyrus couldn’t tell. All he could do was hurt and hope for death.

“Cyrus?”

This voice seemed to come out of nowhere, from some place between his dreams and cries of pain. It was kinder than the others he’d heard tonight—sadder and more sympathetic.

“You’re a mess, Cy,” the male murmured, drawing closer. “I warned you this would happen.”

Cyrus knew that voice, even if his aching body kept him from placing it. He recognized it on some primal level, his body responding to it like a warm embrace. “Jace?” he croaked out the Watcher’s name, even as he knew it wasn’t him. The newcomer’s tone was more husky, and Jace was ... gone.

“No talking. Save your strength.”

The male crouched beside Cyrus now. His hands were on him. The restraints around his wrists clicked and fell away. Cyrus’s wings retracted quickly, though the absence of their weight did little to lessen the waves of pain washing over his body.

Strong arms rolled him onto his side, then rested Cyrus’s head in his lap. Gently, the newcomer removed the sack covering his head. The male inhaled sharply, as if the horror of

Cyrus's battered face was matched only by the pungent smell of vomit wafting up from the discarded bag.

"I'm sorry," Cyrus whimpered, though he didn't know what he was apologizing for. Being a burden, maybe? Or causing his rescuer distress? Cyrus tried to open his eyes. He wanted to see the male who was helping him, but his face was already too swollen from his beating.

"No, *I'm* sorry," the male whispered. He drew closer, cradling Cyrus in his arms like a small child.

Cyrus felt something drip onto his cheek while his rescuer worked to comfort and clean him. There was one droplet at first, then another. So watery, so warm. Foolishly, he thought it might be raining. Then, as he finally slipped out of consciousness, the newcomer sniffled, and Cyrus realized the droplets weren't rain at all.

They were tears.

## JACE

“Jace? Can you hear me?”

He couldn't quite bring himself to lift his head. His temples were throbbing, and his brain was pounding so hard inside his skull he thought the room was shaking, an earthquake underfoot.

“Jace!”

The voice came louder now, more desperate. He had a name for it, too—for *her*, the speaker. He tried to say her name, but it came out only as a two-part moan.

*Hesper.*

“Come on, brother, wake up! Wake up!”

He felt her hand on his cheek, but there was nothing gentle in her touch. She was frantic, patting—no, *slapping*—him awake. He tried to open his eyes to see her, but his lids were too heavy, the veil of lashes too dense.

“Here, try this,” someone else said.

The slapping stopped. But only briefly. Then, Jace felt a splash of water against his face, as cool and refreshing as it was jarring. He smacked his lips, trying to capture some of the moisture on his tongue. His mouth felt so ... dry. And he could smell the rot of his own breath as he gulped down a gasp of air.

“What the fuck, Dev? Was he like this last time you were here?” Hesper's tone was sharp, accusatory.

“Of course not. But Byron did mention he was having a hard time adjusting.”

Finally, Jace managed to lift his head off the armrest of the sofa and open his eyes. *A hard time adjusting.* They talked about him as if he were a misbehaving child at nursery school.

*Only a few hundred years too late for that,* he thought.

“H-hesper ... you’re here.” He was hoarse, and his arm was tingling, pinned underneath him at an angle. He tried to push himself to sit up. He must have fallen asleep here—or, more likely, passed out here—last night. But it seemed like too much work to bother.

Like everything else in his tiny cabin—from the cactus painting on the wall to the horseshoe lamp on the end table—Hesper came into focus slowly. She was kneeling on the floor beside him, scowling up at Devlin, who stood by the kitchenette. She turned back to Jace quickly when he spoke.

“Oh! He’s okay.” Tears swam in her violet-flecked eyes, and she pushed his hair back from his face affectionately before wrapping her arms around him.

Suddenly, the headache, dry mouth, and tingling arm didn’t matter so much anymore. Hesper was *here*. In Arizona. With him. His sister. Safe and well with her usual sass and dramatic beauty.

He was no longer alone.

“Gross, Jace—you stink,” she hissed after a minute, pushing him away. There was a smile on her face, though, and she laughed as she wiped away the fallen tears from her cheeks. “When was the last time you took a fucking shower?”

“I ...” As he finally managed to sit up, he looked down at his clothes and realized what a mess he truly was. One boot on, the other off. Dirt smears on his unbuttoned jeans. Dried sweat stains on his T-shirt. “I don’t know.”

He didn’t remember what seedy shithole bar it was that Talon had taken him to last night, either. It didn’t even really matter. They all blended together after a while. One grimy, tackily decorated dive after another.



Clicking her tongue, Hesper shook her head and stood up, grabbing his hands and pulling him to his feet with her. “You could barely even go a week on your own, couldn’t you, baby brother?”

Jace was so glad to see her he couldn’t even think of a witty comeback. He ran a hand through his hair—fuck, his hair was greasy—and he needed a shave—and grinned. “Guess not. Good thing you showed up when you did.”

“Um, who are Goldilocks and the Bears in the next room?” Devlin asked.

Jace followed the demon’s gaze to the open bedroom door and the tangle of half-naked bodies heaped on his bed. *Fuuuuuck*. Talon, he recognized. And Goldilocks looked like Will. The other two males—both burly, with varying levels of dark body hair—were as much a mystery to him as they were to Dev.

A panicked thought crossed Jace’s mind: what had he done last night? His hands rushed to his fly, and he buttoned his jeans. *Cyrus* ... He wasn’t over Cyrus. He wouldn’t have fucked someone else. Not yet. Not so soon. Not even if he didn’t know where they stood or how they could ever be together again. That first night out with Talon when he’d pushed Will away had proved it.

Sinking back down to the sofa, Jace cradled his head in his hands. “I didn’t ...?” Slowly, the memories returned. They were hazy, but they were there—flickers in the alcoholic fog of his brain. “I didn’t.” He said it more strongly this time, certain of himself. “They’re Talon’s friends. I helped them sneak in and let them crash here so they could have some privacy. That’s all.”

Jace looked up at Hesper. She didn’t know about Cyrus—not really. There had been a passing mention of him at Perdition Marketplace when Eris had died, but that had been all. Still, she stared down at him with disapproval anyway.

Dev let out a long, slow whistle. “Wild night. Byron wasn’t kidding. I better get them out of here before Kai sees you brought in strangers.” Heading toward the bedroom door,

he clapped his hands to wake the males. “Party’s over. Get dressed, get your shit, and get out.”

One by one, the visitors stirred, yawning, stretching, and groaning. All hung over. Each looking around as though he didn’t quite remember where he’d wound up the night before. As Dev herded them out of the cabin, Hesper pursed her lips, crossed her arms over her chest, and glared. Jace knew that look. Usually, he and Cassian were the recipients of it—now, it was just him. And Talon. And some strangers.

Fuck, he’d give anything for it to be him and Cassian again.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Jace?” Hesper snapped. She threw herself onto the tiny sofa beside him as soon as the visitors, and Devlin, were gone. “You’re supposed to be in *hiding*. Kai and Byron are keeping you safe. They’re letting you stay here out of the goodness of their hearts, and this is how you act?”

“It was Tal’s idea.” Even as he said the words, Jace knew it was a poor excuse.

“Bullshit.” Hesper’s expression softened then. “I miss Caz, too, you know.”

“It’s all my fault.” Jace ran his hands over his face, trying to wipe away the hot tears lying trapped against his lashes before she saw them. Hesper had been through enough these past few days on her own. She shouldn’t have to pick up the pieces of his heart, too.

But she did anyway, the same way she always did when he was hurting. Turning toward him, Hesper pried Jace’s hands away. “No. Don’t do this to yourself. You weren’t around as much toward the end, but Caz felt guilty for all the trouble he caused. He was scared. He knew he’d messed up. But it wasn’t your fault. He would’ve found a way to cross the Messengers whether or not you brought him to Nova that night. That’s how he was.”

She reached down to her boot and pulled out a dagger from a sheath hidden along her calf. It was the twin to the one Jace

had hidden in the drawer of the end table. “We each have one to remember him by.”

Devlin. That was thoughtful. Amidst the spoils of Perdition, he’d ensured Cassian’s daggers stayed safe. Jace reached for his blade from the end table and, taking Hesper’s, placed them side by side on the coffee table. Reunited. Just like they were.

“It almost feels like he’s still here with us,” Hesper whispered, staring at the daggers. “That’s silly, right? He had no soul.”

Shaking his head, Jace entwined her fingers with his and squeezed. “Maybe loving him the way we did was enough. Maybe it gave him a soul, in a different way.”

She wiped a set of silent tears from her cheeks but managed a grin. “I like the idea of that.”

They stared at the blades in silence for a while. Then, Hesper looked up at him again. “Before he died, Caz told me you were seeing someone. Another Watcher, he thought. You miss him, too, don’t you? Cyrus, right?”

Shit. She hadn’t forgotten after all.

Jace opened his mouth, but Hesper tilted her head to call his bluff before he could deny it.

“You said his name in your sleep when we walked in,” she told him.

Jace hung his head. “He’s a Messenger ... I think I was falling for him—or that I could’ve fallen for him, anyway.” He glanced up at her shyly out of the corner of his eye, expecting to see a scowl on her face—that, or disgust. This was far from the first time his dick had landed him in trouble, even if this was the worst.

But Hesper simply sighed, and although she frowned, it was from sadness, not disapproval. “I’m so sorry, Jace.”

“You’re sorry? No arguing or grand inquisition about it? No waterboarding or death by a thousand cuts until I agree to give him up?”

“Yeah, so what?” Hesper challenged, her chin jutting out sharply.

Jace stifled a dark chuckle. “Caz would’ve ripped me a new one for saying something like that.”

“Like what? That you’re falling for Cyrus?” She shook her head dismissively. “I’m your sister, not a monster. I want you to be happy. If he makes you happy, I hope you find your way back to each other. I really do.”

Leaning back against the sofa, Jace sighed. “Me, too.”

After a moment, Hesper giggled. She wrinkled her nose and sniffed the air around him. “It wouldn’t hurt you to go take a shower while you wait for him, you know.”

Jace laughed. It felt good to smile—and mean it—for a change. He stood up. “Maybe I’m trying to leave a trail so Cyrus can find me.”

She shuddered melodramatically as he headed toward his tiny bathroom, then sniffed the air again with relief. “Ah ... I never thought I’d be so glad for the smell of peppermint oil.”

THE REST of the day almost felt normal. Hesper joined Jace and the others by the homestead to watch them spar. It was strange seeing her in such a rustic setting, out of the city and away from her high heels and designer handbags. She stood with Nina on the sidelines, cheering him on, even while Corbin kicked his ass as usual.

“Think of ... a scorpion,” Byron told Jace, pulling him aside at one point after watching him struggle to strike Corbin. The demon’s eyes roamed over the parched landscape, looking for inspiration, before landing on the fence in the distance. “Move like one of them. Strike fast. Sting hard. Then get the fuck out of there as soon as you can.”

He patted Jace on the shoulder for encouragement before sending him back into the dusty circle to spar. Corbin approached. Behind him, Hesper clapped.

“You can do it, Jace!”

*Be like a scorpion.*

Jace dodged right, avoiding Corbin's hit. While the demon was still reeling from the miss, he curled his fist and landed a sharp, jabbing punch to his cheek. This time, Hesper and Nina cheered. Byron applauded. Even Kai managed a terse grin.

"Nice, man. Nice." Corbin wiped away blood from his newly split lip. It began to heal while he still had his hand out to shake Jace's.

Hesper worked in the kitchen with Nina for a bit that afternoon, while Jace continued with his task at the fence. At dusk, he came back to the homestead to the sound of her laughter as she sat on a stool at the kitchen counter, telling Talon a dirty joke.

So, coming here was proving good for her.

"Your sister's cool as shit, bro," Talon told him, dropping into a seat across from him at the table for dinner. Nina leaned over the demon, placing a basket of rolls by his elbow. Talon reached for one and stuffed it into his mouth.

"Thanks for the assist last night, by the way," he added after he'd swallowed the whole thing down in one bite.

Jace chuckled as he stabbed his fork into a steak from a nearby serving platter and brought it to his plate. "I'd like to say any time, but I kind of got my ass handed to me by certain parties over it."

Jace's eyes followed Hesper as she carried a bowl of salad across the room, and Talon snorted, putting the pieces together. He snorted. "I bet."

"You bet what?" Setting down the greens, Hesper sat in the chair next to Jace.

"I was just betting Jace I'd drink him under the table when we go out tonight," Talon lied with a laugh.

"Really? You win, then." Hesper spread a cloth napkin over her nap and served herself some greens. "Jace isn't going out tonight." The frostiness in her tone left no room for negotiation.

Jace cut into his steak. “I guess that’s settled.”

Shaking his head, Talon laughed even harder. He reached for a steak of his own. “Like I said, cool as shit.”

While Talon and a few of the others piled into the pickup truck and pulled out of the driveway, Hesper walked back with Jace to his cabin.

“I’ll take the sofa, and you can have the bed if you want,” Jace told her. He already had the door open to the tiny linen closet by the bathroom and his hand on a fresh set of sheets.

Hesper’s silence was suspicious. Jace’s hand froze. He couldn’t ignore the question that had been lurking in the back of his mind all day—the question about why she’d brought a duffle bag full of his own clothes and things from Las Vegas but had packed nothing for herself.

“You’re not staying, are you?” He couldn’t bear to look at her.

“I can’t, Jace,” she whispered. “Lynx won’t allow it. Not yet.”

His head hung low, and he sighed before abandoning the sheets and turning around. Tears were in Hesper’s eyes again. Her heart seemed to be breaking as much as his own.

“I don’t understand. You said you’d follow—”

“It’s not forever,” she said, quickly crossing the room. She cupped his face in her hands affectionately. “It’s the Messengers. They’ve brought me in for questioning related to Eris’s death a couple of times—and they’re watching me. Someone followed me through Nocturna the other night.”

“What the fuck were you doing in Nocturna by yourself? I thought Dev said there was a curfew.”

Her hands slipped away again, and she frowned. “I went to apply for a second job as a bartender at Kur Club. Trying to make ends meet ... now that I have the full rent to pay by myself.”

Jace’s heart squeezed in his chest. Another thing he’d fucked up. Hesper hated Kur Club, too. “Don’t take the job. I-

I'll find a way to get you money—”

Hesper shook her head. “I didn’t get it, anyway. Dolly said she can’t afford to hire new staff while there’s still a curfew. Lynx is going to help me out for now, but you know him. His support always comes with caveats.”

Damn Lynx. The underground leader of the Watchers and demons was a businessman first. Always looking to make deals. Always looking to button up contracts. He wasn’t cruel, but he wasn’t kind, either.

“Lynx doesn’t think it’s safe for me to disappear just yet. I need to get off the Messengers’ radar first—that’s one of his conditions for helping me,” Hesper explained. “Dev snuck me out for today, but I can’t be gone long. I have to be back in Vegas tonight.”

The haunted, aching feeling that had stayed at bay the past few hours was back. Maybe Jace should have gone out with Talon and the others again after all.

As if seeing the change in him, Hesper wrapped her arms around him. “I *will* come back, brother. I promise. You will not be alone forever. I’ll find Cyrus, too, if I can manage.”

He nodded and hugged her back. Despite himself, a spark of hope jolted his heart back to life. Sort of. Jace tried to contain it. Lately, he’d been learning the hard way that hope was the most dangerous emotion of all. It paved the way for failure and disappointment. But he felt it there anyway.

Cassian would’ve shaken his head and called him a stupid arse.

Maybe he was.

“Thanks, sis,” Jace told her, but even as he did, he heard a knock on the cabin door.

“Hesper?”

Dev was back.

Jace’s eyes darted to the clock on the stove in the kitchen. It was almost eight. Time was up. They would have to leave now to make it back to Sin City by midnight.

*Fuck you, Lynx,* he thought as he watched Hesper walk away again.



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**CYRUS**

**J**ace.

The Watcher's name kept him floating like a buoy through his dreams. It was his safe harbor while he weathered the pain and his anchor when he could barely remember what had happened or where he was.

Cyrus didn't know how often he said it. It seemed as frequently on his lips as the cup of cool water his caretaker kept offering him. He hadn't gotten far enough to thank the stranger tending his needs—or even to open his eyes and look upon his face or ask his name. The delirium was too strong. He only knew he was being cared for. Gently. Diligently. Lovingly, even.

But in his dreams, the uncertainty slipped away. It was Jace watching over him, blue-eyed and beautiful, in an oceanside room with plaster walls and arabesque tile. They stood together by the window, looking out at the topaz sea—or they fucked on the rooftop terrace under the stars, with no one to hear them. Other times, Jace simply held him, tracing a fingertip over his lips or combing a hand through his hair.

“You'll make it through this, Cy,” he told him. They were in the room overlooking the ocean again, and the Watcher was curled around him on a plush bed with a canopy. “You're too strong not to. Hang on.”

Cyrus knew what came next. It was what always came next after Jace reassured him. “Don't go this time. Please.”

Jace pressed a kiss to his forehead. “I have to, but I’ll come back.”

Cyrus reached for him, even as he seemed to drift further and further away. “Please ... please ...”

“Please what, Cy?” That deep, rumbling voice was back in his ear as he twisted and thrashed against the sheets. Cyrus was awake—or awake enough that Jace was gone from his dreams. The mattress shifted. His caretaker was beside him again. He never seemed to be far away.

Disappointment swept over him like a tide. “Please take the pain away,” he whimpered.

Firm hands gripped his shoulders, trying to still him. “Stay on your stomach. It’ll hurt less that way.”

Reluctantly, Cyrus rolled over as suggested. It helped. The searing between his shoulder blades lessened, if only barely. His ribs were still sore, though. How many days had passed since his attack? Why hadn’t he healed yet? The bronze cuffs were gone from his wrists. He should be getting better much faster than this—unless ...

The horrible, droning chants echoed in his mind.

*Unless they turned my rune.*

That was it, wasn’t it? One of the Messengers had mentioned marking him like a demon or a Watcher. Such curses ran deep, etched in blood and bone. Only ancient celestial magic was powerful enough to defile someone this way.

The moment of clarity sliced through Cyrus like a knife. He had to look—he had to see for himself what they had done to him.

“Bathroom—I need the bathroom,” he gasped, trying to haul himself up out of bed.

“Hang on, I’ll get the bedpan.” His caretaker was moving again, the mattress squeaking as he stood.

Cyrus opened his eyes. There was no ocean or rustic elegance, and although it was night, there were no stars above.

This room was dark, cast in a sliver of moonlight that peeked through the curtains. He blinked, bleary-eyed. Even the shadows seemed too bright. As he threw the sheets off him, he stood, naked, on wobbling legs. “No—that’s not what I need the bathroom for.”

“Careful, there—you’ll hurt yourself all over again.”

His legs buckled beneath him just as his caretaker reached his side. There was a crash. A nightstand tipping over. The glass he’d been given too many times to count shattered, and the bedpan ... Well, thank fuck the bedpan was empty.

“Easy.” The caretaker helped him to sit on the edge of the bed. “Don’t move. Let me get the glass.”

Finally, Cyrus lifted his eyes to the person who had saved his life. The male’s features blurred a moment, forming doubles. Then, as he stooped to sweep up the glass, he came into focus.

“Xavier?” Cyrus whispered.

No wonder everything about his caretaker had seemed so familiar. Those arms that had held him, the tears that had mourned him, and that voice that had soothed him all belonged to the male who’d once broken his heart as badly as the Messengers had broken his body.

Dropping the broom and dustpan in his hands, Xavier looked up. Relief relaxed the wrinkles on this forehead. “You’re lucid. Finally.”

The general sprung toward Cyrus, falling to his knees at the edge of the bed. He wrapped his arms around Cyrus’s waist and rested his head against his thigh.

“I did my best—I did everything I could think of, but I was worried,” Xavier choked. “I was so worried you might not pull through.”

Suddenly, Cyrus felt painfully aware of exactly how nude he was. He inched back on the bed and pulled as much of the sheet over his lap as he could, but Xavier closed the gap between them almost as quickly as Cyrus created it. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, Cyrus noticed the books that

had also fallen from the nightstand. *Celestial Health, Curing Runic Curses*—they were old and careworn, brought directly from Themis. Xavier really had been trying to heal him.

So, why—even with this proof of how much he cared—did Cyrus still feel disgusted by his touch?

The reason for his repulsion was there, hovering in his mind, just out of reach. On the tip of his tongue, so bitter he could almost taste it. But the haze of fever and pain was too overwhelming.

“I couldn’t lose you again—not like this—”

“I ... I want to see.” Cyrus struggled to speak through his hoarseness. “I want to see what they did to me.”

Xavier lifted his head. His eyes were bloodshot and puffy, as if he had barely slept. His face looked thin, and the scruff on his jaw was fuller than usual. He hadn’t been taking of himself these past few days, only Cyrus. “Not yet. You’re still in shock. You haven’t recovered enough.”

“I want to see.”

It was hard to sound forceful, so Cyrus pushed him away as best as he could instead. As Xavier knelt back on his heels, Cyrus wrapped the sheet around his waist. He gripped the edge of the mattress defiantly and tried to stand again. He recognized enough of the room now. It was larger than the bedroom in his own suite in Nova, but the layout was similar. There would be a bathroom in the corner—there, next to the closet. Xavier’s worried gaze followed him as he took a tentative step around the glass on the floor and headed toward it.

“You’re going to fall,” the general warned.

Even as he spoke, a tremor of pain coursed down Cyrus’s spine. He stumbled and reached out to steady himself against the nearby bureau. Xavier had an arm hooked beneath Cyrus’s shoulders and was supporting his weight before he could protest.

“Let me help you, Cyrus. Let me be strong for you, just this once.”

Cyrus didn't like it, but Xavier was right. He was too weak to care for himself. Reluctantly, he nodded and allowed the other male to help him hobble toward the bathroom. As the light flickered on and he turned to the mirror, Cyrus trembled. He reached toward the glass, tracing the image upon it. There was his face, still swollen and bruised in places. A bandage had been taped against the side of his ribcage, and around his neck lingered a ring of red, irritated skin from where the hood had been drawn tight against his windpipe.

"Your body is too busy healing the major damage to focus on the lesser wounds for now," Xavier explained, watching Cyrus's reaction in the mirror.

*The major damage.*

A knot formed in Cyrus's throat, and his fingertips slipped from the glass. Slowly, he turned to catch a glimpse of himself over his shoulder. Below the nape of his neck, his celestial rune was bright red and raised, as though it had been freshly etched in his skin by a knife. It seemed to pulse against his spine. Throbbing. Exactly like the pain he felt emanating from it. That wasn't all, either. The elegant curve—so much like the shoulder of a harp—had been flipped upside down.

*The mark of disgrace.*

And if he'd been labeled disgraced, the sigil wasn't all that would have changed about him.

"Cyrus, don't—"

Xavier's warning was too late. Cyrus had already unfurled his wings, forcing the general to step back as his plumage emerged. He let out a sob. The fluffy, gold-flecked ivory feathers he'd had his entire life were withered and discolored, coarse and patchy. Many had fallen out. He gave his wings a tentative shake as he looked in the mirror, and three more fluttered to the ground.

"I'm ... molting," Cyrus whispered.

Molting itself wasn't what concerned him. He'd molted before. Most celestials did—at least once a century, some even more. No. It was the jet-black pin feathers that were already

beginning to grow in place of the lost ones that made him panic. Everyone would see. Everyone would know. They'd think him stained, a pariah. Someday, he would have to return to Themis like this. He'd have to explain what he'd done—and what had been done to him—to his mother, to his family and friends, and to any future lovers.

If there ever were any future lovers ... It still seemed impossible to think about anyone except Jace.

*Jace ...*

Even worse, the feathers would be a perpetual reminder of him. Each time he'd look in the mirror, Cyrus would remember the longing, the pain of losing him. He'd wonder about the Watcher constantly. Was he all right? Did he ever think of him? Had he moved on with someone else?

*Please don't move on with someone else. Not yet.*

It would drive Cyrus mad—if it wasn't already. These feathers were hateful and hideous. A shadow tied to his back, haunting him wherever he turned. He'd never escape that night in the alley, and he'd never recover from Jace.

Picking up a sickly fallen feather, he turned it between his fingertips, considering this bleak future. "So ... ugly."

Xavier didn't dispute it. How could he? Cyrus could see through the lie for himself.

Cyrus loosened his grip on the feather, letting it fall into his palm. He should destroy the awful thing. He should destroy them all. Sucking in a breath, he tried to harness the celestial energy inside him. If he could draw it to his palm, he could form a sphere and burn it. He could burn all of them. He'd rather have no wings, no feathers, than suffer this torment.

But nothing happened. Not even a flicker warmed his palms. He was too weak.

That made him feel worse.

Hot and cold flickered over Cyrus's skin. Nausea churned in his stomach. He felt dizzy, and his vision blurred. Perhaps

that was for the best; he wasn't sure he wanted to see anything more tonight than he already had. But as he retracted his wings, Cyrus's knees gave out. He crumpled to the floor, hands and elbows crashing against the hard, cold tile. Xavier's voice was the last sound he heard before he lost consciousness again.

"We'll fix this," Xavier promised. He scooped Cyrus into his arms and smoothed back the hair from his face. "We'll get your rune turned again. This wasn't your fault."

FOR THE FIRST time since the attack, Xavier intruded on Cyrus's dreams. He and Jace were at the Stratosphere. The wind curled around them, and the lights of Sin City sparkled below like desert constellations as they kissed. It was just like the night Jace had brought Cyrus there—the same night Cyrus had told him about Xavier sabotaging his career. But something was different this time. Something was wrong.

Cyrus's wings.

They were changing color. The dirty, damaged ivory feathers swirled in the air like snow. As onyx plumes rapidly grew in behind them, a cold, disembodied voice interrupted.

"You never should have come here. Now, look at you."

Jace stepped back, breaking their kiss. A look of revulsion swept over his face as he stared at Cyrus's falling feathers. "You're disgusting. Filthy and worthless. No one will ever love you like this," he told him. "You're not even fit for the last descendant of the first fallen Watcher."

The voice sounded like Jace's. His lips moved the way Cyrus expected. And the crushing rejection Cyrus felt seemed so real. But the words were nothing like anything he'd usually say. Xavier had gotten to him; Xavier had turned Jace against him the same way he'd turned the other Messengers in their barracks all those years ago.

"Please, Jace. It's still me. I'm still the same Cyrus." He dropped to his knees and grabbed onto the Watcher's hands,

begging him to understand. But when he looked up at Jace, his features had changed.

The male he'd thought to be Jace had been Xavier this entire time.

Cyrus dropped Xavier's hands as though they burned him. Anger boiled up inside him. "You did this ... you did this to me, didn't you?" He didn't know how Xavier had managed it—maybe he'd set his attackers on him, or maybe he'd been there in the alley, joining in on their chants. But it was the truth. He felt it as surely as the hard ground beneath him.

Xavier simply stared down at him. "I've explained this before. I can't lose you, Cy. I need you—I've always needed you, ever since that night with the solis wolves."

It was the same excuse he'd given a century ago, on the night Cyrus had found out Xavier was the reason why he wasn't being sent to the mortal realm. It was the night Cyrus had packed his bags and left the flat they'd shared for the final time.

It had taken decades for Cyrus to clear his name of Xavier's accusations. As he moaned in his sleep, willing Jace to come back, he wondered how long it would take to make right what Xavier had ruined for him this time around.





## CYRUS

Cyrus didn't know what day it was. Nor did he especially care. He stared blankly at the headboard, arms folded beneath the pillow he clutched to his chest, while Xavier dabbed at the new plumage on his wings with a damp cloth.

"You're almost done molting," he said quietly.

For a male more acquainted with weapons and war than grooming and nurturing, Xavier worked with surprising gentleness. He wiped away flaking skin, sprayed the newer feathers with aloe-infused water, and brushed off the few stubborn ivory feathers that got caught on the prickly darker ones. *Celestial Health* rested on the side of the bed where he'd been sitting earlier. The book was flipped open to a diagram of an angel wing for easy access. He'd prepared for this.

"I thought you'd be happier," he said when Cyrus gave a slight, apathetic shrug.

There wasn't much about his situation for Cyrus to be happy about. His delirium had truly broken at last, and his face and ribs were healed. Yesterday, he'd started eating solid foods again, not just the smoothies Xavier had fed him through a straw. But Jace was still gone, the Messengers still hated him, and Cyrus was still at Xavier's mercy, too weak to leave.

"Does Astra know I'm here?" he asked. It seemed strange the chancellor hadn't visited or arranged for him to be moved to Nova's hospital wing. She was busy rebuilding the city, but she must have noticed his absence by now.

Xavier's hands faltered on Cyrus's wing. "She sends her well wishes."

The reply didn't seem like an answer to his question at all. Cyrus shivered. He could read between the lines: Astra had no idea what happened. He had to speak with her. As soon as he was strong enough, he'd track her down, like he had before with the bullet casings. The chancellor would be able to sort out who had attacked him; she'd bring them to justice.

"You and Astra have grown close since you've arrived here." There was no uncertainty in Xavier's sentence. He'd seen the evidence for himself. "You're fortunate she's taken such an interest in you. It'll be good for your career."

He was fishing, suspicious. Maybe he'd even figured out Cyrus was secretly working for Astra, charged with keeping an eye on Xavier.

Well, Cyrus would give away nothing.

"I suppose," he said vaguely. "Though I'll probably be sent back to Themis now. You were right. I don't belong here." It made him feel sick to say those words, but the admission would help to keep Xavier's mistrust at bay.

"What about Watcher Jericho?" There was a hopeful lilt to the general's tone.

*Jace.* The name that kept his heart beating. But Cyrus buried his feelings. It was the best protection he had. "What about him? He's gone."

Xavier grunted in agreement. His hands moved more confidently over Cyrus's feathers, and Cyrus was certain that if he could see the general's face, he'd find a smile stretched across it.

ANOTHER DAY PASSED before Cyrus heard the knock on the front door. He was sitting up in bed, propped against the pillows, flipping through one of the celestial medical texts Xavier had left lying around. Down the hall, the general moved about the kitchen. As far as Cyrus knew, Xavier hadn't

left the suite the entire time he'd been staying there. He expected their visitor to be dropping off another delivery—groceries or medicine, or the laundry Xavier had sent out every couple of days.

Instead, he heard Astra's voice. Her words were muffled, but her tone was distinct.

Cyrus sat up straighter, trying to hear better. Maybe he'd been wrong about her not knowing where he was after all.

"I'm not accusing, simply getting worried," she said.

The sentence was clear enough to carry down the hall—as was the anger in Xavier's reply.

"I suggest you mind your own business, Astra. There's more than enough for you to do than go snooping around here."

The back of Cyrus's neck tingled. They could be arguing about almost anything—from the mortal police patrolling Nocturna to the color of the sky. It was what they did, who they were. But there was a possibility, even if it was a small one, they could be talking about him.

Cyrus wanted to know. Tossing aside the book in his lap, he scooted to the foot of the bed. But the voices grew softer again. He needed to get closer. And to do that, he first needed to dress. Cyrus looked down at his body. His back had healed enough that he could tolerate thin undershirts now, and he'd insisted on boxers after he'd woken up from that nightmare with Xavier at the Strat. But this was no way to greet the chancellor.

He glanced around the room, looking for the terrycloth robe Xavier lent him to wear after bathing. Shit. It wasn't draped over the chair in the corner today. Xavier must have sent it out for washing this morning. His options were limited. He had to think fast. Quickly, Cyrus reached for a pair of Xavier's sweatpants, folded on top of the bureau. They were too big, but they'd do.

He'd just managed to pull them on when he heard the front door close again. The voices went silent. The only sound was

Xavier fumbling with some dishes.

*Fuck ...*

Slowly, Cyrus sank back down onto the bed. Astra was gone. For some reason, knowing he was alone with the general again felt like a kick to the guts.

“Cy? You up?” Xavier tapped on the half-open bedroom door. Without waiting for an answer, he pushed against it with his elbow and made his way in. He carried a tray of food—toast and eggs, fruit and yogurt, tea and water. For a second, he paused, staring at Cyrus. Then, he forced a smile. “Good. You are. And dressed, too. You must be feeling better.”

“A little. Hope you don’t mind that I borrowed—”

“Not at all.” Xavier set the tray down where the sweats had been a minute ago. “It’s why I left them out.”

He was being polite, but his answer came too quickly. Someone else might not notice, but Cyrus knew him. He knew Xavier’s tells. Whatever Astra had said had upset him. Cyrus would have to be careful if he wanted to learn more.

“Who was at the door?”

Xavier avoided Cyrus’s stare and busied himself with pouring out a glass of water from the fresh pitcher he’d brought instead. “Chancellor Astra.”

At least that part was true.

“Don’t worry,” he added, “I told her you were sleeping.”

“Wake me next time, please? I’d like to talk to her.”

He handed Cyrus the glass. “Sure. What about?”

*Careful*, Cyrus reminded himself. *Be careful*.

He took a sip, discarded the glass on the nightstand, and watched Xavier fuss over the items on the tray again. When the general turned back to Cyrus, he held the cup of yogurt and a spoon.

“I want to ask her about starting my transfer back to Themis,” Cyrus said, reaching for the easiest lie to maintain. “I

thought she might have some suggestions on how to expedite the process.”

“You’re serious about leaving, aren’t you?” Xavier sat down beside him and handed him his food. A shadow seemed to pass over his face, dimming the light in his eyes. He couldn’t really be disappointed, could he? He’d never wanted Cyrus to come to the mortal realm to begin with. “There’s nothing I could do to convince you otherwise, not even if you stayed here with me?”

Finally, Cyrus understood what was really going on here. All the awkward moments and unusual kindnesses—the warm glances, destroyed evidence, and tender care—made sense now.

Xavier hadn’t given up on them.

Cyrus wasn’t sure how he felt about that. It was confusing enough trying to reconcile the Xavier who’d broken his heart with the version who’d saved his life. He wasn’t sure what to make of Xavier, the repentant, eager for redemption.

So, Cyrus bought himself a moment by taking a bite of his yogurt. It was surprisingly delicious, thick and cool, drizzled with honey and granola. “Are ... are you asking me to stay—to stay here with you, I mean?”

Xavier ran a hand over the scruff on his chin. He still hadn’t shaved. “I suppose I am. I stole your first chance at happiness here. It would be a shame for you to lose your second.”

It wasn’t exactly the most passionate appeal, but in some ways, that was all right. That was typical, exactly what Cyrus expected of Xavier. And that made his words genuine—maybe even the most honest part of this entire conversation.

“What about the other Messengers?” Cyrus unfurled his wings. “And what about my feathers? Won’t you be ashamed to be seen with me like this?”

Frowning, Xavier shook his head. “I don’t care about the other Messengers. Just you.”

“I’ll ...” The words stalled in Cyrus’s mouth. They tasted like dust and felt heavy, like stone. “I’ll think about it.” He wouldn’t, though—not the way he implied, anyway. Too much of him still hoped for Jace, and too much of him was still too hurt to ever trust Xavier again.

“Please do.” The general looked up at him again abruptly then. “Now, less talking and more eating. I mean it, Cy. Your body needs the extra nutrients as you continue to heal.” He pointed to the medical book still sitting on the bed. “It’s all right there.”

Xavier’s whole demeanor had changed. It was as if he had put on a mask. He even tried to be funny by lifting a spoonful of yogurt to Cyrus’s lips and feeding him for himself. But the smile on his lips didn’t quite reach his eyes, and he was far too forceful as he tapped the spoon against Cyrus’s mouth. Cyrus snatched the spoon away quickly and finished the bite himself. This sort of joking around had never been part of the language of their love, not even in the best of times.

Xavier’s grin faltered. Maybe he realized his mistake. Or maybe he simply wished their relationship had been different. Either way, this was another sign. Another warning that something was wrong.

“Good?” Xavier asked, watching while Cyrus continued to eat.

Cyrus nodded. “It is—thanks.”

He wouldn’t have complained even if it hadn’t been.

THERE WERE other things that struck Cyrus as strange. The more he recovered, the more he noticed them. The way the curtains were always drawn. The fact that the landline phone in the living area never rang and how the TV seemed stuck on an old movie channel. Xavier always had an excuse ready. They rolled off his tongue naturally, as easily as he might tell someone his age or celestial designation.

Once, while Xavier was shaving in the bathroom, Cyrus looked for his cell phone. He’d had it on him that night in the

alley. It should be here, along with his wallet and the jeans and shoes he'd been wearing.

“What're you looking for, Cy?” Xavier appeared in the open doorway, his razor still buzzing in his hand. Cyrus had just closed one of the drawers on the bureau too loudly. Apparently, he'd heard.

“My phone. I haven't seen it since the attack.” Cyrus opened another drawer to show he had nothing to hide with his search. “Do you know what happened to it?”

Xavier blinked calmly. “Top shelf of the closet. You won't be able to use it, though.”

“Why's that?” Cyrus already had his hand on the knob.

“It's broken.”

The general slipped back into the bathroom. He didn't wait around for Cyrus to pull the neat stack of his belongings from the closet; he already knew what was there. Including the smashed cell phone with a shattered screen and dangling wires.

Of course it was broken, a dark voice in the back of his mind taunted. The asshole had probably taken a hammer to it himself while Cyrus had been sleeping.

Then, there was the matter of his care. For days, Cyrus had been wanting a proper shower instead of the awkward sponge baths Xavier had been giving him. Finally, Xavier relented. He'd helped Cyrus to the bathroom and turned on the water, then lingered outside the half-open door. It was a precaution, he'd insisted. Just in case the steam proved too much, or if Cyrus slipped in the shower.

“You're sure you don't need anything?” He'd already asked the question about a dozen times.

“No, I'm fine.”

It wasn't exactly the truth. The heat was making Cyrus lightheaded, and his legs were getting shaky beneath his weight. But he was stubborn. He refused to prove Xavier right.

Until he saw the trickle of red curling toward the drain.



He knew immediately. It had been a pin feather—stubborn, stuck, and stunted. He'd been rinsing his wings when he'd seen it, strangled by the hard, waxy sheath that refused to budge. And he'd pulled. Perhaps too hard, in retrospect, but he had.

The way the feather snapped between his fingertips had been so satisfying. The tension building as he squeezed. The soft pop of brittleness giving way. The rush of pain. It was like an itch that had to be scratched. He'd wanted to be rid of it. He'd wanted to be rid of all of them—every damn horrid, hateful black feather filling in his wings. Cyrus would have plucked each one out if he could have.

But now he slumped against the tile wall beside him instead. “Xave!” He managed to call out the general’s name before he slid to the floor.

“Cy, what’s wro—Cy!” Xavier moved with demon-like speed across the room. Fully dressed, he stepped into the shower. “Shit. You’re bleeding.”

He was. And it was everywhere, growing more profuse by the second. All over Cyrus’s leg and hip. Smearred across his rib cage. Soaking the dark wings against his back.

“It’s a broken pin feather ... I saw it, and I didn’t ... It was an accident,” Cyrus lied as Xavier rolled him into his arms. He was losing blood so quickly. He felt his strength washing away against the tiles, along with the soap and water.

Clouds of steam rose around them. Xavier reached for the towel draped over the shower door and covered Cyrus’s lap. “Don’t worry about that right now. We have to get you out of here. Then, we’ll deal with healing it.”

It was a struggle. They were sopping wet, their chests heaving, slipping around the damp bathroom. Cyrus crawled most of the way, stopping when he reached the safety of the bathmat stretched across the floor. Xavier shut off the water at last, then helped him sit up. It wasn’t until he’d wrapped a dry towel around Cyrus’s shoulders and began rifling through the medicine cabinet that he realized how serious the injury was.

“I have something that’ll help,” Xavier told him. He was frenzied, his forehead wrinkled and his jaw tense. “It’s here somewhere. I just have to find it.”

Fuck. This was dangerous. And deadly. Cyrus’s celestial healing abilities were already taxed. He could bleed out if they didn’t staunch the wound where the underdeveloped feather had been torn from its sheath.

“Do something, Xave ... Please ...” he whispered. His head lolled on his shoulders, tipping back against the wall behind him. “I feel so weak.”

Xavier opened and closed cupboards and drawers. “I’m trying, Cy. I promise.”

He was back at the medicine cabinet, pulling out a jar he must have overlooked before in his hurry. He twisted off the cap as he crouched beside Cyrus. His hands shook.

His hands never shook.

“Here,” he said. “This’ll stop the bleeding.”

“Antiseptic powder?”

Xavier nodded and gently spread Cyrus’s bleeding wing across his lap. “With stardust. It’ll stop the bleeding in case your body can’t.”

It took some effort, but Xavier found the wound, seeping at the epicenter of the darkest, dampest patch on his wing. Cyrus winced as he poured some of the powder onto the raw, damaged spot. The sting only lasted a few seconds. Then, numbness took over, dulling the pain. The bleeding slowed. After a minute more, it stopped altogether.

“Better?” Xavier asked. He watched Cyrus’s face intently, searching for any sign of how the Messenger felt.

Cyrus’s head bobbed.

Xavier let out a long, wavering sigh. He leaned back against the wall next to Cyrus and pulled his drenched T-shirt away from his chest while he tried to catch his breath. “That was ... intense.”

It had been. It'd been risky, too. So risky that, if Cyrus had the strength, he might've been more afraid. "Maybe I should be in the hospital wing."

"No," Xavier said sharply. "I've got everything we need here. This is better. It's safer."

"You didn't take me to the hospital after I was attacked, either. Why?" It was the first time Cyrus had thought to ask the question. He'd been too disoriented by the pain and delirium before.

Xavier hesitated. He reached for the lid of the antiseptic powder and sealed it back up. "No particular reason, other than I thought you'd be more comfortable here, away from other Messengers. Until we know who did this to you, everyone's a suspect."

The bitter, skeptical voice was back in Cyrus's head. Louder this time.

Everyone was a suspect, it agreed. Including Xavier himself.



## JACE

**T**he sting of the needle on his skin was like a balloon bursting. Sharp and all-consuming. It drew Jace's attention away from the ache inside him.

"You're sure about this, right, bro?" Talon asked as he hunched over Jace's forearm with his tattoo gun, tracing the outline.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

Talon laughed and glanced up at him as he wiped away some excess ink. "Maybe because scorpions are nasty little fuckers?"

Jace forced a grin. "Exactly why I want it. To remind me."

The demon nodded with approval and went back to work. "Right on. Badass."

"That's the general idea."

Jace had wanted the tattoo since finding out Talon was an artist who'd owned his own shop back in Vegas. The demon had been vague on the details regarding why he left Sin City, but he'd talked for hours about all the tattoos he'd done over the years. He and Lynx went way back, too, he'd explained. Long ago, it had been him who'd inked their secret leader's knuckles with the celestial runes meaning "love" and "hate." The only two things worth fighting for, Lynx always said. The tattoo was infamous, and he liked it that way.

"You've gotten ink before, right?" Talon asked over the hum of the needle.

“Yeah. I’ve got broken chains on my back. Had them done when we first came to Vegas.” Jace didn’t get into the meaning behind the tattoo. For someone like Talon, familiar with the way the Messengers treated demons and Watchers, it would be fairly self-explanatory.

The demon nodded again. “Good pick. Fuck the Messengers, right?”

“Right.”

He wiped away more ink. “So, you know the drill already, too. You’re an angel, so this is gonna heal quickly. I’m not gonna put a bandage over it. There’s no point. Just keep it clean. Keep it moist. Gently wash it once or twice a day. A little lotion. And you should be good to go.”

“That’s easy enough.”

“For you, yeah. It’s impossible for you to get it infected. You just have to worry about the ink setting. But the humans I used to work on?” Talon whistled and shook his head. “I saw some nasty shit walk back through my door.”

“I bet.”

Only a few minutes more, and the scorpion tattoo was done. The colors were well-chosen. Bold, bright reds and realistic shading. The fucker looked angrier and fiercer than any of the insects Jace had seen hanging out under rocks by the fenceposts. He flexed his arm, watching the scorpion’s tail shift as if ready to sting anyone who approached. Not everyone could pull off an effect like that. Talon had studied the way Jace’s arm moved and fussed over the placement of his drawing for hours before actually inking the image into his skin. But he’d done it, and the result was spectacular.

“This is great, man,” Jace murmured. “It’s perfect, actually.”

Talon laughed, watching Jace admire his work. Then, he swiveled in the stool at the workstation he’d set up in the homestead’s kitchen and began to clean his equipment. “Corbin’ll think twice before breaking your nose again, I bet—and so will anyone else.”

Standing up, Jace reached for his wallet from his back pocket. He felt bad shelling out money on a tattoo like this when Hesper was struggling to make ends meet back in Vegas, but his confidence was worth the investment, and Talon had certainly earned every penny. He'd find a way to make it up to her.

"Keep your money, bro," Talon said when Jace tossed a few bills on the table. "The practice is good for me. Don't want my skills going stale while I'm hiding out here."

"You sure?"

The demon nodded, and Jace tucked the bills away again.

"All right," he agreed, "but I get the first round when we go out tonight."

Talon gave him a mischievous grin. "Works for me."

HE WAS GOING out with Talon and the others again. Hesper wouldn't approve. She'd made that abundantly clear during her last visit, when she'd sent the group off to the bar without him. But she wasn't here, and Jace needed to pass the time one way or another. At least his way was less lonely.

The only problem—right now, anyway—was that he still had some time to kill. It was only mid-afternoon. Jace had today off from his chores on the ranch, but Talon and the others wouldn't be ready to leave for a few more hours. He'd already tidied his cabin and reapplied the peppermint oil in all the cracks and crevices Kai had taught him to watch for. He had zero interest in watching the cheesy soap operas that would be playing this time of day on the lone TV at the homestead. And he really didn't want Nina to rope him into helping her prep dinner in the kitchen.

So, Jace headed back to his cabin and took out the pocket-sized notebook Hesper had brought him. He'd found it tucked in one of the pockets of the duffle bag she'd filled with his clothes from home. He hadn't written in it for weeks now—since the night of the Messenger raid on Nox when he told Cassian about Rigel.

As he sat on the sofa, he stared out the window and flipped through it. So much had changed since that night. The poetry he'd written seemed whiny and shallow, filled with self-pity. Jace had known loss before. That wasn't the difference. What he hadn't truly known was love. Cyrus.

Tossing the notebook aside, Jace reached for his cell phone instead. He still couldn't remember Cyrus's phone number. But if he could ... He ran his fingertips over the numbers on the keypad as if they were on a Ouija board. Maybe if he concentrated hard enough, some spirit would guide him to press the right ones. He scoffed at himself and set the phone aside again almost as quickly as he'd picked it up. He was being ridiculous. A child. Cassian would have mocked his pathetic poetry, but he would've truly taken the piss out of him—as he would've called it—over his telephone voodoo. Jace wouldn't have blamed him, either.

*This is not the behavior of a scorpion*, he reminded himself, flexing his new tattoo again.

When he looked up once more, it was to see a flash of cherry red followed by a trail of dust on the road in the distance. Devlin's car.

He hadn't known the demon was coming to visit today. Usually, Byron or Kai would have told them. They received visitors so infrequently and didn't want anyone to panic, fearful of Messengers might be descending for a raid. Maybe they hadn't known Dev was coming, either.

Which meant there could be an emergency.

Jace stood up as the car turned through the gate and started up the driveway. He wasn't the only one unsure what to make of Dev's appearance. Kai had emerged from the stables, and a few of the others had left their work in the garden beds. Jace joined them outside in time to see the convertible roll to a stop. Dev got out, and he wasn't alone.

“Hesper?”

There she was in tall boots and tight jeans, her long hair rippling behind her as she walked toward him.



“What are you doing here? Are you ...?” Jace’s voice trailed off. There was no luggage in the back, just Hesper’s oversized handbag. She wasn’t here to stay. This was only another visit. “Is everything all right? You could’ve called.”

Hesper reached out to take both of his hands in hers. She worked her bottom lip nervously between her teeth, biting off the lipstick, before looking up at him. “Some things are better said in person, brother.”

*Shit. This is serious.*

Jace glanced around them. Everyone was staring. Even Nina peeked through the kitchen window to see what was happening.

“All right, that’s enough. Let’s give them some privacy,” Kai scolded the others.

The curtain in the kitchen window fell back into place, and everyone began to return to the gardens, muttering questions to see if anyone knew what was going on.

“Thanks,” Jace told Kai.

The Emissary gave him a single nod. “Don’t mention it.” He turned to leave. “I’ll be in the stables if you need anything.”

They were alone—just Hesper, Jace, and Devlin. The demon stood nearby, his arms crossed over his chest. Hesper’s gaze darted toward him. Jace thought she’d ask him to leave like the others. Fuck knew how short-tempered she always seemed to be with him. But she didn’t. Her stare softened; she seemed to be looking to him for support, perhaps even strength.

“We went looking for Messenger Cyrus,” she said, eyes still on Dev. Taking a deep breath, she turned back to Jace.

The expression on her face—the pity and reluctance in her wide violet eyes—was all Jace needed to fall apart. She had bad news, maybe even the worst.

He dropped to his knees, leveled by the hollowness that suddenly appeared where his heart had been a moment ago.

This was exactly why Hesper hadn't called. After everything they had been through, she didn't trust him not to lose his shit.

And she was probably right. Between the two of them, she'd always been the smarter, less impulsive one.

"What happened?" Jace mumbled. He couldn't look at her, only at the ground. Even when she crouched beside him and put her arm around him for comfort, he didn't lift his head.

Dev stepped forward then, sparing Hesper the pain of having to answer. "Cyrus came to Nocturna looking for you. My sister thinks he stopped by Kur Club one night. Someone was asking for me, she said. Something about wanting to find a friend of his. After that, he dropped off the radar. There's only rumors."

*Dropped off the radar.*

Such an ominous expression. So full of mystery, of restlessness. Jace could already sense the decades of unresolved torment to come, hoping for a miracle where there was none to be had. Tears burned his eyes. Cyrus was too good for whatever had happened to him. He was too warm and too kind, a flower scorched in the desert's heat.

Still, he couldn't stop himself from asking, "What are the rumors?"

Instead of answering, Hesper rested her head on his shoulder and squeezed him tighter. They were two of a kind, he and his sister: the last descendants of the first fallen Watcher, ruined in life and cursed in love.

"Jace, I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"What are the rumors?" he repeated. His voice cracked, and he looked up to see Hesper and Dev exchanging worried glances, but once again, neither answered.

Jace had had enough of this bullshit. Sure, he was damaged and fragile, but Cyrus was his lover. He had a right to know the truth, no matter how ugly it was. Shrugging Hesper off his shoulders, he stood up and grabbed Dev's shirt by each of his shoulders.

“Tell me the fucking rumors!” he yelled.

Dev’s eyes widened. He stumbled backward, his legs hitting the bumper of his car. He looked up at Jace like he was a madman—like *he* was the demon instead.

“Jace, don’t hurt him!” Hesper cried. She was at his side immediately, pulling him off the demon. “He didn’t do anything. He’s just the messenger.”

*The messenger.* An ironic choice of words. But it was enough to snap Jace out of his rage. She was right. Dev was a friend. The Messengers were the enemy. They always were—all except Cyrus.

Taking a deep breath, Jace let go of the demon’s shirt. “I’ll imagine the worst,” he said, softer this time. “So just tell me.”

Dev nodded. He swallowed hard and crossed his arms over his chest again. This time, his stance seemed more defensive. “Messengers attacked Cyrus. They thought he was getting too comfortable with us demons and Watchers. Some say they tried to turn his rune upside down. No one’s seen him since ... Everyone thinks he’s dead.”

Jace clenched his teeth. All the cells in his body screamed as his imagination filled in the gaps Dev had left out. Nighttime. A dark alley. And his beautiful Cyrus, his body defiled, left for dead. The pain he must have felt. The fear. The regret. Had he cursed Jace when they’d hurt him, or had he cried out with longing for him instead?

*Why hadn’t he just said yes?*

The grief was too much. It was a supernova inside him. Jace let out a sob. A pale blue light pulsed around his fists. His celestial energy. It was bursting, uncontrolled. He smashed both hands against the hood of the car. There would be no apologies for the dents he left behind.

“Jace, stop it!”

He barely heard Hesper screaming behind him. Everything was a blur. Jace reeled. Dev’s hands were on him, trying to shake him.

“Come on, dude—just relax—”

Kai appeared, his black wings unfurled, steel-nerved and ready for action. “Take a deep breath, Jace.”

A scorpion scuttled by Jace’s foot, and he remembered.

*Be the scorpion.*

Tearing himself away from Dev and Kai, Jace rounded the convertible and threw open the driver-side door. “I’m going to Vegas.”

“Jace, no—you’re not thinking rationally—”

Dev scrambled to keep up with him, but Jace was one step ahead. He turned the keys, still in the ignition, and as the engine roared to life, he threw the car in reverse.

A cloud of dust obscured the edges of the driveway, but Jace didn’t care. There was only Cyrus, and Cyrus was dead. He hadn’t given up on Jace. He’d put himself in danger to find him. The least Jace could do was the same in return.

As he pulled through the gate and onto the main road, he saw Kai and Hesper take flight in the rearview mirror. But their wings were no match for the speed of a mortal car. He fed gas to the engine and watched the speedometer rise. The two disappeared behind a cloud within seconds.

Jace flexed his forearm with the new tattoo. He’d be the scorpion, all right. He’d find out who’d killed Cyrus, and then they’d suffer his sting.

Xavier sounded like a good place to start.



## CYRUS

“I have to leave for a bit today.”

It was one of the last things Cyrus had expected Xavier to say. Especially since the pin-feather incident. The small freedoms Cyrus had earned—taking a shower or dressing himself—had vanished. Xavier was back to the same smothering care he’d given him those first few days after the attack. Always checking to make sure he was warm enough or that he’d eaten. Barely letting him out of his sight. Hovering behind him anytime he walked somewhere, worried he’d fall. He was worse than Eris had ever been with all his fussing.

Cyrus supposed his concern wasn’t unfounded, but that didn’t stop it from being annoying as fuck.

“Really? What for?” Cyrus stepped back from the bathroom mirror. He’d been standing in front of it again, staring at his new onyx feathers. Hating them. And himself.

Xavier glanced away. His forehead was wrinkled again, and he shifted his weight as he leaned against the doorframe. Did he seem more flustered than usual, or was that simply the steam from the mug of coffee in his hand obscuring his features?

“Work stuff,” he grunted. He didn’t elaborate. He only turned back into the adjoining bedroom and began to dress for the day.

Cyrus retracted his wings and followed. “Is everything all right?”

He didn't expect Xavier to confide in him. The general rarely had, even when they'd been together. But the change in their dynamic, with Xavier trying to win Cyrus over, was so strange that it was worth a shot. There was certainly no shortage of troubles that could be on Xavier's mind. The half-closed Strip outside the window was a reminder of that. What was it this time? Another attempted murder in Nocturna? More riots? Or maybe a problem with his illegal mortal arms empire?

Between his injuries and recovery, Cyrus had almost forgotten about the celestial-steel bullets.

Xavier pulled fresh clothes from the bureau, barely looking at his selections. "It's fine." He was really clinging to those single-syllable words. This wasn't a good sign. "I just haven't been in for a while."

Cyrus thought of making a quip about asking him to say hello to Leo for him. But something about the way Xavier stomped around told him not to.

"There's some soup in the fridge. Do you think you'll be able to heat it up, or would you rather I make you a sandwich for lunch before I go?" he asked when he was nearly ready.

Cyrus settled back down on the bed with a book. "The soup is fine. Thanks."

Xavier lingered in the doorway a moment, watching him. The irritability was gone, and that sad, sorry, longing look was back on his face. He didn't want to leave Cyrus, not really. He'd be worried—he was already worried. For a second, Cyrus thought the general might even use the *L*-word when saying goodbye.

*Love.*

That would embarrass them both, and Cyrus was still reeling from Xavier's plea for him to stay. He couldn't bear another scene like that so soon. So, Cyrus managed a grin and beat him to the punch.

"Don't worry about me. I'm getting better, I promise," he assured him.

Xavier nodded. He seemed only slightly relieved. “Is there anything I can get for you while I’m out? I can pick up dinner, and we can watch a movie together when I get back. Any requests?”

Takeout. Something different. And another kind gesture. Cyrus’s stomach gave a flip of approval. That sounded much more appealing than the plain, open-the-container-and-heat foods in Xavier’s regular cooking rotation. He must truly feel guilty for leaving.

“There’s this place that makes this salmon with lemon and olives—it’s Greek, I think.” Cyrus tried to remember his training to come to the mortal realm. Popular cuisines and their geographies were covered in the culture-focused classes, but that seemed so long ago now.

Xavier grinned. His chest swelled as he stood taller. He seemed to like the idea of playing Cyrus’s hero, even in this small way. “I know the place. I like it, too. And yes, that’s right. Greek.”

“I’d like that, then.”

“Then that’s exactly what you’ll have.”

Xavier didn’t need to know that the last time—the only time—Cyrus had had that dish had been with Jace. That would stay Cyrus’s little secret, his own private way of keeping Jace with him.

THE BALCONY DOOR WAS ANOTHER. Cyrus had been thinking about it for days. He’d promised he’d always leave it open for Jace. And he had—at least, until the attack. It felt foolish, but he wanted to do it here, at Xavier’s suite, as well. He didn’t know if Jace even knew which floor Xavier lived on, or which balcony might be his. But if he happened to—and if he came back for some reason and thought to look for him ...

Cyrus wanted to be ready.

Setting his book aside, he wandered into the living area. While he was on the balcony, maybe he’d stay there for a



while and watch the repairs going on at the Strip below. The fresh air would be good for him. He was as much a creature of the sky as he was of the land; it might help him heal.

But when he tugged on the handle to the sliding doors by the sofa, they didn't budge.

*What the fuck?*

He was weak, but not *that* weak. He turned the lock over and over again, retesting in between. It made no difference. The door didn't give an inch either way. He glanced around the room, remembering Xavier's excuses about the TV. It was broken. Maybe the door was broken, too. It was possible Xavier had been so busy taking care of him these past couple of weeks he simply hadn't had the chance to call maintenance for the repairs.

Cyrus could do it for him. A tiny gesture of goodwill to repay him for saving his life.

He reached for the landline phone on one of the end tables. His fingertips were already moving over the numbers before he brought the receiver to his ear. Eerie silence—that was all he heard. No dial tone. No static. No beep. No buttons he pressed mattered. The phone was dead.

For a moment, he stared at the receiver, processing, trying to understand. The phone never rang. He'd noticed that before, but it had never occurred to him to wonder why. Now, he pulled the entire handset off the table, checking for a wire. There had to be a wire. There *had* to be.

There wasn't.

The damn thing wasn't plugged in. There was no wireless base set for it to communicate with. It was just ... disconnected.

Cyrus's chest grew tight, as if a fist was squeezing at his lungs. He had no way to call out—not even his cell phone for texting or social media messages. Was this by design?

*You know the answer*, that mean voice taunted.

No, he wouldn't believe it. Xavier had fucked him over before. Fucking people over was what he did best. But this ... What *was* this, anyway? Was this a kidnapping? Was he being held captive—or, worse, hostage? Cyrus could barely bring himself to think the words. They were too ridiculous. Xavier had been trying to be kind. He wanted Cyrus to stay; he was attempting to rebuild trust.

But if this wasn't a kidnapping, what else could it be?

Cyrus ran his hands through his hair and forced himself to take a deep breath. There had to be another explanation. He simply had to find it.

Circling back to the balcony, he checked the lock and handle one more time. That was when he noticed the metal brackets that had been screwed in at the top and bottom of the door, securing it to the frame. An explanation suddenly seemed harder to find.

“Why would you do this Xavier?” he muttered. “Why?”

The front door. It had opened. Cyrus knew it had. There had been deliveries—and Astra had visited. And Xavier had used it himself earlier to go to work. Cyrus rushed across the living space to check it. It would open, and he would be fine. The TV, phone, and balcony were simply some strange coincidence.

“What the hell?”

The doorknob had been replaced. Where there had been a switch to lock it before, there was now only smooth metal, the same as the closets in the rest of the suite. Cyrus turned it anyway, even though he already suspected what he'd find.

It was locked. From the outside.

He was trapped in Xavier's suite, the same as if it were a prison cell.

Cyrus's breath came ragged. He clutched at his collar, tugging on the neck of his T-shirt. Only a moment ago, he had put holding him captive beyond Xavier's capabilities. The improbable didn't seem so unlikely anymore. He had been

right to stay on guard against the general's attempts at kindness.

Had every gentle glance, touch, and word been a lie, or only a few?

Slowly, Cyrus turned, his back against the door, and slid to sit on the floor. Was this what it felt like to be a caged animal? Vulnerable. Betrayed. Uncertain what tomorrow would bring—if he even had a tomorrow to count on.

He didn't want to think of that. Xavier had put far too much energy into nursing him back to health to simply turn around and kill him. He couldn't be working with the assholes who attacked him, either; they'd left him for dead. No, Xavier had to have some other goal in mind. Even if that was goal was nothing more than keeping Cyrus here—his own strange, black-winged songbird—forever.

Cyrus drew his knees up against his chest and wrapped his arms around himself. This wasn't who he was. He wasn't a victim. And yet, he felt completely and utterly defeated. Xavier had bested him once again. He closed his eyes, wishing he'd bled out from the pin feather the other day. Wishing Xavier had never found him in that alley.

Then, he thought of Jace in his dreams, in their room by the sea. He hadn't dreamed of Jace since his fever broke. Great. Now the delirium was back. Maybe this time, it would take him.

*Get your shit together, Cy. You have to find a way out of here.*

The voice wasn't the bastard that haunted his insecurities this time. It was Jace. It's what he would've told Cyrus if he was dreaming. He always had reassured him. Always. Of course his would be the voice he'd hear now, when he needed strength again.

“Fuck it.”

Cyrus said the words out loud as he dragged himself back up to his feet. He was a soldier, a fighter, a Messenger. Fuck the delirium. Fuck his injuries. And, most of all, fuck Xavier.

The asshole was incapable of change or redemption. By the time the general got back tonight, Cyrus would be gone. He'd claw his way through the fucking walls if he had to.

Xavier's phone didn't have wires? He must have hidden them here someplace. Cyrus would find them. Xavier had switched the doorknobs and rigged the balcony? Fine. He would have used tools to switch out the hardware. Cyrus could find those, too.

And if all else failed? There were his celestial powers. They hadn't returned yet. His body was still more concerned with regenerating feathers and adapting to the turned rune between his shoulders. But they would eventually. He'd bide his time until he was strong enough to harness their energy. Then, if he had to, he'd blast his way out. No lock or bracket could contain him.

For now, Cyrus moved through Xavier's suite like a black hole, consuming everything in his path. He tore open cupboards and drawers, opened boxes and suitcases, and tipped furniture. Searching. Hoping. Trying to find anything that would help him escape.

But what he found before the wires and tools was just as interesting.

Papers. Plans for human weapons designed with celestial steel. There were bullets, yes—Cyrus knew about those—but there was also more. Alloy-tipped clubs. Sleek, modern knives. Darts. Electroshock devices infused with the same cosmic energy that flowed through the veins of Messengers and Watchers.

There were purchase orders, too—memoranda with the insignia of Chancellor Astra's office and payments stamped with her signature.

"This can't be right," Cyrus murmured as he flipped through the pages with trembling hands, trying to make sense of them.

It almost appeared as if Astra was arming the humans, dragging them deeper into the celestial fray. But she couldn't

be. She wouldn't do that. She was a fierce protector of the vulnerable, including the mortals, and when Cyrus confronted her about the celestial-steel bullets, she'd blamed Xavier.

But if she *was* arming the mortals ...

Cyrus tried to shake thought from his mind, but that terrible voice that had been following him since his attack had returned.

*A few minutes ago, you thought Xavier wouldn't lock you up, either,* it reminded him.

He hated to admit it, but the voice had a point. He couldn't be so quick to dismiss anything that had once seemed unthinkable.

And if Astra was arming the mortals—and if the First Sphere found out—she'd be ruined. *Ruined*. The media had been speculating that she'd been losing her touch as her jubilee approached. Was this some desperate attempt on her behalf to end the war and subdue her critics?

No wonder Xavier had been especially interested in Cyrus's relationship with Astra. The general had made no real effort to hide the documents, either. He hadn't locked them in a safe or stashed them in some ratty box under the bed. They were in a folder. In a drawer. In his desk. Cyrus was under heavier lock and key than these were. Xavier had to be accessing them regularly. He had to have plans for them.

"What are you playing at?" Cyrus whispered as if the general was there to reply.

The answer was simple: Xavier was up to nothing good—neither, for that matter, was Astra. But that wasn't all that bothered Cyrus. It was that Astra, like Xavier, had lied. She'd lied *to him*. To Cyrus, her advisor, her trusted link to Xavier whom she'd asked to channel the general toward good. How long had she been planning this? Had she been deceiving him since that night of the party at Nova when she'd taken him into her confidence?

Cyrus wasn't sure who sickened him more: Xavier or Astra.

There was no one he could trust. Except for Jace. But Cyrus had ruined that himself when he hadn't said yes to leaving Las Vegas with him.

*I'd say yes now. I'd say it a thousand times.*

He was still lost in thought when the key turned in the outward-facing lock at the front door. Through the gaps in the curtains, he saw the light outside was changing. Darkening. It was almost sunset. He must have been sitting on the sofa for hours with the papers spread out in front of him.

*Get ready for a shitshow.*

Quickly, Cyrus snatched at the closest paper. As the door swung open, he shoved it into his pocket—currency for later, even if he wasn't quite sure of its value yet.

Then, Xavier stood in the doorway. He clutched a paper takeout bag in his hand. The scent of lemon and oregano filled the air. But they wouldn't be eating their meals anytime soon.

There was too much to talk about first.

Xavier's brow wrinkled as his gaze drifted over the living area. The cabinets were still open in the kitchenette, spices and cereal boxes scattered over the countertop. Half the books on the shelf in the corner were now in a pile on the floor. And his desk was a mess of office supplies, phone chargers, and pulled-out drawers.

Their stares locked.

Xavier dropped the takeout bag on the floor. His eyes burned. Fury, hurt, confusion—all were there in his glare. He knew. He knew that Cyrus knew about the lock and the brackets, the phone and the rigged TV. In another few seconds, he'd figure out Cyrus knew about his stash of papers, too.

“What the actual fuck, Cyrus?” he demanded.

That asshole had him living under lock and key, and he had the balls to act like Cyrus was unreasonable? Glowering, Cyrus stood up. “What the fuck? Why don't *you* tell me what the fuck is going on here, Xave?”

Xavier jerked into action. The door was still open behind him. His face grew red as he whirled around to shut it. Of course. No one could hear. Always secrets and lies with him.

“You want to know what’s going on, Cy?” he hissed as he stormed closer. He was shaking, the tendons on his neck straining. “It’s called me trying to keep you safe. Me trying to keep you fucking alive.”

“Alive? That’s what this is, living like a prisoner?”

“A *prisoner*?” Xavier scoffed darkly. “Do prisoners get cared for the way I have for you? Do their wardens abandon their jobs to nurse them back to health? Do they stay by their side day and night, giving them cool water baths to bring down their fevers and holding them close when they scream in terror?”

Xavier was practically swaying now. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. He grasped his head in disbelief one second only to pound his own chest for emphasis the next.

“What about when the name they scream for belongs to someone else? Jace. Jace. Jace. That was all you ever fucking said, but it was *me*, Cyrus. It was me taking care of you, telling you to be strong and make it through.”

Cyrus cringed. He’d known Jace had been a dream. Even in his delirium, he’d realized none of it was real—the tiled room, the canopy, the jewel-toned ocean. But those arms around him ... the voice that had motivated and comforted him ... they had been flesh and bone. And they’d been Xavier.

The whole time, it was Xavier.

“Where the fuck was Jace when you needed him? Not here. But *I* was, and you still insist on holding the past over my head like a fucking guillotine!”

Cyrus didn’t know what, exactly, a guillotine was, but it was easy enough to guess from the context that it was nothing good. He crossed his arms over his chest defiantly. “And why wasn’t Jace here, Xavier? I seem to recall something about you running him out of town.”

“Don’t pin that on me. Your precious Chancellor Astra did that.”

“But you would have if you could. You couldn’t wait for a chance for him to fuck up, and you know it,” Cyrus snapped. “Besides, I don’t remember it being Astra’s operatives who made such a mess of the Strip that they had to shut it down.”

Xavier’s stare shifted to the papers scattered across the living room floor. The file Cyrus had found. “No. Astra’s been busy with other things,” he said slowly, coldly. “But you already know that, don’t you? The time might come when you’ll have to reevaluate your allegiances. She might not be in a position to protect you much longer.”

“Whatever she’s done has nothing to do with this, Xave. With us. And how you’re treating me like your pet in a cage.”

“My *pet*? You think you’re captive here?” The general shook his head. “You haven’t been the same since the attack. The delirium has made you paranoid. It’s made you mean. You’re not thinking straight. I’m trying to keep them out as much as you safe inside. You would’ve gone back to Nocturna already if I hadn’t locked you in.”

Cyrus raised a brow. “We both know you have other reasons—your *own* selfish reasons—for keeping me here. You could’ve taken me to the hospital wing. I would’ve been just as safe there.”

“You don’t know that!” Xavier shouted so loudly he seemed to startle even himself. He clenched and unclenched his fists again, then drew a deep breath as if trying to force himself to calm.

He was pivoting now. He hadn’t convinced Cyrus with his rage, so he’d try a gentler approach. A kinder one. Reaching out, he placed a hand on Cyrus’s shoulder and lowered his voice. “All I have ever done is look out for you ... You know I’ve never stopped caring.”

Xavier’s kind of caring was a toxic form of deceit and oppression, but ... details.



“You were left for dead,” he added. “The Messengers who attacked tried to kill you. If I hadn’t gotten there when I did, they would’ve succeeded.”

The revulsion Cyrus had always felt whenever Xavier touched his wounds was back. He should have been grateful to his caretaker; he knew it. But now he realized why he hadn’t been. “You knew, didn’t you? You knew they were going to hurt me?”

Xavier stepped back as if he’d been shot through with an arrow. The remains of his indignant grimace faltered, and Cyrus could tell he was right.

“That’s how you found me so quickly.” Bristling, he stepped closer. “You knew it was going to happen. You knew where to find me. And you didn’t stop it.”

“That’s not fair, Cy.” Xavier’s voice was softer, apologetic, pleading. He shook his head. “I didn’t find out until it was too late. The rumors about our history—about us being together ... they knew I’d try to stop them. They kept their plans a secret from me.”

“How long did you think you could keep me here before they’d find out? Did you really think I would never figure it out, either?”

“I was hoping this could work until Astra arranged for us both to transfer back to Themis.” He took one of Cyrus’s hands in his own and held it, tracing over his knuckles affectionately. “I thought it was better. Please try to understand.”

Over the years, Cyrus had forgiven so many of Xavier’s sins. To have to forgive one more felt impossible. The weight was too much, the cut too deep. If he surrendered now, when would it end?

“I can’t stay here anymore.” Cyrus shook off Xavier’s touch and pushed past him into the hallway. He’d had so little on him the night of the attack—his jeans, shoes, wallet, and phone. But they were his. He’d take them, leave, and never look back.

“You’re really going to do this, aren’t you? You’re going to leave again, just like last time.” Xavier was on his heels, following him into the bedroom. The nice-guy act was gone again.

Well, that was short-lived.

“Cyrus! Cyrus, talk to me!”

Cyrus ripped open the closet where he knew Xavier had stored his things. Pulling them off the shelf, he tucked them beneath his arm and began searching for a bag.

“Yes, Xavier. I’m really going to leave.” Found one—small gym bag that cinched at the top. He stuffed the pants and broken phone inside, then slipped on his shoes. “Just. Like. Last. Time.”

This *was* exactly like last time—the time Xavier had filed the false disciplinary report that had resulted in Cyrus’s removal from the list of candidates chosen to come to the mortal realm. Everything felt the same. Eerily, uncomfortably the same. The accusations and shouting. The cruel words that could never be taken back. The hurried shuffling around to throw as many of his belongings as he could in a duffle bag and walk out the door.

Shoes on, Cyrus brushed past Xavier, clipping him with his shoulder.

“Fine! You want to walk out that door? Go ahead and do it,” Xavier shouted after him. “But you will be dead within a day. Leo won’t stop at ‘good enough’ next time.”

“Leo?” Cyrus turned, jaw clenched and seething.

It seemed obvious now that the attack had been Leo’s doing. Danica had probably been there, too. That was how they’d known about the Messenger he’d killed to save Jace at the riots. Cyrus should have guessed. At least he had a name to put to his attacker now.

“You promised Leo wouldn’t be a problem for me,” Cyrus hissed. “You said you had him under control. But you didn’t. In a way, I guess the attack was your fault after all, wasn’t it?”

Xavier stepped backward, wilting. His bottom lip trembled, and tears welled in his eyes. When he spoke again, his voice was shaky and wounded. “Cy, I’m sorry. Don’t go. We’ll talk about it—”

“I’ve heard enough.”

Cyrus slammed the door to Xavier’s suite. The altered doorknob rattled behind him.

First, he’d go to his suite. Pack a bag—a proper one. Necessities only. That was all he had time for. After that, he didn’t have a plan. If Xavier was right, nowhere in Las Vegas was safe for him. He’d try to find Devlin again, maybe. Dev had gotten Jace out of Vegas. He could do the same for Cyrus. He would sit in the lobby at Kur Club and wait. He’d pay for a room if he had to. He and Saxon—that was the considerate escort Lola had mentioned, wasn’t it?—could pass the time talking.

And if Dev never showed, there was Lynx. Cyrus didn’t know the value of the paper in his pocket, or whom it implicated more: Astra or Xavier. Nor did he care. Either way, he suspected the underground leader of the Watchers and demons might find it interesting. Cyrus could use it to barter for his freedom—and for Jace.



## JACE

**G**etting *into* Sin City was easy. It always had been, ever since the Culling ended. It was the getting *out* part that was tricky.

In the early days following the Culling, a perimeter had been set up around Las Vegas. Celestial runes had been blasted into the sky. They were a gate of sorts, hovering there, barely visible to the mortals, like a watermark in the clouds. Demons and Watchers could surrender in exchange for amnesty, but only mortals or Messengers could leave, if and when they pleased.

Dev knew how to trick the runes at the gate. He had a forged pass imbued with stardust. It was how he'd gotten Jace out of the city to begin with.

Jace wouldn't need the pass to get back in.

No one would be looking for him, anyway. Only a fool would go back after leaving. He'd use that to his advantage.

So, he kept driving.

Hesper's cell phone rang after about an hour on the road. Had she and Kai really chased him for so long? Jace heard its ringtone—some catchy, sugary pop song she liked—going off in her handbag on the backseat.

He ignored it.

She'd only lecture him, tell him to turn around and come back to the ranch before it was too late. She'd say they could talk. Then, she and Dev would leave that night, just like they

had before. He'd be alone again, in worse pain than before, without even the hope of seeing Cyrus to carry him through the night.

No. It was better this way. Let him get caught. Let him confront Xavier. Then, let him face the consequences of breaking the terms of his banishment. At least he'd be doing something to atone for all the damage he'd caused. Hesper would finally be free of him. She could start over. Start fresh. Maybe even fall in love again someday.

She'd never love anyone like she loved Cassian, but she could be happy.

And that would make Jace happy. He could die or face prison—or whatever other heinous punishment Xavier concocted for him—in peace.

The candy-pop song stopped. Then started again. Then stopped. Then another phone rang. Classic rock for the ringtone.

*What the fuck?*

It wasn't Jace's phone. He'd left his burner in his cabin. Keeping his eyes on the highway, he reached over to the glovebox. There. The sound was coming from there. After a second of fumbling, he found the offending device. Kai's number flashed across the screen.

Shit. This had to be Dev's phone. He'd been about as prepared for Jace to take off in his vehicle as Jace himself had been.

Auto theft. Another mark against the record of the last descendant of the first fallen.

Jace powered down Dev's phone and shoved it back in the glovebox, along with Hesper's. He didn't need the distraction. Nor did he want it. He pressed down on the gas pedal again, speeding up.

IT TOOK a few hours to get to Vegas. The highway stretched out in long, lonely patches through the desert for most of it.

Jace's thoughts raced as fast as the engine the whole way. Memories of Cyrus and fantasies of kicking Xavier's ass cycled through his mind like a playlist on auto-repeat. He didn't know if the general had anything to do with Cyrus's death, but it didn't matter. He took vicious delight in blaming him anyway.

Somehow, when it came to hurting Cyrus, it seemed Xavier was always at fault.

By the time he reached the outskirts of Vegas, it was almost sunset. A knot formed in Jace's stomach as he passed beneath the arc of semi-transparent celestial runes suspended above the city like glass ornaments.

He fucking hoped everything he'd heard about the runes was still true. Especially the part about Watchers always being allowed in. Celestial forces could be fussy and unforgiving, and he had no idea how banishment worked—if his rune had changed or if his name was on some cosmic registry since Astra's decree.

Jace wet his lips and held his breath. The tiny red car slipped beneath the sigils uninterrupted. He was safe.

Inside the city, Jace ditched Devlin's car by Kur Club. It'd be safest there. Most demons knew who Dev was; many recognized his car. No one would fuck with it—he hoped, anyway. Then, he ducked into a quiet alley and walked the rest of the way from Nocturna to the Strip.

The city was different from the one he'd left. Not surprising. The Perdition Riots and the damage Xavier's soldiers had caused to the Strip were bound to take a toll. It was quieter, less colorful. There were fewer tourists. Those who were out walked around in a hurry, eyeing everyone else on the street with suspicion. Jace moved around them carefully, trying to blend in. He couldn't afford to be noticed, recognized. He couldn't make a scene. This would be easier to accomplish on the ground than in the sky.

He waited until he'd almost reached Nova before flying. Checking over his shoulder to make sure he hadn't been followed, Jace turned down a quiet side street, unfurled his

great gray wings, and leapt to the top of the building across from the tower he knew Cyrus's suite was in.

Jace supposed he should have had more of a plan. Fuck knew he'd had hours to think of one on the drive here. But he didn't. Getting here had been his only focus.

For a while, he simply stood on the roof, staring at Cyrus's balcony across the street. Just like he'd done the night they'd met. Their kiss outside had been scorching. Cyrus had been the sun, and he'd ignited a solar flare inside Jace.

But like all stars eventually did, Cyrus had finally burned too bright.

Jace wanted to get closer. He wanted to stand where they had that night. He wanted to feel Cyrus's presence. Maybe a part of him lingered there, like the tail of a passing comet.

He leaped. He landed. He hoped no one saw.

The balcony door was ajar when he reached for it. Not by much. Just a few inches. But it was.

A lump formed in Jace's throat as he stared at the gap. Had Cyrus left it open for him? It had been their ritual. Their secret. The one way in and out of Nova that the guards couldn't control. Jace ran his fingertips over the handle as if it was an old friend. One of the last things Cyrus must have done before his attack was pull the door open. Just as a precaution. Just on the offbeat chance that night would be *the* night Jace would show up on his balcony again.

Slowly, Jace tugged the door open the rest of the way. As he stepped inside, he reached for a switch. The lights flickered on. Every corner of the living area was illuminated—the sofa where they'd talked and touched, the kitchenette where they'd made coffee and sandwiches, the hall that led to the bedroom where they'd spent hours wrapped around each other's bodies.

The Messenger's suite might as well have been a church for how sacred it suddenly seemed to him.

"Cyrus?" Jace knew it was foolish to call his name, but how couldn't he? How could he have come all this way and not even try?



No one answered.

So much for the miracle he'd been hoping for. It was true. Cyrus was gone. Jace wiped a tear from his cheek. He wasn't sure when he'd started crying again. Maybe he hadn't stopped since Arizona.

He went to the bedroom next. He stared at the bed. Plush. White. Unslept in. He closed his eyes, remembering how he'd let Cyrus fuck him their last morning together. After Lucian, he'd never thought he'd bottom again. But Cyrus made it good. Cyrus picked up the pieces Lucian had left behind, then made him fall apart in a completely different way.

On one of the end tables, there was a feather. Gray with bold, cobalt-blue flecks. One of Jace's. He picked it up and turned it in his hand. He must have shed this at some point, though in the aftermath of the riots, he couldn't remember when. Cyrus had kept it—and not simply kept it. He'd treasured it, from the looks of things. He must have stared at it each day. Maybe he ran his fingers along its silky barbs. Maybe he traced it along his bare skin in the dark and thought of him.

Jace suppressed a sob. If he let himself break down now, he'd never be able to face Xavier. He sat down on the bed. Closing his eyes, he pressed his nose into one of the pillows. It still smelled of Cyrus. His shampoo. His cologne. Spicy, masculine, musky. Fuck flowers. He preferred this.

When he opened his eyes again, he spotted his throwing knives. They were laid across the top of the bureau, clean and perfectly arranged. He stood again and grabbed the belt, wrapping it around himself. The familiar weight felt good against his hips. Knowing how Cyrus had cared for the weapons in his place felt even better.

Jace went back to the living room. Everything was overwhelming. Grief broke inside him like water from a bursting dam. He screamed and pulled at his hair, so close to ripping out the strands. He slapped and struck his face and chest—anyplace he could reach. Anywhere he could hurt.

All he did was ruin those he cared about. First, Cassian. Now, Cyrus. Long ago, even his father had died trying to save his life.

He was toxic. He was poison. But what else could be expected from his bloodline?

Forget Xavier. Vengeance was overrated. It required strength and thought, and Jace simply felt ... defeated. He didn't want to hurt or be hurt anymore. He couldn't stand it.

So, he pulled the dagger from his boot and turned it over in his hands, admiring its jagged ridges and brutal elegance. It was the knife that had killed Cassian. It seemed fitting that he use it to take his own life now.

"I'm so sorry, Cyrus," Jace whispered. Then, he lifted the dagger and rested the tip over his heart.

He was about to drive the blade through, too, when the door to the suite swung open.



## CYRUS

“Jace! No!”

Cyrus’s heart seized as soon as he saw the Watcher standing there, in his living room, a dagger pressed to his chest. He rushed forward on instinct, on the impulse to protect and save.

Jace startled. He turned his big blue eyes toward him, staring in disbelief. The dagger wavered in his grasp. Cyrus closed his own hand over the handle, pulling it away.

“Don’t do it—don’t hurt yourself,” he told him. “*Please* don’t ... for me.”

The blade clattered to the floor.

“Cy ... it’s *you* ... You’re alive.” Jace seemed just as confused to see Cyrus as Cyrus was to see him. The Watcher reached out tentatively, as if Cyrus might be a ghost or a mirage. A trick of the light and his imagination. But when his fingertips grazed Cyrus’s cheek, he gasped and let out a surprised laugh. “They told me you were dead.”

Tears rolled down Jace’s cheeks. He’d been crying for a while, from the looks of it. Reddened eyelids. Drip marks on his T-shirt. Lines of exhaustion across his hard, handsome face. So many signs of abject misery.

Cyrus shook his head. “No,” he told him. His own eyes watered. “Left for dead. But not actually dead.”

Jace stepped closer. He cupped Cyrus’s face in his palms and pressed their foreheads together. The Watcher’s touch felt

so fucking good. He was warm and strong, with a slight roughness to his hands and a softness to his breath. Cyrus didn't need any of the powders or pills Xavier had given him the past few weeks. He only needed this.

“Not actually dead ...” Jace echoed.

“And you're not a dream. You're really here.” Cyrus said it out loud more for his own benefit, to convince himself this was no feverish delusion. He brought his hands to Jace's face—to his shoulders—to his chest. He couldn't stop touching him. There were too many weeks apart to make up for.

“Of course I'm here,” Jace murmured. “You left the door open for me.”

Cyrus chuckled through the sob that caught in his throat. “I said I would. I said I always would.”

A grin parted the tears streaming down Jace's face. He brushed his lips against Cyrus's. “Don't ever die on me again, okay?”

“Don't ever get banished again.” Cyrus kissed him once more. Deeper this time. And longer. He licked the taste of salt away from Jace's mouth and soothed the hint of windburn on his lips. Every gasp, slurp, and soft, stifled moan was like music. Prettier than any notes from an angel's harp. Cyrus never wanted to stop hearing it play.

But his exhaustion wouldn't let him. Too soon, his legs felt weak again. It had been a long day, and he was tired. All the searching. All the screaming. And now ... this. His knees buckled beneath him. He slumped against Jace, clinging to his arms to keep from falling.

“Cyrus? Hey—are you all right?” Jace steadied him. Then, he eased them both to the floor.

“I'm fine,” Cyrus said. He leaned back against the sofa for support. He was shaking from the exertion. “I'm not myself yet. I just need a few minutes to rest.”

Jace lifted a pair of sad eyes to meet his. “That part of it was true, then—the attack?”

Cyrus nodded. “They cuffed me in bronze and turned my rune.”

Jace’s hands were on him again, pulling him onto his lap. As Cyrus straddled him, the Watcher wrapped his arms around him and held him close against his chest. His fingertips stroked the back of his neck, feathering through the strands of hair at his nape, and he nuzzled him, the sweet burn of stubble against his cheek.

The dreams of Jace had been nice, but the real deal was far better.

Cyrus rested his head against Jace’s shoulder. He breathed in the scent of him. The Watcher smelled like leather and sunshine and ... peppermint? So different from the whiskey, soap, and cloves Cyrus remembered, but that was all right. This was lovely, too.

“I’m sorry, Cy ... I’m so sorry,” Jace whispered. “I should have been here.”

“No.” Cyrus was hoarse. “I should’ve been there, with you.”

Jace’s other hand skirted along the hem of his T-shirt, then slipped beneath the fabric.

Cyrus winced, worried how far up his spine the Watcher’s hands might travel. “Careful of my rune. It’s still a little sensitive.”

“Mmm.” Jace hummed in confirmation.

Cyrus shouldn’t have worried. Jace was gentle. He ran his fingertips up and down the lower half of Cyrus’s spine, avoiding the spot between his shoulder blades altogether. Cyrus eased. It was soothing, this skin-on-skin contact. He could fall asleep like this.

“You can tell me about what happened, if you want. Whenever you’re ready,” the Watcher said against the shell of his ear. He grazed his lips along Cyrus’s jaw. “You can show me, too, if you’re comfortable.”

“You don’t want to see. They’re hideous.”

“What are?”

“My wings.”

Jace’s hands stilled on his neck and spine. He pulled back just enough to look him in the eyes. He raised a skeptical brow. “Highly unlikely.”

Challenge accepted.

Shifting in the Watcher’s lap, Cyrus sat up straighter. As Jace’s hands fell to his thighs, he took a deep breath and peeled off his T-shirt, tossing it aside for full effect. Then, slowly, he unfurled his wings. The molting process was complete now. The limbs stretched several feet in each direction, thick with layer upon layer of glossy obsidian feathers. Cyrus looked away, unable to bear waiting for the Watcher’s reaction. Xavier had been ashamed of what his dark wings meant. He never actually admitted it out loud—instead, he’d avoided answering when Cyrus had asked him—but his suggestion that Cyrus have his rune turned back betrayed his real feelings. What if Jace felt the same?

“You’re beautiful ... so beautiful.”

Cyrus lifted his eyes to meet Jace’s. The Watcher was staring at him as though he was the moon lighting the night sky.

No, Jace didn’t feel the same. He was Xavier’s opposite in so many ways, including this.

“You really think so, don’t you?”

Jace nodded and buried one of his hands in Cyrus’s hair, pulling him closer for a kiss. “You always have been,” he said against his lips. “This makes no difference.”

It was Cyrus’s turn to cry now. Big, hot tears rolled down his face. The past few weeks of suffering and fear melted away. Jace was back, and Cyrus was alive. His rune might have been turned, but Jace accepted him—all of him—exactly as he was.

“Don’t ... don’t do that.” Jace kissed away one tear, then wiped off another with his thumb. He chuckled. “You’ll get

me going again.”

Cyrus let out a laugh and held Jace’s face steady in his hands so he could kiss him again. But kissing was no longer enough. He’d gone too long untouched, too long in pain. He needed to feel good again. To be reminded that his body was capable of pleasure.

“Touch my feathers,” he begged. “Touch *me*.”

“Okay.”

Jace’s lips found Cyrus’s again as his fingertips traced along the top edge of each wing. Cyrus shivered. This was oddly erotic. His new feathers were sensitive, unexposed to the elements, and Xavier’s preening had done little to toughen them. Cyrus’s cock was straining against the zipper of his jeans in seconds.

“Fuck, that feels good. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Me neither.” Jace shifted his hips, bucking against Cyrus’s ass. He was just as hard as he was. Deliciously, temptingly hard.

Cyrus dove to unbuckle Jace’s belt at the same time that the Watcher worked his hands into his plumage. Jace massaged and clutched at the black feathers, threading the vanes between his fingers. Every barb tingled as they brushed against his knuckles, rippling like a breeze over water. Currents of bliss ricocheted through his wings and down his spine, settling in his balls. A moan caught in Cyrus’s throat.

*We shouldn’t be doing this. There’s no time.*

Cyrus tried to make himself see reason. He reminded himself that the first place Xavier would look for him—if he decided he was motivated enough—was here, in his suite. But Cyrus was desperate. He hadn’t orgasmed in weeks. After his attack, he’d been too weak to even rut against his mattress during one of his dreams, and his morning wood usually deflated the second he heard Xave’s voice asking if he was awake, wondering if he needed anything. He needed release.

And, most of all, he needed Jace.



So, he raised himself onto his knees and worked Jace's jeans down his hips. The Watcher arched against the sofa, lifting his ass to help. Finally, Jace's cock sprang free, flushed and leaking, that vein on the underside dark and throbbing. He hissed as Cyrus wrapped his palm around him. Fuck, it felt good to be touching Jace again. The heat of his shaft as he gave him a slow stroke. The silkiness of the plump crown as he ran a fingertip along its ridge. The little gasp that escaped his lips when Cyrus thumbed over the slit.

He paused only to bring his fingers to his lips so he could taste him. Jace watched, his pupils dilating, his lids heavy, as Cyrus licked away the dribble of precum from his thumb. Salty. Tangy. Sweeter than any honey, in its own way. A husky, growl-like sound rumbled inside the Watcher's chest at the sight. Then, Jace kissed him again. He swept Cyrus's mouth with his tongue to catch a taste for himself before capturing his bottom lip between his own in a gentle nibble.

"Beautiful. Just like I said." Jace's hands shifted to Cyrus's bare back. They slid down the smooth, lean lines to the dip inside his jeans. He brushed his lips down the side of Cyrus's neck. "And hot as fuck."

His hands came to the front, to Cyrus's fly. "And so damn perfect."

Jace kissed across Cyrus's collarbone while he pulled on the zipper. The teeth gave way one by one, parting in what felt like the slowest undressing of Cyrus's life.

"Faster," he said.

He felt Jace's lips curve into a smile against his sternum. Then, the Watcher's hand was on his cock, freeing him from his pants. It should have been a moment of sweet relief, but Cyrus was already too impatient. He fluttered his wings, trying to get closer, thrusting more of his length into Jace's palm.

"Hang on. Don't wear yourself out. I've got you."

It was different for Jace to offer help than it was with Xavier. With Xavier, caring came with strings. Obligations. Terms for repayment. With Jace, it was a gift. Given, with

nothing expected in return. Cyrus could surrender without sacrificing anything of himself. So, nodding, he settled back in the Watcher's lap once more.

There was lube in one of the nightstand drawers. Jace had to know this; they'd used it before. But he spat in his hand instead, then angled his hips so he could gather both their cocks in his palm.

"Like that ... Yesss ..."

As Jace began to stroke, Cyrus slid his hands beneath his shirt, resting a palm over his heart. Feeling its beat reminded him the Watcher was real, not a dream. He was a strong, celestial male made of blood, bone, and cosmic energy. Born of the stars but right here, beneath his fingers.

"I can take off my shirt—" Jace offered.

"No—don't stop. I've waited too long for this."

The Watcher nodded and pumped his fist around them again. And again. And again.

"Missed this ... missed you," he said, dragging his lips across Cyrus's shoulder while his hand kept moving.

"Me, too."

It didn't take long to find a rhythm that suited them both. And, fuck, they were pretty together. Their two shafts sliding against one another, tips leaking, crowns kissing. The pressure of the Watcher's hand and the smooth silky warmth of his cock against his had Cyrus moaning far too soon.

He wasn't alone.

"Fuck, I'm coming." Jace said it like it was a bad thing, like he was embarrassed not to be able to last longer. His eyes latched on Cyrus's as he spilled himself, ropes of cum painting his hand and both their abs. Fire filled his stare—different and deeper than the amber flames of the demons, but just as hypnotic.

"Come. Come with me, Cy," he begged. The cum made the glide smoother, easier, and he worked them harder. Then, Jace buried his other hand in Cyrus's plumage again, running

his fingers through the feathers. Tugging just enough on the quills to send a fresh set of sparks across his wing.

Cyrus couldn't have resisted even if he'd wanted to. Not being looked at the way he was. Not being touched like this, either. He pumped his hips in time to Jace's thrusts. His balls tightened against his body. He stared right back at Jace, then let out an incoherent shout as the pressure building inside him erupted.

"Jericho ..." The Watcher's true name escaped his lips on a whimper. As Cyrus's eyelids flickered and his body trembled from his release, he thought he saw a smile form on Jace's lips.

He'd always liked it when Cyrus said his name.

Slowly, the stars cleared from Cyrus's eyes and his pulse steadied. Still grinning, Jace brushed his thumb along his bottom lip.

"You're still the only one I let call me Jericho, you know."

Cyrus smiled himself. "I better be."

Breathless and boneless, he rested his head on Jace's shoulder, then retracted his pitch-black wings. The Watcher held him against his cum-smeared chest, running a hand up and down his lower back again, while they both caught their breath. After a moment, Cyrus swallowed away the dryness in his throat.

The time had come to tell Jace what he hadn't been able to bring himself to a few minutes ago.

"We have to leave," he said. "Now."



## CYRUS

They couldn't stay.

Cyrus explained this while they quickly cleaned themselves up. Then, exhausted, he sat on his bed, directing Jace while he packed a bag for him. He told Jace about the demonic rune that still stained his door. About being left in the alley by Kur Club and Xavier bringing him home. About all the delirium and pain—and then the shock of discovering he'd been captive the entire time.

As he moved around Cyrus's bedroom, searching for the items Cyrus wanted—a few family photos and keepsakes, clothes, toiletries—Jace grimaced and clenched his fists. He muttered curse words under his breath. Called Xavier a bastard. Said he would fucking kill him if they ever came face to face again.

And then he turned to Cyrus with as much sweetness as he'd had venom the moment before and promised that where they were going, Xavier wouldn't be welcome. He'd never be a problem again.

"Where *are* we going? Where were you this whole time?" Cyrus asked.

"This ranch in Arizona. It's off the grid, very private, and full of people just like us. Astra's little zoo of outcast celestials and demons." Jace added his throwing knives to the bag, then zipped it closed and flashed him a smile. "An Emissary—Malakai, Kai for short—is one of the owners. You won't be the only one with black wings."

Cyrus wasn't sure how he felt about trusting his life to an angel of death, but if Jace trusted Kai, he supposed he could, too. Even if he worked for Astra, whose intentions he now questioned.

"There's something we should talk about later, when it's safe," Cyrus said, remembering the papers he'd found in Xavier's desk earlier—and the one still folded in his pocket. "It's about the chancellor."

Jace nodded. "When it's safe." He slung the strap of the bag over his shoulder. "Now, how the fuck are we getting out of here?"

It was a valid question. Cyrus couldn't fly. The molting was done, but he still wasn't strong enough. Not until the turned rune on his back was fully healed—whenever that might be.

"You can take the balcony," he suggested, "but I have to walk out of here."

Jace made a face. "I'm never leaving you behind again. Xavier was crazy enough to lock you up once. There's no way we're taking the chance he might try again. I'll carry you."

That plan had disaster written all over it, too. They were too similar in size and weight. Cyrus would only weigh Jace down, especially with the added burden of his bag. Cyrus glanced around the room, wracking his brain. Trying to find another way. His gaze rested on a baseball cap on the nightstand. Jace had pulled it from the closet while packing. It made Cyrus think of Kur Club—of the line of patrons he'd seen in the queue to the lobby, hiding their faces. Hoods, hats, and masks. Anything would do.

"No," he said firmly, reaching for the cap. "We're walking out of here together. It's a risk, but Xavier doesn't know you're back. We have that on our side."

"HOW DO I LOOK?" Jace asked as they made their way toward the bank of elevators at the end of the corridor a few minutes

later. The Watcher wore a baseball cap and sunglasses, while Cyrus had on a hooded sweatshirt.

“Normal,” Cyrus told him. “Like a mortal.”

Jace glanced at him behind his sunglasses and grinned. “But a hot one, right? Like a movie star or something?”

Cyrus let out a laugh. “That goes without saying.”

It felt strange walking out of Nova so simply. It was too brazen. The exact opposite of all the secrecy they’d tried to maintain by sneaking around and using balconies before.

But it worked.

No one in the elevators seemed to notice them. They blended in with the other hotel guests, checking out or changing rooms. Then, they kept their heads down as they crossed the gaming floor, moving toward the exit.

“I think that slot attendant’s looking at us funny,” Cyrus whispered, spotting a female staring at them by a row of Celestial Spins machines. He tucked his chin tighter against his chest. “Maybe the whole sunglasses-at-night thing was a little heavy-handed.”

“Maybe. But it’s too late now,” Jace muttered between clenched teeth. He adjusted the strap of the duffle bag on his shoulder. “Keep walking. Don’t change your pace. It’ll only make us look more suspicious.”

Cyrus held his breath the rest of the way, until they were standing outside on one of the side streets. Then, he let out a long, shaking sigh and looked up at Jace. “Where to next?”

“You’ll see.”

KUR CLUB WAS one of the last places Cyrus expected Jace to take him. It was early enough in the evening that the brothel lobby wasn’t swarming with clients yet. But that also meant the female demon who greeted everyone—Lola, he thought she’d been called—wasn’t as attentive. Or present, even. They stood at the counter waiting, staring at the garish furnishings. As the seconds ticked by, a knot formed in Cyrus’s gut, and his

palms grew clammy. He'd underestimated how much being back in Nocturna, so close to where he was attacked, would affect him.

"Why are we here again?" he hoped Jace hadn't noticed the way his voice wavered.

The Watcher glanced over at him and entwined their fingers, giving his hand a squeeze.

He'd noticed.

He was just being low-key about it instead of embarrassing him. Thank fuck.

"Because of that truck we saw in the parking lot—next to the car I said was Dev's," Jace said. "They came looking for me."

Cyrus recalled the parking lot they'd passed outside. It had seemed ordinary enough—well, ordinary enough for Nocturna. Beat-up cars. A couple with broken windows. Litter. Expired meters. Jace had pointed out a dusty, oversized pickup truck and sighed. The vehicle had been parked—and hastily, from the looks of its angle—beside a sleek, shiny red convertible. If any of the vehicles in the lot stood out, it was these two. And that was simply because they looked better cared-for than the others.

"Who's 'they?'"

"Dev, maybe? Or Kai? Any of them could be here." Jace glanced at the hidden door behind the still-abandoned counter and frowned. "They won't be happy with me. I sort of ... *borrowed* Dev's car without his permission."

Cyrus raised a brow, trying to look stern as he fought against the grin forming on his lips. "'Borrowed without permission.' That's a new one for me. I sort of like it."

Jace laughed. "It means—"

"Oh, I got what it means." Cyrus was still learning mortal colloquialisms, but this one had been clear enough. No explanation required.



Jace feigned an innocent expression, batting his lashes like some doe-eyed ingenue. “Do angels really not steal things in Themis?”

“There are thieves. Just not cars.” Cyrus brushed a kiss against Jace’s cheek. “I’m glad you’re better at stealing hearts,” he whispered against the shell of his ear.

Jace looked at him as though he was ready to bend him over the counter and pick up where they’d left off at Cyrus’s suite, no regard for whether or not anyone saw. Cyrus might have let him, too, if the hidden door in the wall hadn’t opened exactly then. Lola, dressed in an outfit equally extravagant as the last time Cyrus had seen her, froze the second she stepped into the lobby.

“Oh, fuck. It’s you ...” Her eyes locked on Cyrus first. Then, she turned toward Jace. “*And* you ...”

“Definitely not happy with me,” Jace muttered under his breath.

Lola moved quickly then, hurrying around the counter. Grabbing them both by their shirt collars, she pulled them aside from the handful of other patrons milling about the lobby. When they reached a secluded staircase down an abandoned hallway, she finally paused.

“You can’t just walk in here looking like this!” she hissed. She stared them up and down as though they were dressed like character actors at a theme park instead of in ordinary clothes.

“Why not?” Cyrus asked. “You said hoods and masks were preferable before.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right. But that was *before*.”

“Before what?”

Huffing a sigh, Lola pulled a cell phone with a glitter-encrusted skull on the case from one of her pockets—it was a strange mix of sunshine and the macabre, sort of like she was herself, Cyrus supposed. Her fingertips moved over the screen with demonic super-speed, typing furiously. After a second, she tapped a window that had popped up and turned the device toward them.

“Before this.”

There was no sound, but there were two figures on a grainy video taken from a security camera. One in a baseball cap and sunglasses. The other with the hood of a sweatshirt pulled over his head. The former carried a duffle bag as they walked through the gaming floor at Nova, on their way to the exit. Now that Cyrus was watching from this viewpoint, he realized he and Jace looked less like guests and more like they’d just helped themselves to the contents of the casino safes. Not exactly subtle.

What worried him more, though, was the banner that scrolled across the bottom of the screen while the clip played repeatedly, an endless loop.

*Authorities search for suspicious couple seen leaving Nova Hotel and Casino, it read.*

“Shit. That was only, like, half an hour ago,” Jace muttered.

A heavy weight sank to the base of Cyrus’s gut. “It’s Xavier. He was looking for me. He wanted to see if I’d actually leave like I threatened.”

“And now that he knows you’ve left, he’s probably figured out that’s me there with you.” Jace finally took off the sunglasses and baseball cap. He ran a hand through his hair, ruffling the thick dark waves into a mop of handsome chaos. “Lola’s right. These won’t do me any good now.”

Cyrus threw back his hood now, too. There was no sense pretending they were fooling anyone. “Sorry, Jace. I put you in danger.”

The Watcher wrapped his arms around him, hugging him from behind and nuzzling against him, cheek to cheek. “I knew the risks when I came back to Vegas. I *wanted* the risks. I just didn’t expect to find you still here ... alive.”

Lola stared at them like they were a pair of baby bunnies frolicking in a field. “Ohhh ... stop it, you guys,” she whined. “You’re making my brain short-circuit from all the cuteness.”

And then I'll be sad when Dev murders you ... Well, Dev won't *murder*-murder you, but Lynx might."

That caught Jace's attention. His head jerked up. "Lynx is here?"

"He'll *be* here. Tomorrow. Adrian, too, probably. Dev already called them."

"Shit." Jace sucked in a sharp breath. Cyrus wasn't sure if his reaction was more about Lynx or Adrian—whomever Adrian was—but it didn't really matter. The point was made that they were fucked in either case.

"Come on," Lola said, starting up the stairs. "Dev will want to know you're at least someplace safe now. He and your sister got here a few minutes before you did."

Jace groaned. Apparently, facing Dev and Hesper was almost as formidable as Lynx himself.

THE BROTHEL MUST HAVE ONCE BEEN a hotel. An old one. A grand one. One with many floors, additions, and winding corridors. How Lola managed to navigate it at all was surprising. But she did. They passed a lounge area where several celestials sat playing poker with demons in various stages of undress. An entire wing seemed sectioned off for kinks, if the muffled sounds of whips and groans were any indication.

And in another space behind a wall of floor-to-ceiling glass, a cluster of bodies writhed on a range of tufted, elegant sofas, beds, and benches. There were bouncing cocks and breasts. Wings and horns. Legs spread open for tongues and fingers to explore. Everyone moved together in unabashed pursuit of gratification. Touching, kissing, and fucking while being touched, kissed, and fucked by someone else.

"It's the Pleasure Room," Lola told them, grinning mischievously, when she noticed the way Cyrus stared. "Guests are welcome to watch or participate, given a few simple rules ... Unfortunately, we don't have time for either right now."

Finally, they reached a quieter portion of the building, located on a higher level toward the back. It was nicer here. The furniture looked less worn out, for one thing. And it didn't reek of cum and cigar smoke, like much of the rest of the building.

"This is our VIP section," Lola explained. "It's reserved for *sensitive* guests. High-profile visitors from Themis. High-ranking Messengers." She paused intentionally and cleared her throat before adding, "Chancellors."

Cyrus's eyes widened. He hadn't taken Astra for the sort to visit a brothel. There was a lot he seemed not to understand about her, actually. "*The* chancellor?"

"Maaaaaybe." Lola winked. "I can't say. Discretion, you know."

She rounded a corner, then opened a door on their right. As they entered the room, Cyrus was immediately blinded by a blur of silky black hair.

"Jace! You stupid fucking fuckhead! Don't you *ever* do something like this to me again!" Sobbing, Hesper launched herself at her brother. She pounded a fist at his chest, even as she drew him close for a hug.

"I'm sorry, Hesper. I really am ..." Jace wrapped his arms around her.

"I know it's been hard—I *know* it has, but that's no excuse. We have to stick together."

"I know. Shhh ..." He stroked her hair. "It's all right. We're together now."

She punched him on the shoulder a final time, then stepped back, wiping tears off her cheeks. "You fucking know we are, and you better get used to it. I'm not letting you this far out of my sight again for a long-ass time."

Behind her, leaning against a bureau with his arms folded across his chest, was a male demon with shaggy hair and a scarred cheek. Devlin. Every description Cyrus had ever been given of him was accurate. Dev stifled a grin and shook his head, amused, as he watched the brother-sister reunion. His

gaze lingered on Hesper a moment longer than necessary. Then, he held his hand out to Cyrus.

“I hear you’ve been looking for me,” he said.

Cyrus returned his grasp. “Would’ve been better if I’d found you a couple of weeks ago.”

The demon raised his brows. “So I heard.” He clapped Cyrus on the shoulder. “Better late than never, though. Congrats on not really being dead, by the way.”

Cyrus gave a wry smile. “Thanks.”

Their conversation caught Hesper’s attention. Sniffing, she turned toward them.

“Hesper,” Cyrus greeted with a nod.

She blinked, stunned, as she stared at him. Recognition glinted in the violet flecks of her eyes. “Asshole ... It’s *you*.”

“That’s *Not-an-Asshole* now, if I recall correctly?”

Jace glanced between them, a wrinkle forming between his brows. “You two ... know each other?”

Hesper sighed. “Remember how I told you I thought there was this Messenger following me?” she asked Jace.

Something warmed in Cyrus’s chest at the thought of Jace and Hesper talking about him—even if they didn’t realize it was him at the time. It was nice to be thought of, to be a part of their circle. Like Cassian had been.

“Yeah,” Jace said.

She threw her hands in the air dramatically. “It was him. I can tell Lynx not to worry about that now, I guess.” She looked at Cyrus again then and, smiling, nudged him in the shoulder with the same sisterly familiarity she’d shown Jace a moment ago.

Thankfully, she spared him the punches.

“I suppose I better start calling you by your actual name, huh? *Cyrus*,” she said.

“Well, it *does* have a better ring to it than Asshole.”

“Lucky for you, it does.” Hesper tilted her head to the side then and sobered. “Why didn’t you tell me who you were?”

Cyrus shrugged. “I tried. You kept cutting me off. For some reason, you were eager to shake the creepy stranger following you through the violent, darkened streets.”

She raised a brow. “Hmm. Can’t imagine why ...”

“I’ll try not to be so stalker-y next time I keep you from walking into a shoot-out.”

Jace leaned forward, inserting himself between them. The crease in his forehead deepened. “Wait—there was a shoot-out? I’m missing something.”

“We’ll explain later.” Hesper waved his comment away as though it was trivial, then turned back to Cyrus. “There’s a lot of other stuff to catch up on first.”



## JACE

Cyrus was tired. He tried not to show it, but Jace saw it in his eyes. In the yawns he stifled. In the way he gradually turned quieter, listening to the others talk instead of joining in. He stretched out his legs as he sat on the bed in the room Lola had brought them to. He looked ready to curl up beneath the plush velvet comforter at any moment.

“Kai and Byron are glad you’re okay, Jace,” Devlin said, sliding back into his chair.

The demon tucked his cell phone in his pocket, then reached for an oyster from the tray of food Lola had sent up to them. Kur Club had a limited menu—mostly aphrodisiacs and select decadent treats for the more discerning patron. Chocolate-dipped strawberries. Caviar. Pomegranates and nuts. It was an odd assortment but enough to satisfy their hunger.

“There’s room for Cyrus to stay at the ranch, too.” He slurped down the oyster, then tossed the emptied shell onto their rapidly growing pile of discards. “So, the problem is more one of how to sneak you both out of the city *again*—” Dev rolled his eyes toward Jace. “—Especially now that you’re both wanted and likely on Xavier’s radar.”

Hesper frowned into her glass of wine. “Can’t you just forge another pass like you did before?”

Dev nodded. “I can. That’s not the hard part. Getting through the extra checkpoints they’re setting up on the major highways into and out of Vegas is a different story.” He



reached for another oyster and brandished it around while he spoke. Some of the liquor spilled onto his jeans—not that he seemed to notice. “The Messengers can arrest you now, Jace. You broke the terms of your banishment by coming back.”

“Yeah, so what does that mean? Realistically?” Jace asked.

“Basically ... you’re fucked.” Dev swallowed down the oyster with far too much delight for the moment.

“So, if the highways are no good, we’ll fly out,” Cyrus said.

*Except you can’t fly yet.* Jace wanted to remind him of this—but also didn’t.

It didn’t matter, though. Dev was already shaking his head. “*No bueno*, Cy. The Messengers are crawling all over the skies.”

“Mortal police on the ground and Messengers in the skies ... It’s a fucking nightmare.” Jace ran a hand through his hair. He really had fucked himself by coming back. In his defense, he’d never thought he’d be leaving the city again. He’d thought he’d be killed or tossed into one of Nova’s prison vaults. He hadn’t put much consideration into other scenarios—or any scenario, really, even the first—but especially not the one in which Cyrus was still alive.

“Mortal police with celestial-steel bullets, don’t forget,” Cyrus added.

Jace’s head slingshot in the Messenger’s direction. “Since when?” He looked at Hesper next. “Does this have anything to do with that shootout?”

She nodded. “The same.”

“There’s more, too.” Cyrus dug a hand into one of his pockets and pulled out a folded-up piece of paper. He slid it across the comforter toward Jace, who was sitting by the foot of the bed. “I found it in Xavier’s suite. He’s got a folder full of others just like it.”

Hesper leaned over Jace’s shoulder as he glanced at the page. “I don’t understand ... What does this mean?”

It took Jace a minute to understand as well. What he was looking at appeared to be a purchase order ... for celestial-steel adaptations of mortal weapons ... from Chancellor Astra's office ... with her signature on it. Unease crept over him. He read the document again. There must be a mistake. Astra wouldn't be arming the mortals. She knew better than to draw them deeper into the fray. They were to be protected, not used as pawns against either side. It was hard to believe that someone who'd saved his life—who'd saved all the outcasts at Kai and Byron's ranch—was capable of this.

And yet if there'd already been a shootout—if Hesper and Cyrus had seen it with their own eyes—there was no mistake.

“Well, give it here. I want to know all the secrets at the slumber party, too,” Dev said, sighing and extending his hand expectantly. Jace handed him the paper. His dark eyes widened as he skimmed over the page. “Well, fuck me ...”

“It's bad, right?” Cyrus asked.

“Hell yeah, it's bad. Xavier had this?”

Cyrus nodded. He leaned his head back and hid another yawn behind his hand. “When I told Astra about the celestial steel bullets at the shootout Hesper and I saw, she said she suspected Xavier. She thought he was melting down the celestial steel from Perdition Marketplace and distributing the bullets with the bronze handcuffs. She pointed the finger at *him*.”

“Someone's lying.” Hesper was standing now, pacing around the room. “Did you believe her, Cy?”

“I did at the time. I mean, her word against Xavier's? No contest. But now, with this ...” He shrugged, and the others nodded, agreeing.

“Astra told me not to worry about Xavier,” Cyrus continued. “She said she had a secret weapon to use against him.” He pointed to the document, still in Dev's hand. “What if she was talking about those—or something like them?”

“But why would Xavier have these? His office is separate from the chancellor's,” Hesper said.

“Maybe he’s planning to blackmail the chancellor,” Jace mused. “Or report her to the First Sphere in Themis. She’ll lose her post.”

“Then we’ll all be fucked.” Dev’s face screwed up like a prune. “Whatever she’s doing with all these weapons, we’re still better off with her in charge instead of someone like Xavier, or worse.”

Jace scoffed. “*Is* there someone out there worse than Xavier?”

“Let’s hope not.” Hesper cringed, her whole body shivering. “Either way, it’s an appalling thought.”

For a moment, they all sat there, somber, staring at the paper in Dev’s hand. Astra might not be trustworthy, but a Las Vegas led by Xavier was downright bleak. It would be the Culling all over again. Jace and Hesper had barely survived the first round of attacks on demons and Watchers. They might not be lucky enough to do so again.

Whatever was going on, they had to stop it.

Finally, Dev stood up. He placed the document on the bureau by the door. He did not reach for another oyster this time around. Instead, he sighed, let his hair flop over the scar on his cheek, and hooked his thumbs in his pockets.

“Lynx needs to know about this. We’ll tell him when he gets here tomorrow,” he said. “In the meantime, I suggest we all try to get some sleep.”

Sleep. The next problem to solve. Jace shifted uncomfortably. His gaze drifted to Cyrus again. It would be a shame to make him move, find a way to get him back to Hesper’s apartment at Nocturna Tower, then get him settled in again. He’d been through so much today.

So had Jace.

“Hesper? All right if we crash with you?” he asked.

She snorted. “Your name’s on the lease, too. Technically.”

But Dev shook his head. “It’s too dangerous. With Messengers looking for you, you’re better off staying put. Lola

said the room is yours for however long you wind up needing it. You'll be safer here than at Nocturna."

Safer. Jace liked the sound of that. Xavier probably had someone watching the security footage at Nocturna Tower like a hawk, waiting for him. He wouldn't think to check Kur Club right away, if ever. This could work. He glanced at Cyrus to find him already nodding his head.

It was sort of funny, if he thought about it—spending their first night back together at a brothel. But it would do.

Dev clapped his hands. "That's settled." He turned to Hesper then. "Want a drive back to Nocturna? I'm heading there myself. It's almost curfew."

Hesper hesitated. "Fine," she said with a reluctant sigh. She turned on Jace then. "No shenanigans. I mean it. You do not leave this room. For. Any. Reason. You got it?"

Cyrus chuckled. The Messenger might as well get used to Hesper's ball-busting. If they all managed to get back to Kai and Byron's in Arizona, they'd all be spending a lot more time together.

"Yeah, yeah, no death wishes," Jace mumbled. "I got it."

As she and Dev headed toward the door, he wondered if Hesper had noticed yet the way the demon looked at her, as if she was the only light in the bright Vegas skyline.

THE ROOM WAS NICE ENOUGH. For a brothel. It had Cyrus in it, for one thing—the most important thing. If it meant getting Cyrus back, Jace would've slept in a fucking ditch. In the rain. With rats. So, in that regard, he supposed this place was a fucking palace. It had its quirks. Like the phallus-shaped candles scattered around the room and the cabinet of brand-new sex toys in the corner. The minibar was not a minibar at all but stocked with an assortment of edible undergarments, flavored lubes, and an array of pills promising various forms of "enhancement" on their labels.

Then, there was the bathroom.

“Hey, Jace, come look at this.”

He was by Cyrus’s side in a heartbeat, staring down into a giant, red, heart-shaped bathtub. Big enough for two. Or three. At the very least. Part of him was surprised there wasn’t one in the Pleasure Room.

“I thought these only existed in cheesy, old-school pornos.” Jace laughed. “But maybe that’s intentional. Life imitating art, or art imitating life, you know?”

Cyrus did not know. The vacant, mildly confused expression on his face gave him away. Another mortal-realm phrase he wasn’t familiar with. Jace chuckled and pulled him into his arms, his back to his chest. He pressed a kiss to his temple.

“One of the perks of staying at a brothel, I guess,” he said.

“*Perk* isn’t exactly the term I’d use. Still, I’m thinking of trying it out,” Cyrus said, running a hand over his smooth-shaven jaw as he considered.

“Really?” Of course he was. The Messenger was exhausted and probably aching. A soak in the warm water would do him good. Jace should have thought to suggest it himself. “I’ll get it started for you.”

They had a few minutes of fun exploring the vanity drawers, looking for bubble baths and soaps. They found those. Along with razors and waxing strips—and an impressive array of enemas and douches.

*Nice touch*, Jace thought, making a mental note for later.

When he turned back around, the Messenger was already taking off his clothes. Jace froze, watching. Somehow Cyrus made the simple act of stripping look like art. A ballet. Equal parts elegant and athletic. Jace meant every word he’d said back at Nova about how beautiful Cyrus was. The Messenger was a little thinner than he remembered—he must have lost some weight under Xavier’s care. But that only emphasized the tightness of his abs, the ropes of muscle in his arms and legs, and the V-shaped cleft where his hips met his thighs.

Fuck, Jace wanted to touch him there—everywhere, really—but there in particular. They'd been too rushed, too desperate, to do more than make each other come as quickly as possible when they'd met at Cyrus's suite.

He intended to correct that now.

"You don't have to stand here and watch over me," Cyrus told him as he stepped into the tub. He wobbled, weak and slightly off balance, then settled back against one of the curved walls. "I'm not a child. I'm just ... recovering."

"I'm not going to stand here and watch you like you're a child." Jace pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor. "I'm going to join you."

Cyrus's eyes widened as Jace unzipped his fly. Jace hooked his thumbs on the waist of his jeans and took them, along with his underwear, to the floor in one swift motion. His cock, already hard and leaking, bobbed against his thighs. Cyrus stared at it the way Dev had stared at the oysters over dinner—only, he looked twice as hungry.

"If that's okay?" Jace added.

Cyrus scooted forward in the tub to make space for Jace behind him. Then, he glanced over his shoulder with feigned reluctance and gave an exaggerated sigh. "I suppose there's room." The corners of his mouth curled into a smile. The perfect punctuation to end his sentence.

Jace chuckled as he kicked off his jeans the rest of the way, then peeled off his socks. He'd missed Cyrus's sense of humor. The unexpected pops of sarcasm. The way his whole face brightened when he smiled. The warmth of his laughter, like a sweater on a cold day. How was it possible that hours ago, he'd been inconsolable, and now, here he was, his heart bursting with hope and affection for the male in front of him?

It only took a moment for Jace to slip into the bathtub behind Cyrus, his legs parted. Almost immediately, the Messenger settled back against him. That perfect, toned ass of his pressed mercilessly against Jace's erection. Such delicious torment.

“Is the water warm enough?”

“Yeah.” Cyrus reached for the washcloth and bar of soap he’d placed at the edge of the tub.

Like everything else in the room, the soap was suggestive in shape. Jace thought it was meant to resemble female anatomy, but he couldn’t be quite sure. That had never been his area of expertise.

“Here, let me do that,” Jace offered.

Cyrus craned his neck to glare at him, brow raised. The accusation that Jace was treating him like a child again was on the tip of his tongue.

“No way. I insist.” Jace shook his head as he took the soap and cloth from him. “Xavier got to pamper you for weeks. I’m only asking for one night.”

Cyrus scoffed. “It was hardly pampering. You’re already much better at this than he was. Your tub-side manner, for one thing, is vastly superior.” Leaning forward, he offered his back to Jace for washing.

Jace’s eyes watered as he stared at the raised, reddish lines of the Messenger’s newly turned rune. Even after weeks of healing, the harp-like curve still looked raw and painful. He swallowed hard, trying not to show how much it saddened him, but his hand trembled anyway as he gently brushed the washcloth over the inflamed sigil.

“Tell me if I hurt you, and I’ll stop.”

“You could never hurt me ... not in any of the ways that matter.”

That was a daydream. Beautiful in theory but a lie. Jace could—and *had*—hurt Cyrus. That the Messenger had been left behind in Vegas without him was proof of that. It was only his good fortune that Cyrus didn’t see it the same way.

“You’ll never hurt like this again if I can help it.” Jace pressed a light kiss to the wound. When Cyrus shivered, he kissed him again. And again. Until the entire rune had felt the weight of his lips. “Is it all right that I did that?”

Cyrus's voice was husky. "You can kiss me anywhere you like."

Grinning, Jace pulled the Messenger back against his chest, wrapping his arms around him. "Is that a fact?" he whispered against his ear.

A smile played at the corners of Cyrus's lips. He rested his head against the Watcher's shoulder. "You never have to ask, either."

"That's too good to be true. You're going to have to prove it." Abandoning the washcloth, Jace ran his hand down the side of Cyrus's chest, teasing a ticklish spot he knew was there, below his armpit. "Would you let me kiss you here?"

Cyrus twitched. He tried to suppress a giggle as he squirmed under Jace's hand. "I suppose."

"How about here?" Jace continued to explore the Messenger's abs and arms, repeating the question while reacquainting himself with the body he'd gotten to know so well before leaving Las Vegas.

Then, he moved lower. He grazed over Cyrus's inner thigh, brushing over a dusting of fair hair and around a curve of muscle before stopping by his sac. "What about here?"

Cyrus's breathing quickened. His cock twitched with interest. He managed to squeak out a meek "yes."

"And here?" Jace ran a fingertip over the strip of his skin behind his balls, pressing lightly to stimulate the bundle of nerves inside, before working his way between Cyrus's ass cheeks. Dragging his lips down the side of Cyrus's neck, he rubbed a circle around his hole. "What about here?" he whispered against his damp skin.

A moan slipped from Cyrus's lips. "That would be all right with me."

Jace breached the ring of muscle then, slowly working in a digit. "This all right, too?"

Cyrus whimpered. It was the only response he seemed able to manage.



He'd take that as a yes.

Jace crooked his finger, finding the Messenger's prostate and working it from the inside now. He stayed there, pumping in and out of Cyrus's hole, stroking that sensitive spot while Cyrus groaned. Fucking hell, what he wouldn't give for that finger to be his cock instead. But the Messenger was still injured; penetrative sex was probably not on his agenda ... even if he had stared at his cock like it was a mouthwatering delicacy a moment ago. Jace could be patient.

It wasn't easy. But he could.

"What if I wanted to kiss you here?" Jace brought his other hand to Cyrus's sac and tugged lightly, rolling the balls over his fingers. The weight of another man's sac in his hand always turned Jace on. The pulsing heat of it. The delicateness of the skin. The way it filled his palm. His own cock throbbed as he held the Messenger there.

"Mmm ..." Cyrus's lower lip was caught between his teeth, and his sandy blond lashes fluttered closed—so pretty against his cheeks. His hips bucked up, trying to fuck into anything possible but finding no relief. "Jace ... please."

Jace couldn't let him suffer.

The Messenger's cock was as hard as celestial steel against his stomach. Jace wrapped his hand around the shaft, and the member pulsed against his palm, practically vibrating. So desperate. So full of need.

"I want you just as much," Jace whispered against Cyrus's ear. He kissed behind his earlobe, nuzzling against his hairline. He began to work his fist up and down the Messenger's cock with one hand while pumping his finger in and out of his channel with the other.

This was serious now. All pretense of the game they'd been playing a moment ago melted away beneath the heat of their touch. Cyrus moaned. He thrust against his palm, seeking Jace's strokes, chasing his orgasm in earnest. Then, he ground his ass against Jace's other hand, eager to ignite that extra spark inside him.

“Is this how you’d ride my cock if I were inside you?” Jace asked.

Cyrus gulped his next breath and caught his bottom lip between his lip as he shook his head. It thrilled Jace to see him like this: uninhibited, untamed, incapable of feeling self-conscious. He was so immersed in touch he’d lost all other senses, even—and especially—speech.

Jace had once told Cyrus he fucked like a back-alley demon prostitute.

It was still true. Especially since they were now in a brothel.

“No? Then show me,” Jace urged him. “Ride my hand like you would my cock.”

The Messenger clenched around him in response, squeezing and rocking wildly. He clutched the edge of the tub, gaining purchase. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the tile.

“Yesss. Perfect. That’s it, Cy.” Jace jerked him faster. He fingered him relentlessly, stroking that spot over and over again. “So gorgeous. So hot.”

The bathwater frothed around them, churning like whitewater rapids. One of the waves they made crashed over the side of the tub. Then another. The clothes Cyrus had neatly folded and placed on the edge fell to the floor. Jace’s abandoned socks were sodden.

They were making a proper mess of the bathroom. Everything dirty and delightful at the same time. And yet Jace had the sneaking suspicion this was likely one of the more innocent things that had ever taken place inside the heart-shaped tub.

His dick twitched again at the idea of such debauchery—at the thought of all the other rooms at Kur Club where demons and celestials exactly like them were also getting off. They didn’t need the Pleasure Room. They were surrounded by pleasure rooms and in one themselves.

“Close ... so close ...”

Cyrus said the words, but Jace already knew. He felt them, saw them, heard them. He ground himself against Cyrus's ass as they moved together. Fuck, he was so hard. After so many weeks with just his hand for company, it took great self-control to keep himself from rutting against the Messenger until his cream joined the bubbles in their bath. But Cyrus came first. He had to come first. He had earned it.

“Oh, fuck!” Cyrus tossed his head back and let out a sob, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. Jace latched his lips onto the morsel, swirling his tongue around it before sucking on and kissing it. This was the only oyster he wanted.

The Messenger arched against Jace's chest. By the foot of the tub, his toes poked out of the water and curled against the tile. He trembled, panting through his orgasm. Jace moved his hands in a frenzy, milking each drop of precious cum from him that he could, finding his prostate one last time.

Then, he was coming himself. Untouched, the friction of Cyrus's body against his cock enough to carry him to completion. Jace gasped and closed his eyes, drawing one ragged breath after another. He dropped his head to Cyrus's back, his cheek resting on his rune. For just a minute, there was nothing but heatwaves and racing hearts and miles and miles of Cyrus's soft, creamy skin pressed against his own.

Finally, Cyrus relaxed against him. He craned his neck to press a kiss to Jace's jaw and grinned. “Infinitely better tub-side manner.”



## CYRUS

Lynx had a reputation around Nova: shrewd, tough, and an aggressive defender of demons and Watchers. If the whispers were to be believed, he was also this side of psychotic. He had seen some shit in his time, and that shit had made him reckless, unpredictable. Erratic was a nice way of putting it. Lynx could go from breaking someone's kneecaps to handing them a cigar the way some cars went from zero to sixty.

Which was why Cyrus was surprised to see such a well-dressed, slick-haired, fashionable man accompanying Dev and Hesper into their room at Kur Club. He wasn't expecting someone so ... put together.

"We'll deal with you breaking the terms of your banishment later, Jericho," he told the Watcher bluntly.

"Jace—"

Lynx snorted and rolled his strikingly green eyes. He flexed his fingers, the knuckles popping ominously beneath his "love" and "hate" tattoos. "Don't start with that bullshit again. We use our *real* names here. Grow a set and face who you truly are."

Jace scowled but didn't argue. Impressive. Lynx was almost as good at making Jace cower as Hesper. Cyrus thought he shouldn't be nearly as amused by this as he was, but he couldn't help it.

The leader of the Watchers' underground army reclined in a chair and crossed one leg over the other like a prince in his

palace—which, Cyrus realized, he practically was. Unofficially or not, Nocturna was his domain. Then, Lynx pulled a cigar from the interior breast pocket of his pinstriped suit and lit it.

“What I really want to know about,” he said, exhaling a curl of smoke, “is this document Dev tells me your boyfriend found.” Lynx’s eyes shifted to Cyrus then. There was something predatory about his stare, a big cat lurking in his angel’s face. “Ah, the boyfriend. The one who can be trusted.”

“Cyrus,” Jace grunted.

Lynx gave him a glare.

“Since you’re so interested in names,” Jace clarified, smirking.

A sharp laugh burst from Lynx’s chest. “You’re one of my favorites, Jericho, you know that, right?”

“I fucking better be,” the blue-eyed Watcher mumbled.

Time to pivot. Cyrus cleared his throat. “The document’s there, on the bureau.”

He pointed to it, watched Lynx reach over to pick it up, then retold the story of how he’d found it in Xavier’s suite. By the time he was done, he wasn’t sure which side of the Lynx-shaped coin he’d ended up on: broken kneecaps or nicotine. The Watcher simply stared at him. A fixed, unnerving glare.

Cyrus began losing hope for his kneecaps.

“I can’t pretend I’m not disappointed to see this,” Lynx finally said.

Shit. Bodily harm was definitely on the table.

“If the inferences we might make from this evidence prove to be true, Astra will need to be held accountable,” the Watcher continued. “Not just by the courts of Themis but by us, the Watchers and demons.”

“Do you really think she’s up to something, then?” Hesper asked.

“I don’t, though I cannot explain this paper, either.”

Cyrus sucked in a breath. The room fell so quiet there were only the faint moans of someone at work in another room down the hall.

A bit distracting, really.

“I’ve known Astra for quite some time. We’ve had our differences—and we certainly didn’t get off on the right foot,” Lynx explained.

“Why not?” Hesper asked.

“Because she tried to kill me.” He took a long, slow drag on his cigar, letting his words sink in.

They weren’t exactly a glowing recommendation.

“But we’ve come a long way since then. She’s proven herself to me, and now I trust her wholeheartedly,” he finally added. “Which is exactly why I took the liberty of asking her to meet us here today—so she can prove her innocence. And so we can get to the bottom of whatever is *really* going on.”

As if on cue, there was a soft knock at the door to the room. Lynx clenched his cigar between his teeth, pulled an expensive-looking pocket watch from his suit, then flicked it open.

“She’s almost on time, too,” he said as he rose to answer.

The chancellor began speaking as soon as he opened the door. “Lynx, I’m truly afraid I can’t stay long. There are problems with the contractor rebuilding the Strip, and my jubilee planner insists on meeting with me this afternoon, but I was so concerned when I got your message—”

As Astra stepped into the room and let her hood fall to her shoulders, her gaze fell on Cyrus, standing by the bed. She stopped short, and her eyes grew misty. Cyrus stiffened. It was strange seeing her again. Unlike Lynx, he wasn’t so certain of her innocence. He didn’t know how to feel or act, or know what to say.

But then, as quickly as his confidence in her had been shaken, it was restored. Astra crossed toward him, practically floating, her arms extended. She held his face in both her

hands and stood on tiptoe to brush a maternal kiss against his forehead. “Cyrus, you’re alive!”

At least one mystery was solved: Astra had no idea Xavier had been keeping him in his suite. That meant there had been no plans in progress for them to return to Themis, either. And if Xavier had lied about these things, maybe Lynx was right to trust her so much.

Cyrus felt foolish for having doubted her. Xavier was a liar, yet he’d been right about one thing: Cyrus hadn’t been thinking straight since the attack. But it hadn’t been the delirium that had made him suspicious and bitter. It had been Xavier himself—being cooped up in the general’s suite, alone and dependent on his care. It was as though a part of Cyrus knew all along that he’d been a prisoner.

“Xavier found me ... Then he ...” Cyrus began to explain what had happened, then quickly gave up. He simply sighed and squeezed Astra’s hands in return. “It’s complicated, and it doesn’t matter anymore. I left.”

She nodded sympathetically, understanding well enough. “Xavier was acting so strangely—unexpected absences from work, dodging phone calls, deferring to others on decisions. It was all very unlike him. I could tell he was hiding something, just not what. I’ve been beside myself with worry for you. I am sorry you suffered because of him—but not that you live.”

Stepping back, the chancellor turned to Jace next. “And Watcher Jericho ... Why am I not surprised to see celestial walls could not keep you away?” Astra grasped his and Cyrus’s hands, then drew them together inside both of her own with a knowing grin.

Behind her, Lynx snorted. “For someone short on time, you’re certainly wasting a lot of it.”

Astra laughed and released Cyrus and Jace from her grasp. “Troubles with Adrian souring your mood, Lynx?”

“My sex life is fine. A brand new celestial shitshow is what’s souring my mood, Astra.”

She raised her brows. “Oh?”



“Did you bring the document as I asked?”

She pulled a neatly kept envelope from one of the pockets in her gown. “Well, yes, but what is this about? You were terribly vague on the phone.”

Lynx brandished his cigar about like a sword, motioning for Dev to take the envelope from the chancellor. The demon crossed the room swiftly. In seconds, he’d taken the envelope from Astra’s hand, removed the document inside, and had it spread across the bureau beside the paper from Xavier’s suite. With a small, cylindrical magnifying glass pressed against his eye, he glanced between the two, comparing the seals at the top of both pages.

Of course. Dev was a forger. The best in the business. If anyone could detect fraud between the two pages, it was him.

“What’s your assessment, Devlin?” Lynx asked.

Astra brought a hand to her collar as if clutching at a nonexistent set of pearls. “What is happening, Lynx? What is going on?”

Another few seconds passed. Did anyone breathe? Cyrus couldn’t tell. It certainly didn’t seem so. Dev pulled the nearby lamp closer, setting the shade slightly askew. Then, finally, he lifted his head.

“It’s a fake,” he announced.

“What, exactly, is a fake?” Astra asked.

“Xavier’s document.”

“Look,” Dev said, nodding toward the paper the chancellor had brought. “This is an order for bronze handcuffs that we know Astra signed off on. This came from her office—and from her directly. We know it’s authentic.”

Everyone crowded around Dev, leaning over his shoulder, trying to see for themselves. Then, the demon pointed to a spot in the halo-and-scroll insignia at the top of the page.

“Notice this little swirl here?” Devlin grinned like he’d just cracked the code to some ancient hieroglyphics. “Xavier’s doesn’t have it.”

It took a second of squinting, but Cyrus saw. The mark was missing. The two documents were not identical.

“And that’s not all.” Dev rubbed each paper between his index finger and thumb. “These papers are different weights and textures. Xavier’s is cheaper.” He seemed to bounce up and down a bit, gleeful, at that part. “And the colors are slightly off. You can see it in the blues.”

Beside him, Lynx swore under his breath. Astra looked around, confused. And Jace and Hesper exchanged the same wild eyes and aghast expressions Cyrus had come to realize meant some injustice was happening.

None of them disputed that Dev was right.

A pang of guilt caught in Cyrus’s chest. He had doubted the chancellor. The chancellor who had been kind to him, welcomed him, and helped him and Jace whenever she could. But this had all been another one of Xavier’s ploys, executed so perfectly. He’d even alluded to Astra being involved with questionable activities when they’d fought yesterday.

Lies. Just another web of lies. And even knowing better, Cyrus had fallen for it. Again.

Would he ever learn?

“Thank you, Dev. You truly have the sharp eye I always heard you did,” Astra told the demon. “But why is this comparison necessary? Where did this other paper come from?”

Dev took a deep breath and looked at Lynx, who nodded. Some sort of permission was granted. “We suggest you sit down for this, chancellor.”

Astra lowered herself to sit on the edge of the bed while they told her about Xavier’s folder. For the first time since he’d met her, she seemed small—small and still shrinking. Vulnerable and sad.

“I knew Xavier had somehow managed to get weapons with celestial modifications to the mortals. I just couldn’t figure out how,” she mused. “Now, I know.”

She'd used similar words when Cyrus had brought the bullet casing to her weeks ago. Further proof of her innocence.

“He’s so desperate to win the war, he’ll use any measures,” she added, shaking her head.

Something had been bothering Cyrus all night. Ever since Dev mentioned the possibility of Astra being ousted and Xavier taking over as chancellor. He hadn’t fully realized what it was until right now, hearing Astra speak for herself.

“No,” Cyrus said abruptly. “This isn’t about the war. This isn’t about a vendetta against demons or Watchers—or him wanting to go back to Themis.”

Lynx raised his brows, skeptical, but the more Cyrus spoke, the more certain he felt. He moistened his lips and stood taller. The truth was, he *had* learned about Xavier in all their history together. He’d learned exactly what they needed to know right now.

“Yes, he wants to win, but not in the way you’re thinking, Astra.”

The chancellor looked up at him. Her gaze was sharper this time, and her presence was back. Equal parts captivating and creepy. Was that hope in her eyes?

“This is about him wanting power. *Your* power, chancellor.” The back of Cyrus’s neck tingled. “I think ... I think he’s trying to destroy you and become chancellor himself.”

It all fit. Xavier was never content with his station but always working toward something more, something greater. And yesterday, he’d practically confessed he was aiming for the chancellorship himself.

*She might not be in a position to protect you much longer,* he’d said.

Xavier wasn’t trying to blackmail Astra or report her to Themis, the way Cyrus had assumed. He was going to take her role by force. Using humans to do it.

“I know him, chancellor. I probably know him better than anyone else in all the realms. He doesn’t care about hurting people to get what he wants.” Cyrus swallowed hard. “That includes mortals ... and you. I’ve been hurt by him before myself.”

He glanced at Jace then, remembering their words last night in the bath. When they’d said they’d never hurt each other, what they really meant was *I love you*.

The Watcher gave him a warm smile, everything understood.

“It’s so fucking obvious ...” Across the room, Lynx cracked his knuckles again. Cyrus had heard he’d earned his first fortune many years ago as a demonic martial arts fighter. Knocking someone out still seemed his most basic instinct, and he looked as though Xavier was next on his list. “We’ve all heard rumors about what Xavier is capable of doing. This is more of the same.”

“I agree.” Astra stood up. She was more than a commanding presence; she was more than a force of nature. She was a newly formed star right here in the room. Alive and bright, pulsing with energy, her eyes shining. “You’re right, Cyrus. You *must* be right. It’s what makes the most sense. Xavier’s been taking shots at me for decades, since I took office from Nash, my predecessor.”

Lynx grumbled to himself again at the mention of the last chancellor. Louder and more clearly, he added for the group’s benefit, “I don’t know about you, but I’m thinking it’s about time karma caught up to that fucking bastard.”

Astra nodded. “We might have had peace among celestial kinds years ago if not for him. I shudder at the thought.” She worked her hands against each other, folding one over the other as she paced the room, thinking. “There is so much on his side. The ammunition, the humans—they’ll follow him.”

“Most of the Messenger soldiers will, too,” Lynx reminded her. “They fear him. They won’t risk standing up to him.”

The chancellor frowned, disappointed.

“I’m sorry, Astra, but you know I’m right.”

“Of course. It’s true,” she agreed. “Their loyalty is to him \_\_\_”

“Maybe not,” Cyrus interrupted, remembering the bickering in the alley the night of his attack. Leo had gone against Xavier’s orders to leave Cyrus alone. His anger had outweighed his fear of their commander, and he’d convinced other Messengers to follow.

“There’s dissent,” Cyrus continued as the others gaped at him. “Xavier’s still powerful—but not as much as he used to be. The soldiers are more loyal to his ideals and him. I heard them say he’s lost his way before they turned my rune.”

Lynx’s eyes gleamed with interest. “A splinter cell ... that’s encouraging.”

“Yes, but is it enough?” the chancellor countered. “My diplomatic entourage is poorly trained in combat. They have brilliant minds and caring hearts, but they work with their pens rather than their swords. They cannot fight against his soldiers.”

“You won’t be alone. The Watchers will stand with you,” Lynx assured her. “You have always been good to us and the demons, even when it’s been unpopular.”

Astra sighed with relief, her spirits having risen again. Managing a meager smile, she reached for his hand and squeezed it in both of hers. “Thank you, Lynx. That means everything to me. I have always valued our friendship.”

“As have I.” He set his cigar aside, then reached for his phone from inside his suitcoat. “I’ll have my assistant, Izarra, begin making arrangements immediately.”

While he stood and crossed the room for privacy, Hesper stepped forward.

“But we don’t know enough yet to act,” she said, waving her hands about dramatically as she talked. “We don’t know when or where Xavier will strike. How can we possibly mobilize against him? He’ll see us coming a mile away. His soldiers might not be Watchers, but they aren’t blind, either.

It'll be hard to hide a few hundred gray, flapping wings in the sky. We're not exactly the subtle sort."

Jace's mouth twitched up in one corner. "What's this 'we' business? I thought you were laying low. Like Caz. Didn't want to get involved."

She smirked. "Things change. Caz is dead. I became a part of this the second Eris attacked him."

Eris. Cyrus hadn't thought of his dead cousin since his rune was turned. But Hesper was right. Eris had been flawed, imperfect. She'd followed Xavier blindly. He'd taken advantage of her eagerness to advance, and it had gotten her killed. Cyrus preferred to remember her differently, though—and better. He wanted to remember her as the do-gooder little girl, the one who followed the rules to a fault and looked after him and her sister. Cyrus would carry her name in his heart into any fight against the general—to avenge the Eris he knew back then.

Just like Hesper and Jace would do for Cassian.

"Look, we don't have all the answers yet," Dev said. He still held his magnifying glass in hand and rubbed at the lens with this sleeve, polishing it up. "But we've sorted out so much already. How hard can the rest of it be? Especially once we get Izarra on the case. Her backchannels, man." He shook his head slowly and whistled as though impressed. "She's never let us down before."

In the far corner of the room, Lynx was arguing with whoever was on the other end of the line—with Izarra herself, presumably. The Watcher pinched at the bridge of his nose and let out a sigh. Thoroughly exasperated.

"Yes, I promise," Lynx huffed into the mouthpiece. "Extra vacation time. All that you want. Name the number of days."

Cyrus couldn't tell who was winning or losing the argument. At the moment, his money was on Izarra. If she fought for the intelligence they needed the way she fought Lynx, they might have a shot at defeating Xavier after all.

Dev chuckled and shrugged. “Don’t worry, she’ll take the assignment. She lives for this. She just likes to bust his balls. And get extra time off. She’s got grandkids now, you know.”

At last, Lynx ended his call. He stood still for a moment, facing the wall, shaking his head at the ceiling as though trying to calm himself. Then, he turned.

“Well?” Dev asked.

Lynx startled. A strand of hair slipped loose from his tawny pompadour. “Izarra’s on it. She’s alerting the network, advising everyone to proceed with caution, and reaching out to her contacts on the Messenger side to confirm our suspicions.”

“Excellent! Very helpful, Lynx. And please do extend my gratitude to Izarra as well.” For someone whose leadership—if not life—was in jeopardy, Astra seemed a bit too cheerful. She clasped her hands and started on another turn around the room, a grin on her face.

“Everything is falling into place already,” she said to no one in particular.

Maybe the Messenger rumor mill had gotten it wrong about Lynx. Maybe Astra was the more erratic one.

“There’s one problem, chancellor,” Lynx interrupted.

She lifted her head. “Oh? And what is that?”

“Xavier and his soldiers still outnumber us—and that’s *before* the human police are counted. We need more help.”

Astra nodded, then smiled again. This time, the dreamy optimism in her eyes was replaced with cunning. “Of course we do. We’ll use my secret weapon.”





## CYRUS

When Astra had mentioned she had a secret weapon against Xavier, Cyrus had pictured a well-crafted sword. Or an unusual celestial power. Or another sneaky, little-known law she could use to hurt him on the back end—as she had with Jace and his banishment.

He did not expect her secret weapon to be demons from Arizona.

And yet that was exactly what—or, rather, *who*—it was.

They arrived the next afternoon, pulling up to Kur Club in a handful of pickup trucks much like the one Dev and Hesper had driven. There were at least a dozen of them, along with a human and a couple of Watchers. The entire VIP section of the brothel was closed off to house them. The second they walked up the stairs, the place took on a strangely fun, frat house-like air.

Cyrus stood with Jace outside their room, looking on as the Watcher greeted the newcomers like old friends. Hugs. Handshakes. Pats on the back. Inside jokes—something about a broken nose. Cyrus wasn't sure what had happened, but it made Jace happy to see them. And that made him happy, too.

“Jace, my man!” a heavily tattooed demon, his horns brazenly on display, said as he assaulted Jace's hand with some overly complicated-looking, far-too-alpha fist bump. “Thought you'd pull some stunt to get out of paying for the drinks you owe me, huh? Don't think you're getting away with it.”

Jace laughed. “Fuck you, Tal. Try checking your room first. There might be a fifth of something sweet in your nightstand drawer already. Lola snuck it up from the lounge for me this morning when we found out you were coming.”

“Right on.” There was that hand gesture again. “You better stop by later. We’ll catch up.” The demon’s gaze shifted to Cyrus then, and he nodded slowly, a knowing grin spreading across his face. “The famous Cyrus. Good to meet you, bro. You swing by, too. I’ll tell you stories about the fuckery this one—” He nudged Jace in the ribs. “—Got up to in Tucson. We’ll get you inked up while we’re at it.”

The demon wandered off to harass one of the others then. Cyrus turned to Jace, brows raised. “Inked up?”

Jace shrugged. “Talon’s the one who did my scorpion.”

He flexed his forearm, and the tattoo Cyrus had noticed last night in the bathtub moved. The insect almost looked alive, as if it was swinging its tail, getting ready to sting. It was impressive and deadly and sexy all at the same time. Cyrus rather liked it.

“Don’t worry,” Jace added. “Tal’s pretty harmless. All talk ... mostly. You don’t have to actually get a tattoo.”

Talon didn’t seem harmless. He seemed like the love child between a wrecking ball of testosterone and a collapsing star. Dangerous and ready to detonate. A lot like Xavier—but with a better sense of humor.

“I like him,” Cyrus said with a shrug. “And we’ll see about the tatt.”

Jace’s eyes widened. “Really? You’ll think about it?”

Cyrus didn’t get to answer. Two males brought up the rear of the group. One had tousled dark hair and a hoop piercing through the side of each nostril. The other was larger, bulkier, with a stern expression and silvery hair pulled back into a man-bun. When they reached the top of the stairs, the whole corridor went quiet.

“That’s Byron and Kai,” Jace whispered in Cyrus’s ear.

But the pair needed no introduction. Cyrus could have guessed who they were on their reputations alone.

“All right, everyone. Drop your bags in your rooms, then follow me,” Byron instructed. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“OH, BE CAREFUL WITH THAT!” Dolly—whom Cyrus had since learned owned Kur Club and operated it with Lola, her daughter—warned Byron as she scurried across the near-empty Pleasure Room.

There was a complicated history between them. Something about Dolly raising Byron but him also being Lynx’s nephew. There was a death or two in there, too. Jace tried to explain it all to him earlier, though Cyrus didn’t fully recall the details. The point was that Byron, Dev, Dolly, Lola, and Lynx were all like family. Kai, too. He and Byron were partners, both romantically and in business. Their business was more than simply running the ranch where Astra smuggled her favored celestial outcasts. It was also to train others in demonic martial arts. To make a secret army for her, away from Xavier’s prying eyes and influence.

They were her weapon. Fierce. Vicious. And loyal to Astra for saving their lives.

“Don’t worry, Ma,” Byron told her from over the arm of the sofa he and Jace were lifting. “We won’t hurt your precious furniture.” He flashed her a sweet smile, charming her the way only a son could.

Dolly placed her hands on her curvy hips. “It’s not the furniture I’m worried about. It’s *you*, honey,” she told him, half laughing, half scolding. Then, she picked up a box of candles and hurried out the door at the opposite end of the room.

Byron and Jace weren’t far behind her. Cyrus watched from where he stood, wiping down the windows, as they struggled to fit the sofa through the door. The problem wasn’t so much the weight of the piece as it was the awkwardness of the scroll-shaped armrest.

“Woah, hang on.” Cyrus rushed toward them and crouched to push the armrest through the entryway before it caught—for the third time—on the frame. Finally, they made it through.

Bryon turned his grin toward him now. “Hey, thanks. I never would’ve noticed that.”

Before they rounded the corner, Cyrus thought he heard Byron add, for Jace’s benefit, “Cy seems like a good guy.”

Warmth pooled in Cyrus’s chest as Jace grunted an affirmative reply.

With just a few more trips to the storage area in the basement, the Pleasure Room would be cleared, cleaned, and prepared for a new type of group activity: sparring, demonic martial arts style. Already, the rest of Kai and Byron’s crew were starting to file in for practice.

“Damn, so sad to see all the orgy furniture go,” Talon said. He gave an exaggerated sigh and threw a few half-hearted punches into the air to warm up. He was already slightly breathless from his own trips hauling furniture. “Wish we’d gotten here *yesterday*.”

“Settle down,” another demon—Corbin, Cyrus thought he was called—told him. “You get into enough trouble as it is.”

“I guess this is still a good room for a pounding, just a different kind. Right, Cy?” Talon gave him a suggestive wink.

*Harmless? Yeah, right.* Cyrus chuckled to himself as he wiped down the final corner of the window. Talon would learn soon enough that he and Jace didn’t share.

Byron and Jace returned a few minutes later. Then, Kai arrived. In seconds, the demon and Emissary had the rest of the group lined up and doing drills.

“It’s too much, Cy. Trust me,” Jace told him quietly as he moved off into position. “You’re not strong enough yet, and this stuff is hard.”

Not strong enough. It was the same excuse that had also landed Cyrus on cleanup duty, wiping down the windows while the others moved boxes and furniture. He shrank back

reluctantly. This was going to be the biggest stand against Xavier he'd ever seen, and he was sidelined.

Disappointed, he leaned against the wall, watching the way the demons and Watchers moved. Quick, jabbing punches followed by a high kick. It didn't seem so hard to him. Intense? Yes. But not hard. The moves were something he could learn if he wasn't still recovering from Leo's attack.

Maybe if he could show Jace his celestial powers were back, he'd be able to convince the Watcher he was healthy enough to learn. It would be a big ask, but it was worth a shot. He *had* to be part of this. After so many years of guilt, of hiding Xavier's secrets, he had to help him fall. He owed it to Eris and everyone else the general had ever hurt.

So, once again, Cyrus lifted his hand and focused, trying to draw the strength of the cosmos into his palm. His skin tingled, and his lifeline seemed to let off a hazy glow, but that was it.

*Damnit.* When were his fucking powers going to finally return?

"They don't let me fight, either." The only human in the group—a woman who'd been introduced to him as Nina—approached and leaned against the wall beside him. "Mortals are too fragile. Kai's rule."

Startled, Cyrus lowered his hand. He shoved it in his pocket, hiding the evidence of his failure like a misbehaving child. "I'd normally be with them, I'm just injured—"

"I know. I heard," Nina assured him with a kind smile. Her gaze drifted out across the room then, toward Corbin, and she sighed. "It's going to be hard sitting around knowing Corbin's putting himself in danger, and I can't at least be there beside him."

"What are you going to do when he's off fighting?" Cyrus asked.

Nina shrugged. "He'll want me to be someplace else. Someplace safe. But I don't know how I'll be able to stand it, not knowing if he's okay." She looked up at him again. "It

must be killing you, too. Especially after just getting Jace back.”

Cyrus supposed her words were intended to make him feel better, less isolated, but they were more depressing than anything else. He was annoyed enough about being left out; he hadn't thought as far as out as what it would be like to lose Jace again. He didn't *want* to think of that, either.

“Maybe we can wait out the fight, whenever it happens, together?” Nina asked. “It'll be less lonely that way.”

“Sure.” The response was automatic, and as soon as Cyrus said it, he wished he hadn't. Not moving furniture or skipping demonic martial arts training was one thing, but letting Jace walk into a fight against the Messengers without him? Unacceptable. He had to find a way to be there, even if Jace didn't like it. Even if it went against Kai's rules.

Nina's eyes brightened. At least she seemed happier about her lot.

Shit. Had Cyrus just made a new human friend?

“By the way,” she added with a grin, “I heard what Tal said to you earlier—you know, the part about filling you in on the fuckery Jace got up to in Arizona without you?”

Cyrus nodded. He hadn't been worried. He trusted Jace ... though now he thought maybe he should've at least asked a question or two if Talon had been involved.

“Don't pay attention to whatever Tal says,” Nina continued. “Jace was a mess the whole time. He missed you so much.”

She looked over at the Watcher. Jace finished a series of punches, then glanced at Cyrus to see if he'd been watching. Wanting his approval. Cyrus gave him a quick thumbs-up, and a sparkle lit up the Watcher's eyes.

Nina laughed. “See? That angel there—he loves the shit out of you. Plain and simple as that.”

She patted him on the shoulder then. “I'm going to go check out the kitchen. I used to be a chef. Maybe I can rustle

us all up something a little heartier than oysters and fruit for dinner.”

As she walked away again, Cyrus returned to watching Jace. The fighters had broken off into pairs to begin sparring now. Jace moved to a nearby corner with Talon. Fists up, they stalked each other in a circle, staring each other down, waiting for the other to strike first. Nina’s words replayed in Cyrus’s mind.

*It’s going to be hard sitting around ... Especially after just getting Jace back.*

Fuck this. Cyrus was not a sidelines kind of guy.

He crossed toward them and tapped Jace on the shoulder. “Teach me something.”

Jace turned and stood straighter, though Talon kept his stance. Cyrus half wondered if the demon was contemplating throwing a sucker punch.

Frowning, the Watcher shook his head. “Cy ... No. I’m barely able to do this myself. You don’t know—”

“One thing.” Cyrus was more adamant this time. “A punch. I can handle a punch.”

Jace hesitated. He glanced at Talon. The demon dropped his fists and adjusted his pants. “It’s just a punch, bro,” he said. “I’ll show him myself if you won’t.”

Cyrus knew he liked Talon. Even if he was trouble.

Jace ran a hand through his hair and exhaled slowly. “Fine.” He turned to Talon. “But Cyrus hits. You don’t hit him back, got it?”

The demon tossed his head back with laughter. “I see how this goes—make the demon your punching bag. That’s gonna cost you more drinks.”

“You’re on,” Cyrus said before Jace could disagree.

Taking Jace’s spot opposite Talon, Cyrus drew a deep breath. The demon crouched, hands on his knees, bracing himself, and licked his lips.

“Come on, angel, hit me,” he taunted with a wicked grin.

Jace rolled his eyes, then stood beside Cyrus. Placing his arm around his shoulders, he molded his arm and fist to the right position. “The idea is to make quick jabs. Move fast. Sting hard and get the fuck out of there before he strikes back. Like a scorpion.”

Ah, the scorpion. Cyrus glanced at the tattoo on Jace’s forearm, finally able to understand its meaning. “Sting hard. Got it.”

He didn’t get it.

Jace had been right. This was more difficult—and tiring—than Cyrus had expected. He threw his first punch, and Talon dodged it. Easily. The demon’s head jerked left, and his arm made contact with Cyrus’s wrist, swiping him away.

He wasn’t even close.

“Nice try, angel, but you can do better.” Talon waved him forward again. “You’re this great warrior. I know you are. So hit me like you fucking mean it ... Hit me like I’m Xavier.”

A pulse of anger ignited in Cyrus’s bloodstream at the thought of his former partner. Of being Xavier’s captive. Of the way Leo’s attack had, if even indirectly, been his fault.

*Just because we’re not lovers anymore doesn’t mean we have to be enemies,* Xavier had once said.

Bullshit.

Cyrus swung again. And he missed again.

Panting, with sweat beading at his hairline, Cyrus glanced at Jace. He expected the Watcher to tell him he’d had enough, but Jace simply stroked the stubble on his jaw thoughtfully. Then, he wrapped his arm around Cyrus and adjusted his stance.

“This shoulder goes back,” he said as he moved Cyrus’s limbs around like clay. “And hold your fist up more.” He stepped back and surveyed his posture, then nodded as if admiring his handiwork. “There you go. Now, give him hell.”



Talon crouched. Cyrus thought of Xavier again. This time, he pictured the forged papers and Astra. He imagined the city under his control. And he remembered Eris. Eris, who would have been better off without his influence.

He threw another punch.

“Fucking hell!”

Cyrus’s hand stung. Had he just hit a brick wall or a demon’s face? He shook out his fist, trying to loosen up the tension. But that was nothing compared to Talon. The demon stumbled backward, landing on his ass. He massaged his jaw for a moment. Then, laughing, he wiped away a trickle of blood on the back of his hand and stood.

“Scorpion!” Talon cheered, raising his arms over his head and jumping up and down. It was as if he’d gotten a shot of adrenaline instead of a haymaker. “Hell yeah! That was incredible! Woo!”

Yes, Cyrus absolutely should’ve asked more questions about what had happened in Arizona.

Jace clasped Cyrus on the shoulders. Across the room, Byron clapped, while Kai jerked his head in an approving nod. But it was Astra’s praise that surprised him the most.

“Well done, Cyrus.”

She glided toward their corner. Her smile held the same coppery warmth as the hair flowing over her shoulders.

How long had she been standing in the entryway, watching them practice? Lynx trailed behind her, distracted, his cell phone practically attached to his ear. Neither of them had been around Kur Club much today. They were too busy—Lynx with making arrangements, Astra with trying to carry out her usual routine as though nothing was wrong. Against Lynx’s advice, she’d returned to her office at Nova, insisting Xavier would notice if she went missing. They couldn’t risk him growing suspicious and changing his plans.

Not that they knew his whole plan yet ... or were even any closer to figuring it out than they’d been a day ago.

“Thank you, chancellor,” Cyrus said. “It feels good to be moving around again.”

“I can imagine. Your color is better today, too,” she said. “Your health really is improving.” She glanced at Jace with a sly grin, as if to imply Cyrus’s wellbeing had something to do with their reunion.

Maybe it did. The awful inner voice that had been taunting Cyrus at Xavier’s suite had been silent since he’d left. That alone was progress.

“What do you think, chancellor? They’re impressive, aren’t they?” Kai asked as he and Byron came toward them.

Astra nodded graciously and beamed as she looked around the room. She even grinned at Talon. “Most impressive. We almost stand a chance.”

“Others are on their way.” Lynx hung up his phone. “Adrian’s been rounding up more of our numbers—a few of his friends, still hiding out in Chicago. It’s a good thing, too, because there’s been another complication.”

“And what is that?” Astra asked.

Lynx clenched his teeth. “Izarra has been able to confirm some of our suspicions. Her sources say Xavier’s initial plan was simply to send his forged documents to the courts of Themis and request your removal from office. A peaceful, if dishonorable, change of power.”

Astra clasped her hands and tilted her head. “If that’s what his plan *was*, what is it currently?”

Lynx glanced at Cyrus then and hesitated. “He knows Cyrus took that paper from his suite ... And now he’s worried we’ll act against him preemptively, so he’s accelerated his plan—and resorting to violence for good measure.”

Uneasiness gnawed at Cyrus from the inside. “I’m sorry, Astra—I never meant to make things worse.”

She touched his arm. “You have nothing to apologize for, Cyrus. Instead, I thank you. If you hadn’t found Xavier’s forgeries, we wouldn’t know anything about his true

intentions.” She looked up at Lynx. “And what are those intentions now, Lynx?”

“He’s attempting to have you assassinated, chancellor,” Lynx said. His knuckles rippled as he flared his fingers and cracked them one by one.

Astra’s face fell. “I see. That *is* a rather ... definitive ... solution, isn’t it?” She steepled her hands and brought them to her chin. “Do we know when he’ll try?”

“At your jubilee.”

“My jubilee,” Astra murmured, almost to herself at first. “It’s the perfect opportunity. Xavier’s in charge of arranging security. It’ll be easy for him. Stage a distraction. Position a Messenger guard. Wait for the right moment ...”

“Or use a human,” Lynx growled. “That’s what those modified weapons are for. A failsafe in his plot.”

Astra’s hands dropped to her sides again, and her eyes burned with disgust. “A mortal assassin. It’s his best cover. No one will suspect a human—not unless they know everything he’s been up to with arming them.”

A chill spiked up the back of Cyrus’s neck. He clapped his hand over it. He could almost see the scene playing out. A podium. Crowds. Astra speaking. And a too-trusting mortal armed with a rifle, firing celestial-steel bullets from a distant rooftop. The sniper would be gone before anyone ever found them, oblivious to the extent of the damage they’d done until it was far too late.

Cyrus almost felt sorry for the general’s recruit. In another place and time—and with a different type of weapon—it might have been him assigned to the task.

The plan was perfect. Bleak and bloody and almost foolproof.

Classic Xavier.

Beside him, Byron and Kai exchanged a determined glance, then a single nod.

“It won’t come to that, Astra,” the Emissary said, folding his arms over his broad chest. His voice was low and gravelly enough to be menacing without shouting. “Xavier won’t get anywhere near you. You have our word.”



## JACE

**T**hree days. They had just three *fucking* days to come up with a plan to bring Xavier down before he got to Astra first.

If that wasn't excuse enough to get wasted, Jace didn't know what was.

“What sort of plan do you think they're hatching up out there?” Talon asked. He hovered over the bureau in his room, prepping to start Cyrus's tattoo. The Messenger sat at the nearby desk, his shirt sleeve rolled up and arm outstretched. Waiting. He'd been cagey when Jace had asked what he was getting done. It was a surprise, he'd told him.

Jace had never really been one for surprises, but he was eager as fuck for this one.

He tossed another ice cube into his tumbler of whiskey and sat on the edge of the bed. Taking a sip of his drink, he thought about the group they'd left in the Pleasure Room when Nina had called them all for dinner. Lynx and Astra had stayed behind, along with Kai and Byron. And Adrian—a dark-haired Watcher with ruby-tipped wings—had shown up with Dolly just as the others were walking out. Within seconds, they were tacking maps of Nocturna to the wall and muttering something about moving the jubilee celebration here.

“It'll be something crazy if Adrian's involved,” Jace said.

Both Talon and Cyrus looked at him with question marks in their stares. “I'll bite. Who the fuck is Adrian?” the demon asked.

“Lynx’s partner.” Jace took another sip of his whiskey. “The two go way back—before the Culling, even. They worked together in Chicago for a while. I don’t know all the details. Lynx doesn’t talk about it much, but from everything I’ve heard, Adrian’s always been a badass. Now, he’s sort of like Lynx’s enforcer. When Lynx wants someone’s ass kicked, it’s usually Adrian who does it. No questions asked.”

Talon laughed. “Sounds like my kind of people.” He took a sip from his beer—it was early enough in the evening the demon was starting out lighter than usual, drink-wise. Then, he dropped into a chair across from Cyrus, wiped his forearm clean, and started to outline his tattoo.

At first, Cyrus winced as the needle drilled into his skin. But then he reached for his own glass of whiskey to wash down the pinch of pain. Jace grinned. The Messenger seemed to have developed a taste for the alcohol since he’d introduced him to it—that, or sentimentality drove him toward the bottle. Either way, it warmed something inside him to watch Cyrus with his drink.

Jace leaned forward, trying to sneak a peek as the tattoo began to take shape. No dice. He wished he was close enough to watch over Talon’s shoulder. But that would spoil the surprise, would it?

“It’s smart of them to move the jubilee location,” Cyrus said. “It’ll throw Xavier off. He’ll have to reconfigure everything he’s been working on.”

“Awww, poor baby.” Talon made a fake-pouting face, then smirked.

Jace snorted with laughter.

Cyrus seemed less amused. A line formed between his brows. “He’s going to be pissed off. More determined. Unpredictable. He’ll be even more dangerous than before.”

“We’ll have to plan for that, too, then.”

Jace turned to see Corbin standing in the open doorway, a bottle of beer in his hand. Most of the doors to the rooms in the brothel’s VIP wing were open, the crew from the ranch

milling around with drinks and music. Passing the time. Waiting for any news the others could share.

Inviting himself in, Corbin took a swig of his drink and leaned against the bureau. Cyrus nodded to agree with him. “Exactly,” the Messenger said.

Talon let out a long, slow whistle as he wiped away some of the excess ink on Cyrus’s forearm. “This is starting to sound like a taller and taller order by the minute.”

Corbin shook his head. “I don’t know about that. If Xavier’s losing his grip on the soldiers, we might stand a chance. Plus, we know the asshole has at least one major weakness.”

Everyone looked at the demon expectantly, and he laughed as if the answer should be obvious.

“I’m talking about Cyrus,” he clarified.

“Me?” Cyrus scoffed and sipped his whiskey again. “Not sure that’s still the case after I found his forgeries and ruined his plans.”

“Sure, it is,” Corbin told him. “Maybe he’s a little pissed off right now, but when the chips are down, he’s Team Cyrus all the way. He proved it when he pulled you out of that alley. You’re the reason his soldiers think he’s lost his way. Having you on our side is definitely an advantage.”

The idea of using Cyrus against Xavier—or involving the Messenger in the upcoming fight at all, given his health—made Jace’s insides crawl. But before he could say so, the conversation was already moving on.

“Let’s hope you’re right,” Cyrus, still seeming unconvinced, said with a shrug.

Corbin raised his beer bottle as if to toast to Cyrus’s words. Then, he leaned over Talon’s shoulder, sneaking a glance at the tattoo, and let out another laugh. “You’re going to like that when it’s done,” he told Jace. “Guaranteed.”

IT WAS PERFECT. Corbin had been right: Jace liked the tattoo.



All right, he loved it—perhaps was even a bit obsessed with it.

Part of that, though, had something to do with the fact that he'd had about one whiskey too many, the music was blaring in the hallway, and someone—Talon, he suspected—had paid for a few escorts to join their party in the VIP section.

“Let me see it again,” Jace whispered in Cyrus’s ear as he pinned him against the wall outside their room with his hips. They’d been doing this all evening: kissing and touching and grinding against each other during each stolen moment they could find. At this point, he was as horny as he was buzzed. “Please?”

Cyrus laughed. He raised his left arm, exposing the bare skin by the inside of his elbow. “Happy now? How many more times are you going to ask me to do this tonight? It’s more exhausting than demonic martial arts practice.”

Jace caught Cyrus’s raised hand in his own and pressed it against the wall, holding his arm by his head. He entwined their fingers as he admired the tattoo. The image was so realistic. Filled with burning reds. The tail that seemed to move. The stinger that threatened to strike. He was getting hard just looking at it, thinking about its meaning.

“It’s a masterpiece,” he said. He nuzzled Cyrus’s cheek, dragging his nose and stubbled jaw against his smooth skin. “I can’t get enough of it. I’ll never get enough of it.”

“It’s practically the same as yours.”

“I know. That’s the best part.” Jace pressed a kiss to the scorpion inked onto Cyrus’s skin. It was still healing, but this much touch wouldn’t harm it.

The tattoo was the mirror reflection of his own—Cyrus’s idea, Talon had told him. The Messenger hadn’t wanted to copy, but to complement, Jace’s. When they stood across from one another, their tattoos looked ready to strike from any angle. When they stood side by side, the images seemed to bookend their bodies, barring the way for anyone to separate them.

Life imitating art, and art imitating life. Exactly as they'd talked about by the bathtub.

Jace had never considered himself a connoisseur of paintings or sculptures, but he was very much a fan of this design.

Cyrus reached for him then, burying his hand in Jace's hair and tugging him closer until their lips met. He kissed Jace like he was trying to imprint the Watcher on his heart, not just his skin. He kissed him like he might not get the chance to tomorrow. Pushing off against the wall, he brought his other hand to Jace's waist and walked him back into their open room. Slowly. Carefully. Never breaking their kiss. Every nibble, suck, and sweep of his tongue was tinged with as much lust as whiskey.

He kicked the door closed behind them, shutting out the noise and prying eyes. "That's better now, don't you think?" he asked, drawing back just enough to catch his breath.

But Jace didn't give Cyrus long to recoup. Nodding, he pushed the Messenger against the door, pinning him there the same way he had outside in the hallway.

"Parties are overrated," Jace said before ducking his head and planting his lips to the underside of Cyrus's jaw, against that patch where his chin met his neck.

The Messenger groaned as Jace began to lick and kiss his way down to his collar. When he got there, he tugged Cyrus's shirt over his head before continuing his exploration across his shoulders and down to his smooth, bare pecs. He lowered himself to his knees, running his hands over Cyrus's torso along the way.

"Jericho ..."

His name was a whine on Cyrus's lips. Always such a pretty sound. Always so perfectly timed. Jace's cock throbbed to hear it. As he unbuttoned the Messenger's fly and tugged his jeans down his thighs, he glanced up at Cyrus, his eyes smoldering. Then, he brushed a row of kisses across his abs, left to right, exactly where his pants had hung a moment ago.

Cyrus squirmed. “It’s not enough that you’ve exhausted me. Are you going to torture me now, too?” He worked his hand into Jace’s hair again, holding tight but letting him stay in control.

Chuckling, Jace tipped his nose into the V-shaped line where the Messenger’s thigh met his hip and breathed in the scent of him. Musky and manly. Heavenly and his. He pressed a kiss on one side, then did the same to the other.

“Is it really torture if you’re enjoying it?” To remind Cyrus that he very much was, in fact, enjoying himself, Jace licked a bead of precum from his crown. The Messenger inhaled sharply, his head falling back against the door as he clutched at Jace’s hair.

Jace had made his point.

It was time to stop dicking around and just get to ... the dick. He placed a hand on Cyrus’s hip, holding him steady as he licked a line up the Messenger’s sac, then sucked one of his shorn balls against his mouth. Such soft skin, such warmth and earthiness beneath his tongue. He swept his tongue from side to side, then up and down, varying speed and pressure, before repeating the process all over again with the other.

The Messenger’s cock was next. Stiff as a steel arrow and leaking like a faucet. Grasping the base of Cyrus’s shaft, Jace lapped his way to the tip. He swirled his tongue over the slit, delighting in its saltiness. Then, cupping Cyrus’s sac in his hand, Jace wrapped his mouth around him. He took him deeper, inch by inch, until that hot, pulsing cock bobbed against the back of Jace’s throat.

Jace sucked him. Stroked him. Kissed him. He tugged the parcel in his palm until Cyrus was breathless and moaning, his eyes flickering closed, no longer able to watch. His fist tightened again in the Watcher’s hair.

Then, Jace popped off abruptly. Cyrus wouldn’t last long if he kept up this pace—and he wanted Cyrus to last. Not to torment him. Not to tease, either. But to fulfill.

The Messenger let out a disappointed gasp. “What’re you doing? I was about to—”

“I know.” Jace stood up, taking his hand and towing him toward the bed.

Cyrus kicked off his jeans, socks, and shoes along the way, then settled back against the pillows, watching while Jace stripped as well.

“I want you to come,” Jace told him. “But I want to do it with you.”

He climbed onto the bed, hovering over him, kissing his way from Cyrus’s navel to his collar. Finally, he straddled his waist. Cyrus’s cock brushed against his taint, the tip bumping against Jace’s sac, unintentionally teasing. A pang of desire shot through Jace’s groin.

Cyrus moistened his lips with his tongue and nodded up at him. He ran his hands along Jace’s thighs, the light hairs rippling over his muscles, then lifted his head to press their lips together.

The Messenger’s hands roamed over any over bare skin he could find as they kissed. Up the side of Jace’s ribs. Across his belly. Pinching his nipples. Before long, they were panting and sweating and writhing against each other with equal desperation.

“Inside me ...” Cyrus could barely manage the words between kisses and groans. “Inside ... now.”

Jace reached for the bottle of lube from the bedside table, but he didn’t slick himself up first. He warmed the oil in his hands and reached for Cyrus’s cock, still nudging his ass.

Cyrus’s brows wrinkled, and he sucked in his bottom lip as Jace worked his shaft. This wasn’t what he’d asked for, and it wasn’t what he expected—Jace could tell from the uncertainty written across his face. Inevitably, the Messenger had assumed they’d have sex the way they usually did: Jace would start with Cyrus’s hole. He’d work the Messenger open, then slick up his cock, bury himself inside Cyrus’s channel, and pound him until they were both drunk on cum and kisses.

Yet that wasn't Jace's plan. Instead, Jace stretched himself with his fingers, rising onto his knees so Cyrus could watch him pump his digits in and out of his own hole. Then, when he was ready, he sidled back on Cyrus's body and slowly seated himself on his cock.

The stretch burned. But it was bliss, and it was fucking beautiful.

"You don't have to—" Cyrus's voice was strangled by his own whimper as Jace bottomed out.

"I want this, Cy," Jace assured him.

Jace understood the confusion, the reluctance. They'd never fucked in this position before, and he had only bottomed for Cyrus once. The Messenger knew there was a reason why—and that it had something to do with Lucian, Jace's previous lover. But Jace hadn't been ready to talk about it, and Cyrus hadn't pried.

Tonight was no whim, though. Jace had thought this through. He'd showered and cleaned himself after dinner before going to Talon's room, using martial arts practice as an excuse. But that had only been a half-truth. It was this. This was his real reason.

A grin brightened Cyrus's face. He reached for the discarded bottle of lube by Jace's knee, then poured some in his palm. "Then I want it, too," he said as he wrapped his slicked-up fist around Jace's cock.

Giving his hips a tentative roll, Jace leaned down to kiss Cyrus again. The Messenger worked his cock in his hand lazily as Jace settled into a rhythm, trying to find an angle and pace that pleased them both. His grip was enough to keep Jace hard but not to make him come too soon.

"Take it ... Take whatever you want," Cyrus whispered.

Jace intended to. He shifted once more, going faster, and let out a groan as the Messenger's crown brushed against that sensitive spot inside him. He moved the same way again and again, growing increasingly feral. Fuck, it felt good to have

Cyrus beneath him like this—to be in control of their lovemaking while surrendering to him at the same time.

The old power Jace thought he'd lost—that Lucian had taken from him when he'd hurt and degraded him—was back. Coursing through his blood. Throbbing in his cock. Building at the base of his spine. It made him forget about the next three days, about the noise outside the door and the squeak of the bed beneath him.

There was only now. Him and Cyrus. Starry eyes and breathless moans.

Cyrus gripped Jace's hip with his spare hand, helping him maintain his balance, guiding him back over that favorite angle. He jerked Jace's cock faster, twisting his palm on the upstroke.

“I'm gonna—”

He already was.

Jace couldn't remember the last time he came so hard. His orgasm crashed through his body, rattling and ricocheting against his bones. His cock pulsed in Cyrus's hand, jets of cum dampening his chest. He whimpered and gasped, sagging against the Messenger and resting his head on his shoulder.

Cyrus took over. He fucked Jace from below, his hips thrusting in short, rapid bursts. He was close—and getting closer by the second.

“Fill me,” Jace told him. “Give me whatever you want.”

The Messenger's cock twitched. Then, he did exactly that.

“Is this going to be a new thing? We'll argue over who gets to fuck the other?” Cyrus teased after they'd both come and cleaned and were back on the bed, huddled beneath the covers. He hooked his arm around Jace's midsection as they laid on their sides, his chest to Jace's back.

Jace let out a laugh. “Maybe. At least it's a fun argument to have.”

“It really is.”

Lucian drifted through Jace’s thoughts again—his handsome face, the way he’d seemed charming at first, so sophisticated. Jace owed Cyrus more of an explanation than the hurried insistence he’d offered a few minutes ago, when he’d lowered himself onto the Messenger’s cock. He deserved the truth, and Jace deserved to heal.

“You know, after Lucian, I never wanted to have someone inside me again.” Jace took Cyrus’s hand draped over him and entwined their fingers. “You changed that, Cy. You make it good ... You make me feel like I *am* good, too.”

The Messenger’s body tensed against him. His breath on the back of Jace’s neck slowed. “Lucian didn’t?”

Jace shook his head. He stared at a spot on the wall, trying to block out the memories. He and Lucian met at a poker room—Jace didn’t play, but Cassian did, and it was fun to watch his antics. Lucian had been older and interesting, a collector of oddities who found beauty in the rare and unusual. Jace had been so sure he was *him*: his partner destined by the cosmos, someone he’d spend the rest of his life with, like Hesper had planned to do with Cassian.

But to Lucian, Jace was just another oddity—the last descendant of the first fallen celestial. If sex was a game and novelty the cards with which to play, then Jace was a royal flush.

“Lucian was always ... rough,” Jace said. There was more to it than that. There were the demon-horn sex toys and visits to Kur Club because Jace was, in time, never quite enough. But those darker details could wait. “He’d humiliate me, too. He’d tell me I was garbage and remind me that I was Jericho, the last of Stellan’s tainted bloodline. It wasn’t simple dirty talk in bed. When Lucian said it, he meant it. He got off on it.”

He sighed before continuing. “Caz beat the shit out of him when he found out. He brought me home. Back to live with him and Hesper. He carried me the whole fucking way on his back because I was too hurt to walk ... The next day, he got my stuff from Lucian’s, had my phone number changed, and

told me he never wanted to hear me say that asshole's name again.”

Cyrus let out his breath on a long, slow exhale and squeezed Jace's hand. “I'm glad you had Caz.”

“Me, too.” Jace gave a weak smile, remembering his friend. He fucking loved Cassian for everything but especially for his care during that time with Lucian. The demon had seen how unhappy Jace had been before he did. He'd saved him from his own, too-trusting heart.

“Did you love him?”

“Lucian? I thought I did ... But I guess it's not really love if all someone does is break your heart.”

“No, it's not.” Cyrus knew this all too well himself. Leaning closer, he brushed a sympathetic kiss against the Watcher's shoulder. “I'll love you, Jace. I'll love you until my end of days.”

Warmth flooded Jace's chest. His smile broadened, and he twisted in the Messenger's arms to look up at him. Burying a hand in his hair, he pulled Cyrus down for a kiss.

“You can't just say shit like that to me, Cy,” he told him.” You're going to make me love you, too.”





## JACE

“**Y**ou’re absolutely sure you want to do this?”

Cyrus’s sandy-blond head bobbed in a single, solemn nod. He barely looked up as he buckled his golden bracers over his arms. “This is as much my battle as anyone else’s. Maybe even more so.”

It didn’t matter how much the Messenger insisted. Jace wasn’t convinced this was a good idea—that *any* of this was a good idea, but especially the part about involving Cyrus. Corbin hadn’t been the only one to realize Cyrus was Xavier’s weakness; Lynx, Kai, and the others had, too. Cyrus had been glad for the chance to help. They would use him to bait Xavier—to catch the general’s attention, cause a disruption, and maybe even lure him out.

Jace didn’t like it. Cyrus still seemed too ... frail. And he tired so easily. Throwing a few strong punches at Talon in the Pleasure Room during practice was different from having the stamina to fight in an extended battle. But maybe Jace simply saw what he wanted—that was what Hesper said. And what Jace wanted was to make any excuse he could to keep Cyrus safe, alive, and away from Xavier. For him, the Messenger had died once before. The prospect of losing him a second time seemed even more unbearable than the first.

“Stop hovering over him like a mother hen,” Hesper hissed as she shoved Jace’s throwing knife belt at his gut. “It’s *not* sexy.” It was about the tenth time today she’d reminded him

that going out to face Xavier with the others was Cyrus's choice, not his.

"Said the world's foremost expert on hen pecking," he muttered.

Catching the belt on his wrist, Jace rubbed at his abs. He knew she was right. She didn't have to be so rough about it, though.

Hesper gave him a warning glare, then opened the lid to one of the caskets set up on the platform beside them. "Shut up and get in, *baby* brother."

Jace glanced at Cyrus a final time. He was the best and brightest thing in the dark and dirty tunnels beneath Sheol Street. So handsome in his tunic and traditional Messenger armor. The pieces weren't his own—Astra had gotten him a new uniform from the stockpile at Nova. But the bow and arrow propped against the mirror were his. The chancellor had managed to have one of her trusted assistants smuggle them from his locker at the hotel's arena.

His bracers secure, Cyrus picked up his weapon and slipped the bow sling over his shoulder. "What?" he asked, noticing the way Jace stared.

"Nothing. I just ..." Jace hesitated. There was so much he wanted to say.

*I just want you to be careful.*

*I just don't want to lose you.*

*I just love you.*

Any of those words would do.

But Jace couldn't say them. They were too overwhelming. Speaking them might make the worst come true, and that was more terrifying than anything Xavier might have in store.

So, he reached over to Cyrus instead and, burying a hand in his hair, kissed him. Those plush lips. The taste of mint. The slide of his tongue against his own. And that sweet, stifled moan ... On second thought, maybe neither of them should go.

Maybe they could just live down here forever, subsisting on rainwater and kisses.

Behind him, Hesper cleared her throat. It was almost time.

Jace drew back and touched his forehead to Cyrus's. "Promise me if shit hits the fan and things get really bad, you'll get the fuck away from here, right?"

"There's nowhere I want to go if you're not there, too." The Messenger's voice was huskier than usual.

"I mean it, Cy. Promise."

"Only if you do, too."

Jace nodded.

Finally, Cyrus agreed. "Go to the Stratosphere," he said. "If something happens, we'll meet there." He looked past Jace to his sister then. "You, too, Hesper. If we have to run, we run together."

"Okay." Hesper's eyes were glossier than usual, the violet glinting strangely. Was she about to cry? Stepping forward, she wound an arm around both their shoulders. "Take care of each other out there, will you?"

She wouldn't be in the heart of the action. She'd be guarding Nina at Lynx's penthouse in Nocturna Tower, per Corbin's request. Secretly, Jace had been relieved Hesper would be tucked away from the greatest danger. Keeping an eye on Cyrus was more than enough to keep him busy.

"All right." Hesper ran her index fingers under her eyes. Yeah, she was definitely about to cry. "You guys have someplace to be."

One more kiss. Just one more. Jace stole it—a quick peck—before Cyrus turned and settled down into his casket, his bow and arrow tucked beside him. Then, Jace did the same.

"Surprisingly comfortable," he said, half joking, as he stretched out on the silk-lined padding.

Hesper stared down at him as if he'd gone mad.

“Relax. I’m not suggesting you trade in your fancy pillowtop mattress or anything. It’s just surprising. That’s all. I get why humans use these. Sort of.”

“You can be really sick sometimes, Jace. You know that, right?”

From his neighboring coffin, Cyrus chuckled. “How do we look?” he asked Hesper, changing the subject.

Hesper’s grin was wry. “Pretty great for a pair of dead guys.”

THE CASKET MIGHT HAVE BEEN comfortable enough, but being alive in it, trapped beneath the lid while they were carried through the tunnels? Not so much. It was dark and hot and cramped, and Jace slammed his head against the lid at least three times. This was one part of the mortal lifecycle he was grateful celestials could avoid indefinitely. He hoped whoever carried Cyrus were being more careful.

“Hey, we’re not actually dead in here,” Jace called up through the wood panel above him.

Talon’s manic laugh answered. That explained a lot. The demon was as reckless with this task as he was with everything else. “Quit your complaining. We’re the ones who have to do all the work while you’re literally lying down on the job.”

That wasn’t quite the truth. But the debate would have to wait until later. The casket thudded to the floor—perhaps with a bit of retaliatory roughness. Jace stifled a groan and moved his hips as one of his throwing knives shifted, the handle digging painfully into his side.

Finally, the lid sprang open. Jace gulped down the fresh air descending upon him.

“Easy. We don’t want to break the coffins too early.” Astra’s voice preceded her luminous, copper-toned form hovering over the casket.

Jace couldn't see much—just the ceiling of the platform they were waiting beneath and the foreheads of a few passersby. Dev and Corbin were there, along with Talon and Astra. On the periphery, Jace saw the lid to Cyrus's casket pop open. He wished there was time for him to reach over and hold his hand. Just in case. Just to remind him how much he cared.

“This is some real Trojan horse-type shit, chancellor,” Talon said, nodding with approval. “Old school. I like it.”

Astra smiled. “Thank you, Tal. It was Adrian's idea. Xavier will never suspect it.”

A dark, elegantly shaved head bobbed into view. “Chancellor, it is time.”

“Thank you, Aurelia.”

The chancellor smoothed down the front of her tunic and unfurled her wings—pristine ivory tinged with gold, much like Cyrus's used to be. She gazed down at Jace first, then her fellow Messenger. “My gratitude to you both knows no bounds—”

“Places! Places, everyone!” Aurelia clapped her hands as she called out into the space.

The demons disappeared. Astra moved out of sight. Then, the platform was moving. Lifting. Gliding. Taking them up to street level. The earpieces that Hesper had outfitted Jace and Cyrus with before they'd left the tunnels beeped.

“The stars are shifting. Everyone on high alert,” Kai rumbled in his ear. He was coordinating the major activities from Kur Club's rooftop—the best vantage point to see all of Sheol Street. As their resident Emissary of death, it was also up to him to intervene if everything went too far sideways.

The ceiling above the platform parted, making way for them to emerge. Sunlight glared down at them. Then, the tops of the burnt and battered buildings along Sheol Street. Finally, the platform jolted to a stop. They were no longer simply on a platform; they were on stage.

“Gentlemales and gentlefemales, men and women, celestials, demons, and mortals ... I present the revered

Chancellor Astra of Themis.”

Applause drowned out Aurelia’s voice as it was broadcast over a speaker into the street. Somewhere beneath it all, a few boos hovered darkly.

Jace’s pulse jumped. They’d known there was discontent, especially among Xavier’s soldiers. This wasn’t surprising, even if it was disheartening.

Astra cleared her throat. “Fifty years ago, I arrived in Las Vegas for the first time. I found a city struggling under the weight of the celestial burden it was forced to carry. Demons were downtrodden. Watchers had been browbeaten into submission, and the Messengers had grown discouraged.

“Leadership was corrupt, and mortals were fearful. Together, we stood on the precipice of war and peace, hatred and acceptance. We were given a choice: to change, or to perpetuate the wounds that divided us.” She paused, drawing breath. There was silence. Then, she added, “We chose division.”

Gears turned as metal arms pushed the top of Jace’s casket upward, positioning it at an angle until it was nearly standing. On the other side of Astra’s podium, he knew Cyrus’s casket was also open, tilted and facing out.

“I stand here today not with false messages of hope and reassurance. Instead, I stand here with proof of how we have failed—failed each other and ourselves. This is not a celebration. It is a funeral.”

A series of gasps rippled over the crowd. When the chancellor’s office had announced the last-minute change to the location for her jubilee parade—from the northern part of the Strip to war-torn Sheol Street—there had been confusion enough. Now, pandemonium was brewing. Whatever attendees had been expecting the chancellor to say or do to celebrate her anniversary in office, it was certainly not this.

Astra simply raised her voice over their heckling, serene and strong as usual. “Many of you knew, or had at least heard

of, Watcher Jericho. Jace. The last descendant of the first fallen angel, Stellan.”

Jace struggled to keep his eyes closed. He wanted to open them, to see the scene laid out before them. He could picture it so clearly in his mind. The balloon bouquets in gold and ivory contrasting with the burn marks and graffiti on the buildings behind them. Lynx’s Watchers, still as stone and dark as gargoyles, hidden among the rooftops. And Kai and Byron’s fighters mixed in with the crowd. Blending in. Ready for combat.

Somewhere among them, Xavier was watching. Someplace just as close, his assassin waited, searching for the right moment. Adrian was on the prowl, searching for them both.

“Many of you also knew Messenger Cyrus, Jace’s partner, though the secret of their affection for one another was forced into the shadows. Recently, it was also the cause of their demise.”

The crowd was growing louder. Shouts and curses filled the air.

This was what they wanted. A frenzy. Chaos to catch Xavier off guard. To buy Adrian time to find him, to stop him and his assassin.

“You might recall Jace as someone who protected his demon cousins and helped his Watcher brethren. He survived the Culling, but he could not survive without his heart.”

The hissing intensified.

“Who killed Jericho?!” someone screamed in outrage.

“Fuck you, Messengers!”

Jace’s insides squirmed. Had Astra written an entire fake eulogy for him? For Cyrus? She was really laying it on thick, stoking emotional fires. Including Jace’s. No one should ever have to hear their own life laid bare like this.

“As for Cyrus, I can personally attest to his warmth and optimism. He always had a kind word and a smile for



everyone—mortal, demon, or celestial. Despite this, he was attacked and left for dead by his fellow Messenger soldiers.”

“Cyrus betrayed his kind!” a different voice screamed.

Sheol Street was a powder keg. It wouldn’t take much to set off the crowd now. And still, Astra kept speaking.

“Jace and Cyrus are an example of the kind of unity we must achieve—and also a warning of the grim demise that awaits us, all of us, if we fail. Let us—”

A piercing scream rose from the crowd then, cutting off the chancellor’s words. Jace’s heart thumped harder. His eyelids twitched. No. He couldn’t open them. He couldn’t move. Not until Kai said so.

“Kai, what’s happening?” Byron asked in Jace’s earpiece. The demon was on the ground with the others.

“A fight’s breaking out on the ground. Messengers and demons. Up front, by the stage. Get there as soon as you can.”

“On it.”

The crowd roared. There was a pause, then a beep in Jace’s ear, and Kai spoke again. “Jace, Cyrus, get Astra out of there. It’s not safe. Hurry!”

Jace had never heard the Emissary raise his voice above much more than a whisper, and yet he was barking into their communications system so loudly it drowned out almost all other sounds. Jace’s heart thundered in his chest. He felt savage, his blood on fire. Grabbing one of his throwing knives in each hand, he opened his eyes and kicked against the bottom half of the casket’s lid, still closed around his legs. The wood paneling burst open, shattering at his feet.

For a moment, Jace blinked, his eyes adjusting to the light. Everything was as he’d imagined. The balloons. The graffiti. The stage. Sheol Street was swarming. Demons, celestials, and mortals stood together, shoulder to shoulder from curb to curb. What had started as a festival was ending in a fight. Some were throwing punches. Others pushed and shoved. Humans fled.

Sirens blared and blue lights flickered. Then, police cars skidded to a stop at each end of the road, cordoning off Sheol Street from Kur Club to the abandoned warehouse where Jace had given Cyrus his first glimpse of Nocturna.

And overheard, a flurry of white and ivory wings began to circle the sky. Gray followed almost immediately. Messengers and Watchers clashing above the same way they were on Sheol Street below.

“Astra, let’s go!”

On the other side of the podium where the chancellor had stood, Cyrus had also burst from his casket. He rushed to the chancellor’s side, his bow and arrow drawn, ready to shoot.

“Jace, take her—I’ll cover you both!”

No. No, he fucking wouldn’t. This was not what they discussed. He was supposed to take her back to the tunnels while Jace guarded their exit. And then, if things really took a turn, he’d promised he’d go to the Stratosphere.

“Cyrus, no!” Jace shouted. He rushed toward them.

A flash of movement caught his attention on the edge of the stage.

A Messenger landed, blocking their path to the stairs. His white-blond hair had been dyed to match the color of his wings, and a simple star was tattooed along the side of his neck. As he drew his sword, the celestial steel hummed and glinted in the sun. His face crinkled with rage. “If you weren’t dead before, you certainly will be now, Messenger Cyrus.”

Cyrus’s jaw clenched. He pivoted sharply, aiming his arrow at the newcomer. “Not if I kill you first, Leo.”



## CYRUS

“Jace, get Astra out of here!” Cyrus bellowed as Leo sprinted across the stage.

He knew how much Jace hated that he was here. If it was up to him, Cyrus would have been safely stashed at Lynx’s penthouse with Hesper and Nina. But hopefully, the Watcher would listen. Hopefully, he’d understand that facing Leo, his attacker, was not only his choice but his right.

“Cy—” A word of protest began to fall from Jace’s lips, but Astra cut him off.

“Stay together, you two. I can fend for myself. I’m out of practice with combat but am not unversed—”

“You’re too important, chancellor. Go!” Cyrus shouted.

He didn’t look to see if they’d listened. He didn’t argue anymore, either. He couldn’t. He could only keep his eyes and arrow trained on Leo.

“Going to kill another Messenger?” Leo smirked. He was close enough to strike now. “I would’ve thought you’d have learned your lesson about that last time we tried to teach you.”

Memories of that night in the alley ricocheted through Cyrus’s mind—the pain, the bursts of light overhead, and that eerie, mournful chanting. A chill ran down his spine at the same time heat burned on his cheeks. His hands shook. Sweat moistened his palms. His grip on his bow and arrow faltered.

No. He couldn’t cower. He’d spent too many years living under the weight of his guilt and anger over everything Xavier

had done, feeling complicit in his crimes. He refused to live in fear, too.

Cyrus tilted his head, popping his spine back into submission, and drew a deep breath. He moistened his lips and gripped his weapon tighter. The arrow drawn. The bowstring taut. Poised for release.

“I guess there are some lessons I’ll never learn,” he said, seething.

“We’ll see about that—and maybe this time it’ll stick!” Leo charged then, grimacing and swinging his sword.

Cyrus released his arrow.

And Leo faltered. He hollered with pain as the sharp, steel arrowhead struck its target: his shoulder. Dark red pooled on his tunic. Still, he advanced.

“Pathetic. Just like Xavier has become,” he sneered.

“We’re not the same, Leo. I don’t want to destroy you,” Cyrus shouted over the crowd.

“That’s even worse.”

Stepping back, Cyrus put distance between them. He climbed on top of Astra’s fallen podium and drew another arrow. And another. Aim and release. Quickly. Carefully. He buried arrow after arrow in Leo’s body—his other shoulder, a thigh, a foot. Each shot a warning, intended to slow but not to kill.

Leo swung at him again. “Surrender yourself, Messenger!”

Too soon, Cyrus’s arm trembled. He was tiring, weakening, barely able to keep Leo away as they moved around the stage. Jace had been right to worry. He wouldn’t be able to do this much longer.

“Jace!”

Cyrus reeled quickly, taking his eyes off Leo to search for the Watcher. He didn’t know where Jace had gone, but he had caught flashes of blue-flecked wings on the periphery. Jace

was around here someplace with Astra, fighting his own battle. Could he even hear Cyrus's plea for help?

“Jace!”

He saw the dark-haired celestial standing back-to-back with Astra, fending off a group of Messengers with their throwing knives and golden spheres. Jace's head jerked up, his stare locking on Cyrus. The next second, his eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. He stabbed one of his blades into an attacking celestial, then leaped into the air.

“Cyrus, get back!”

Jace was coming, but he would be too late.

Cyrus turned back to find Leo hovering high in the air above him. The Messenger's face contorted with fury as he plunged downward abruptly, his sword aimed for Cyrus's heart. He moved fast and was picking up speed, leveraging gravity to accelerate his deadly decent.

There was no escape. The best Cyrus could hope for was to hide—to buy himself time until Jace's arrival. Realizing this, he dove to the ground, seeking shelter by one of the caskets.

“Fuck you, Leo!” someone shouted.

Xavier.

That was his voice. Cyrus knew it this time. There was no delirium to cloud his mind. His pulse quickened. As he landed on his back behind the open lid of what had been Jace's coffin, Cyrus twisted in the direction of the sound. He glanced up in time to see Xavier's white wings sweep over him as he soared closer, fixed on a course to intercept Leo.

The unlikely had happened: Cyrus had called for Jace, but it had been Xavier who'd reached him first.

Overhead, the two males collided mid-air, both of them grunting from the impact of their bones and armor. Cyrus winced at the sound.

“I told you Cyrus was not to be touched!” Xavier bellowed, rebounding quickly and drawing his sword.

“You’re a fraud, general,” Leo snapped back. “You’re unfit to serve. If I have to remove you from your post myself, then I will.”

Cyrus rolled onto his feet, crouching behind the casket as he watched them trade insults and sweeps of their swords.

“You disobeyed direct orders,” Xavier told him, blocking Leo as he lunged. “You had to know I would find you.”

“You’re a hypocrite—your orders are meaningless now, general!”

There was another metallic crash. Their breastplates locked. Together, Xavier and Leo spun, a tornado of white wings and rage.

“After today, your soldiers will follow *me!*” Leo hissed.

“Never!”

They broke apart, only to slash at one another again. This time, scarlet bloomed against their tunics, creeping slowly outward until it stained their wings.

“Xave!” Cyrus gasped, unable to tell who’d been struck at first.

Then, Leo’s body landed, face down, on the stage beside him. The Messenger’s eyes were open, and the angry grimace was still bent on his lips. His wings stretched across his back like a blanket. They twitched once, then fell still.

Cyrus had seen death more times than he cared to count. It was one of the occupational hazards of being a soldier. Still, it took him a moment to realize Leo was no longer breathing, his bloodstained sword rendered useless in his limp, lifeless hand.

It took him a moment longer than that to realize that Xavier had also been injured—that the blood on Leo’s sword belonged to the general. Xavier was still aloft but sinking slowly to the ground. His wings barely fluttered behind him, doing just enough to break his fall. He brought a hand to his stomach. As his fingertips grazed over the seeping wound, he dropped his sword. It clattered to the stage next to Leo’s body.

“Cyrus, what is this ...?”

Surprise hung like a solemn note in Xavier's voice as he held out his blood-drenched hand for Cyrus to see. Finally, his wings gave out, no longer able to carry his weight. He collapsed to his knees on the stage, then slowly slumped over.

“Cy?”

Cyrus clambered toward him, scrambling to take Xavier in his arms.

“What's happening?” the general asked. He still held his hand in front of him, offering it up like some strange flag of surrender.

Cyrus tried. He tried to hold onto the anger and resentment in his heart. As he held his former partner, he reminded himself of all the ways Xavier had hurt him, hurt others. He recalled scenes of the broken crossbow and of being isolated from the soldiers in their barracks—of the way he was denied his application to come to the mortal realm and of being locked in his suite, an unwitting captive. More than a hundred years of hurt and loneliness had passed between them.

But Cyrus couldn't make any of it stick. The Messenger in his arms was no longer the fierce, ruthless leader whose soldiers admired as much as they feared. He wasn't power-starved and always plotting, a constant danger to those around him.

He was the scared, abandoned boy his father wouldn't claim and his mother struggled to raise. The good-looking recruit strutting around during training, ambitious and smart, with a frown for every one of Cyrus's smiles. The traumatized soldier with nightmares in the bed across from him—and the lover who'd been so grateful for the comfort of his touch.

More importantly, Xavier was the caretaker who'd affectionately tended Cyrus through fever and pain after his rune had been turned.

*I'll do whatever it takes to protect you. I wish you could see that,* the general had told him that day in the prison level.

For all his flaws, Xavier had loved him. Cyrus hadn't been able to see it before, but he did now. Despite all Xavier's lies,



when it came to his heart, he'd meant every word.

"You're dying, Xave," Cyrus whispered. He took the general's hand in one of his own and brought it to his lips, grazing a kiss across his soiled knuckles, before resting their hands, fingers entwined, on his chest. "You're dying ... for me."

A faint smile curled the corners of Xavier's mouth. "Good. I'm glad. It's what I wanted." He was paler now, and his hand felt far too cold in Cyrus's. "I've hurt you so much—I never meant to, but I did—"

"Now's not the time, Xave—"

"But it is." The general clenched his teeth to stave off a tremor of pain. "You have to know I'm sorry."

Cyrus nodded and grasped his hand tighter.

"Whenever you think of me, please remember me like this," Xavier begged. "Whatever you think of me, please know that I loved you."

The lump in Cyrus's throat was strangling. His eyes were searing, unshed tears building behind his lashes. "I will."

"You promise?"

"I swear," Cyrus told him. His forgiveness was a gift Xavier didn't deserve; he knew that. But that didn't stop him from giving it anyway.

The general's smile widened. His eyes fixed on some point in the distance—a cloud in the sky or some far-off star, barely visible in the daylight. Then, his body went still. No more breath. No more tremors.

The grief was blinding. Cyrus brought Xavier's hand to his lips once more as he rocked his body in his arms. Was he allowed to mourn the death of someone who'd hurt him as much as Xavier had? Cyrus wasn't sure. Nothing about their relationship had ever been simple, including this.

Especially this, maybe.

He gave in to the sadness anyway.

“Let him go, Cy.” Jace was here. His hand was on his shoulder, his voice in his ear.

Shaking his head, Cyrus shrugged the Watcher off. He’d explain himself later; Jace would understand. He always did. Folding Xavier’s hands over his breastplate, Cyrus stood and unfurled his onyx wings. He tilted his head back and let out a sob. It was a cry that had been building in him for weeks, since he’d first arrived in Sin City. Maybe it’d been there even longer—since the day he’d met Xavier.

He fluttered his wings, rising into the air over Sheol Street. Spheres of celestial light burst around him. Horned demons moved in a blur. Mortal police stood by their vehicles, guns drawn and aimed into the crowd. He wasn’t weeping solely for Xavier anymore. He was weeping for all of it. For all of them.

A gunshot echoed, the sound sharper than any blade in his ears.

*Astra ...*

Xavier might have died, but his assassin was still somewhere on the ground.

Someone screamed from the stage below—Aurelia, was it?

As the chancellor fell backward, Jace caught her in his arms, easing her to the ground. Aurelia knelt beside them. She pressed her hands to the wound. She knew. She *knew* a celestial steel bullet was buried in Astra’s chest. Her panic said it all.

Cyrus’s heartbeat quickened. He scanned the rooftops, searching for movement. There he was—a redheaded man with a sniper rifle, poking through one of the broken windows above Perdition Marketplace. He was familiar-looking. Not just a redhead but Redhead, one of the cops who’d arrested him that day on Sheol Street with Ransom. If Cyrus had to gamble, he’d bet Dimples was somewhere in that room behind him, too.

Now Cyrus knew how word got to Xavier that he’d been arrested so quickly. Both mortals were probably on his secret payroll.

Redhead hurried to pull back and disassemble his gear, but it was too late for him to hide. Cyrus had already seen. He reached for an arrow, but his quiver was empty.

No matter, he was a celestial. He had the strength of the stars on his side—if he finally managed to summon it.

*Don't fail me again. Please don't fail.*

He curled his hands into fists and raised his arms overhead, trying to channel the celestial power flowing in his blood. This war had to end. Today. Even if it took the last of his strength to do it.

Pressure built all around him. The atmosphere seemed to crackle. Static electricity sparked in the air. Clouds darkened, and a cool breeze swept his hair back from his face.

Something was happening, but it was different, wrong. This wasn't the usual warmth Cyrus felt in his palms. No golden orbs danced at his fingertips. He wasn't channeling celestial energy from within; he was drawing it toward him from outside—no longer like the sun but more of a dark star.

He cried out as the force crushed his lungs.

*Let go. Let go ...*

Jace's words over Xavier's body echoed in his mind. What if he just ... did?

Cyrus opened his hands, releasing his hold on the cosmos. And as he did, lightning burst above him. It splintered the sky with shards of golden light, shedding sparks and flames like rain.

The fires faded as they fell, burning too bright to last for long. As quickly as they appeared, they disappeared again, dissolving into the wind.

Silence swept up and down Sheol Street. Fingers pointed, eyes stared, mouths gaped—all of it, at him. The celestial with pitch-black wings. Neither Messenger nor Watcher, but something else entirely.

Slowly, Cyrus lowered himself onto the stage beside Jace, Aurelia, and Astra. His chest heaved as he struggled to catch

his breath. Running a hand through his windswept hair, he knelt at the chancellor's feet.

She smiled at him and held out her hand. In her palm was a bloodied bullet. It was silver, and it glowed like celestial steel. But it no longer hummed like the stars, and it had not killed her.

"I don't understand," Cyrus murmured, staring. "Is that ...?"

Astra's head bobbed against Jace's chest. "The bullet that shot me. One from Xavier's lot."

"Is it...?"

"Perfectly harmless to celestials." She sat up, wincing. "Well, almost, anyway." Through the hole torn in her tunic, Cyrus saw the gunshot wound was already healing, her skin knitting back together. She reached out to touch his cheek. "And it's all thanks to you."



## JACE

“I have a theory,” Astra told them later from the large, leather sofa in Lynx’s penthouse in Nocturna Tower.

They’d brought her here, instead of Nova, after the attack at the jubilee. Even if the bullet wasn’t fatal to celestials, she was still injured, and this was closer than Nova. Aurelia and Izarra had helped her get cleaned up and changed, and she’d had her first dose of celestial healing salve applied. It was strange to see her changed into Lynx’s clothes—a button-up collared shirt seemed to be the least formal piece he owned—but she appeared comfortable enough. Wrapped in blankets. Sipping tea. Staring at them all with her wide, watchful eyes.

From the bank of windows that overlooked Nocturna, Jace looked down at Sheol Street. Kai and Byron were on the ground, helping their fighters round up the last of the Messenger resistors. Most surrendered after Xavier died. They no longer had to fear his retribution. Those who refused ... faced Byron’s fist and a trip downtown in a mortal police car. Kai had called a few minutes ago to share that Adrian had found Redhead and Dimples. The pair was among the first to be arrested.

There were others who’d been injured, too. Corbin, for one, was in a guest room down the hall. Hesper and Nina attended to him. He’d recover, but it would take some time, and Nina was fairly shaken by the whole experience. Jace had heard Talon was at Kur Club with some injuries, too—though, knowing him, it might have been a ploy to work on getting the

Pleasure Room back in order so he could enjoy it before returning to Tucson. Either way, Jace would visit him later.

For now, he turned away from the window and crossed the room toward Cyrus, who was sitting in one of the wingback chairs across from Astra. He placed his hand on the Messenger's shoulder from behind. Cyrus sat straighter, glanced up at him, and grinned.

Fuck, he'd been spectacular on that stage. As dark and terrifying with his onyx wings as he was beautiful. Everyone had watched him, captivated, but Jace especially. He'd underestimated Cyrus's strength—the way he'd fought Leo, the way he'd cared for Xavier as he died, and the way he had, somehow, saved all of them from a worse fate.

After all these lonely years, Jace had finally found someone with a heart as big as his own, who loved as wholly and completely as he did.

Cassian would have approved. If the demon were still here, there would be no more teasing or warnings, advising Jace to guard his heart.

He returned Cyrus's smile, then looked over at Astra.

“Oh, and what is your theory, chancellor?” Lynx, in typical Lynx fashion, had a cigar in hand. He sat in the chair opposite Cyrus, one leg crossed over the other, wearing yet another of his perfectly pressed suits.

Astra turned her gaze to Cyrus. “I believe Cyrus drew the cosmic currents from all the celestial weapons on Sheol Street today—including Xavier's retrofitted bullets.”

Cyrus startled. “You do?”

She nodded. “I suspect that when you were attacked, Leo turned your rune incorrectly. He made you not a conductor of celestial energy but an insulator of it. Instead of channeling the stars through your body, you channel energy back to the cosmos.”

The Messenger ran a hand along his smooth-shaven jaw as he considered her words. “I suppose ... The chanting seemed

strange. Nothing happened at first. Maybe Leo did something wrong.”

“Ah.” Astra held up a finger for emphasis as she spoke. “An error in translation, I suspect. Not everyone is trained to speak the language of our ancestors. A simple mispronunciation of one of the runes could certainly produce such an effect.”

Cyrus’s brows furrowed. “That would also explain why I haven’t been able to produce an orb since the attack, wouldn’t it? It’s not that my powers are weak. It’s that they’re different. *I’m* different.”

“How fortunate for us today.” The chancellor gave her shoulders a slight, amused shrug. She hid her glee-filled smile behind her teacup as she took a sip.

Lynx crossed his other leg as he shifted in his seat. “Are you saying Cyrus neutralized all the celestial steel on Sheol Street?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” She set her teacup aside and brought her hand to her abdomen where she’d been shot. “A most unique and impressive power. I owe you my life, Cyrus. If it hadn’t been for your unusual, newfound gift, I would likely have died.”

Cyrus dismissed her compliment with a wave of his hand. “It was an accident, Astra. I had no idea what I was doing.”

So modest. As always. As if Jace’s heart wasn’t already brimming enough to burst.

The chancellor shook her head as if thinking the same. “Nevertheless, it’s the truth. And perhaps you could humor me, Cyrus, by testing your little ‘accident’ again sometime?”

“On what?”

“On the balance of Xavier’s celestial weapon stockpile—and on our own.”

“Our own?” Lynx leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You mean, all celestial steel in the mortal realm?”



Astra dipped her chin to confirm. “It is for the best, don’t you think? Just because we *can* have something, doesn’t mean we *should*. Sometimes, we’re better off preserving what is innocent.”

Cyrus nodded. “Happy to.”

“Well, fuck me.” Lynx drew on his cigar again, then pointed the smoldering tip at Jace and Cyrus. “You know, I always had a feeling the two of you would somehow bring peace to our kind.”

Astra chuckled and reached for her tea again. “Yes, yes, Lynx. You’re so very wise,” she teased. She lifted her cup as if in a toast. “To Cyrus, Jace, and my very wise friend, Watcher Lynx.”

Lynx simply smirked. “So, what happens next, chancellor, now that there’s peace in Sin City?”

She grinned again. “First, the barrier runes come down. And then, I’m thinking we might want to consider relocating celestial headquarters.”

A crease formed in the Watcher’s brow. “Where to?”

“Well, what can you tell me about Los Angeles? The name has a certain ring to it, don’t you think?”

JACE PLACED the last of the boxes in the corner of his bedroom with the others. “That’s everything.”

Cyrus looked up from the pile of clothes he was removing from his own box on the bed. “Really? I swear it seemed like more when I left Themis.” He glanced around the room as if trying to solve the mystery of what could possibly be missing.

Jace chuckled and jumped onto the bed. Placing his hands behind his head, he leaned back against the pillows and put up his feet. “Trust me. I carried everything over from Nova myself. I’d remember if I left anything behind.”

After Sheol Street, Cyrus hadn’t wanted to go back to Nova again. He never wanted to go back to Nova, he’d said. All that was left there were bad memories. He’d recover from

those, too, but that would take more time. Luckily, they had plenty of that now.

Jace had immediately offered Cyrus a home at the apartment he, Hesper, and Cassian had shared in Nocturna Tower. He'd spent the past few days making trips between the two celestial residences, boxing up the last of Cyrus's personal belongings, helping him settle in.

They were living together.

The space was a bit cramped, of course, and it lacked the sleek amenities of Nova. Plus, Hesper pounded on the bedroom door whenever their more amorous activities got too vocal for her taste. But it was perfect in every way that it wasn't.

"Oh, no. Here we go again." Cyrus raised a brow as he looked at Jace. "I see where this is heading."

"You do?"

Cyrus nodded. A grin twitched at the corner of his mouth. "We're back on those scouting badges you used to like to talk about, aren't we? You're looking to earn that badge for romance again—or for realm's best boyfriend, maybe?"

Jace laughed once more. He'd forgotten about their old joke. And, damn, it felt good to be able to joke with him again. And to flirt with him again. To pick up where they'd left off before the Perdition Riots and everything afterward that had interrupted them.

"Realm's Best Boyfriend sounds good to me," Jace said. "But I'm happy enough we both get merit badges for getting out of this shitshow alive."

"It's good to be an overachiever." The Messenger laughed now, too. Fuck, his smile was gorgeous. As wide as the horizon and as bright as the sun. It warmed Jace more than the desert heat.

"Take a break. You've been working hard," he said softly, slipping his hand into Cyrus's and pulling him onto the bed beside him.

Cyrus landed on all fours over him. “You’ve been working harder. Let me make it up to you.”

He ducked his head down to kiss Jace, plundering his mouth with his tongue. Jace groaned. These moments—times when Cyrus took control, reminding Jace that he was just as powerful and wanting as him—had happened before. They were always surprising, always exciting.

They were also a sure sign Cyrus was feeling better, his turned rune fully healed at last.

Jace’s cock was straining against the zipper of his jeans in seconds. His hips bucked, grinding against Cyrus’s, trying to find relief. But the Messenger was relentless.

“No, you don’t,” he murmured against his lips, drawing back for a breath. “I’m not going to let you hump my thigh like a dog until you come. We’re not wasting a perfectly good hard-on like that.”

“We’re not?”

Cyrus shook his head. He kissed a trail across Jace’s jawline and up to his ear. He gave the lobe a nip, then dragged his lips down his neck, pausing only for a quick lick at his Adam’s apple.

Jace’s hips bucked again. “For someone who doesn’t want to waste a hard-on, you seem awfully eager for me to blow in my pants.”

“Wait for it.” Cyrus shimmied down the bed over him, lifting his T-shirt and kissing a trail down his sternum, then abs. He nuzzled the neatly trimmed trail of hair beneath his navel while his fingers worked Jace’s fly open. Together, they peeled Jace’s pants down his thighs until his cock sprang flat against his stomach.

“Fuck, Cy,” Jace whispered, watching as Cyrus stripped himself just as quickly. Jace took his cock in his hand, stroking himself as piece after piece of the Messenger’s clothing disappeared over his shoulder and onto the floor behind him.

The past few days had been good to Cyrus. He was eating more and had begun working out again, and it showed. The

faint, starry glow was back in his skin, and his muscles were already better defined. Jace's mouth watered.

So did his cock.

Cyrus unfurled his wings. Stars above, Jace adored those dark feathers. The sleekness of them. Their softness. The way they were strong enough for him to tug. The Messenger gave a wicked grin as he climbed back on the bed and hovered over Jace's groin. All this was calculated. Cyrus knew exactly what he was doing to him. And he liked it.

"You're getting far too much enjoyment out of this effect you have on me."

"You bet I fucking am." Cyrus lowered his head again, this time shooing Jace's hand from his shaft and replacing it with his mouth.

Jace let out a whimper as Cyrus swallowed him down in one slow, steady gulp. As the tip of his cock grazed the back of the Messenger's throat, he grabbed onto his wings, clutching at his dark feathers instead of the sheets. Then, Cyrus's sandy-blond head bobbed up and down. His cheeks hollowed as he sucked him. His lips smacked as he popped off to lick precum from his crown. And his eyes burned with lust when he glanced up at him from beneath his lashes.

All too soon, Jace was coming. Gasping. Thrashing. Hot jets of cum spilling down Cyrus's throat as the Messenger sucked him through his release.

"I love you, Cy," Jace whispered, moving his fingers from Cyrus's feathers to his head, thrusting himself deeper down his throat.

It was a rotten time to say it, Cyrus gagging on his cock, threads of cum and spittle dripping from his lips when he looked up at him. But they'd already said they loved each other in every other possible way except this, so Jace supposed it wasn't exactly a surprise.

Cyrus wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and let out a laugh. "Yeah, I figured that out, Romeo."

He sidled up the bed again, his own cock hard and leaking, brushing against Jace's abs. The Messenger pressed a quick kiss to Jace's lips. "Love you, too."

Then, he was hovering over him again, feeding his cock into Jace's mouth while he clutched at the headboard.

Jace gulped Cyrus down greedily, holding onto his thighs to steady him as he pistoned his hips and fluttered his wings, taking whatever he needed to feel good. Jace marveled at the power beneath his hands, between his lips. It was such a stark difference from the softness of Cyrus's feathers, hair, and heart. How was it possible for someone to be two completely opposite things at once?

It didn't matter. Cyrus did it so well.

Afterward, they stayed together on the bed, arms and legs and tongues entwined, licking the last remnants of one another off their mouths.

A knock on the door startled them both.

"Are you guys having weird black-wing sex again?"

Hesper.

Jace wasn't sure he'd phrase it quite like that, but close enough. "Um. Kind of."

Cyrus rolled off him, stifling his laughter and retracting his wings.

Heaving a sigh, Jace stood and pulled up his jeans. He was still tugging his T-shirt down when he opened the door a crack.

"Is this my punishment for me and Caz being so loud all those years?" Hesper's eyes were shrewd and narrow. Her hands were tented on her hips as she stared at him.

Jace laughed and glanced at Cyrus over his shoulder. The Messenger was standing, gathering up his clothes. Warmth swelled in Jace's chest as he watched him. "I prefer to think of it as my reward for living hundreds of years spent with a broken heart."

“Mhmm.” Hesper pursed her lips, unconvinced. Then, dropping her hands from her sides, she sighed. “So, speaking of Caz, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you.”

Jace hesitated. He ran a hand through his hair, sobering at Cassian’s memory. His mind raced. Had she come to ask him for the demon’s blade so she could have the matching pair? Was there something else she wanted? “Okay. Shoot.”

“Would it be all right if Dev came with us to the Strat tonight?” She blurted out the words as if she couldn’t believe she dared to speak them herself.

This was ... unexpected. Cyrus came to stand behind him, fully dressed and also confused. He shrugged.

“Dev?” In truth, Jace was only partly surprised. He’d noticed the way the demon looked at Hesper, even if she always seemed completely oblivious.

“I know it’s soon ... and it’s not like *that*—not at all. We’re friends,” Hesper hurried to explain.

“But you don’t like him. You’re always—” The words *bitching at him* came to mind, but Jace thought it wiser not to say them out loud. “Annoyed with him.”

Hesper’s cheeks reddened, and although she tried to frown, she couldn’t quite stop the shy smile that curled her lips.

Okay. Maybe she was never as annoyed as it seemed.

“We got to know each other pretty well on the drives to and from Arizona,” she said. “Mostly, we just talk about Caz. Share stories about him. Try to make each other feel better about losing him. Dev’s been ... a comfort. I’ve liked having him around.”

A comfort? A friend? Jace had a feeling it was only a matter of time before that evolved into more and Hesper ate her words spectacularly. He looked forward to seeing that day. But for now, he knew better than to argue. Let her find happiness again. No one could replace Cassian, but Devlin already knew that. Together, they could keep their friend’s spirit alive.

Grinning, Jace leaned against the doorframe. “Absolutely,” he said. “In fact, I think that’s a great idea.”

BYRON, Kai, and the others would be going back to Arizona tomorrow. They’d say their goodbyes and promise to see each other again soon. Hopefully, they actually would. Tonight, though, was a celebration. Astra had reserved the observation deck at the Stratosphere for their group to watch the barrier runes dissolve.

There was aster wine. And harp music. And plates of hors d’oeuvres. Lynx passed the evening with Adrian, both dressed in suits and smoking cigars. Meanwhile, Hesper stayed close to Dev’s side, laughing. Truly laughing. The violet flecks roiled in her eyes, and she blushed when he stood on tiptoe to whisper in her ear. It was the happiest Jace had seen her in weeks—since Cassian died.

“I fucking love Las Vegas!” Talon shouted at one point. He climbed onto one of the tables and waved his fists in the air.

“How many drinks has he had?” Jace overheard Nina ask Corbin.

Corbin made a face. “Enough, obviously,” he said, before rushing over to tug the demon back down to the floor.

From a nearby lounge chair, Kai managed one of his rare laughs. Talon was not his problem tonight. The Emissary could finally relax. He could lean against Byron, who sat on his armrest, and enjoy the way the demon smoothed the hair back from his face.

When midnight approached, Astra led them in a countdown, just like Times Square on New Year’s. That was all right with Jace; this was a new start in many ways, too. He followed along, cheering alongside the others.

Sixty seconds. Fifty seconds. Forty ...

Cyrus wove his fingers through Jace’s and tugged him toward the railing, a tumbler of whiskey in hand. He led him to the same spot where they’d stood when Cyrus had

confessed his history with Xavier. Cyrus still spoke of the general sometimes—but in a different way, with fondness and gratitude for the ex-lover who’d saved his life.

Fifteen seconds ...

Together, they looked out across Sin City. Taillights blurred on the highway, and the Strip was darker than it had been the last time they’d come here together. But the city would rebuild. It would heal, exactly like Cyrus had.

Three seconds ...

Above the clouds, light burst in a circle around the city. It raced across the sky in blues and greens and purples—the Las Vegas version of the aurora borealis. Then, it disappeared over the mountain peaks in the distance.

The celestial runes warding the city were gone. For the first time in more than fifty years, everyone was free.

“*Lux aeterna!*” Astra was the first to shout their refrain, though the others quickly followed.

Eternal light.

Jace hadn’t heard those words in weeks. For the first time in ages—maybe even ever—they finally seemed true.

Cyrus turned to look at him, his eyes as bright as the stars. “Now that the barrier runes are down, where do you want to go next?”

Jace squeezed the Messenger’s hand, remembering the way he’d told Cyrus he’d felt trapped here—how the view from the Stratosphere had once been his only real comfort. Jace smiled and took a sip of his whiskey. “Anywhere we fucking want.”



# EPILOGUE

## CYRUS

**I**n his delirium, he had dreamed of a room much like this. Rustic plaster walls. Arabesque tile. A bed with a canopy. And floor-to-ceiling windows facing a blue topaz sea. Cyrus leaned against the wrought-iron railing—another balcony, so much like the one at his suite in Nova—and let the ocean breeze ripple through his hair. It'd been three years since he and Jace had left Las Vegas and came to Malta, and he still hadn't tired of the sound of the waves breaking over the rocks below. Or the smell of saltwater.

Or the feel of Jace's breath on his neck when he snuck up behind him and pressed a kiss to the upside-down rune between his shoulder blades.

"Ready to go, or do you want to stand here all day?" Jace asked against his ear as he wrapped his arms around him.

Cyrus grinned and settled against Jace's chest, resting the back of his head on his shoulder. "I'd rather stay, but I guess I'm running out of excuses. We already had sex on the roof. And in the shower. Where else is there?"

Jace chuckled. "We haven't fucked in the bed today. Yet. But I think we should eat something first. You know, build up our strength. I'd rather have a marathon later than a sprint right now."

"A marathon. I like the idea of that." Cyrus ran his thumb over the scorpion tattoo on Jace's forearm—the twin to the one on his own—as he considered. A dull rumble from his

stomach made the decision for him. “Guess that settles that. Food it is.”

CYRUS ALWAYS LIKED the open-air markets. He liked the sweet scent of the exotic fruits at the stalls, the colors of the pottery and fabrics, the laughter of children playing games in the aisles, and the way somewhere—close by but always out of sight—faint music curled around the corners.

He and Jace held hands, their fingers loosely entwined, as they wandered. They paused to check the ripeness of some oranges, Jace sniffing at the rind before handing over his money. A few stalls later, Cyrus shook his head, trying to hide his laughter, as Jace haggled—poorly—over the price of some prickly pears. They walked away with a bag of tiny, red-skinned potatoes instead.

Potatoes were good. They needed them for dinner anyway. Jace was cooking tonight. Roasted chicken and vegetables with herbs. His specialty. The meal he’d promised to make Cyrus after Eris had died. It was their favorite, something he made once a week now—each time at Cyrus’s request.

“What time is it, do you think?” Jace asked, accepting a segment of orange from the fruit Cyrus peeled as they walked.

“I’m not sure.” Cyrus leaned over a tray of wooden carvings to ask the shopkeeper at the next stall. Pointing to his wrist where a watch would rest, he asked the question in English; the response came in Maltese. Cyrus understood anyway—one of the benefits of being a celestial. He turned back to Jace, who seemed busy rebalancing the bags draped over his arm. “Four o’clock.”

Jace nodded and swallowed down another bite of orange. “Great. We have time. Hesper and Dev won’t get here for at least another hour, and there’s something I want to show you.”

Cyrus couldn’t imagine what, after the years they’d spent in their new home, they hadn’t yet explored, but he was happy enough to follow Jace out of the market and down a side street. Together, they wound toward an older part of the city,

near the harbor. The neighborhood had a patched-together look, as if it had been rebuilt and restored over and over again through the centuries. In a way, it reminded Cyrus of Nocturna.

“When you mentioned a marathon earlier, this wasn’t what I had in mind,” Cyrus teased.

The Watcher looked at him with a boyish grin and tugged on his arm. “Come on. We’re almost there.”

Jace turned another corner, then spread his wings. Gray and blue plumage filled the shadows behind the humble stone building beside them. Heaving a sigh, Cyrus unfurled his own pitch-black wings. He still missed his ivory feathers, but he’d come to love these, too. Their dark onyx was a magnet for the sun, and the warmth felt good on his back.

Since the battle on Sheol Street, Jace had somehow even managed to convince him they were beautiful.

“What, exactly, are we staring at?” Cyrus asked, after leaping up to join Jace on the rooftop.

“It’s where I lived when I was a kid,” Jace said. “I thought they’d torn it down ages ago, but I found it the other day. That window, over there—” He pointed to an arch on the second story that opened up to a deck-like platform. “—That was the room me and Hesper shared. I can’t believe it’s still standing.”

He left out the part of the story Cyrus had heard before—the way Messengers had forced them to flee, how his father had died later that night after carrying him to safety. Instead, Jace simply smiled. Focused on the pleasant, not the pain.

“And that was where Murat lived.”

Cyrus followed his gaze to a similar old farmhouse with a courtyard in the back. He’d heard this story before, too. Murat. Jace’s childhood best friend. His first crush. The old man he’d come back, on a whim, to check on decades later. Murat was still here, living with his family, children and a wife around him.

“This is exactly where I stood when I came back that day and saw him,” Jace told him, walking closer to the edge of the

flat roof. “His wife looked nice, and they seemed so happy. She poured him tea, and he caught her hand and kissed it before she walked away. The way she looked at him ... I wanted that.”

He glanced over at Cyrus with a warmth in his eyes he could only imagine was similar to that between Murat and his partner all those years ago. Cyrus felt the pull in his chest. Deep and gravitational. Tugging him closer, closer. Until their lips brushed together. Immediately, he was lost in the present the same way Jace was in the past.

“Close enough?” Cyrus asked when they parted.

Jace shook his head and let out a laugh. “Even better.”

WATCHING Jace work in the kitchen was better than any movie. Cyrus always found it amusing to see his tattooed, dark-haired, muscular Watcher walking around in an apron. So unexpectedly domestic. The nights when Jace would joke around with the chicken, making the uncooked bird dance in the roasting pan like a marionette without strings, were his personal favorite, though he was also fond of the times Jace tried to wow him with knife tricks—flips, throws, and fancy carvings.

“We could charge admission and make a fucking fortune,” Cyrus said over the rim of his whiskey tumbler as he sat on a stool at the counter.

Not that they needed the money, of course. He and Jace still worked odd jobs for Astra and Lynx, traveling to and from Malta, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles—where the Messengers were establishing a new celestial embassy—when required. They were comfortable enough.

“Forget a live show. I’m aiming for TV.” To emphasize his point, Jace hurled a paring knife across the kitchen, burying it in one of the oranges they’d gotten at the market earlier.

Cyrus chuckled. “Showoff—and a waste of a perfectly good orange.”

A knock at the door interrupted them. Hesper and Dev. It had to be them. Cyrus slipped off his stool, citing Jace's dirty hands, to go answer.

It had been months since the last time they'd seen Hesper and Dev. As Jace had always predicted, the two couldn't stay simply friends. Hesper had a tamer love for Dev than Cassian, Jace said, but it was love, earnest and complete, just the same. They had a child now, too—an infant daughter. Cassiopeia, they'd named her.

There was a Caz in the family once more.

Jace had cried when he'd heard.

They'd seen pictures and video-chatted, but tonight was special. Tonight, they would meet Cassiopeia in person for the first time.

“Hey, Asshole!” Hesper was back to calling Cyrus that sometimes, but nowadays, it was with affection. She threw her arms around the black-winged Messenger the instant he opened the door.

“Hesper, *language*,” Dev said. He shook his head as though to scold while turning the covered baby carrier he toted around away from her. “Not around Caz. We've talked about this.”

He was kidding, of course. When Hesper smirked at him, he laughed and greeted Cyrus the same way.

Cyrus raised a brow as he waved them inside. “Good to see you, too ...?” He was still trying to come up with an equally offensive nickname in rebuttal, but nothing seemed to fit. Besides, Hesper was a mother now. It felt wrong to insult her, even in jest.

“Is that my niece?” Jace appeared in the hallway, still drying his hands.

“Brother! You're not the baby in the family anymore!” Hesper brushed her cheek against his in greeting, but Jace was far more interested in the bundle Dev carried. Hesper clicked her tongue in annoyance as the Watcher pushed past, barely pausing.

Dev set the carrier on the credenza in the entryway and pushed back the shade drawn over it. “Here she is.”

Cassiopeia was beautiful, with dark hair like both her parents and a tiny pair of violet horns beginning to protrude near her forehead. She smelled like baby powder and honeysuckle, and she kicked her little bare feet when they peered down upon her as if she was excited to see them.

“She’s fucking perfect,” Jace breathed. “Hi, sweet Caz.”

Cyrus grinned. It was almost more fun to watch him watching Cassiopeia than it was to see the baby herself.

Gently, Jace picked up the gurgling infant, scooping her onto his shoulder. “Wait until you see the booties I got you today at the market—”

Hesper laughed. “You got her booties?”

“When did you do that?” Cyrus asked.

Jace shrugged. “Yes. Real men buy baby booties. Get over it,” he told his sister. He turned to Cyrus and added, “While you were finding out the time.”

Ah. That had been a distraction. A decoy. A ruse to delay revealing what a sappy pile of mush he was bound to become the moment he met his best friend’s namesake. Cyrus wasn’t completely sure how Jace had managed the transaction so quickly; he’d only had his back turned for a minute. But he loved Jace all the more for it.

The Watcher’s response made Hesper laugh even harder. “Are they pink? Please tell me they’re pink.”

Jace’s cheeks reddened. “No. They’re not *pink*,” he snapped defensively. “They’re ... violet.”

Dev and Hesper exchanged a conspiratorial glance. They were never going to stop teasing him about this, Cyrus saw it in their eyes.

“Don’t listen to them, Caz,” Jace told the baby, starting down the hall toward the living area. “They wish they had booties, too. And when you outgrow those, I’ve got a very

special dagger you can have. And when you're old enough, I'll teach you how to throw—”

“You will *not!*” Hesper cried, cutting him off.

She might have laughed first, but Jace laughed last.

CYRUS THOUGHT about Xavier almost daily. Even now. Maybe he always would. In the weeks following Astra's jubilee, he'd learned more about how much Xavier had risked to protect him. Between the destroyed evidence, his order that Cyrus was untouchable, and his absence after Leo's attack, Xavier had lost credibility with most of his soldiers. Some had filed petitions for his removal with the courts of Themis. Others, like Leo, had taken matters into their own hands. The truth was that Xavier had needed the mortals' allegiance as much as he'd wanted it—without them, he might have failed sooner.

He'd sacrificed his power and his ambitions. And he'd done it all for Cyrus.

Gradually, Cyrus made peace with the pain Xavier had caused him. It became easier to focus on the good memories, instead of the bad. He kept his promise—to remember Xavier as someone who'd loved him, who'd given his life to save him. In a way, he felt affection for the general in return. Mostly, though, Cyrus simply felt gratitude. Without Xavier, he would have died in a Nocturna alley or during Astra's jubilee.

Without Xavier, he wouldn't be here with Jace and his newfound family right now.

As they settled around the dinner table on the patio out back, Cyrus thought of Xavier again with that same sad, thankful fondness.

“How was the flight from L.A.?” he asked, taking a turn holding Cassiopeia while Jace served up the chicken.

It was twilight—a pleasant evening, warm enough for short sleeves but not too humid, and the stars were just



beginning to shine overhead. The solar lights flickered on, illuminating the small garden around them.

Hesper snorted and rolled her eyes. “Long. We actually arrived yesterday, though.”

Jace looked up sharply, a wrinkle of confusion between his brows. “Yesterday? But you said—”

There was a strange glint in her violet-flecked eyes. She pursed her lips, repressing a smile, and glanced over at Dev. They were hiding something.

“Hesperrr ...?” Jace asked, drawing out her name in a warning.

Dev nodded, and she turned back to Jace and Cyrus. “We were thinking we spend too much time apart. Especially now that Caz is here,” she told them.

“And?”

“And we want her to grow up with her uncles around.” Hesper was doing this on purpose, tormenting him, delaying her answer.

“*And?*” Jace was getting testy now. He tilted his head and glanced at Cyrus, seeking sympathy, but the Messenger was far too amused by his exasperation to commiserate.

Realizing this, Hesper finally unleashed her smile. She’d tortured her brother long enough. “And so ... we bought the house next door.”

Jace dropped the fork he’d been using to serve up everyone’s plate. “You just *bought* it?”

“We did.” She threw her hands up in a celebratory air. “It’s why we arrived a day early. We signed the papers this morning. Looks like we’ll be living together—almost—again, brother.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll still have your space,” Dev clarified. He gave Hesper a meaningfully look, and Cyrus got the impression that, unlike swearing, this *was* something they had actually discussed earlier. “We’ll divide our time between L.A. and here. That way, I can help Lynx with our new business,

we'll still see my side of the family, and everyone gets to watch Caz grow up.”

“We were so happy here as kids, Jace, remember?” Hesper said, her eyes distant and starry. “Now Caz can also have a bit of that.”

Jace nodded, appeased. He remembered; Cyrus knew he did. It was why they lived here, too.

The Watcher reached over to pat Cassiopeia on the back, a smitten grin on his face. “Looks like I get to teach you about being a badass someday after all,” he told the baby. “But don’t tell your mom.”

Cyrus laughed. Jace had been right when they’d kissed on the rooftop earlier. This life wasn’t as good as the one Murat had had.

This was even better. Because it was theirs.

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*Thank you for reading about Jace and Cyrus!*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*USA Today* bestselling author A.L. Morrow is the (naughtier) alter ego of a young adult novelist. When she isn't writing clean(ish) YA tales, "A" enjoys dreaming up steamy scenes and spectacular settings—often along with a touch of magic or myth. She believes that love is love and likes reading and writing various genres of romance.

In her downtime (what's that?), A finds delight in scouring for secondhand designer fashions. She briefly lived in a haunted mansion, once took a flight to visit Scotland for a day, and is prone to meeting minor celebrities in random hotel elevators. She resides in the eastern US.

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